Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



Vietnamese sisters, members of Formation Support for Vietnam, gather at Marian Days in Carthage, Missouri, in August 2024. (Courtesy of Ngoc Nguyen)



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Of the more than 25,000 religious sisters in Vietnam from congregations that have faithfully served the church for centuries, very few have ever received the opportunity to receive higher education or have been placed in positions of authority or decision-making. For generations, Vietnamese male clergy were fortunate to study and pursue graduate degrees around the world. Formation Support for Vietnam, or FSVN, a nonprofit organization established in 2010, has sought to overcome this blatant gender discrimination and offer support for both clergy and female religious who seek to study abroad in the United States.

This higher education allows both men and women religious in the Vietnamese church to gain knowledge and professional skills that can be brought back to more effectively serve the church in Vietnam. Formation Support for Vietnam has served as a bridge to knowledge, allowing Vietnamese religious sisters a chance to cross into the realm of American Catholic and public universities — places that were previously inaccessible.

Vietnamese society has traditionally placed women as subordinate and subservient to men, with widespread practices of preferential treatment for males. This is partly due to the societal influence of Confucianism, where women are expected to follow the cultural norms of three submissions: a girl must obey her father; submit to her husband when married; and depend on her eldest son when she becomes a widow. The latter two submissions remain relevant for religious sisters who must be submissive and dependent on male clergy.

Additionally, Vietnamese women are expected to embody the four womanly virtues of diligent work, pleasing appearance, appropriate speech and moral conduct, with little concern or expectation for them to receive an education or contribute to society outside the home. These cultural characteristics have also influenced the Vietnamese church, as higher education was deemed unnecessary for women and religious sisters because it was a role reserved for the male clerical hierarchy.

The reality of this prejudicial gap has remained evident over the past decade. Diocesan congregations remain under the authority of the bishops, who must approve every action, including the opportunity to send sisters abroad for higher education. Some superiors were reprimanded for sending young sisters abroad without notifying their bishops because of the expectation that they would not have received approval.

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Unfortunately, this highlights the persistent belief in Vietnamese culture that significant contributions and decisions in the church can only be made by males. Despite these limitations, the support from FSVN has allowed Vietnamese sisters to maintain a dream and a desire that someday they will be offered the opportunity to study and gain the respect and dignity to fully contribute to their parishes, dioceses and the Vietnamese church.

Formation Support for Vietnam plays an important role in helping Vietnamese religious sisters fulfill their dreams of accessing higher education. For example, a Vietnamese Dominican sister shared her joy when asked about the opportunity to study in the U.S., saying:

> Through the support of FSVN, I was granted an opportunity to pursue a Ph.D. program in spirituality. It was a dream come true for me. As a nun living in a developing country and under a strongly patriarchal culture, this dream was at one time unreachable and unimaginable for me, or so I thought. But now, my dream is becoming a reality.

Through her doctoral studies, she hopes to bring the skills and knowledge she gains in the U.S. back to Vietnam to serve "in the field of spiritual direction and to accompany those who want to live a more intimate relationship with God."

Likewise, Sr. Cao Thu Ha, of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of the Phan Thiet Diocese, speaks positively about the impact of Formation Support for Vietnam: "FSVN played a pivotal role in creating the opportunity for me to study in the U.S. … FSVN served as a bridge between my congregation and American educational institutions … FSVN made my academic dreams a reality."

Ha hopes that this opportunity will enable her to "enhance education quality in disadvantaged areas, bridge the theory-practice gap, and inspire positive change in Vietnam's educational landscape."

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Although the sisters recognize that it will be difficult to change such deeply entrenched cultural biases, they remain hopeful and know that each small step brings them closer to the day their dream will come true.

It is encouraging that many women religious congregations have started to overcome barriers by sending young sisters to study in the U.S. Since its beginning, FSVN has supported nearly 100 religious sisters from 55 congregations in pursuing master's degrees or doctorates in theology, education, psychology, social work and more. Leaders of these congregations have emphasized that the sisters who have studied abroad significantly contribute to the development of their congregations upon returning to Vietnam. However, it is important that the knowledge the sisters gain in the U.S. does not remain limited to helping the sisters in their communities but can extend to benefiting the parish and diocesan levels, as well as the overall Vietnamese church.

Acknowledging the problem of gender bias in Vietnamese culture, Fr. Nguyen Khac Hy, the chairman of the board of directors of FSVN, stated, "While Vietnamese culture has traditionally favored men over women, I believe this gap is narrowing, and in the near future, the contributions of religious women will become increasingly vital to the formation of both men and women in the Vietnamese Church."

It is heartening to see these changes in the way women are perceived and treated in Vietnamese culture. I hope the church's leadership also recognizes their contributions, abilities and talents and invites them to contribute and cooperate in developing the Vietnamese church.

Vietnamese religious sisters are grateful for the bridge that Formation Support for Vietnam has provided to connect them to opportunities that were previously impossible. It is our hope that after crossing the bridge, we can continue to make it wider by sharing our knowledge and experiences. Promoting higher education will help not only our sisters in Vietnam but also all Vietnamese women in need of greater opportunities.

It is important that we become bridges ourselves, leading those still suffering from oppression and discrimination to a place of safety and equality. As one sister said, those of us who have walked through Formation Support for Vietnam's bridge must become "the voice of the voiceless." With persistence, we can apply our knowledge and actively contribute to the development of the church by participating in

teaching and ministry, and help to narrow the gender gap in the Vietnamese church.