

# The Challenges in Implementation of the Rights to Participate in Political Field of the Ethnic Minority Women Groups: Kotu and Taoi in Thuathienhue Province of Vietnam

## Abstract

In recent years, the status of ethnic minority women in Thua Thien Hue: Kotu and Taoi have been improved. They have been asserting role in different sites of life, contributing strong for local development. The status of women in the family and society has changed considerably. The number of women who hold positions of leadership in local governments and community is increasing. They have been contributed to Policy-making at all of levels. However, in fact shows the gender equality status of women is still not very sustainable. They had been facing many challenges, especially in the field of participation due to barriers from various causes. This is invisible barrier that make the rate of women's participation is low. It has not achieved the goals set out in the Development Strategy and Policy to touching MDGs, for the advancement of women.

**Keywords:** Women of Kotu; Taoi; Challenges; The right to participate; Political field

## Review Article

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## Introduction

Taoi and Kotu are two ethnic minorities in Vietnam, residing in the western mountainous region of provinces: Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam. Taoi groups have a population of about 34 960 people, of which Taoi people living in Aluoi of Hue province have 29 558 people (accounting for 67.35% of Taoi in Vietnam). Kotu people in Hue have 14,629 people (23.8% of Kotu people in Vietnam). Both of ethnic minority groups locate mainly in the west and southwest of the mountainous districts of Hue province, which are concentrated in Nam Dong and Aluoi districts [1].

On economic conditions, two groups live by farming on mountain-style shifting cultivation, nomadic; Livestock (buffalos, pigs, goats, chickens by free-range method, only a few families make cages with several dozen buffaloes); Hunting and gathering still play an important role in their daily life. In some villages, people make traditional crafts (knitting, pottery, weaving, etc.), but they just hardly earn some money from selling their product. Economic base on self-sufficient, "people just sell some produce of the mountains trip searches, or product from production cultivation and purchase of necessities served daily life as salt, rice, ax, mucus [2].

Kotu and Taoi people are patrilineal marriage regime, whereby, marriage was conceived of as the man married his wife in the form of purchase. Form of marriage is marital monogamy and residence at her husband house, however, is still the expression of form of marriage primitive (marriage plundered; married her husband's brother, married sisters of wife; widows can also live with their fathers in law, as well as sons can live with their second mother or

their father when their father pass away) [3]. The family is built on the basis of the patriarchal regime has quite solid, the man is the head of the family, has the power and inheritance property. The woman, after marriage, completely depends on her husband and her husband's family, and they have no independent position on property and also personal freedom.

The two ethnic groups have a diverse religious system, but there is a big similarity between the communities, differing only in some details of worship and the way it's performed. In order to manage the community of established institutions, the traditional social management institutions of the Kotu and Taoi are similar, first of all to be the village head (village patriarch). Council elected by village patriarch (in some villages, outside the village there are landowners (Ala Katiec); where the village is not concurrently the land owner), the sorcerer (witchdoctors) and head of the family [4].

In order to regulate social relations, to establish order of the community, both of ethnic used to use traditional institutions such as customs and habits [5]. Whatever the legal framework for the right to political participation of women equality between women and ethnic groups in Vietnam, but in practice, the exercise of political participation of women is governed by many factors such as (Figure 1).

With the specific factors in the context of the economic and social situation of two communities led to the fact that the number of women elected to the system of representative agencies at all levels of tenure recently are not meet the rate had been proposed, despite the political determination of the authorities at all levels with the efforts of social organizations. In Aluoi district has over

12,000 woman members, surprisingly there are no women in the district's Vietnamese Communist Party Committee (VCPC). The proportion of women was elected to the system elected bodies despite not achieving the expected but still higher than number of women served in a branch of law enforcement agencies, and this is one of the large challenges in the implementation of the millennium goals. In fact, the implementation of gender equality policy in Taoi and Kotu communities is facing the following challenges: 1. Legal awareness in this area of communities is not high, 2 The strong influence of customs, habits on the perception and behavior of community members, resulting it's hard to change behavior of community.

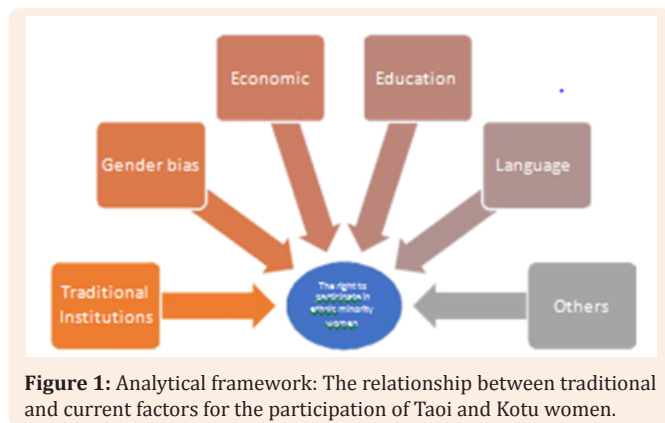


Figure 1: Analytical framework: The relationship between traditional and current factors for the participation of Taoi and Kotu women.

### The Real Status of Women's Participation in Political Field

After the reunification of Vietnam (04/30/1975), the political participation of women in the two ethnic minorities has been prospered. They have been affirmed its position on aspects of social life. Women's participation in all aspects of society is significant compared to the time before 1992. The proportion of women participating in the government levels have increased sharply and become more and more important voice in deciding policy in the communities. In line with the local socio-economic transformation, the human development index and human rights assurance have gained many sustainable achievements. Women play an increasingly important role in all areas: politics, economics, education, culture, and especially the role of women in the family and parenting.

In the field of political participation, in recent years, the proportion of women of two groups are deputies in the People's Councils at all levels, are leader in government branch's, is constantly increasing, but look at what happened on reality show emerging issues: Firstly, the proportion of women participating in representative missions is low, especially in high-ranking bodies. Over the past few years, the number of women in the two ethnic groups is delegate has increased, mainly at the commune and district levels. In the higher levels, they are still absent. In the election of the People's Council of Thuathien Hue Province, 7<sup>th</sup> Term (2016-2021), there was no delegates are women of two ethnic were elected.

The results of the election of deputies to provincial-level People's Councils in V, VI and VII terms show that the percentage

of women in the two ethnic groups was not sustainable (Figure 2).

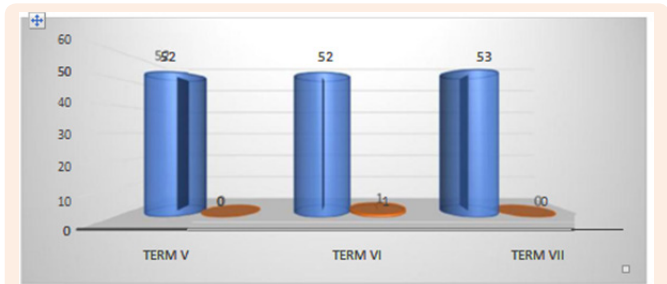


Figure 2: Percentage of Kotu and Taoi female members in Provincial People's Councils [6].

It can be seen that during three terms, only one Taoi woman was a member of the provincial People's Council in the sixth Term, but no one of the two ethnic groups was elected in the VII Term. With the two-level People's Councils: district and commune levels, the percentage of women who are members of the Commune People's Council and the equivalent level in the comparison of the three recent terms indicate the number of women had elected to the office held steady levels and increased slightly, but it was still far from achieving the target of 30% of delegates is the female as determined as the government political determination [7].

Second, the political participation of Kotu and Taoi women is reflected in another array of colors with the proportion of women participating in Vietnamese CPC (Figure 3). Statistics show that if the proportion of women in the elected bodies is low, the proportion of women attending VCPC is lower (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Kotu and Taoi women's figures represent Aluoi district People's Council [8].

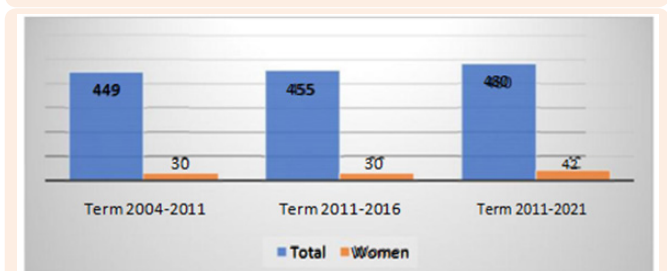
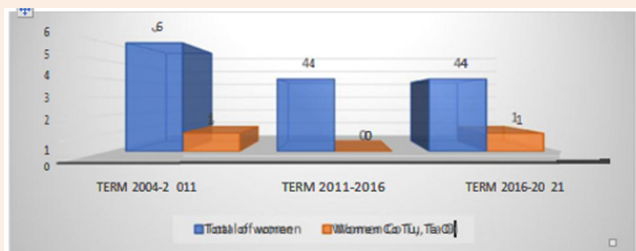


Figure 4: Data of Kotu and Taoi women as members of commune level People's Council in three courses in Aluoi district [9].

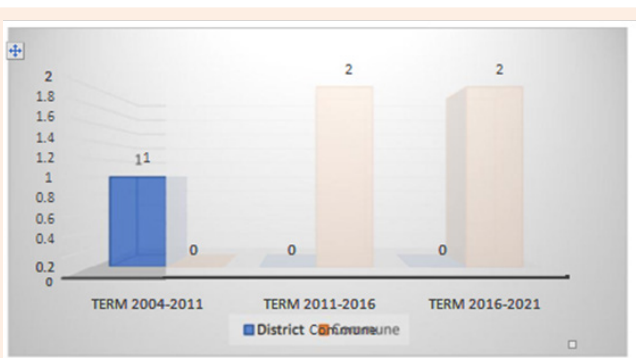
The above figures show that the percentage of women participating in the CPC at the district level is very low. The rate is too small to compare to the presence of women in the VCPC organization of all levels (Figure 5). It is not yet commensurate with the contribution and capacity of female members. This is very important because the political regime in Vietnam is

politically unstable, the Vietnamese Communist Party holds the leadership position, so if women can participate in VCPC, their voice and power of decision will increase.



**Figure 5:** Percentage of Kotu and Taoi women in the district Executive Committee in Aluoi district [10].

Third, in the executive branch, the percentage of women also is not really high in leadership positions, and most of them hold the deputy role within the organization. The following data reflects a corner of this picture (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Number of female Kotu and Taoi holding positions in executive branch in Aluoi [11].

The percentage of women in Kotu and Taoi in head positions is hard to see and the development is also slow, unstable, in some organizations women leader position tend to decrease the number; Most of women leaders are in second place, with few real rights. On some levels, the field of women’s participation has increased, but gender gaps in numbers and quality in participation are still large. It is difficult for women of two ethnic minority groups to be equal in accessing opportunities to achieve a position corresponding to their level, ability and contribution to the social.

Fourthly, the role and voice of women in the community is very limited. In the communities, the percentage of women taking the village head role is quite small (only one woman from Ango commune of Aluoidistrict). Women participate in socio-political organizations at grassroots level (National Front, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, etc.) tent to have a higher leadership role, but mainly as deputy and their decisive voice is still very limited.

### Barriers to the Participation of Women of Kotu and Taoi Ethnic Minority Groups in Political Field

Despite many positive signs, shows that ensuring women’s right to participate in politic is better years by years, but it is

still facing many challenges. These challenges are not only come from objective causes, but also come from women themselves, namely: Not possible rate of women in the representative system is due to the influence of traditional customs and practices of Kotu and Taoi peoples. Both of ethnic minority groups living in mountainous areas, the level of economic growth - social is low, economic fundamentals are still based on the method “clean, burning, sowing”, the social characteristics “self-sufficient, closed, seemingly dominated only by internal relations” [12]. These leading to the bias about men and women role, and it’s has been exist in community mind-set for a long time. Therefore, people are not really aware of human rights, especially the rights of women and the right to participate in public affairs. According to practices of both peoples, the position of women is for cultivation, after the man done the job clean upland fields, the woman who is responsible for “sowing”, care and harvest. All the task that are being consider as easy and not need lots of strength. After work, the women’s jobs at home is cooking, taking care of their children. Participation in activities that determine the community’s work is male. This has led to gender prejudice and the underestimation of the role of women in society and the family.

According to their custom, marriage is mainly base on sales-trade. Wedding gifts is a duty of a groom and groom’s family. The bride’s family request is fulfilling by the groom’s family, it’s will lead to the concept to see wife as a product; The place of residence after marriage is the husband’s family; In the family, “the wife plays a minor role, depending both economically, socially and culturally”, which leads to significant limitations on the social activity of the woman after marriage. In many cases, women are involved in social activities, holding positions of leadership before marriage. After marriage, because husband and husband’s family prevented them from participating in social activities, they have to been stopped all of activities, although they wanted. With traditional gender stereotypes, the role of women in society is very limited compared to men. Most of the interviewed people’s in the communities still think that the only important thing is that men are capable of taking on the main role; the role of women in production activities is tilling, weeding, harvesting agricultural products and household care. Men established an important position in society, hold the key positions of village elder patriarchy (Ariayvel, landowners, the worshiper of Taoi groups) and (Kuoi Temoh Yang of Kotu group) [13]. With the concept that only men are knowledgeable about social issues, have knowledge and skills to take on the important work of the community, manage the activities of society. The voice of a valued and decisive man, a man of his own ability, has the right to conduct domestic and external affairs of the community and of his family.

Due to the perception of the role of men and women, the voices of women leaders have not really received from community’s support. The community and society still doubt the leadership possibility and decisiveness of women. Therefore, in the localities surveyed, most of the meetings in the communities, the majority of participants are women (about 70%), in particular there are meetings, and women had participated in over 95%. But important meetings or community work decisions, such as summing up the work of the village, the majority of the participants are male. With idea from community peoples, that meeting is easy work, mainly

to listen to ideas about transmission, women get back to their family, tell their husband, and the decision right depends on the men. Men with their experience will see what has been done and what has not been done, so men will attend final meeting to give opinions

“In the previous society, the roles of men and women were very different: the wife was bought by her husband (wedding gifts: 2 cows, 7 pigs (if conditions permit, engagement gifts: 1 dog, 1 pig, 1 chicken), in the wife’s family do the work: Cooking, washing, working in the field, not involved in social work, this is for men. Works, women are not allowed to participate (the important work of the village: worship, perform religious rites in wedding and culture festival.) In the family, important work of the family decided by husband. At present, although there are many changes, but Kotu men also drink a lot, the family work is mainly women do. In-depth interview 6: An old man from Kotok village, age 80 and give decisions not women.

In traditional society, the status of Kotu and Taoi women is influenced by a number of factors, including: low educational attainment, wedding fees and gender roles in family work assignments (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** Factors influencing the status of Kotu and Taoi women in the past.

On the other hand, the concept of “gender” in traditional society suggests that women symbolize “softness”, associated with virtues: resignation, obedience, and dealing with emotional relationships, have to concessions. Thus, in the traditional view also show that “female leaders are associated with such characteristics as obedience, affection, conscientiousness, and patience, which are attributes that are considered. It is not suitable for leadership positions” [14].

The economic situation of women in the family is also a significant cause leading to the restriction of the exercise of women’s right to participate in the politic field. For both communities, all property is owned by men and managed and disposed of. According to custom, a man is, of course, the owner of the property of the family. This is also a reason why there is still the phenomenon of male sex, in both peoples, it is customary if the couple do not have a son, the property will be transferred to the children of the siblings. According to interviews, many respondents said that in the Kotu and Taoi ethnic groups, the daughters who marriage were never be given land, only boys were, or previously and even now the land use rights of parents are left to the son. Because boys have to stay to look after their parents,

the land has to let their sons and daughters have their husband family take care of. Customary also regulates the right to inherit property, the role of economic management in the family belongs to men, in the family of valuable assets such as motorcycles, or the title of land use rights belong to the man. The survey results show that 100% of households belonging to two ethnic groups borrow preferential loans provided by the policy bank. Loans are allocated to the Women’s Union. But after completing the loan procedure, women are the one who borrowing but the right to decide and using of family loans is male.

In addition, both ethnic groups are in the same unhealthy condition as other ethnic minorities, “the food poverty of ethnic minorities seems to have increased in most regions” [15]. Efforts by governments at all levels to improve the economic situation of ethnic minorities have been made, however, the poor rate still high in the community, “for every 10 ethnic households, there are seven households are unable to meet their essential needs” [16]. With such difficult economic conditions, the livelihoods of most Kotu and Taoi families are placed on women’s shoulders. The survey in Anjo Commune (Aluoi District) is a typical commune to increasing the rate of female staffs. Although it locates the center of the district, but the commune has poverty rate is approximately 31%, of which the average income is VND 1.5 million per month (about 70\$).

On the other hand, the inadequacies of the basic social services system and the difficulties in accessing these services have had a significant impact on the life condition and time to participate in the social activities of women. In the condition: “basic social service delivery system, which is not gender responsive, the needs and circumstances of women and girls in ethnic minority areas, remote and isolated areas, disadvantaged regions, many women migrants, the number and quality of services in these areas are still unresponsive and do not meet the needs and circumstances of women.” [17]. Although there has been a shift in the division of labor by gender in the family, due to social conditions, women of two ethnic are still responsible for housework. After marriage, shifting cultivation and caring for children are carried out by women, so when women are involved, they must perform tasks by two shoulders, always under pressure. The conflict between the family tasks and social tasks, so many women cannot bear the pressure; have to give up political career. Through a fact-based survey, most married women spend most of their time in the family, so many have sacrificed their careers to take care of their families and children, despite the fact that they want to be involved in social activities.

The backward livelihoods, the lack of arable land and the lack of stable income are still one of the challenges for most families, especially for women. On the one hand, women are directly affected by economic conditions. On the other hand, because of their lack of economic independence, women of both ethnic groups are vulnerable. The burden of livelihood, economic dependence on husbands is one of the major challenges facing women. It is clear that in the condition women are responsible for much of the family work, “the fact that women spend most of their time caring for family members means that they have no access to social activities” [18].

The limitation due to the difference in the mother tongue and the official language used is also a barrier to women's participation in the political field. In fact, policies and documents are used in Vietnamese language. Having to use Vietnamese as a second language leads to the fact that many women cannot participate in political activities, restricting in making comments for policies. In the interview process, in addition to women who are native Vietnamese-speaking staff, the majority of people have not yet mastered the language, which limits their access to adequate policies. On the other hand, the lack of proficiency in Vietnamese is also a cause to a reluctance to criticize the policy, limiting opportunities for participation, which is one of the reasons for the absence of kotu and taoi women at the provincial level.

Due to women's lack of confidence in their ability and language, limited knowledge, and inferiority feeling because of their ethnic minority roots is also one of the obstacles to women's participation in social activities. They are hesitant to speak because the Kinh language - which is used as the main language in Viet Nam, of them is unclear, so in meetings, the most of women just listen, rarely they give personal views on issues, hesitating to speak out for other people to commenting and reviewing community issues, policy of government.

Limited awareness of policy makers on gender and gender mainstreaming in policy making is also one of the reasons for the low level of female participation. While the gender equality law has stipulated the levels of government, agencies and organizations have a responsibility to mainstream gender into the policy-making process. Actually, this depends on the vision and "good will" of the leaders in the organizations, which is a big challenge for local personnel activity, especially at the level of commune. But then, due to the lack of mandatory regulations for agencies and organizations, so many places, sometimes the leaders of agencies do not really care about the important to have gender mainstreaming for women. So, there is a lack of strategies for fostering and training female human resources in localities and at all levels and sectors. According to the results of the survey point out that in localities in Nam Dong and Aluoi districts, despite the high political will at all levels, however, because the planning and implementation of the policy is not close to the actual situation, resulting in the deputy's election of the People's Councils at all levels in 2016 where local women candidates did not receive the trust from the people, leading to not quite optimistic rate of female deputies [19].

The conditions: people's intellectual level and political consciousness are challenges in engaging in political activities of women. Surveys show that although the proportion of women under 30 years of age is highly literate, but most of them have primary and secondary education. Contact to the women's groups of two ethnic groups (including women leaders at the commune level), only one female secretary of the commune is currently attending the distance learning program for the university. In this regard, the majority of women who hold managerial positions in the community interviewed said that the level of literacy is one of the major problems for women, limiting the ability of women to make decisions. From a general perspective, it is not only women with lower education levels, but also men. The number of interviewees was 19% illiteracy, primary education

was 31%, secondary education was only 18% and no university graduates in the community, awareness of politics is a big issue. The interviews show that it seems that the achievements in the field of women's participation in politics are due to the political will and not to the internal needs of the community and the women themselves. Because of their low education, in some cases, women were introduced to electing but they were afraid of being chosen because of lack of confidence to participate in social work. At the commune and district levels, there have been no cases where women are self-nominated, but female candidates are introduced by political and socio-political organizations. This is also the reason why the percentage of women participating in elected bodies in localities has not reached the target of 30% in the nearest term, although when negotiating to finalize the list of candidates, all localities have paid attention to the ratio of female candidates to ensure the balance. Apart from objective challenges, it is impossible not to mention the challenge that comes from the women themselves, the majority of women still do not overcome their prejudices, do not dare to assert themselves, do not believe in themselves and therefore do not overcome the prejudices of society. "The characteristics that men in positive terms - such as ambition, courage, and determination - are considered negative in women." A study shows that "female leaders are linked to characteristics such as hearing, emotion, conscientiousness, and perseverance, which are considered to be inappropriate for leadership positions" [20].

Physical and temporal issues are also a challenge in exercising women's right to participate, because of the social tradition, women have to be double responsible to implement their work and fulfill their family role. Meanwhile, due to biological characteristics, women have more health problems than men, leading to many physical limitations as well as toughness that affect much of the social and family life. In order to do two tasks in parallel, women need to be flexible, have good health, and have the ability to arrange scientific works so many women are retreating from their duties when they are under pressure. On the other hand, women living in upland areas with traffic problems, with biological characteristics, will, to some extent, limit their ability to cope with unexpected emergencies.

Lack of various types of social services supporting women in housework and caring for families and children is a difficult barrier for many women. Reducing the burden of family work for women is one of the essential elements in the liberation of women, and this can only be achieved when social services develop to support women in housework and child care. Given the socio-economic conditions of the two ethnic groups, the lack of basic social services and the difficulty in accessing these services have had a significant impact on the opportunities and time to participate in the social activities of women. Viet Nam "has not yet fully addressed the needs and circumstances of women and girls in ethnic minority and remote areas, in remote and disadvantaged areas, there are many women migrants. The number and quality of services in these areas are still unresponsive to gender, not meeting the needs and circumstances of women [21]".

Observing research sites show that social services such as health services, child care, preschool, ... are not guaranteed to meet the support for the actual needs, it includes the quality and

quantity of services. During the research process, all the research villages came to the situation of women and children are sick but the conditions are very limited care, severe cases must be brought to Hue city to diagnose and treat, though households have health insurance but other costs are beyond the capacity of payment of the family. With this condition, the periodic health examination is completely foreign to the people.

On the other hand, the knowledge of the people and the women of the two ethnic groups about the support services is not good, the income of the family is low, many economic difficulties, so in some place services are available but the conditions for women to access these services are unmatched. Therefore, the majority of women of both ethnic groups are tied to household chores, most of the time just to carry out family-based production and care, and have no time to participate in social activities.

It can be seen that the implementation of the right to participate in Kotu and Taoi women is facing huge challenges, which are the barriers to "the full development of women's empowerment in serving the nation and humanity" [22].

### Conclusion

Given the figures indicated, the fact that the proportion of women in Kotu and Taoi ethnic minority groups involving in politics system is not matched to the capacity and contribution of women to society; the number of women in key positions is still low; Though women's opinions has been showed respected and considered, but Thiers's listening and decision-making are limited. The main obstacle to this is not the legal framework for gender equality, but rather the factors: family conditions, gender role and gender bias is limited and partly due to the capacity of women. In order to overcome these barriers, we need to synchronize the following activities: It should be breakthrough policies in the planning and training of female cadres for each ethnic group and each locality. Increase in the proportion of women personnel planning in positions, especially at the decision level. "Research shows that if the proportion of women involved in political activities and community life reaches 30 to 35 percent (often called the critical amount), there will be real impacts on the political pattern, the content of the decisions, and the political life will be reformed" [23]. There is a need for a change in the "structured" approach to negotiating a candidate list, which should reduce the criteria of female candidates.

VCPC at all levels should cooperate with the local authorities, social organizations (NGOs, CSOs) to organize training courses for women candidates on the skills of election mobilizing campaign. Designing action plans and skills for accessing and using communication channels for social activities.

Rapidly develop and improve the basic social services system in the regions; increase opportunities access to the social security service system to reduce the burden of family responsibilities for women. To minimize the situation of women having to give up the opportunity to take part in the political field because of the family work burden. In fact, the regions of the two ethnic groups reside, the social security system is in short supply, and the services are available, the quality is not really guaranteed.

Promote awareness for women themselves, so that every woman goes through self-deprecation, vigorously crosses the barriers to assert themselves. It is women who "need to focus their mind on decision making at all levels." [24] and therefore "it is important to encourage women to participate in community life in order to make good use of their contributions and ensure that all people enjoy human rights without gender discrimination, full participation of women is essential not only for the development of their strength but also very beneficial for the overall progress of society" [25].

Achieving the goals set by the National Strategy, meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), requires the involvement of the entire political system, but first requires the affirmation of the female, overcoming them self. This requires women to overcome the challenges that exist, this is bumpy road. But this is a trend and a measure of progress, so these barriers must definitely be lifted, for a community of prosperity and progress.

### Acknowledgment

None.

### Conflict of Interest

None.

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