

# Retirement Age Policy Change from a Gender Perspective: The Case of Vietnam Labor Code Amendment in 2019

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ジェンダー問題から見た退職年齢政策の変遷に関する考察  
— ベトナムの2019年改正労働法を事例に —

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the Vietnamese retirement age policy reform of 2019, which gradually increased the retirement age from 55 to 60 years for women and from 60 to 62 years for men. Consequently, the policy reform narrowed the gender gap in the retirement age from five to two years. This study aims to understand why Vietnam increases the retirement age for both women and men and narrows the gender gap in retirement age between them rather than eliminating it. The author uses a mixed approach to analyze relevant documents and interview key policymakers and experts involved in the retirement age policy. This study argues that several factors influence the retirement age policy reform. At the international level, Vietnam's commitment to comply with international human rights norms and labor standards and the active roles of international actors influence the government's decision to change the retirement age policy. At the national level, policy reform is driven by various demographic, socioeconomic, and political factors, including potential labor shortage and pension imbalance, the decisive role of the leading party, and women's leadership achievement. Significantly, due to public resistance, hindering cultural factors, and a lack of relevant policies supporting women extended working lives, the government narrowed the gap in retirement age between women and men instead of equalizing. Understanding these underlying factors suggests that policymakers should consider relevant policies to empower women and promote gender equality in the political and economic spheres.

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## 1. Introduction

Retirement age is the age at which individuals exit the labor market and qualify for pension benefits (OECD 2011, p.20). The retirement age has attracted much attention from researchers and policymakers worldwide because of its significant implications for employees, employers, and society. Individually, when workers retire, it impacts their health, well-being, labor force participation, economic status, and marital equality (Fisher et al. 2016; Pilipiec et al. 2020; Scharn et al. 2018). Additionally, retirement timing affects organizations' workforce planning and management, productivity, and costs. Moreover, the retirement age can affect government pension systems and the labor supply (Fisher et al. 2016, p.231). Given that population aging has occurred worldwide, the retirement age has been a policy tool that many governments undertake in response to demographic and socioeconomic challenges.

Globally, retirement age has changed over time. A long-term survey on retirement age across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries shows how the retirement age has changed (OECD 2011). Over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the average retirement age for men fell from approximately 64.3 years in 1949 to 62.4 years in 1993; the average retirement age for women decreased from 62.9 to 61.0 years (OECD 2011, p.33). Since the mid-1990s, many governments have implemented policy reform to increase retirement age. During 1993-2002, approximately one-third of the OECD countries increased the retirement age for men, and two-thirds did so for women (Turner 2007, p.96). By 2050, the average retirement age is expected to reach nearly 65 years for both sexes (Chomik & Whitehouse 2010, p.6; OECD 2011, p.18). The same trend has been documented in the United States (Munnell 2011, 2015).

It is noteworthy that the current trend of increasing the retirement age has faced strong public resistance in many countries. Recently, there have been strikes and protest across France against government's reform of raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. The opponents consider retire early is the right and retirement is a time to enjoy life after years of working (Smith 2023). The phenomenon has occurred not only in France but also in other nations, such as UK, Russia, etc. Despite the unpopularity, governments increase retirement age due to the reasons as follow. First, raising the retirement age is one policy option to prevent a pension system crisis caused by high life expectancy (Moore 2001; OECD 2011; Templin 2011; Turner 2007). Because people live longer, pension benefits are paid over a long period, putting pressure on public finance (Templin 2011, p.1201). Raising the retirement age could help reduce the pension fund's long-term deficit and promote general economic gains (Moore 2001, p.546). Second, by keeping people in the labor market, increasing the retirement age would increase the labor force participation of older workers and thus address labor shortage risk (Munnell 2011). In addition, people are considered to have healthier and better educational levels than the previous generations, which allows them to extend their working lives and delay retirement (Moore 2001; Munnell 2011, 2015; Turner 2007). However, increasing the retirement age could harm certain groups with short longevity, poor health, low educational level, low income, or physically demanding jobs (Axelrad and Mahoney 2017, p.65;

Moore 2001, p.546; Templin 2011, pp.1202-1203). Moreover, increasing the retirement age adversely impacts youth employment; however, several empirical studies do not support this argument (Boheim and Nice 2019, p.9; Kalwij, Kapteyn, and De Vos 2010, p.345).

Beside the trend of lengthening the retirement age, we can see an additional trend of the equalization of the retirement age for women and men, where the retirement age for women is lower than that for men. Historically, the retirement age of women has been below that of men. One-half of OECD countries have had, at some time, a different retirement age between women and men (Chomik and Whitehouse 2010, p.7; OECD 2011, p.26). The main argument for women's earlier retirement age is the perception of protecting and benefiting women by relieving them from work and granting them pension benefits earlier than men. However, this perception changed from the perspective of gender equality (Turner 2007, p.89). Several United Nations (UN) human rights treaties and International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions set principles of non-discrimination based on sex and gender equality. For example, The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calls for State parties to eliminate discrimination against women in employment to ensure the same rights (Article 11). In particular, the CEDAW Committee recognizes that earlier retirement age is a form of discrimination against women (CEDAW 2010, para.17). Previous research argues that lower retirement age negatively impacts women's pension benefits because shorter earnings histories translate into lower benefits, which are paid out over a longer period because of higher women's life expectancy than men's (Brimblecombe and McClanahan 2019, p.328; Zhao and Zhao 2018, p.220). Therefore, equalizing the retirement age could mitigate the pension gap (Bettio, Tinios, and Betti 2013, p.75).

Almost all advanced economies have established equal retirement ages for women and men. For example, Japan, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, and Germany have equal retirement ages for both sexes at age 65. A few OECD countries, such as Switzerland and Israel, have different retirement ages for women and men, (OECD 2017, p.11). Even though these countries implemented the retirement age reform, the retirement age of women is below that of men. Swiss government in 1997 increased the retirement age for women from age 62 to 64 while men retire at 65 (Lalive and Staubli 2015). In 2004, Israel legislated a gradual increase in the retirement age for male from 65 to 67, while that for female raised from 60 to 62 (Shai 2018).

The literature review raises one question: Why do some States increase the retirement age for women but do not equalize it to that for men? To our knowledge, this question has not been fully answered in the existing literature. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap. This study analyzes the retirement age policy change in 2019, whereby Vietnam gradually raised the retirement age for female workers from 55 to 60 years and male workers from 60 to 62 years. By investigating factors influencing retirement age policy reform at the international and domestic levels, this study helps better understand the policy change, and thus could address the unanswered question above.

Vietnam is an interesting case because two trends in retirement age can be seen within the recent policy reform. On the one hand, the reform increased the retirement age for both women and men.

On the other hand, the policy changed toward equalizing the retirement age for women and men by narrowing the gender gap in retirement age between them from five to two years.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it extends the literature on factors affecting retirement age policy reform, which mainly focuses on domestic factors to a broader context by identifying international factors that influence government decision. Second, it analyzes the retirement age policy change through a gender lens, which has received less attention in previous studies. Third, it offers an empirical evidence of the developing country with faster-aging population than other countries given its low-middle income status.

In practice, this study aims to promote the principles of nondiscrimination and gender equality stimulated by several UN human rights treaties and ILO conventions in the labor and social security fields. This study is also relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to empower women, end all forms of discrimination against women (SDG 5) and achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men (SDG 8). In addition, although this study focused on policy reform in a single country, it may be relevant to countries with low and/or differential retirement ages between women and men.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes Vietnam's recent retirement age policy reform. Section 3 presents the research questions and methodology. Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 summarizes the findings and policy implications.

## **2. Vietnam retirement age policy reform in 2019**

This section sets the background for the study by providing an overview of the Vietnamese retirement age policy and the 2019 policy reform.

In Vietnam, the retirement age was established in the Decree No.128-CP dated December 27, 1961 of Government *on the temporary social insurance policy for workers, public officials* (Article 42). The retirement age was set at 60 years for men and 55 years for women and remained unchanged until 2021. This is the retirement age for workers under normal working conditions. Laborers in certain occupations can retire earlier or later. For example, military officials or workers performing heavy, harmful, and dangerous jobs can retire earlier. People with working capacity are decreased from 61% and above also retired earlier. University lecturers and high-level government officials can retire later (Article 187 the 2012 Labor Code). The retirement age was applied to all employees in the public and private sectors (Article 2 the 2014 Social Insurance Law), and when employees begin receiving pension benefits if they have a social insurance contribution for at least 20 years (Article 54 the 2014 Social Insurance Law).

In 2019, the National Assembly (NA) adopted a policy reform that gradually raised the retirement age for female workers from 55 to 60 years and male workers from 60 to 62 years (Article 169 the Labor Code 2019). The policy proposal was submitted and discussed at the NA plenary sessions twice, in May and October 2019, was approved on November 29, 2019, and took effect on January 1, 2021. The retirement age has increased gradually by three months per year to reach 62 for men

over eight years (2021-2028) and by four months per year to reach 60 for women over 15 years (2021-2035). Table 1 provides details of the new retirement age rules.

Table 1: New Retirement Age Provision

<b>Year</b>	<b>Female workers</b>	<b>Male workers</b>
2021	55 years old and 4 months	60 years old and 3 months
2022	55 years old and 8 months	60 years old and 6 months
2023	56 years old	60 years old and 9 months
2024	56 years old and 4 months	61 years old
2025	56 years old and 8 months	61 years old and 3 months
2026	57 years old	61 years old and 6 months
2027	57 years old and 4 months	61 years old and 9 months
2028	57 years old and 8 months	62 years old
2029	58 years old	
2030	58 years old and 4 months	
2031	58 years old and 8 months	
2032	59 years old	
2033	59 years old and 4 months	
2034	59 years old and 8 months	
2035	60 years old	

Source: Decree No.135/2020/NĐ-CP dated January 18, 2020 of the Government on the Employees' Retirement Age.

During the policy reform process, the proposal for an extended retirement age attracted considerable public attention. People talked about it anywhere, from indoors to outdoors and from buildings to sidewalk cafés, which was relatively unfamiliar to Vietnamese society. Over the past decade, some attempts have been made to extend the retirement age during discussions of the Gender Equality Law and the Labor Code, but were rejected. The main reasons for rejection were the lack of intensive studies and objections from employees and employers nationwide (UN Women 2012; World Bank and ILSSA 2009). This inspired me to conduct the study to determine why the Vietnamese government accepted the proposal of raising the retirement age this time and to explore the rationale behind the government's decision to narrow the retirement age gap between women and men rather than abolishing it.

### 3. Research questions and methodology

#### 3.1 Research questions

To achieve the purpose stated in Section 1 and exploit the Vietnamese retirement age policy reform, the present study has one central question and three sub-questions.

The central question is: What factors affect retirement age policy change under the Vietnam Labor Code Amendment in 2019 ?

The sub-questions are: What external factors influence policy change? What internal factors drive policy reform? Which gender-related factors affect policy change?

#### 3.2 Research methodology

I employed qualitative methodology to answer these questions. The qualitative method is suitable for a better understanding of the retirement age policy change in Vietnam. I used a mixed approach to collect the secondary and primary data as follows:

First, I reviewed several documents relevant to the retirement age policy reform, including (i) legal documents; (ii) government documents such as reports issued by the government and NA and their bodies; (iii) research reports and papers conducted by domestic and international organizations; and (iv) academic and non-academic materials.

Second, I conducted interviews with policymakers and experts involved in the retirement age policy reform process, including (i) NA members who directly pressed the button to adopt the policy proposal; (ii) officials of relevant government bodies and mass representative organizations for employees, employers, and women, who participated in preparing and drafting the policy proposal; and (iii) experts from domestic and international consultants who worked closely with the Vietnamese government. Table 2 summarizes the participants.

Table 2: List of Interview Participants

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Organization
01	46	M	National Economics University (NEU)
02	39	M	Centre for Information, Strategic Analysis and Forecast (ILLSA)
03	44	M	National Assembly (NA) Deputy
04	64	M	Former Vice-chairman of the Committee on Social Affairs (NA)
05	40	M	NA Deputy
06	39	F	Social Affairs Dept., Office of NA
07	50	M	Office of Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA)
08	51	M	Legal Dept., MOLISA
09	48	M	Social Insurance Dept., MOLISA
10	55	M	Legal and Policy Dept., Vietnam General Federation of Labors (VGFL)

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Organization
11	56	F	Employer Office, Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI)
12	52	M	International Labor Organization (ILO), Vietnam Office
13	47	F	Legal and Policy Dept., Vietnam Women Union (VWN)
14	63	F	Former Senior Official of Gender Dept., MOLISA
15	47	M	World Bank (WB), Vietnam Office
16	44	M	Legal Dept., Vietnam Social Security (VSS)

Note: M-Male; F-Female

In August 2022, I traveled to Hanoi's capital city for a field trip. Hanoi is Vietnam's administrative, cultural, and political center, the base of all government bodies. I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour. All participants were Vietnamese; therefore, the language was Vietnamese. An interview protocol was used to guide the study. At the beginning of the interviews, I introduced myself as a Waseda University doctoral candidate and the study's purpose. I then explained their right to withdraw at any time without giving reasons. I committed to keep information confidential. I asked for recording and to do so if the participants agreed. In parallel, I took notes during the interviews.

Once the data were collected, they were analyzed thematically. The data were grouped into three themes based on the research questions. Each theme was divided into subthemes. The following sections present the findings in detail.

#### **4. Research results**

Drawing on both secondary and primary data, the results revealed that various factors influenced the retirement age policy change in Vietnam. These factors can be categorized into external, internal, and gender-related ones.

##### **4.1 External factors**

The findings revealed two external factors affecting policy reform in Vietnam: (1) international human rights norms and labor standards that require member States to fulfill and (2) international organizations' activities.

##### **4.1.1 International human rights and labor standards**

One of the primary purposes of increasing the retirement age is to promote gender equality in the labor market and guarantee the non-discrimination principle following the international instruments to which Vietnam was a member State (MOLISA 2019). Vietnam was one of the first States to sign



the CEDAW on July 29, 1980 and ratified it on November 27, 1981. Vietnam also became a signatory country to the ICESCR on September 24, 1982. Before that, Vietnam joined the ILO Convention Nos. 100 and 111 in 1997. As a result, Vietnam must apply international regulations to its domestic laws and policies.

Regarding retirement age, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights called on Vietnam to “amend all legislative provisions that discriminate against women, such as the different retirement ages for men and women” (CESCR 2014, para.16). Similarly, the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended adopting “the same age of mandatory retirement for women and men” (CEDAW 2015, para.29).

The Vietnamese government considered such recommendations during the retirement age policy reform process. Vietnam recognized that the five-year retirement age gap was not in line with international standards. “The difference in retirement age between men and women can lead to discrimination” (Report of MOLISA *on assessment of the compatibility of Labor Code 2012 with international standards*, p.53), and hence needed to be amended. In addition, many interview participants mentioned international treaties as a significant factor contributing to change Vietnam’s retirement age policy (Interviewees 04, 05, 12, 14, and 15).

#### **4.1.2 International organizations**

Over the past decade, several international organizations engaged in the retirement age policy reform to increase the retirement age has been placed on the policy agenda. Many participants appreciated the international players in supporting the Vietnamese government (Interviewees 01, 02, 06, 07, 08, 14, and 16). “In recent years, the role of international organizations has been more important. They have provided recommendations that help Vietnam’s policies based on scientific evidence.” (Interviewee 01).

Their contributions were mainly through evidence-based research and technical and financial support. Since 2006, the World Bank (WB) and its partners have identified the differential retirement age in Vietnam as a human rights issue (World Bank 2011, p.10). This was emphasized by UN Women from the perspective of CEDAW (UN Women 2012, p.1). Furthermore, the WB conducted a cost-benefit analysis for different scenarios of increasing retirement age, including the one adopted in the Labor Code 2019 (World Bank 2019, pp.11-12), which served as “a basis for the government before making decision to reform the retirement age.” (Interviewee 15).

Among these actors, the ILO has dominated. The ILO actively participated in the Labor Code amendment in general and the retirement age policy reform in particular. The ILO cooperated closely to support MOLISA and CSA by conducting evidence-based research, providing international experience, supporting the assessment of the socioeconomic impact of the policy proposal, and organizing consultation workshops and conferences. The former NA deputy assessed the ILO’s role as below.

“During amending the Labor Code, the drafting organization (MOLISA) and the NA



supervising organization (CSA) were ready to listen and use comments and suggestions from international organizations... ILO participated in adjusting each article of the Bill Labor Code and help Vietnam complete the 2019 Labor Code amendment.” (Interviewee 04).

Other international organizations, such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Australian Embassy, have also been involved in the retirement age policy. All these actors collaborated to promote gender equality in Vietnam based on their vision and strengths. Notably, an informal group of ambassadors and organizational leaders acted as coordinating organs to support Vietnam effectively (Interviewee 15).

## **4.2 Internal factors**

Several demographic, socioeconomic, and political factors drove the retirement age policy. Due to the aging population and to address the risks of labor shortage and pension fund imbalance, as well as to narrow the gender gap in retirement age, Vietnam increased the retirement age for both women and men at a faster pace for women than men. This was also based on the fact that many older adults continued working after retirement age. Not surprisingly, the policy change was oriented directly by the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). Interestingly, women’s leadership smoothed the new retirement age legislation.

### **4.2.1 Demographic and socioeconomic factors**

The aging population is the world’s most common demographic trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Vietnam is no exception. Vietnam even has a faster-aging population than other countries in the region: it will take only about 18 years for Vietnam to double the proportion of older people aged 65 and over from 7% to 14% of the total population (i.e., moving from an “aging” population to an “aged” population), compared to 26 years for Japan, and 21 years for Thailand and China (VNCA and UNFPA 2019). Notably, it is going through this transition at lower level of per capita income (40% of the global average) (World Bank and JICA 2021, p.1). Therefore, given its low-middle income status, Vietnam has aged before becoming rich.

This section summarizes Report No.120/BC-LĐT BXH of MOLISA to assess impact and explain retirement age adjustments. First, the rapid pace of the aging population has significantly increased the number of older people while the proportion of working-age people has decreased. Over five years, the working-age population increased by 2 million, from 53 million in 2013 to 55 million in 2018, with an average of only 400,000 employees per year, much lower than the 1.2 million extra per year in the last period. It was forecasted that Vietnam would face a labor shortage in the next 20 years if the retirement age was not raised. Second, the labor force participation of older workers after retirement is high. Approximately 70% of female retirees aged 55–60 and males aged 60–65 participated in the labor market. Raising the retirement age would formally keep them in the labor market and continue contributing to the economy. Third, narrowing the gender gap in retirement age promotes gender equality in the labor market, following international standards. Fourth,

Vietnam's life expectancy at the age of 60 was 22.5 years, while under the current pension program, the pension fund was only sufficient to pay pension benefits for ten years. Therefore, extending the retirement age contributes to balance pension funds in the long-term.

Regarding the factor of pension fund balance, some participants stated that "this reason is not critical (Interviewee 07) because "retirement age policy affect a small group in the working age population who have social insurance relationship" (Interviewee 01). The coverage of social insurance system in Vietnam is low; about 24% of women and 18.3% of men in the labor force were covered in 2015 (ILO 2021). They include workers in the formal sector only, such as civil servants, military officers, or employees having labor contracts for at least one month. It means that workers in informal sector that accounts for about 76% of total employment (ILO 2021) are not affected by the increasing in retirement age, at least in short-term.

#### **4.2.2 Leadership**

"From 2021, the retirement age will be adjusted according to the goal of increasing the general retirement age, gradually narrowing the gender gap in retirement age regulation. For certain occupations, employees are entitled to retire five years earlier or later than the general retirement age. Adjusting the retirement age requires a long-term vision and a roadmap suitable for economic growth, job creation, and unemployment, with no negative impact on the labor market, ensuring the quantity, quality, and structure of the population; gender equality; balancing the Social Insurance Fund in the long term; population aging trend; nature and types of labor; and between professions and fields."

(Resolution No.28-NQ/TW dated May 23, 2018 of the VCP Central Committee on Reforming Social Insurance Policies)

These regulations of the Resolution No.28-NQ/TW guided the retirement age policy change. The Labor Code was amended to institutionalize the requirements of this resolution. Notably, before issuing Resolution No.28-NQ/TW, the VCP asked relevant ministries and organizations to research and prepare theoretical and realistic foundations and consulted international and national experts. "The VCP plays the decisive role and the Resolution is built based on taking into account relevant factors carefully." (Interviewee 03).

Interestingly, there were three women in the Political Bureau (Politburo), the Party's most powerful body. They comprised the Chairwoman, the Permanent Vice-Chairwoman of NA Term XIV (2016-2021), and the Head of the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Commission for Mass Mobilization. So far, the NA Chairperson has been the first woman in the history of the highest legislative power. This created favorable conditions for adopting the delayed retirement age policy proposal as stated by the interviewees: "Two NA women leaders have great voice during the discussion of the policy proposal at NA sessions and increase support to new policy." (Interviewee 03). Beyond that, "three women leaders in the Politburo proves significant progress of women empowerment in the policy-making field in Vietnam." (Interviewee 04).

### 4.3 Gender-related factors

Indeed, these factors fell into the internal factor group but were analyzed separately, focusing on the gender perspective. This explains why Vietnam narrowed the gap in retirement age between women and men rather than eliminating it.

#### 4.3.1 Gender gaps

Women's labor force participation in Vietnam is remarkably high: about 70% of working-age women are in the labor market, compared to the average world rate (47.2%) (ILO 2021). However, female employees face several gender gaps in employment and social security, such as wage and pension gaps. The five-year retirement age gap between women and men caused disadvantages for women. For example, women's earlier retirement age implies lower pension benefits that are calculated based on the number of contribution years and salaries accumulated in their working history.

In addition, in the public sector, lower retirement age disadvantaged women regarding promotion and training opportunities. For example, officials who were promoted for the first time must not be older than 55 for men and 50 for women, according to Decision No.27/2003/QĐ-TTg dated February 19, 2003 of the Prime Minister *promulgating the regulation on the appointment, re-appointment, shift, resignation, and removal from the office of leading officials and public employees*.

Therefore, increasing the retirement age could help ease gender issues faced by female Vietnamese workers (Interviewees 01, 12, and 13). Furthermore, from an economic perspective, increasing the retirement age would benefit individuals and the entire economy. Women working until the age of 60 can collectively earn an additional 10,619.4 billion VND (around US\$483 million). Men working until age 62 can earn an additional 4,595.4 billion VND (around US\$209 million). The new retirement age regulation also increases the annual net benefit to around 0.218% of the GDP (World Bank 2019). This estimation was confirmed by Nguyen (2019).

#### 4.3.2 Policy rationales

There have been controversies regarding retirement age provisions, both pre-and post-reform. Previous research has shown that female retirees, employers, and employees disagreed with increasing the retirement age (World Bank and ILSSA 2009). Most employees in the manufacturing sector, such as textiles, leather, and marine workers, did not want to postpone retirement (Interview 10). Some NA members suggested to maintain the current retirement age for workers in the manufacturing and service sectors (NA Secretary General 2019, p.2). The opinions were backed up by the arguments that labor-intensive employees have working age that is shorter than those in other occupations. "They usually enter the labor market early and have long working hours, so that they are not healthy enough to extend working lives." (Interviewee 04).

Most participants agreed that the new retirement age was suitable for Vietnam's socioeconomic conditions. It implemented the regulations of the Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents (2015)

that require an adequate assessment of the socioeconomic impact of policy proposal and integrating gender equality in the proposal before submission to the NA. However, some argued that it was “a halfway reform” (Interviewee 12). Although the Labor Code 2019 successfully addressed many gender issue regulations based on the changing mindset from protecting women to promoting gender equality (Chapter X), the new retirement age provision differed somewhat (Interviewee 15).

From the participants’ views, there were some rationales behind the government’s decision to narrow the gender gap in the retirement age instead of abolishing it. Firstly, differences in public opinion and among stakeholders may cause the government to carefully consider neutral policy options (interviewees 10, 15, and 16). “Government increases the retirement age for both sexes to achieve the agreement of both sexes and the whole society.” (Interviewee 16).

Secondly, women is the main provider of care for family members with care need (ILO 2021). It is common in Vietnamese traditional culture if retired women take care grandchildren. A female interviewee who is also a retiree said that retired women do not favor extended retirement age because they want to take care their grandchildren whose parents are working. She is one among them. She added: “Vietnam childcare services are weak and do not meet the need. Kindergartens are not easy to access because public schools are overloaded, while private schools are too expensive and the fees paid for domestic workers are very high.” (Interviewee 14).

Thirdly, relevant policies have not yet supported women in extending their working lives (Interviewees 13 and 14). In addition to the childcare service mentioned above, the current social insurance system does not cover unpaid jobs including the care tasks mostly performed by women (ILO 2021).

It was well noted that all interviewees agreed that the retirement age policy was ongoing reform. It has moved toward equalizing the retirement age for women and men. After 2035, when the phased-in period is completed, men will reach the full age of 62 by 2028, and women will reach the full age of 60 by 2035. The government will revise and assess the implementation of new retirement age regulations and consider further reform.

## **5. Discussion**

Increasing the retirement age to deal with an aging population and its negative impacts have been inevitable in many States worldwide. However, the gender gap in retirement age between women and men has led to disadvantages in labor and retirement. This study attempts to explain why Vietnam’s retirement age policy changed and why the retirement age for women increased but was not equal to that for men. This study identifies various explanatory factors influencing the Vietnamese government’s decision to change its retirement age policy. They range from international to domestic levels, including Vietnam’s commitments in line with international human rights norms and labor standards on anti-gender discrimination and gender equality, the crucial roles of international actors, the driving demographic and socioeconomic factors, the decisive role of the leading party, and women’s leadership achievement. In particular, the gender-related factors,

including public resistance, hindering cultural factors, and a lack of relevant policies supporting women to extend working lives, help explain why the Vietnamese government narrows the gap in retirement age between women and men rather than eliminating it.

This study provides evidence that international factors significantly impact the national retirement age policy reform. In an era of globalization, no single country can exist without interacting with other countries, as most countries are members of the United Nations. Member States must harmonize international laws with domestic laws and policies by signing and/or ratifying the UN international human rights treaties and the ILO conventions. The retirement age policy reform is one such case. International organizations also play an important role. Dominant actors, such as the ILO and the WB, assist the Vietnamese government effectively in policy reform by providing evidence-based research and financial and technical support.

The finding that demographic and socioeconomic factors leading to retirement age policy change is consistent with a large body of literature (Axelrad and Mahoney 2017; Moore 2001; OECD 2011; Templin 2011; Turner 2007). Like other countries, Vietnam's retirement age policy reform was driven by several domestic factors. However, the pension factor differed slightly. In developed countries, a pension crisis is the primary reason for retirement age change. This is not the case in Vietnam because the current pension system covers only formal workers, who account for approximately 30% of the total employment. In this sense, the scope of the policy reform is not substantive, at least in the short-term.

Finding the decisive role of the leading party is a unique for Vietnam. In other countries, the decision to select a proposal to increase the retirement age results from negotiations between political parties (Templin 2011). In Vietnam's one-party political system, the change to the retirement age policy is guided by Resolution No.28-NQ/TW of the VCP. More interestingly, three women in the Politburo (3/18 members) could help approve a new retirement age provision. This is a good example that illuminates the important role of women's leadership in policy decision-making toward gender equality.

With a gender lens, the study confirms previous research (Anastasia et al. 2013; Arza 2015; Bettio et al. 2013; Brimblecombe and McClanahan 2019; Zhao and Zhao 2018) that identify the negative impact of women's earlier retirement age on women's status in the labor market and social security. Significantly, this study explains why the Vietnamese government decided to narrow the gender gap in the retirement age instead of abolishing it. In Vietnam, the traditional perception of women's roles and the lack of gender-sensitive policies hinder the equalization of the retirement age for women and men. In addition, the opposition to delayed retirement highlights the complexity of policy option. Narrowing the gender gap in the retirement age from five to two years is an essential step for further improvements in the future.

The results of this study have several implications. From a theoretical perspective, this study offers empirical evidence for human rights and labor studies in relation with the retirement age. Moreover, it focuses on the gender perspective, which is usually neglected in the existing literature

on retirement age policy reform. From the policy aspect, although the study focuses on policy change in the developing country of Vietnam, the findings may be relevant to other countries with low and differential retirement ages between women and men. Finally, the study strongly supports the implementation of international human rights laws and labor standards on nondiscrimination and gender equality and to achieve the relevant SDGs.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study finds that several factors at the international and domestic levels primarily explain Vietnam's retirement age policy change. The main contribution of this study is to increase the understanding of the factors influencing the policy change and provide insights into how these factors affect the policy reform. Understanding these underlying factors would help in designing relevant policies. For example, policymakers should consider policies that empower women in policy decision-making and support women to work longer in the labor market.

This study has both strengths and limitations. The participation of elite people provides great insights into this study. For instance, they suggested a factor related to women's leadership that I did not consider during the initial study period. It is suggested that I interview international experts who could help the study triangulate (this will be done in the next phase of the study). In addition, many documents cited here are non-peer-reviewed; however, they provide the necessary information for policy analysis.

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