



Gender Stereotypes in Vietnamese Education: The Influence of Cultural Norms on Subject Choices and Career Aspirations

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Abstract

This paper examines how cultural norms shape gendered perceptions of subject choices and career aspirations among Vietnamese students. Using a structured survey of 103 high school and university students in Ho Chi Minh City, the study analyses beliefs about gender-appropriate fields, sources of influence (family, teachers, media), and intentions to pursue STEM or caregiving/social professions. Results indicate persistent stereotypes—STEM is perceived as more suitable for men, while education and care sectors are associated with women—yet younger urban respondents report greater willingness to challenge these norms. The paper contributes an updated, context-specific account of how gendered habitus is reproduced in Vietnamese schooling and offers actionable guidance for policy and practice, including gender-responsive counselling, teacher training, and textbook review. The study adds empirical evidence from Vietnam to the global literature and outlines a feasible pathway to reduce stereotype-consistent choices.

Keywords: culture; education; gender bias; student aspirations; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Gender equality in education has advanced in Vietnam in terms of access; however, entrenched cultural expectations continue to influence what students study and who they aspire to become. Within Bourdieu's framework, schools transmit and normalize gendered forms of cultural capital, creating a 'habitus' that channels girls and boys into different academic trajectories (Bourdieu, 1986). International agencies caution that such biases constrain national human capital formation—especially in STEM—and slow progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). This

study responds by providing current, city-level evidence from Vietnam and translating findings into practical steps for educators and policy makers. The purpose is to identify how gender stereotypes operate in secondary and tertiary education and to assess the extent to which students resist or reproduce them.

Research questions (RQs) and hypotheses (Hs) are as follows:

RQ1: How do gender stereotypes influence subject selection among Vietnamese students?

RQ2: How do cultural norms shape students' career aspirations based on gender?

RQ3: Are there differences in gendered perceptions by student gender and study level?

H1: Female students are more likely to prefer humanities and social-care fields.

H2: Male students are more likely to aspire to technical and leadership careers aligned with masculine-coded norms.

2. Literature Review

Vietnamese educational materials and classroom practices continue to reflect traditional gender roles. Content analyses of textbooks reveal women disproportionately portrayed in caregiving roles and men in analytical or technical domains, implicitly signalling which pathways 'fit' each gender (Nguyen & Le, 2020; Phan & Pham, 2021). Beyond materials, the hidden curriculum—norms and expectations transmitted informally—reinforces gendered identities and self-concepts (Losioki & Mdee, 2023).

International evidence indicates that stereotypes can dampen girls' self-efficacy and aspirations for STEM even when performance is equivalent to boys. Recent work shows that gender- role beliefs predict both academic self- concept and achievement through aspirations (Chen, Hassan, Hamzah, Murad, & Wu, 2025). In Vietnam, disparities in STEM engagement persist, shaped by long- standing cultural assumptions and unequal access to mentorship (Vuong et al., 2020). Early exposure also matters—bibliometric mapping highlights the importance of early childhood interventions and teacher beliefs for later STEM participation (Nguyen, Bui, & Hoang, 2024).

At the policy level, Vietnam has articulated commitments to gender equality in education; yet implementation requires targeted actions in counselling, curriculum, and teacher training (Duong, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). The present study builds on this literature by offering up- to- date survey evidence from Ho Chi Minh City and by outlining concrete implementation strategies for schools and ministries.

3. Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. Participants (n = 103) consisted of high school and university students in Ho Chi Minh City recruited via convenience sampling. The online questionnaire captured demographics; subject preferences; career aspirations; and perceived influences from parents, teachers/counsellors, peers, and media. Items included multiple-choice questions and 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument was piloted with 10 students to refine wording and ensure clarity. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; informed consent was obtained electronically in accordance with institutional ethical guidance. Analysis involved descriptive statistics to

profile beliefs and intentions, and cross-tabulations to compare patterns across gender and study level. Representative visualisations (bar charts) are provided to aid interpretation.

4. Results

Results show that many respondents still associate STEM with men and caregiving or social fields with women. Parents and teachers remain the most frequently cited influences, with media also playing a non-trivial role. At the same time, a notable subset—particularly among urban university students—expressed confidence to select subjects based on interest rather than gendered expectations.

5. Discussion

Findings are consistent with prior Vietnamese work showing gendered subject identities and channeling in school guidance (Nguyen & Le, 2020; Vuong et al., 2020). The salience of parents' and teachers' views reflects how the hidden curriculum reproduces gendered expectations in everyday interactions (Bourdieu, 1986; Losioki & Mdee, 2023). However, the evidence that many students wish to choose by interest aligns with global reports pointing to gradual normative change and the importance of school-level interventions (UNESCO, 2021).

6. Implications and Implementation

Counselling: Integrate gender-responsive career guidance in lower and upper secondary schools, using counter-stereotypical labour-market information and alumni role models. **Teacher development:** Embed gender-sensitivity modules in pre-service and in-service programmes; include classroom observation rubrics that track equitable participation. **Curriculum and textbooks:** Audit examples and visuals for balance; prioritise revisions to STEM chapters (Nguyen & Le, 2020). **Families and media:** Partner with parent associations and youth media to normalise female participation in STEM and male participation in care professions. **Monitoring:** Track subject enrolment by gender and review counselling content to evaluate progress. These steps align with national priorities and global guidance (Duong, 2024; UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023).

7. Limitations and Future Research

The sample is limited to one urban area and relies on self-reported perceptions; causal inference is constrained. Future work should include rural provinces, employ mixed methods, and assess the effects of specific school-based interventions over time.

8. Conclusion

Gender stereotypes continue to shape educational choices in Vietnam, yet attitudinal shifts among younger urban cohorts suggest opportunities for change. Targeted action in counselling, curriculum, teacher practice, and family/media messaging can widen students' options and reduce stereotype-consistent selection.

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