

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: THE CASE OF VIETNAM

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Foreword

Domestic violence against women is a world-wide problem, occurring in developed and developing countries alike, and in families across all layers of society. It is not a new problem, but recognition of its extent and serious impact is new and growing. Until recently, this topic has received limited serious research attention, due to its social sensitivity and the dearth of quantitative and qualitative information available. In the past few years, studies in many countries have helped place this issue before citizens and policymakers. At the same time, slowly but certainly, best practice ways of addressing it successfully are being identified.

This study on Vietnam is part of a broader research project on Gender and Development being undertaken by the World Bank in several countries around the world. In October 1998, we held consultations in Hanoi with the leading gender specialists in Government, civil society and donor organizations to discuss important gender issues in Vietnam. During these consultations, domestic violence was identified as a topic that urgently merited more research. Thus, it was decided that a study on this topic would serve as one of two case studies on Vietnam to be used in the Bank's global Gender Report. From the beginning, it was envisaged that the study would build upon the excellent research done by Population Council (1998), as well as on other research data produced by the Women's Union (1997) and the Center for Family and Women's Studies (1992, 1999).

Three researchers of the Institute of Sociology in Hanoi were commissioned in March 1999 to undertake the study. Dr. Vu Manh Loi, researcher in the Family Sociology Department of the Institute, acted as the lead researcher. Dr. Vu Tuan Huy, director of the same Department, and Dr. Nguyen Huu Minh, researcher, were full team members. In addition, Ms. Jennifer Clement, an independent consultant, assisted the team in defining the study's design and methodology, and in the final write-up of the study. We are grateful to CIDA for their financial support in publishing and disseminating the study.

The study aims to shed light in particular on: a) community and institutional attitudes towards gender-based violence in the family, and b) individual, community, legal and institutional responses to domestic violence. The study is largely qualitative, although a modest quantitative survey was part of the research.

We hope that this work may be helpful in raising awareness among decision makers and the general public, in bringing about necessary policy and program changes, and in changing behavior at the personal level.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is difficult to measure domestic violence in Vietnam. Different people express different perceptions of what constitutes unacceptable abuse within the family context. For many, the occasional conflict is a normal part of family life. A large proportion of women and men also view a husband's occasional blow as a normal function of his role as head of the family and educator of the wife and children.

Domestic violence occurs throughout Vietnam, in all regions, in both urban and rural areas, and in families of all income levels. Domestic violence rates vary, however, depending on these and other variables. The reason domestic violence exists is because of deep-rooted attitudes regarding socially and culturally prescribed roles, responsibilities and traits of men and women. It is generally assumed that women are responsible for maintaining peace and harmony within the family, and in family relations women are considered subordinate to men. Conversely, men are viewed as hot-tempered with less emotional control, traits that are exacerbated by the consumption of alcohol. Drinking is an accepted male characteristic, and is seen as a necessary part of men's role in representing their family socially. Although gender equality and freedom from violence are guaranteed under the law, attitudes perpetuating inequality and violence persist in most communities, and in institutions entrusted with overseeing and implementing the law.

Causes and Consequences of Violence

Severe violence is considered socially unacceptable throughout Vietnam. When violence does occur, however, this study shows that both women and men often view it as the woman's fault, and believe the man to be justified in hitting his wife. Violence is considered illegal and socially unacceptable only when a woman is deemed 'innocent' of wrongdoing.

The study indicates that the two greatest contributing factors to domestic violence are economic hardship and alcohol abuse. In many incidences these two issues are inexorably linked. Other major factors include issues of sexuality (adultery, jealousy, sexual incompatibility), harmful social habits such as gambling and drug abuse, and differing opinions regarding child rearing and relations with friends and relatives.

Interviewees from all economic strata believe that domestic violence is exacerbated by economic hardship. This opinion appears to be supported by the small amount of quantitative research conducted under this study, which shows a correlation between poverty (as measured by people's own ranking of their wealth) and domestic violence. The most common explanation given for this link is that couples who are struggling to make ends meet are under greater stress.

The study conversely found that the higher the education level of a husband and wife, the lower the rate of verbal abuse, physical abuse, prohibiting the wife's movements, and forced sex. This correlation is believed to be linked to the better educated suffer less from poverty. Higher rates of physical violence in rural households are also primarily attributed to poverty.

The husband's drinking habit was a recurring theme in interviews. Half the women interviewed stated that their husbands had a drinking habit, with higher rates in rural areas. Men often attributed their drinking to their wives' nagging, and thought their wives should be more patient when they drink. Other problems linked to domestic violence included gambling, family debt, and drug abuse.

While the general perception is that domestic violence is decreasing in urban areas, it is also believed that disputes between spouses are exacerbated by men frequenting *bia om* or "hugging bars", and massage parlours. Urban men also have greater access to pornographic videos. Some informants linked these developments to men placing greater sexual demands on their wives.

A few women interviewed spoke of men's jealousy. Women with a broad range of contacts – often through work – are generally less susceptible to gender-based violence, possibly because of their economic independence. However, there are instances in which these women are subjected to verbal and/or physical abuse due to their husband's jealousy.

Adultery by men appears to be fairly widespread. In some cases this is linked to the *bia om* mentioned above. Other times men will take mistresses or second wives. Women interviewed attributed these practices to a woman's inability to produce a son, or to her failure to please her husband sexually. Most women felt that they had no right to say no when their husbands asked for sex, and viewed sex as his right.

Other factors contributing to marital disputes and gender-based violence include relationships with extended family and friends. Husbands and wives also often disagree over proper disciplinary measures and methods of raising their children. Women are generally expected to indulge children and offer a soft influence to counter the stricter role of the father.

Gender equality in the household appears to be a key variable in domestic violence. In households in which the husband and the wife both earn income and make expenditure decisions, the levels of domestic violence are lower.

Perceptions of change in domestic violence

In all three regions it was surprising to find that – contrary to our initial hypothesis – the general consensus of people interviewed is that domestic violence is decreasing. Reasons given for this were that:

- the standard of living has improved, leading to less economic tension within the family
- the status of women in the family and in the broader community has increased
- people now have a greater appreciation of the law and are better educated
- women now have more contacts outside of the home
- women are more tolerant of their husbands

Conversely, the limited number of media and journal articles on domestic violence indicate that the issue is being ignored, and that the actual incidence of violence could therefore be increasing. Some believe that the influx of outside influences and rise in “social evils” such as pornography and brothels, particularly in urban areas, may also be contributing to a rise in domestic violence. However, the findings of this study are inconclusive, and show no evidence to support either hypothesis of increasing or decreasing rates of domestic violence.

Individual and Institutional Responses

Women who are victims of domestic violence do not have many choices. Most women have to tolerate the abuse, and are reluctant to inform outsiders. In serious cases women may seek help from neighbours, friends, and relatives to stop the violence. In addition, relatives, especially the wife's parents, can provide temporary refuge and advice.

Formal networks such as Resident's Units, Reconciliation Groups, the Women's Union, and local authorities (e.g., People's Committees and the police) intervene only in serious cases. Under the law, local authorities can fine a man for beating his wife. The Women's Union and reconciliation groups are given a mandate of reconciling couples in divorce cases. These organisations may bring perpetrators to court, but this practice is not common unless a woman has requested legal action. Representatives of these institutions are not trained specialists, and they often advise women to tolerate their situation, and to place family integrity and their children's interests above their own personal needs. There appears to be no collective action being taken by or on behalf of women to address domestic violence on a societal scale.

Women usually only turn to the law when abuse is serious and ongoing. Even in these circumstances, many women remain reluctant to prosecute their husbands. Even when they do, courts can reject cases not considered to be serious. However, the structures for monitoring and intervening in domestic violence cases – before the cases reach legal institutions – are fairly well established. Part of this intervention

process is providing advice, but the advice is often couched in traditional values and calls on the women to be passive and tolerate their situation.

The findings of this study suggest that domestic violence is a very complex process influenced by multiple factors. The severity and frequency of violence is difficult to measure, as violence can take many forms and be of varying intensities. However, underlying all of the factors that can lead to domestic violence are traditional gender values, roles, and responsibilities. The failure of institutions to question existing and entrenched gender stereotypes allows domestic violence to continue occurring, permeating all layers of society, and being treated as a 'normal' and accepted part of spousal relations. Given the deep-rooted nature of these perceptions, it is not surprising that institutional actions and policy documents perpetuate the existing *status quo*.

The general perception of interviewees is that gender violence is relatively low in their communities (with estimates of physical violence occurring in 5 to 20% of households). This figure is well below recorded international data, and may simply reflect the fact that certain levels of domestic violence are accepted as normal in Vietnamese culture. However, domestic violence may also be being minimised by community groups entrusted with maintaining social order (such as Resident's Units and the Women's Union).

Instances of violence against women are more frequent in societies where violence is a more accepted way of resolving conflicts, and in which authoritarian rather than negotiated solutions to differences are prevalent (Sanchez & Gonzalez 1997:73). It can be argued that Vietnam is not a comparatively violent society, and that one may therefore expect gender-based violence to be correspondingly lower. However, this theoretical point should not detract from the fact that domestic violence is a very real and widespread problem in Vietnam, affecting women from all social and geographical groups.

Recommendations

This report recommends that:

1. gender-based violence receive priority attention from policy makers and be considered an important social issue. This will require fundamental changes in the way people view gender roles and gender equality. An effective advocacy program is needed to raise the awareness of policy makers at all levels, and to create a favourable institutional environment for combating domestic violence.
2. there be a well designed program for raising public awareness of gender-based violence via the mass media. Awareness-raising campaigns could also be carried out through community-based activities such as meetings, target group discussions, and distribution of brochures and leaflets. Messages should be differentiated by gender. In this awareness raising campaign, domestic violence topics should be integrated with broader concepts of gender equality, and be integrated in the ongoing program for raising public awareness of legal issues.
3. a training program be developed to increase the capacity of the Women's Union and reconciliation groups to improve their gender sensitivity, legal knowledge, and counselling skills. It is also recommended that special training workshops for court and justice officials be initiated at district levels to help the officials avoid gender bias in interpreting laws and handling gender-based violence cases. The training program could be organised to initially train a small group of national specialists, who would then assist in training practitioners at lower levels.
4. existing centres be better provided with better resources, and that counselling services be expanded to other locations. Existing centres may need an active marketing program in order to make their services more widely known. The process of expanding counselling services to other places may take time, and special programs for training counsellors may be needed before counselling centres can be set up in other cities and rural areas.

5. the establishment of refuges for women seeking short-term assistance be considered and researched. It would be possible to start with small pilot projects in a few places in the country. The experiences of refuges in other countries can also be drawn on.
6. further research be conducted to shed light on many important aspects of gender-based violence in Vietnam. For example, this study's estimations of the prevalence, frequency, and changes in the different types of violence is only tentative, and based on the perception of the respondents. This qualitative study only suggests hypothetical explanations that call for more elaborate and rigorous measurements and testing. It is recommend that a national representative survey on gender-based violence be carried out to investigate the forms violence takes, its prevalence and frequency, and its determinants, causes, and consequences. This survey would form a baseline from which to measure changes in both the scope and intensity of domestic violence, and social attitudes toward this violence. A separate study on legal practices and the practice of social organisations involved in dealing with violence incidences would also be valuable.
7. key institutions' (such as the courts, police and People's Committees) systems for recording, analysing, and reporting on instances of violence be reviewed and revised. We also recommend that a task force be established within the National Committee for the Advancement of Women to routinely monitor gender-based violence in Vietnam, including its levels and trends.

INTRODUCTION

International Recognition of Gender-based Violence

In international discourse, gender-based violence has clearly been placed in the realm of women's human rights over the past decade. Prior to 1993, most Governments regarded violence against women largely as a private matter between individuals. (United Nations 1996). However, domestic violence has increasingly been recognised "as an obstacle to equality, and an intolerable offence to human dignity". International research has demonstrated that domestic violence is a world-wide phenomenon affecting an estimated 20 to 50% of all women. "Most of the violence against women takes place within families, and the perpetrators are almost exclusively men, usually partners, ex-partners, or other men known to the woman." (WHO 1998:5).

Women from all ethnic groups, nationalities, and classes are potentially victims of violence. Violence is not confined to any one particular socio-economic class; it is closely associated with male control of female sexuality, and cultural definitions of women's place within that culture. Women all over the world are therefore subject to an implicit contract in which their societies offer them economic and social security on the condition that they not breach certain socially constructed boundaries. The Beijing Platform of Action states that "[v]iolence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement." (United Nations 1995:75). Indeed, no female is excluded from the threat of gender-based violence. "Gender violence is not random violence in which victims happen to be women and girls: rather, the 'risk factor' is being female." (Bunch, Carillo and Shaw 1998 cited in UNIFEM 1998).

Acts or threats of violence against women instil fear and insecurity into their lives, and hinder their development and the achievement of equality. The fear of violence is a permanent constraint on the mobility of women, and limits their access to resources and basic activities. High social, health, and economic costs to the individual and society are also associated with violence against women (United Nations 1995:74). Where violence is ongoing, a woman will live in constant fear of further abuse, and will therefore try to adapt her lifestyle to minimise it. Thus, rather than a succession of isolated incidents, domestic violence is often a long-term, chronic condition which has a substantial cumulative effect on a woman's overall well being. If carried out by someone she is intimate with, it also poses substantial obstacles to seeking help (Njovana 1996:46). Studies done globally – including Vietnam, Australia and Zimbabwe – suggest that victims may not seek help for 10 or more years after the abuse has started. (Njovana 1996; Le Thi Phuong Mai 1999; & Dang 1999).

While unequal gender relations are the root cause of violence, certain economic, social, and cultural factors may exacerbate the threat and reality of violence. In studying the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity in examining gender-based violence, Saffioti concluded that if men do not dominate in class terms, they may exert gender power to compensate. Saffioti views gender-based violence not only as an assertion of male power, but also as a reaction to male impotency. (Saffioti 1997:75-76). Social class is intimately related to economic status. Although poverty is not a direct cause of violence, and violence cannot be cured exclusively by economic remedies (UNIFEM 1998), violence is often exacerbated by poverty. In addition to the strain poverty places on households, it also impairs women's ability to leave a violent household (Clarke 1997:60). Middle class and wealthy women are not immune from domestic violence, of course, and many suffer in silence out of fear of being stigmatised.

Recognition of domestic violence in Vietnam

Despite Vietnam being a signatory to the CEDAW Convention and the Beijing Platform of Action, which call for action to be taken against public and private gender-based violence, domestic violence has not been recognised by policy makers as a critical constraint to women's advancement in Vietnam. To date, there has been very little research conducted on policies addressing the issue of domestic violence in Vietnam. The small amount of research carried out on gender-related violence has tended to focus more on public incidences of violence, such as trafficking in women, child prostitution, and child sexual abuse.

In 1997 the Vietnam Women's Union conducted a study on domestic violence. It was a small study in which the researchers used secondary data from newspapers and various institutions in three northern provinces (Hanoi, Ha Tay, and Thai Binh) as a basis for their analysis. The most important finding of the study was that domestic violence against women appeared to be quite widespread. However, the study did not provide a truly comprehensive picture of gender based violence in Vietnam.

The Population Council recently prepared a qualitative report on "Violence and its Consequences for Reproductive Health", which included details of domestic violence cases drawn mainly from interviews with women who have utilised the services of the Ho Chi Minh City Counselling Centre and its telephone hotline. The paper discusses the underlying traditional and Confucian ideologies that promote gender inequality. It goes on to discuss various forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, stating that "domestic violence can occur in families from all education and socio-economic levels" (Le 1998:36). It lists numerous factors that can contribute to domestic violence, including alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, mental illness, stress and/or frustration, and son preference. The issue of forced sex in marriage was raised in small focus groups of men and women. It was seen as a problem to be tolerated by female focus groups, while the male groups did not consider it to be a serious issue.

In her paper on domestic violence in Vietnam, Le Thi Quy identifies four causes of domestic violence: economic issues; low education and "vestiges of feudalism" whereby people think more highly of men; cultural and social habits such as drinking, gambling, adultery and jealousy; and mental illness. Other factors that contribute to disputes between husbands and wives include failure to have a son, and the complexity in the relationships between parents and their daughters-in-law or sons-in-law (Le Thi Quy 269).

I THE STUDY

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative field research conducted in Vietnam during April and May 1999. It also includes a review of media reports. To date, the amount of research and secondary data generated on gender violence in Vietnam has been extremely limited. This report aims to serve as a catalyst in providing opportunities to further discuss this sensitive issue within Vietnam.

1. Research Objectives

The research for this study concentrated on: community and institutional attitudes surrounding gender-based violence, and; individual, community, legal, and institutional responses to domestic violence. The research was designed to:

- Examine inconsistencies between the current law, its interpretation, and its implementation at the district and commune level;
- Document community and institutional attitudes regarding what constitutes gender-based violence, what causes this violence, and how these attitudes differ between women and men, various age groups, urban and rural populations, and the three main geographical regions;
- Document persons' perceptions of change - at the district and commune level - regarding the severity and frequency of domestic violence over the last ten years, and the perceived reasons for any such change;
- Analyse the response of institutions such as the police, courts, mass organisations, and local authorities to incidences of violence (how are violent incidences brought to authorities' attention, what procedures and reporting systems are in place to respond to incidences, and when are actions taken to bring these incidences to prosecution);
- Analyse media coverage of gender-based violence over a set period in both 1989 and 1999 to examine and compare the number and type of cases reported, how the media interpreted and reported on these events, and how the media shaped and/or conformed to social and cultural norms;
- Examine how women, either as individuals or collectively, are attempting to (or can) address gender-based violence;

- Identify possible areas for future research (especially more in-depth quantitative and longitudinal research), and explore possible policy, program, and project responses available to the Government, mass organisations, and donors (including NGOs) to address gender-based violence.

It is not within the scope of this study to examine all aspects of gender-based violence. Therefore, the study's focus is on domestic violence against women that is perpetrated by their husbands or other family members. The study does not examine child abuse, public violence (such as trafficking, "public" rape and prostitution), and violence perpetrated by the State. However, the research team remained open to these and other issues when they arose in interviews.

Methodology

This study aims to shed more light on anecdotal evidence of domestic violence directed towards women within the family. Due to limited resources and the sensitivity of the issues being discussed, the study is primarily qualitative in nature, relying on information gained from in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, and a review and analysis of Vietnamese media. However, the information gained from these means was supplemented with information from 601 questionnaires, which provided an opportunity to compare data from various sources.

Selection and Sampling

Vietnam - a geographically long and narrow country - was divided into three distinct geographical regions for the purpose of this study, each with distinctive social and economic characteristics. Separate surveys were conducted in each of these three regions: Central (Thua Thien Hue Province), North (Hanoi City) and South (Ho Chi Minh City). One rural and one urban district were chosen in each region, and within these six districts, one commune in each was identified. Research was only conducted in communes that are primarily populated by persons of Kinh ethnicity (the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam).

In-depth Interviews

At the district level, in-depth interviews were conducted with key institutional players who, it was believed, would be confronted with gender-based violence in their work. These persons included People's Committee representatives, police officers, court officials, Women's Union cadre, and criminal investigation officials.

Similar interviews were conducted with commune-level officials including police officers, Women's Union and other mass organization cadre, justice officials, and People's Committee representatives. It was assumed that while district officials would only encounter more serious physical cases of gender-based violence, commune level officials would be more aware of general cases of community violence.

The study originally intended to conduct hold in-depth interviews with two divorced women in each of the six communes. In total, seven such interviews were actually conducted.

Focus Groups

In addition to in-depth interviews, the study called for the creation of twenty-four focus groups at the commune level. Participants were selected based on their age, gender, and marital status; only married women and men were interviewed. In each of the six communes, four focus groups would be convened, comprised of:

- men below 30 years of age
- men above 30 years of age
- women below 30 years of age
- women above 30 years of age

As explained below, only 21 of the planned 24 focus groups were ultimately held.

Questionnaire

The research team spent two days developing guidelines for the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Based on a field test conducted in Hanoi, questionnaires were modified, and it was decided to design a similar questionnaire for 600 married women (100 in each target commune). These women would be chosen from a list of married women of reproductive age provided by commune family planning workers, using a systematic random sampling method. It was believed that these questionnaires would provide a reasonable amount of quantitative data to supplement the study's qualitative data. Due to the limited time allotted for the study, it was decided to only interview married women, as the researchers believed that women's comments would prove more illuminating than men's.

Media Analysis

The other component of the study required teams to review each region's major newspapers and the Women's Union weekly publication, "Phu Nu", for the month of April 1999. Although the teams had also planned on reviewing the same publications from the same month 10 years earlier, this was not always possible due to a lack of archive records. In such cases, teams examined articles from a proximate month.

In total, 55 in-depth interviews of key district and commune-level institutional actors were conducted, as were 21 focus group discussions and seven in-depth interviews with divorced women. Of the three focus group discussions that were not held, two were for under-30 males (one urban, one rural) in Hanoi, and one for under-30 females in Van Ninh Ward, Hue City. The high marriage age for males in Hanoi and the fact that many of these men migrate for long periods of time to find work made it difficult to convene a group of married men under 30 years of age. In Van Ninh Ward, Hue City, few women under the age of 30 are involved in the Women's Union, making it difficult to attract enough young married women to participate in the focus group.

Limitations and Potential Bias

The Sensitivity of the Topic

Given the sensitivity surrounding the issue of gender-based violence in Vietnam, it can be assumed that some bias came into play, as interviewees may have been too embarrassed or reluctant to discuss their experiences with an outsider researcher. A number of steps were taken to minimise this potential bias. In in-depth interviews and focus groups, issues were only discussed in the "third person", and persons' personal experiences with violence were not solicited. If people offered such information, however, this information was noted. Personal details were asked for in the 601 questionnaires. However, the respondents were first informed about purpose of the study, its confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation (the respondents could skip any question or refuse to participate if they so desired).

Selection Bias

Random sampling is a very complex, time-consuming process in Vietnam. Permission for all research activities must be channelled through appropriate authorities at each level of administration. In this study, the study assistants selected from the Women's Union and the Youth Union were responsible for identifying interviewees for in-depth and focus group interviews. The nature of the study and the networks that these individuals have within the community would have influenced the selection process.

Conformist Bias

The interviewees' perception of what the purpose of the interviews was, and their possible desire to provide what they thought were "right" answers, may have also influenced their responses.

Misunderstanding of Concepts

During the process of undertaking the study it became clear that problems existed regarding interviewees' understanding of the concept of domestic violence. It became apparent that certain levels of domestic violence are considered a social norm in Vietnam. This may have resulted in underreporting of violent incidents in the interviews.

Interviewer Bias

Given the limited time allotted for this study, it was not possible to fully and adequately train the interviewers. Although the interviewers who were selected generally had research experience some personal bias may have emerged in their questioning. Firstly, since the issue of domestic violence is not widely understood, the interviewers may not have fully appreciated the aims of the study, and their own perceptions and biases may have affected the results. In the focus groups and in-depth interviews, the interviewers' lack of familiarity with qualitative techniques and their possible failure to probe or ask follow up questions may also have affected the results.

II. FINDINGS

The following findings are largely based on the qualitative interviews conducted pursuant to this study. Quantitative data is cited in some places to supplement the qualitative data.

1. Defining Domestic Violence

The internationally accepted definition of gender-based violence set forth in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993 was used for the purposes of this study. Under the Declaration, violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." (United Nations 1995: 73; UNIFEM 1998). Article 2 of the Declaration identifies the three areas in which physical, sexual and psychological violence commonly occur: (1) the family, (2) the general community, and (3) violence perpetrated or condoned by the State (United Nations 1996).

This study's focus is on violence occurring within the family, particularly husband-on-wife violence. As a general matter, violence within the family may include battery, the sexual abuse of children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, verbal abuse, economic abuse, deprivation of financial, social, and emotional resources, female infanticide, and prenatal sex selection.

The study found no evidence of dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation, female infanticide and prenatal sex selection in Vietnam. The concept of marital rape appears to be non-existent in Vietnam, but the respondents did report cases of forced sex within marriage. Forced sex occurs when the husband insists that the wife have sex with him despite her explicitly expressing that she does not want to. This issue is discussed in a subsequent section.

With the broad, internationally accepted definition of gender-based violence in mind, this study openly explored what people in Vietnam consider to constitute violence against women. It became clear from the pre-test interviews, and was confirmed by subsequent interviews, that the respondents' understanding of violence within the family differs from the international norm. Within the communities surveyed, only very serious and systematic abuse against women which significantly damages the husband-and-wife relationship is considered to be violent. It is an accepted norm is that family members are supposed to love and care for each other, and maintain family in peace and harmony. However, it is also an accepted norm that conflicts may occur, and that when they do, violence may sometimes result in many families. It appears that if violence does not occur on a regular basis, women tend to forgive the husband. In such cases, the relationship is not seen as a violent one. Many respondents view domestic violence as an ongoing process rather than an isolated event.

Thus, it seems that there are three aspects of a husband's response in family conflicts that determine whether the community considers his actions to be violent: (1) the frequency of the behaviour, (2) the level of physical or emotional damage experienced by the woman, and (3) who is seen to be guilty of igniting the

conflict. If a man systematically treats his wife badly (regardless of the other two criteria) he is viewed as an abusive man. Occasionally violent actions, including slapping, are seen as undesirable but are not necessarily deemed serious or abusive. On the other hand, occasional actions which do cause serious health or psychological damage are considered abusive. For example, extra-marital sex or a severe beating may be considered abusive even if they happen only once. If the wife is considered “guilty” of igniting the trouble, however, the husband’s violent action, although not socially desirable, is deemed “understandable,” and “justifiable”.

People think that this [domestic conflict] is unavoidable in family life, just like our ancestors before have said that “even bowls and spoons in the shelf sometime are shaken away from the right place, let alone the husband-and-wife relations.” They think that this is normal. Only in cases when the wife gets injured because of a beating or when she is beaten repeatedly do people ask the local authorities to help. If they are only shouting and yelling they do not need help.

Female, Women’s Union leader

There are many times we [women] are at fault. Therefore our husbands beat us. It is alright because we were wrong.”

Married woman, aged 26

Rather than offer a standard definition of gender-based violence, this study has attempted to gauge the general community’s understanding of acceptable and unacceptable violence against women in the home. The study sought to classify violent abuses according to their severity and the nature of the abuse – that is whether it is verbal, physical or emotional abuse. Verbal abuse may include a husband scolding his wife or using bad or humiliating language. Emotional abuse encompasses a range of behaviour, including restricting the wife’s activities (confining her at home, not allowing her to do something, etc.), neglecting the wife (not talking with her), and adultery. Physical abuse includes hitting and slapping, beatings which cause physical injury, forced sex, and murder.

While it is recognised that men at times can also be victims of marital abuse (both verbal, emotional and physical), the focus of the findings is on gender-based violence against women, as women are more often at risk than men.

2. Perceived Prevalence, Frequencies, and Severity of Violence

Examples of serious cases of physical violence were provided more frequently in interviews with commune and district officers than with general community members. Examples offered included beatings that cause injury or social disorder in a neighbourhood, prohibiting a wife’s movement, adultery, and physical violence leading to divorce. Violence outside of the home, such as rape and murder, was also mentioned in a few interviews with court officials.

Focus group members were chosen randomly by community representatives (although some bias may have influenced their selection), and group members were not asked for their personal experience but just for their general perceptions. However, it became apparent in most groups that there were female group members who were victims of verbal and/or physical violence, and male group members who were perpetrators.

In my family when my husband is upset he beats me, but he doesn’t insult me at all. For example, one time he told me to do something but I forgot. I argued with him so he beat me. I had to accept [the beating] because I am weaker than he is. If I were stronger I would fight back.

Woman in Hue Focus Group

In my family, if my wife treats my visiting friends badly, I may accuse her verbally after that. If she resists, it is difficult to avoid giving her a few slaps out of rage. It is normal. It is our family life.

A working class male in an urban focus group, Hanoi

Verbal and Physical Abuse

Respondents reported that there are rarely instances of verbal and physical abuse serious enough to draw the attention of neighbours. Some respondents in focus groups attempted to estimate the frequency of different forms of domestic violence in their community. While no consensus emerged, women in Ho Chi Minh City suggested that verbal abuse occurred in about 20% of families, while physical violence takes place in less than 10% of families. An urban male group in Hue estimated that 50% of husbands verbally abuse their wives. A rural male group in Hanoi estimated that some form of violent abuse occurs against wives in approximately 10% of families in their commune, although beating only represents a small fraction of these abuses. A rural female group in Hanoi estimated that less than 5% of women in the commune suffered from serious violence. It must be noted that these estimates do not include occasional acts of violence, which are considered “normal”. While the accuracy of these estimates may be questionable, they at least provide a starting point for examining the depth of domestic violence in Vietnamese communities.

Emotional Abuse

Respondents often mentioned the “cold war” approach taken by both men and women to deal with conflicts. This approach involves spouses ignoring each other and not talking to each other for prolonged periods of time. Such tactics are not generally perceived to be a form of violence or abuse. The questionnaire results showed that 75% of husbands neglect their wives at some point. There is evidence that emotional deprivation particularly occurs in cases where the husband is having an affair or seeking a divorce from his wife.

Sexually related abuses

Sex-related abuses in the family normally take the form of emotional abuse (e.g., systematically ignoring the wife, having an extra-marital relationship) or physical abuse (that is, forced sex). In Vietnamese culture, as in many other cultures, it is considered the conjugal right of the husband to have sex with his wife. In a women’s focus group discussion in a rural commune, when asked “what do you think if the husband insists on having sex and actually does it when the wife explicitly tells him that she does not want to? Is it an abuse? Is it illegal?” the participants’ responses included the following:

I just got married, I don’t know. But I think if I don’t want it and my husband keeps forcing me to have sex, it is a form of coerced sex and can be considered as an abuse and an illegal act.

34 year-old woman, an urban housewife

Once they are husband and wife, it cannot be called illegal. It is his right and this right cannot be considered as illegal because husband and wife have this right. In my opinion, it is not an abuse either. I don’t think it [accusing him] is good. As women, we should behave in such a way to make husbands care about us to reduce the unpleasant feeling. Many of my friends said to me “OK, lay down and let him do whatever he wants.” Others resist the husband to manipulate the man, wanting him to ask again and a gain and to promise to do other things before letting him to have sex. Abuse occurs only when he uses dirty words and beats the wife to force her to have sex. Other than that is not an abuse.

41 year-old farmer woman

I think that it is not illegal. The husband and the wife should talk.

30 year-old farmer woman

Sex has not traditionally been a subject for public discussion in Vietnam. This makes it difficult to assess the prevalence and frequency of forced sex. Most of the reported cases of forced sex arise from instances of divorce, or conflicts that require intervention from community institutions. According to legal professionals, there is evidence of forced sex in many divorce cases, but the frequency of this behaviour is impossible to measure. It is thought that sexual troubles may be an important cause of the most frequently cited reason for divorce, which is “incompatibility of the husband’s and the wife’s characters.”

3. Causes and Consequences of Violence

While international research indicates that the root cause of gender-based violence is inequality in gender relations, several factors contribute to the severity and frequency of gender-based violence. In this study the two most important factors that emerged were economic hardship and alcohol abuse. In many instances, these two issues are inexorably linked. Other major factors include issues of sexuality (adultery, jealousy, and sexual incompatibility), differing opinions regarding child rearing, patriarchal traditions, and relationships with friends and relatives. While domestic violence can occur among couples from all social groups, there was an overwhelming impression among respondents that the form and frequency of domestic violence has a class dimension.

Economic Hardship and Violence

It was a common perception among interviewees that domestic violence is caused by economic hardship. This opinion appears to be supported by quantitative research which shows a correlation between poverty (as measured by people’s own ranking of their wealth) and domestic violence. “Better off” households are less prone to verbal and physical abuse (Table 1). The most common explanation given for this link is that couples who are struggling to make ends meet are under greater stress.

[Family conflicts] usually come from poor families who are faced with a ‘lack of front door, lack of back door’. In other words, when your mind is in a puzzle, there is no way out. Then it is easy for family conflict to occur when you or your spouse say an inconsiderate word or do a thoughtless thing.

Male, Reconciliation Group member

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF ABUSE BY SELF-RANKED INCOME LEVELS

Self Assessed Income Ranking	Any Verbal Abuse	Beating	Forced Sex
Worse off	86%	25%	25%
Average	82%	13%	16%
Better off	74%	10%	18%

Education and Violence

Respondents tended to assume that the frequency and severity of abuse is also linked to the educational level of the couple – the higher the education, the lower the rate of verbal and physical abuse. For instance, it seems to be quite a common perception that the “cold war” approach is a more middle class response to conflict. The Women’s Union representative in the urban quarter of Hue believed that couples with high status and education tackle issues of conflict through discussion, in contrast to families in which the husband has less education, and uses force to solve problems.

For intellectual people, they may hold a grudge for weeks if they get hurt by the spouse’s bad language. For them, using strong words is considered as a humiliation. For working class people, they have a low education and they think that it is normal.

A working class male in an urban commune

Despite these perceptions, the fact of the matter is that domestic violence also occurs among higher educated couples.

My son-in-law gave his wife a few slaps in front of other family members. It happens frequently, even though it is the family of a medical doctor. My son-in-law is a doctor, his father is an assistant doctor, and they think that giving the wife slaps is normal!

A women in a focus group discussion in an urban commune

The perception of a correlation between educational levels and domestic violence appears to be rooted in the fact that the less educated generally suffer more from day to day poverty. In fact, quantitative data indicates that there is no linear relationship between a husband's education and his treatment of his wife. When income levels are accounted for, education levels do not appear to be a causal factor in the occurrence of physical abuse. However, data indicates that the higher the education of the husband, the higher the chance of verbal abuse, but lower the chance of forced sex.

Alcohol Abuse and Violence

Husband's drinking habits were a recurring theme in interviews, and were often linked to violence and poverty. It is believed that poor men might drink to forget their problems, and that a husband's use of his family's limited income on alcohol may lead to increased marital tension.

In my neighborhood, there is a couple, Mr. C. and Mrs. L. They sell Pho (Vietnamese rice soup) on the street. Mr. C. is a nice man when he is not drunk. But every time he gets drunk, he often humiliates his wife verbally, and beats her. They have had a fight during the last two days, and did not sell Pho as usual.

Female focus group, Hanoi urban commune

Half of the women interviewed by questionnaire stated that their husbands have a drinking habit. This problem is higher in rural areas (53.7%) than in urban areas (45.2%) and undoubtedly contributes to a downward cycle of poverty. The number of women reporting that their husband had a drinking habit was highest in the South (Ho Chi Minh City, 53.6%), and lowest in Central Vietnam (Thua Thien Province, Hue, 44.9%). Drinking is generally viewed by men as a normal part of their social responsibilities. However, both women and men express disapproval of excessive and continuous drinking, and see links between drunkenness and verbal and physical abuse.

My husband's drinking makes me angry. There are many things put on my shoulders, such as children's study, but he just pays attention to drinking. He brings his friends home and they drink and make my house a mess. Disagreement between husbands and wives, and family conflict, come from these cases.

Rural female farmer, Ho Chi Minh, age 39

Gambling and Debt

Habits that can lead to debt, thereby increasing households' economic insecurity, are also factors that contribute to domestic tension and violence. Men most commonly go into debt due to gambling habits. Twelve and a half percent of women surveyed stated that their husbands gambled. On the other hand, women are more likely to end up in debt through an informal rotating fund. According to a judge in the 9th district in Ho Chi Minh, debt caused by gambling and informal rotating funds is one of major causes of family conflict.

Debt, economic insecurity, specific economic or social failures, or job loss can easily be translated into anger at home.

Family life is very complex. It's not just sex, or drinking that upsets a couple's life. I know a couple, the husband and the wife get along very well. The husband is not a drinker, but he has a lot of troubles at work. He changed jobs many times and is repeatedly disappointed with his work. The wife did not try to understand him. She accused him of his weaknesses. Then come their fighting.

Female focus group, Hanoi urban commune

Gender stereotypes and Violence

Personal characteristics were often cited as important factors leading to violent behaviour. These personal traits, in turn, are linked to gender stereotypes and roles. For instance, in Vietnamese culture men are expected to drink socially, to be the breadwinner, and to serve as head of the household. It is also believed that men have a more uncontrollable temper than women do. Women, on the other hand, are expected to maintain harmony within the family. As parties fulfil their expected roles, violent conflict can result, as demonstrated above in instances of alcohol abuse, gambling, debt, and work-related problems. Domestic violence can also occur when cultural stereotypes are challenged.

A recurring theme brought up in discussions with men was that women are viewed in many instances, as responsible for violence that occurs. This opinion was particularly strong in the young men’s focus group discussion in urban Hue. They agreed that domestic violence is not widespread, and many of the causes of domestic violence they identified were clearly aimed at blaming women for inappropriate actions, such as complaining too much, talking too much, or not satisfactorily carrying out wifely and motherly duties.

Nobody wants to beat his wife. Man’s patience has limits, and few women understand that. Even when the husband does something wrong and he knows that it is wrong, if the wife keeps accusing him again and again, say for 15 times, she is sure to be beaten. I did beat my wife sometimes because of this.

Male focus group, Hanoi quarter

Gender roles are often challenged when the wife is the main breadwinner. Some men whose sense of masculinity is threatened by this may use verbal abuse and physical abuse to maintain their dominance within in household. The qualitative data below also indicates that women who are the main earners realise and assert their economic role, and are less passive and less tolerant of mistreatment than more “traditional” wives.

TABLE 2: INCOMING EARNING AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The main income earner is:	Wife n = 67	Husband n = 224	Both n = 310
Husband neglects wife	84	75	73
Husband uses strong words	81	75	63
Husband yells at wife	69	57	42
Husband prohibits wife	15	9	4
Husband uses forced sex	24	19	15
Husband beats wife	16	20	12

This table indicates that all forms of violence occur less frequently in households where the husband and wife are equal income earners (52% of all households). Reported abuse is greatest in households where the woman is the main income earner, with the exception of wife beating, which is highest in households with male breadwinners.

Women also judge other women based on socially accepted gender stereotypes. Many women respondents believe that women themselves are responsible for domestic violence, or bring the violence upon themselves by “inappropriate” behaviour.

Women who are beaten by their husbands must do something wrong or behave in a tactless way in order to make their husbands lose control.

Female in focus group, Hanoi quarter

One of the Women’s Union representatives gave an example of an impatient wife in which she stated:

If I were her husband I would also beat her. She is too impudent. She abuses her husband's lineage and throws it in the river. A husband does not beat his wife without reason. If she was patient he would not dare to beat her.

Women in focus groups generally commented that if a wife is at fault she should accept being yelled at, or even beaten, by her husband; such treatment is unacceptable only when she is not at fault. A group of rural married women in Ho Chi Minh City mirrored this attitude, stating that when a husband is angry with his wife, she should keep calm and maintain the peace; if a wife is quarrelsome, it is normal for a husband to beat her. Such beliefs reinforce stereotypical female passivity, encouraging married women to accept their husband's behaviour in order to maintain the peace avoid abuse.

In my case, when my husband was drunk I used to scold him. But he would get angry and curse me. But now, I have drawn the lesson that when he is drunk I don't say anything.

Housewife, Hue Focus Group, aged 21

Issues of Sexuality and Violence

Conflict and disputes are often linked to sexual issues such as jealousy, adultery, and prostitution. With the rapid economic growth of the last ten years, there has been a boom in the number of karaoke bars and massage parlours in urban areas, many of which serve as brothels or *bia om* ("hugging bars" attended by young women who are often prostitutes). Pornographic materials are also more readily available, particularly in urban areas. Some informants linked these developments to men returning home and placing greater sexual demands on their wives, which may, in turn, lead to forced sex in marriage.

Adultery appears to be commonplace, with many men having either a mistress or a second (illegal) wife. Women interviewed on this subject attributed adultery to a woman's inability to produce a son, or to her failure to please her husband sexually. A justice official in Hue told of a case in which a husband had an affair in order to have a son, prompting his wife to petition for a divorce. Once the wife gave birth to a son, however, the husband treated her better, so she withdrew the divorce proceedings. Another case was mentioned in Ho Chi Minh in which a husband who was having an affair physically abused his wife in order to encourage her to seek a divorce.

Forced Sex

Forced sex in marriage is clearly an issue of gender inequality, in which a woman is forced to give in to her husband's demands. This practice is commonly viewed as the husband's conjugal right in Vietnam. Many women believe that if they do not give in to their husband's requests, he will have an affair or visit a prostitute.

He may say "if you don't allow me, I will go to make love with other woman, I will need to have a girlfriend." I don't think it is good to accuse him. As women, we should behave in such a way to make husbands care about us to reduce the unpleasant feeling.

30 year-old farmer women

Not surprisingly, women, more than men, view sexual issues as a major cause of marital conflict. Forced sex often emerges as an issue in divorce cases, and is often accompanied by other types of violence.

I'm a petty trader. I sell small items in the market. The job requires that I talk with many customers each day. My husband is a lazy man and he likes to complain. He has beaten me several times. He has kicked me out of the house at night when he wanted to. He felt jealous seeing me selling goods to customers. He gave me headaches at night with his trivial complains. He often humiliated me verbally and then brought me to bed. I felt upset and was in no mood to have sex. I got sick of it. He then accused me, [saying] that if I did not want it I must be having an affair with some other man. I worked all day and felt tired. At night I just wanted to sleep. I gave in silently, just to be able to go to sleep quickly. Then he said, "you cannot sleep when I am

still awake.” If I did not say anything, he might go on “why do you not talk to me?” If I said something, he could turn it around “F... you, do you dare to talk to me like this?” Whatever I did, I lost. I filed the divorce before the Tet [Vietnamese new year], but I just got divorced recently.

A 26 year-old divorced woman, Hanoi

Extended Family Relationships

Other factors that contribute to marital disputes and gender-based violence include relationships with extended family and friends.

In my case, he showed too much filial piety towards his parents and his siblings. If I complained about that, it would result in a disagreement between us. So I had to tolerate his behaviour. The wife’s tolerance is a necessary condition for a peaceful family life.

Woman in focus group, Hue.

Husbands and wives also disagree about means of disciplining and raising their children. Women are generally expected to indulge the children and offer a soft influence to counter the stricter role of the father.

4. Perceptions of Change in Violence over the Past Decade

One of the study’s aims was to gauge whether persons’ perceptions of domestic violence and its frequency have increased or decreased over the past ten years. In the absence of any baseline data on domestic violence, the study relied on two methods to assess changes in societal perceptions. First, interviewees were asked for their personal perceptions over the past ten years. Second, a media analysis was conducted, comparing reports from 1999 with reports from ten years earlier. This analysis also included a review of newspaper and journal cuttings collected since 1983 by the Institute of Sociology (IOS). Unfortunately, the evidence on this point was inconclusive.

Personal Perceptions of Interviewees

Interestingly, the overall impression expressed by various focus groups and interviewees was that domestic violence in Vietnam has decreased over the last 10 years. Reasons given for this decline included the fact that: the standard of living has improved, there has been an increase in the number of jobs, the status of women in the family and in the broader community has increased, people have a better education, women have more contacts outside of the home, government mass media campaigns have promoted the “happy family”, and that women are more tolerant of their husbands. One Women’s Union official also thought that people now have a better understanding of the Family and Marriage Law.

While the majority of respondents felt that domestic violence has decreased, other respondents stated that domestic violence might in fact be increasing as a result of urbanisation, the transition to the market economy, and consequences of these phenomena such as *bia om*.

Before most people were farmers. After a hard working day in the evening men drunk with their friends at home. Next morning they continued to work in the field. Now they became workers and after the working day they go drinking at a bar. Therefore they just neglect their family.

Female, state employee, living in rural area, age 41

Many government officials who were interviewed believed held the view that domestic violence is decreasing, while public violence (such as rape) and divorce is on the rise. One district court judge in Ho Chi Minh City stated that family conflicts attributable to drunkenness are declining, while family conflicts due to debt and adultery are increasing.

Other government officials stated that they believe domestic violence is increasing. According to an informant in one of Hanoi's District Courts, the number of cases related to marriage, family, and divorce have increased in recent years. However, an increase in court cases and divorces does not necessarily indicate an increase in domestic violence. It may simply be that women are more willing and able to report incidences of violence than in the past. Moral norms and social perceptions about marriage and the family, are also changing. Women may be more aware of their rights, and therefore increasingly demanding that legal institutions protect their rights. Officials confirmed that it is increasingly women who are initiating divorce proceedings.

In 1998, about two third of the divorce requests were from women.

A Female officer in the District Legal Department in Hanoi

The fact that women who are the main income earners are more susceptible to abuse may prove to be an important factor affecting the frequency and severity of domestic violence cases in the future. Under the economic reform process traditional income structures within the family have been challenged; new opportunities exist for women to become breadwinners, while some men may be faced with unemployment. This is an issue that requires further research and monitoring.

Comparative media analysis

Major newspapers were selected for analysis in each of the three studied areas. In Hanoi, the New Hanoi, Capital Security, and Capital Women were reviewed. In Hue, Thua Thien-Hue was examined, while in Ho Chi Minh City, Liberated Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City Police, and Ho Chi Minh City Women were chosen for review. These newspapers were selected either because they are considered sensitive to women's issues, or because they specifically report on criminal cases. To accurately gauge changes over the last ten years, researchers intended to read all issues of these newspapers for the month of April in 1999 and in 1990. Due to difficulties in locating all the April 1990 issues of the Ho Chi Minh City Women, issues from October 1992 were selected, as this is was the first month from which all issues of the newspaper could be located. The table below summarises the findings:

TABLE 3. MEDIA COVERAGE

Newspaper	Total number of articles		Number of articles about gender-based violence	
	4/1990	4/1999	4/1990	4/1999
New Hanoi			0	0
Capital Security	200	500	0	2
Capital Women	70	200	1	2
Thua Thien-Hue		1500	0	3
Liberated Saigon			0	0
HCM City Police	100	550	0	2
HCM City Women	400 (10/92)	180	3 (10/92)	7

Note: *If no articles about gender-based violence were found, the total number of articles in the newspaper were not counted. It also bears noting that the approximate number of articles of a particular newspaper are not necessarily similar in the two reference years, since some of the newspapers changed from weekly or bi-weekly publications to daily papers.*

It is clear from the analysis that the issue of gender-based violence has not been a widely addressed over the past ten years. The issue was nearly absent from newspapers in 1990, and although there are more articles about violence in 1999, the relatively low number of articles on gender-based violence indicate that it remains an insignificant topic in the media. Given the lack of significant coverage about gender-based violence in these newspapers, it is impossible to gauge changes in the prevalence of domestic violence based on this analysis. It can only be concluded that there has been no significant progress made towards raising public awareness of these issues through the media.

As was the case with the general interviews, the limited media coverage examined linked gender-based violence with other issues such as economic hardship, drinking and drug abuse, irresponsibility, adultery, inappropriate behaviour of the wife, and the husband's hot-temper. Although not explicitly stated, the articles implied that a certain level of conflict and domestic abuse is normal within families, and further implied that women are partially responsible for domestic violence due to their inappropriate behaviour. Articles counselled women to try to understand their husbands, and stated that reconciliation is the key to the solution of family conflicts.

Analysis of newspapers and periodicals since 1983

Since 1983, IOS has systematically collected articles from all major newspapers and periodicals circulating in Hanoi which address issues of marriage and the family. The collection does not purport to contain every topical article from every issue, but it does provide a valuable source of information.

The collection reveals that domestic violence was not a topic of public debate before 1994. Before that time, only a few isolated articles had ever addressed some extreme forms of gender-based violence such as prostitution, trafficking in women, adultery, physical abuse associated with divorce, and child marriage. The term "violence" was never used to describe these abuses, nor was any equivalent to the English term "gender-based violence." Articles using such terminology were only written about extreme cases such as murders, violent attacks, or rapes. The authors of these articles indicated that these violent actions occurred only in a very small percentage of families, and depicted the perpetrators as criminals or "bad elements" who were brutal, poorly educated, selfish, lazy, irresponsible, and often alcohol and/or drug abusers, gamblers, or sexual perverts. Less extreme cases of violence received little attention, and were normally not covered or only mentioned in passing in discussions about divorce cases.

It was in a 1994 article that the term "domestic violence" was first used. However, the article, "Invisible Violence in the Family" by Le Thi Quy, primarily focused on women's heavy workload, economic hardship, limited spatial mobility, and limited educational opportunities. In 1995 the same author published "Reinforce Social Control, Prevent Domestic Violence", in which she cited the English term "domestic violence" with a Vietnamese translation. She went on to explain that domestic violence had become a major topic at international conferences on women, especially the International Conference on Gender-Based Violence and the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women.

Other articles from 1995 and 1996 reflect language in UN documents discussing family and gender issues, wife beating, adultery, and child marriages. Nevertheless, domestic violence remained a minor topic of coverage; discussion of the issue was limited to instances of serious physical violence.

Gender-based violence was given slightly more exposure in 1997 and 1998. It was during this time that IOS librarians first reserved a special section for articles on domestic violence (13 articles in 1997, 6 articles in 1998). In a number of articles on violence, authors expanded the concept of violence to include less serious abuses that do not currently warrant legal intervention under Vietnamese law. These authors stated that domestic violence is a widespread and growing problem, that women need protection from violence, and that the issue warrants further public attention. In most articles, however, the term "violence" was still only used to describe serious instances of physical abuse.

The authors of more seem to believe that domestic violence is on the rise, and that this rise is attributable to the development of the market economy in Vietnam. When identifying causes of violence such as the feudal patriarchal practices of men, poverty, disparities between the rich and the poor, low education of perpetrators, drinking, gambling, drug abuse, adultery, and sexual abuse, the authors focus their blame on the market economy. Interestingly, the authors fail to provide any substantive evidence backing their claims regarding the rise in and causes of gender-based violence. Most of their conclusions are mere speculations based on the limited observation of extreme cases, and their statistics often inconsistent. In sum, no solid evidence is provided that lends credence to their claims.

The topic of domestic violence has only recently appeared in Vietnamese newspapers and journals. The visibility of this issue is still limited, and has not been made a priority for public debate. The lack of media analysis may provide insight into current cultural norms regarding violence, but it provides no help in trying to discover the true extent of gender-based violence in Vietnam.

5. Individual and Institutional Responses

Women's Individual Responses

All men and women interviewed for this study agreed on the importance of maintaining family integrity. However, this often led to emphasis being placed on the need for women to tolerate marital abuse. Interviewees generally felt that women are justified in taking action only when violence poses a serious threat to the harmony and reputation of the family. Women appear to tolerate less serious or occasional abuse that they consider to be “normal”, or abuse that they believe they have brought upon themselves.

Women react differently to more serious and ongoing abuse. One group of women stated that while there are some women who will forget about being beaten, “women who live by their innermost feelings, they can't forget their husbands' curses and beatings.” Many women, especially highly educated and urban women, may intentionally not talk with their husband for days (the “cold war” tactic) to express their protest. Other women may fight back verbally, hoping to draw the attention of neighbours to come and help. Some women may actively seek help from friends and relatives, particularly the wife's parents, who can provide temporary refuge and give advice to the couple to help avoid violence in the future. Social organisations such as the Women's Union and Reconciliation Groups may also provide assistance to women in times of trouble. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, women may also seek advice from newly established hotlines and counselling centres.

Another common response to serious cases of domestic violence is divorce. According to a lawyer from the People's Supreme Court, 17,897 women requested and were granted divorces in 1994 because they were victims of spousal abuse. 24,992 divorces were granted in 1995 and 19,828 in 1996 for the same reason (See “Divorce: An Issue Calling for Attention” by Hoa Cuc, Vietnam Women, August 4, 1997). Despite these statistics, divorce is still considered an option of last resort.

Most women have to endure the suffering, not knowing what to do. They live for their children. It is not desirable to have a divorce. If a woman is still young, she may suffer from a divorce less. There is a 40 year-old woman, with children, who is beaten by her husband. If she gets divorced, her children will lose a parent, living with the father and no mother, or living with the mother and no father. The children may become deviant. Many divorced couples have children who have become deviants. If the husband remarries, the stepmother may hurt the children. So, many women think that they should endure the suffering and keep the family intact for their children.

Female group discussion in the rural commune, Hanoi

Response of Neighbors and Friends

In most cases of family conflict, women keep silent when their husbands seem to lose self-control. As long as family conflicts do not grow serious enough to draw the attention of the neighbours, nobody intervenes. Yet neighbours and relatives are the most important groups coming to the aid of women in serious cases of abuse. In other cases, abused women who may turn to their relatives or their friends to intervene on their behalf, and speak to their husbands.

Normally women endure it [abuse] and keep silent. When they cannot stand it, relatives on the husband's side will participate in the settlement.

38 year-old in the male focus group discussion, rural commune, Hanoi

When women are abused, first of all they seek help from parents, brothers and sisters. The Women's Union may come after that.

Many respondents said that neighbours are very important actors in stopping cases of domestic violence. However, neighbours are often only aware of serious cases that cause a disturbance in the neighbourhood. While all respondents agreed that husbands who brutally beat their wives should be brought to trial, some qualified their statements based on who was responsible for igniting the violence.

As a man, I don't agree if someone beats his wife, because this is a violation [of the law]. How would we feel if someone who is stronger beats us? However, if one of my neighbours beats his wife because she is not good, I am not concerned. But if she were good, I would feel indignant about that.

Men's focus group, Hue

Other men in this Hue focus group discussed solutions that dealt more with outside intervention. They stated that in cases where drunken men beat their wives, the neighbours should come and restrain both parties. In other cases local authorities, such as the head of the resident's unit should intervene.

Institutional Responses

As a socialist country, Vietnam has developed a strong system of institutional structures reaching down to the community level. Many of these entities intervene in household issues. However, the responses of these various institutions to domestic violence appear to come from their mandate to maintain harmony within the community, rather than a concern for the individual rights of the victim.

At the community level, a **Resident Unit** is often responsible for maintaining social order in resident clusters comprised of 25 to 80 households. These units may co-ordinate with the local police, and with the local **Reconciliation Group**. Each Reconciliation Group normally consists of one representative from the Women's Union, one from the Fatherland Front, and a commonly respected individual(s) in the residential cluster. The Women's Union representative is usually the only woman in this group.

Resident's Units

The role and responsibility of the Resident's Unit seems strongest Central Vietnam, and was hardly mentioned by respondents in the North and South.

I am the head of our resident's unit. Once when a couple was fighting I came to intervene but the husband told me go away. However, I thought that it is my responsibility, and once they had settled down they sympathized with my position. There have been many cases like that. If there was no one who was responsible for intervening in these situations, the society would fall into disorder.

Young man in focus group, Hue

My father is head of the resident's unit so I know that when a husband beats his wife my father goes to them to explain what is correct and who is at fault.

Woman, Hue Focus Group

Resident's Units are also empowered to impose fines and certain punishments, such as community work.

In my group there was a family in which the husband got angry with his wife and burnt all her clothes. The security group invited him to have a meeting with them 5-6 times and they fined him approximately 50,000 dong. Yet he continued to beat his wife so he had to carry out community work in the quarter.

Female in over-30 focus group, Hue

Women's Union and Reconciliation Groups

Unless invited to intervene by the woman or her family, the Women's Union and Reconciliation Groups tend to intervene only in cases of serious domestic violence, in order to stop the immediate abuse. There is generally no follow-up counselling for the couple. However, the Reconciliation Group and Women's Union are also brought in to work on divorce cases, as a reconciliation process is required by law before the Court can proceed with a divorce hearing.

Reconciliation Groups interfere only when the situation becomes very serious, such as in [a]divorce process, or when the husband and the wife have [a] very big fight. They are not interested in normal exchanges of verbal abuse.

A young woman in the focus group discussion in an urban commune

Since most cases of domestic violence occur behind closed doors, it is difficult for the Women's Union or Reconciliation Groups to know of their existence. In one urban quarter, for example, there were only three cases of domestic violence in which the Reconciliatory Unit intervened in 1998. This low number of cases recorded however may be attributable to household privacy, or to the groups' lack of responsiveness.

I don't think that anybody in this quarter has ever contacted the Reconciliation Group at all. The Group has not performed its functions well. I don't know what to say about them because when troubles happen I never see them coming to help.

A man in a focus group discussion in the quarter

I don't know of anybody in the Reconciliation Group. Of course, the Reconciliation Group cannot cover all cases because most family conflicts are small and short-lived. They don't know all cases to intervene in.

Another man in the focus group discussion in the quarter

A frequently mentioned problem with reconciliation is that community-level people lack knowledge of their legal rights and obligations, while members of the Women's Union and Reconciliation Groups do not have professional training in how to counsel and offer advice.

There is a problem that in the process of reconciliation, the members of Reconciliation Groups work out of their enthusiasm only. They do not have specialization to do so. That is why they have limited powers of persuasion. They cannot analyze the situation, and explain what is right and what is wrong.

Male focus group discussion in a rural commune

The advice offered by these intervening bodies appears to most often be geared towards the goal of maintaining social harmony and family integrity, with the interest of children placed above the individual interests of each spouse. Since it is widely believed that children of broken families do not receive proper care and education, abused women are advised to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their children, and to not seek a divorce. One representative of the Women's Union in Central Vietnam told of a case in which she intervened. She advised a wife to control herself when her husband gets angry, and to bring neighbors in to help ease the situation. A Women's Union representative in the South stated that she similarly advises her clients, telling them:

Please be patient so that you still have your husband and your children will still have their father. If you divorce him now then your life will be more difficult.

Counselling Services

For decades, the weekly newspaper Vietnam Women has had a special question-and-answer section devoted to helping women in troubled families solve their problems and conflicts. The success of Vietnam

Women has encouraged other newspapers to imitate this example. Counselling centres are also now emerging in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Vietnam's first counselling centre, the Centre for Counselling on Love, Marriage, and the Family, was set up in Ho Chi Minh City by the Vietnam Youth Association six years ago. The centre provides direct counselling, telephone hotline, and regular mail services. Lawyers, medical doctors, specialists from various social sciences disciplines, and cadres of the Youth Union and Women's Union staff the centre. The centre has provided services to an increasing number of women suffering from domestic violence. A senior specialist at the centre stated that:

From our counselling work we see that gender-based violence in the family is a social phenomenon which is alarmingly widespread. It has thousands of forms. It happens with couples in all age groups and with different religious backgrounds and educational levels. The only difference is that highly educated husbands tend to have more emotional abuses and men with low education tend to have open and rude physical violence.

There are many reasons for violence, but among the deep-rooted causes is the influence of the feudal ideology that "husband is the master and wife is a servant", the low general knowledge base, the uneven absorption of Western living styles between the wife and the husband, the lack of awareness about gender equality and women's rights on the part of women, and the lack of effective institutional measures to protect women.

In the current market economy and open social relations, negative effects [of market economy] are freely operating in the society in the forms of prostitution, adultery, drug abuses, gambling, fraud, and selfish and irresponsible living styles. These social evils combined with the above-mentioned causes have lead to an increase and diversity of domestic violence. This has deprived many women from of right to have gender equality, which they should have in the life, [of their right to]peace, and especially [of their right to participate] in the progressive political system in Vietnam.

The Centre is currently debating whether to establish a temporary refuge for victims of domestic violence. While the idea of a temporary refuge is generally welcomed, and is often considered a last resort for many women in desperate situations, some specialists have raised concerns about the economic feasibility and legal legitimacy of such a refuge.

Responses within the Legal System

Domestic violence cases normally come before a court as either criminal or divorce cases. A District Investigator stated, however, that most cases of domestic violence never reach a court due to legal impediments and victims dropping the charges before trial. Moreover, divorce is usually only granted in cases involving instances of repeated and serious violence.

The most important principle applied by courts when judging divorce cases is set forth in the Law on Marriage and the Family, which was enacted to protect the integrity of the family, and "to protect mothers and children, helping mothers to perform well their sacred motherhood function." (Article 3 of the Law on Marriage and Family, 1986). Court officials who were interviewed generally believed that women suffer more than men in divorces. Thus, the aims of protecting women's interests and protecting the integrity of the family are closely related. Others argue, however, that bringing an abusive husband to trial is a disruptive event for the family. Under the current law it is difficult to bring the perpetrator to trial, even if he has violated the law, without the request of the victim.

In the last year, there was no case in which the husband caused serious injury to the wife. There were only a few cases requiring prosecution in which the husband violated the one-husband, one-wife law. But it is very difficult to charge the husband with this law. First, it is difficult to

obtain evidence. Criminal cases require very clear evidence. Second, even if there is enough evidence, in the process of prosecution the wife may change her mind and drop the case. In this situation, the Court will not intervene. This is because the most important guideline for judging a violation of the one-husband-one-wife law is to protect the family integrity.

A Female officer in a Hanoi District Legal Department

Two years ago, a woman reported that her second husband had sex with her own 16-year-old daughter, and the girl also reported this. We started the investigation in order to bring the man to trial for violation of the Criminal Law. In the process of investigation, the woman and the girl changed their mind and insisted on dropping the case. The girl denied the earlier report about the case. We did not have enough evidence because only the girl and the woman knew exactly what had happened. The case, then, was dropped.

A Female officer in a Hanoi District Legal Department

Another important aspect of governing divorce law is that conciliation is compulsory before any divorce can be granted. Conciliation is normally carried out several times. During this process, many couples change their mind and reconcile with each other, dropping the divorce request. A weakness of this system is that it treats couples as equals, despite the fact that women are often in a much weaker position than their husbands to negotiate their rights.

Protecting women's rights and providing them with access to housing, child support, and an equal share of family assets are major concerns of the Court in divorce cases. Decision 01/NQ-HDTP by the Judge Council of the Supreme Court on January 20, 1998: Guideline for Application of the Marriage and Family Law, stipulates that "when dividing property [in a divorce], [the court] must protect the interests of the wife and small children [below 18 years old]."

Government officials who were interviewed stated that the primary determinant of whether or not a divorce case makes it to court is the seriousness of the underlying offence. Other external factors such as support networks, financial independence, and access to legal advice were not believed by the officials to greatly influence women's decisions to go to court. Once a divorce case is filed the court will interview the couple to determine whether or not the case is serious enough to warrant a divorce.

Although the house and other property are divided equally between the wife and husband in divorces, it is nevertheless very difficult for a woman to establish a life following a divorce. When the couple has small children, the wife usually has the right to raise them, and the husband must contribute money to assist his ex-wife. However, court officers and divorced women note that many husbands ignore their responsibility of caring for their children following a divorce. Many divorced males have a low income and have little to contribute to their children. Many others, however, withhold payments out of spite for their ex-wives. According to a female Court officer in the Thanh Tri District, Hanoi, about one third of the divorced husbands in the district do not pay child support. The same officer said that in recent years the division of family property in divorce cases has become easier, as general living standards have improved.

Husbands who injure their wives can theoretically be charged under the Criminal Law. In practice, there are two conditions necessary for this to occur. First, there must be more than a "10% degree of damage" to the wife's health¹, and second, the wife must file charges. The Court will not normally bring the man into custody without the woman's request, regardless of the degree of injury. If the husband beats his wife repeatedly and systematically, he may theoretically be charged with the crime of "abuse against the wife" even if the "degree of damage" is less than 10%, and even if the wife does not file charges. This is only possible, however, if the local police have substantial evidence of the systematic beating. Obtaining such

¹ This is based on Government Regulation No. 12/TTLB which outlines specific types of damages to a person's health, and allocates a percentage to the degree of damage. The degree of damage can only be assessed by the Council for Estimation of Health Damage located at central and provincial levels.

evidence is very difficult, and there are very few circumstances under which the authorities will bring the man to trial.

The District Investigator in Hue did give one such example in which a wife was subjected to repeated physical violence until she was finally hospitalized with a broken eardrum. At this point she petitioned for a divorce. The Court decided that this was a criminal rather than a civil case, and asked the Investigator to prepare the case for prosecution. At the time of the interview the criminal case was still pending. In the meantime, the divorce case has been put on hold, and the wife is still living in the same house as her abusive husband.

A major gap exists between the actual law on domestic violence and the implementation of the law. Impediments to implementation include a lack of education and knowledge of the law on the part of the public. One Court Official who was interviewed stated that the problem is not a lack of appropriate laws, but rather an unwillingness to abide by the laws and weak implementation efforts. The Government is beginning to implement education campaigns about the law education, and recently created law councils responsible for disseminating such knowledge. As the Vice-Chair of Hue City stated, however, domestic violence is best solved not only by laws, but also by increasing the role of the community in addressing domestic violence, since all actions happening inside the family unit can not be regulated by the law.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that domestic violence is a very complex process influenced by multiple factors. The severity and frequency of violence is difficult to measure as violence can take many forms and be of varying intensities. However, it is clear that traditional gender values, roles, and responsibilities underlay many of all the factors that lead to domestic violence.

Both men and women in Vietnam take the traditional patriarchal value system for granted. A consequence of this is that people equate gender equality with peaceful conformity to socially prescribed gender roles, and an improvement in a woman's status is one which helps her fulfil this traditional role better. The failure of Vietnamese society to question entrenched gender stereotypes allows domestic violence to continue occurring as a 'normal' and accepted part of spousal relations. Given the deep-rooted nature of these perceptions, it is not surprising that institutional actions perpetuate the existing *status quo*.

Most interviewees believed that gender-based violence is relatively low in their communities (with estimates of physical violence occurring in 5 to 20% of households). This figure is well below recorded international data and may simply reflect the fact that certain levels of domestic violence are accepted as normal in Vietnamese culture. However, domestic violence may also be minimised by community institutions entrusted with maintaining social order.

Violence against women occurs more frequently in societies where violence is an accepted way of resolving conflicts (Sanchez & Gonzalez 1997:73). It can be argued that Vietnam is not a comparatively violent society, and that one could therefore expect gender-based violence to be correspondingly lower. However, actual data indicates that domestic violence is a very real and widespread issue in Vietnam, affecting women from all social and geographical groupings.

Any approach created to address domestic violence must be integrated with existing programs and entities. The extent of the domestic violence problem in Vietnam is still unrecognised. Communities need to be made aware that a domestic violence problem exists, and that violence is not an acceptable way of resolving conflicts. Other strategies could stem from this campaign, such as improved legal regulations, and better knowledge and counselling skills within community organisations. The existing institutions entrusted with intervening in family conflicts provide a valuable entry point for such action.

Recommendations emerging from this study are outlined below. It should be noted that UNIFEM has approved, in principle, a project on gender-based violence that will be implemented by the Women's Union. This project will encompass many of the recommendations made below on training and awareness raising.

Recommendation 1: An Advocacy Program

Despite its widespread prevalence, gender-based violence has not yet received priority attention from policy makers. An effective advocacy program is therefore needed to heighten the awareness of policy makers at all levels, and to create a favourable institutional environment for combating domestic violence. For gender-based inequality and violence to be adequately addressed by policy makers, fundamental changes must also be made in the way people view gender roles and gender equality in Vietnam.

Recommendation 2: Awareness Raising

As the results of the study have shown, many men and women accept gender-based violence as the norm. Solving family conflicts by violence is still considered justified if the woman is "at fault". Domestic violence against women is still largely considered a private matter, and there is no sense that women are currently able to take collective action to combat the problem. Although gender equality is guaranteed by the law, many women are nevertheless deprived of the very fundamental right of being respected and physically protected. Women continue to endure violence in silence, in part because of a lack of knowledge about their rights, as well as a lack of public condemnation of all forms of violence. A change in this situation and the creation of a new environment in which all forms of violence against women are condemned would require numerous measures. Foremost among these should be an active awareness raising campaign in the mass media, as well as awareness drives through community-based activities such as meetings, target group discussions, and distribution of brochures and leaflets. In this awareness raising campaign messages should be differentiated by gender, and domestic violence messages should be integrated with broader concepts of gender equality as well as the ongoing program for raising public awareness of legal issues.

As previously stated, there is no collective action currently being taken to combat gender-based violence. Such a process of empowerment and action may still be a long way off in Vietnam, but a good starting point would be a broad recognition of the core issues and the implementation of the proposed public awareness campaign.

Recommendation 3: Training

Although a strong social network exists commune level within bodies such as the Women's Union and reconciliation groups, a general lack of gender sensitivity, counselling knowledge and skills limits the effectiveness of these institutions. It is therefore recommend that a training program be developed to increase the capacity of the Women's Union and reconciliation groups in these areas.

It is also recommended that special training workshops be held for court and justice officials at the district level to help them to avoid gender bias in interpreting laws and handling gender-based violence cases. The training program could be organised to initially train a small group of national specialists who would then help to train practitioners at lower levels.

Recommendation 4: Expand counselling services

Information obtained from counselling centres in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City has indicates that women who are victims of violence value counselling services. Unfortunately, professional counselling services are currently available only in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It is therefore recommend that existing centres be better resourced, and that counselling services be expanded to other locations in Vietnam. Existing centres may need an active marketing program in order to make their services widely known. The process of expanding counselling services to other places may take time and special programs for training counsellors may be needed before counselling centres can be set up in other cities and rural areas.

Recommendation 5: Temporary Refuges

Many cases of physical violence occur at night and when the perpetrators are drunk. In some instances women are forcibly kicked out of the house. . In these and other situations the victims may need a temporary

refuge to avoid being beaten. Respondents reported that there are some women who seek temporary refuge in their parents' house. This option is not available for all women in need of a temporary refuge, however. One reason is that many women live far away from their family of origin, as more women migrate to other provinces to work and get married.

The establishment of temporary refuges would require a series of legal and administrative arrangements in addition to certain funding requirements. Nevertheless, it is recommended that this option be considered, possibly starting with small pilot projects in a few places in the country. The experiences of refuges in other countries can also be drawn on.

Recommendation 6: Research

Our study results suggest that more research is needed to shed light on many important aspects of gender-based violence in Vietnam. For example, this study's estimations of the prevalence, frequency, and changes in the different types of violence is only tentative and based on perception of the respondents. This qualitative study only suggests hypothetical explanations that call for more elaborate and rigorous measurements and testing. It is recommended that a national representative survey on gender-based violence be carried out to investigate the forms violence takes; its prevalence and frequency; and its determinants, causes and consequences. This study would form a baseline from which to measure changes in both the scope and intensity of violence and social attitudes to violence. A separate study on legal practices and the activities of social organisations involved in dealing with violent incidences would also be valuable.

Recommendation 7: Monitoring prevalence and trends

In order for policy makers and researchers to more effectively combat gender-based violence, they require reliable and gender sensitive tools for monitoring the prevalence of violence and its trends. One way to do this is to improve the existing civil registration systems of the relevant institutions. Although incidences of violence are recorded routinely by local People's Committees, police, investigation bureaus, courts and medical facilities, these records are not disaggregated by gender. For instance, on standard court forms categories for divorce do not disaggregate the cause of divorce by gender, but simply state "adultery"; "forced-marriage", "beating and physical violence", and the like.

It is therefore recommended that relevant systems for record keeping, analysis and reporting be reviewed and revised. We also recommend that a task force be established in the National Committee for the Advancement of Women to routinely monitor gender-based violence, including its levels and trends, in Vietnam.

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