

Data Breaks the Silence on Violence Against Women: A Case Study of Vietnam

Executive Summary

In 2010, survey data shed light on a hidden issue affecting more than half of women in Vietnam. A nationwide survey by the General Statistics Office (GSO) of Vietnam found that 58% of women reported experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by their husbands, and 87% of women who had experienced physical or sexual abuse had not sought any form of help.

The data catalyzed a public conversation about the nature of violence against women, raised awareness around coping strategies and available support services, and informed new government strategies and policy responses addressing violence against women, most notably the *National Strategy on Gender Equality (2011-2020)*. As a result of these government strategies, Vietnamese women experiencing violence at home are now able to access a range of counseling, health, legal, and shelter services.

This case study demonstrates the vital importance of engaging policymakers in all phases of data collection, analysis, and dissemination. In Vietnam, this helped ensure data was used to inform and monitor policy commitments.

Almost ten years on, the GSO is about to complete its second nationwide survey on violence against women, while other nations in the Asia Pacific region are looking to emulate their successes.

Background

In Vietnam, violence against women is traditionally perceived as a private issue — a matter between husband and wife that should remain behind close doors, without state intervention. Many women are reluctant to share their experiences or seek help due to stigma, lack of support from family members and authorities, and fear of possible repercussions for themselves and their children. Even talking about sexual violence within a marriage may be regarded as inappropriate, with many believing it should be tolerated for the sake of “family harmony.” Due to its traditional taboo nature, the true extent of violence against women in Vietnam remained hidden for many years.

As the issue of violence against women gained international prominence in the 1980s, the Government of Vietnam began taking steps to promote formal gender equality. Starting with the ratification of the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* in 1982 and the *Beijing Platform for Action* in 1995, the government committed to ensure that national domestic violence laws, policies, and programs were introduced, funded, and actively monitored. Specialized laws on gender equality and domestic violence were eventually adopted in 2006–7 following concerted advocacy efforts by community activists and development partners.

Yet despite these improvements to the legal framework, the extent of violence against women in Vietnam was still not well understood. A dedicated nationwide survey was required to accurately assess the incidence of violence and its impact on society. Policymakers needed solid evidence to develop preventative strategies, design responsive services, and measure progress on implementing the newly introduced domestic violence law. Conducting a qualitative survey was also needed to unearth community perceptions in order to challenge the cultural stigma and myths surrounding violence against women.

The Data

In 2009, the General Statistics Office (GSO) of Vietnam, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and development partners, conducted a nationwide survey of 4,838 ever-married women aged between 18-60 years old about their experience of physical, sexual, and emotional violence in marriage. The study sought to obtain detailed information on the prevalence and nature of violence against women, the indirect and direct impacts on health, community attitudes towards domestic violence, and women's coping strategies.

For the first time in Vietnam's history, both quantitative (population-based survey) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and focus group discussion) techniques were employed to produce a comprehensive national picture of violence against women. The final report, *National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Viet Nam (NSDV)* was launched in November 2010 via awareness-raising seminars and workshops organized by UNFPA, GSO, Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MoSTC), and Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA) targeting the media, policymakers, health care professionals, service providers, civil society organizations, and the general public.

The survey results were startling. An alarming 58% of respondents reported having been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by their husbands, and 87% of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence had not sought any form of help. The study found that domestic violence victims who did seek help most commonly turned to local leaders who dismissed domestic violence as a "family issue." Domestic violence also had a significant impact on health, with 26% of respondents reporting physical injuries, and 60% reporting having been injured multiple times. Qualitative interviews revealed that women and local authorities were also generally unaware of the law on domestic violence.

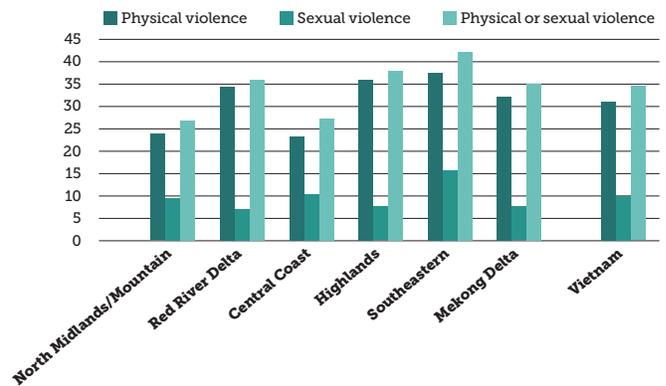


Figure 1. Prevalence of physical or sexual violence by husband among ever-married women by region, in Vietnam

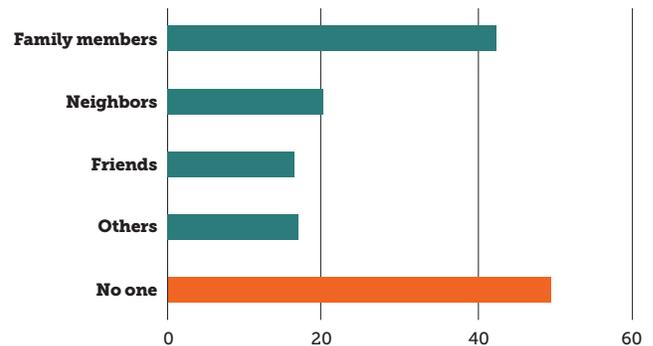


Figure 2. Proportion of women who told someone among women who experienced physical or sexual violence by husband, Vietnam

KEY FIGURES ON PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, AND EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE IN MARRIAGE IN VIETNAM

4,838 ever-married women between 18-60 years were surveyed in 2010 in Hanoi, Hue, and Ban Tre provinces in Vietnam.

58% of respondents reported having been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by their husbands.

34% of respondents reported having suffered from physical or sexual violence by their husbands at some time in their lives.

87% of respondents who reported having experienced physical or sexual abuse from their husbands had not sought any form of help.

26% of respondents who reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse from their husbands also reported physical injuries as a direct result.

Reactions to the Data

The national survey stimulated wide public discussion around a formerly taboo topic. Awareness-raising efforts, including a video featuring testimonials of domestic violence survivors, and a multi-country tour for government officials to observe programs designed to address gender-based violence, helped to bring the survey data to life. Community outreach activities including speeches, parades, arts performances, exhibitions, and music videos also helped disseminate the survey's findings at provincial and local levels.

Significantly, the survey prompted concrete policy and programmatic decisions. This came as a result of a prolonged period of engagement, advocacy, and data literacy building among policymakers within key government agencies. As Ha Thi Quynh Anh, program specialist, human rights and gender, at UNFPA Vietnam reflects, "That was a very long process. We couldn't push the government to believe in our findings, or to use our findings right from the beginning."

Findings from the survey provided critical baseline indicators and targets for several new national action plans, including the *National Strategy on Gender Equality (2011-2020)*, the *National Plan of Action for Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (2014-20)*, and the *National Thematic Proposal on Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence (2016-2020, vision to 2030)*. While the National Assembly may have created the first law on domestic violence in 2007, prior to this survey there was no accurate basis for setting measurable indicators and targets. Follow up research in 2012 by UN Women on the cost of domestic violence against women — both direct and indirect — provided further incentive for the government to act upon the data.

Increased budgetary allocations to combat violence against women and invest in support services followed. Under commitments made in the *National Strategy on Gender Equality* led by MoLISA, new social service networks and two shelters ("Peace Houses") run by Women's Union and thousands of trusted addresses and community shelters are now available to shelter women fleeing violence at home.

On the back of the national survey, efforts were also launched to build the capacity of policymakers and government officials to implement violence against women policies. Gender-based violence training was conducted for law enforcement officers and others within the justice sector with support from the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), while gender sensitization activities were organized to support program implementers across various sectors including Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, Children and Youth, and Agriculture and Rural Development.

Almost ten years later, the survey data has become a regular feature in civil society and government speeches and awareness raising activities like the "Stop Violence Against Women" campaign. Originally a UNFPA initiative, this has become an annual event that unites government, civil society, and development partners. The survey data has also been utilized for monitoring and reporting on Vietnam's international commitments to eliminate violence against women. According to UNFPA Vietnam, the exercise of implementing the NSDV has strengthened the GSO and co-implementing bodies' long-term capacity for gender data collection, coordination, and analysis.

The global community is taking note of Vietnam's pioneering work to comprehensively change survey rates, coping mechanisms, and attitudes towards violence against women. Neighboring countries from the Asia-Pacific region are now seeking to replicate the NSDV study, with government officials from Mongolia and Indonesia conducting study tours to learn about Vietnam's experience. Through the ongoing capacity building efforts of the UNFPA's kNOwVAWdata initiative, a new generation of statisticians and advocates are being nurtured to measure the prevalence of violence against women.

DIGGING INTO DATA COLLECTION

The methodology was adapted from the WHO's *Multi-country study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence*, which uses a standard questionnaire and allows for comparability with other settings. In total, about 5000 women were surveyed. Furthermore, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with survivors of violence, as well as representatives from the

Women's Union, health services, police, village leaders, and the Communist Party. In addition, four focus groups were held in Hanoi, Hue, and Ben Tre provinces with a cross section of community members of different ages and gender to explore attitudes towards violence against women.

Specially trained female field workers were employed to gather the data in an ethical and safe way. The field workers were carefully selected by the GSO and Provincial Statistics Office (PSO) based on criteria such as emotional maturity and the ability to engage with people from a variety of backgrounds on sensitive topics. They received two weeks of training in interview techniques, empathy, and giving support to women ahead of data collection.

Additional measures were also taken to protect the safety and privacy of respondents. For example, only one woman per household could be selected for interviewing to protect confidentiality. Women were also not interviewed in their own home. Instead, they were invited to participate in the study at a neutral location such as a community center. The subject matter of the study was then carefully explained by the interviewer one-on-one. All respondents had the right to refuse to answer questions, and were provided with information about existing support services they could access at the end of the interview. These measures helped to ensure that women felt comfortable discussing what was considered a private and even shameful issue.

Success Factors

This case study highlights the importance of engaging with potential data users (such as policymakers) throughout the entire process of design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Several factors contributed to creating impact through the use of NSDV data in Vietnam, including:

- **High political will and data demand:** International commitments and the introduction of the domestic violence law in 2007 surfaced a need for rigorous baseline data. Key implementing ministries such as the Ministry of

Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, and Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism were all making requests for data to help them prevent and respond to violence against women.

- **Partnership between data collectors and users:** Stakeholder consultation throughout the entire process (including design, collection, and analysis) was key to developing a sense of ownership over the findings, thereby increasing the prospects of data use. Multiple stakeholder workshops were held to discuss, analyze, and socialize the results of the survey with representatives from government agencies, civil society, and development partners. This helped promote data literacy among participants, while promoting acceptance of the findings, ahead of publication.
- **Proactive involvement of the Women's Union and local leaders:** Involvement of women's groups, local government, community leaders, and health providers made quantitative research possible, and also resulted in active support for qualitative work. Their involvement helped to build legitimacy, trust, and access to interviewees.
- **Technical support of development partners:** The NSDV was only possible with the financial and technical support of a wide range of UN agencies, donors, and gender experts. In particular, the WHO (2009 study) and UNFPA (2018 study) provided extensive capacity building for the research team on the WHO methodology, data literacy, and gender sensitization.

Challenges & Next Steps

Despite impressive progress in strengthening policy commitments and raising awareness about violence against women, traditional gender stereotypes and perceptions of domestic violence still dominate many parts of Vietnamese society. There is a lack of capacity for gender mainstreaming among many government officials, state administrative agencies, and judicial bodies. And although additional studies utilizing the survey data have provided further insight into the risk factors for violence against women, some data and programming gaps still exist. For example, UN Women noted the lack of evaluation studies and coordination between

different ministries, departments, agencies, and NGOs working on different aspects of gender-based violence.

To overcome these challenges, the government of Vietnam is enhancing communication and awareness raising efforts, conducting training on the laws on gender equality and domestic violence, and strengthening the national database system on gender-based violence (a key commitment in the *National Thematic Program (NTP) on GBV prevention and response (2016-2020)*).

The GSO is about to launch the results of a second follow-up survey in partnership with MoLISA and UNFPA. The survey, conducted in 2018, will help to assess the efficiency of violence against women policies and programs introduced over the past decade. A special steering committee coordinates the survey, comprised of representatives from responsible government agencies to encourage buy-in. The scope of the survey has been broadened to encompass the economic costs of violence, the nature of violence outside of the home and marriage (e.g., in schools, public spaces, and workplaces), and prevalence of violence among adolescents, older women (aged 15-64), and women with disabilities.

The updated evidence generated by the second survey (due out in late 2019), will be essential for reviewing progress implementing violence against women commitments, and evaluating programs providing preventative and care services to survivors. Pham Ngoc Tien, Director of the Gender Equality Department at MoLISA stated at the launch of the second NSDV study in January 2018:

“In order to develop appropriate, effective and practical policies...we need reliable data and information as evidence for guiding and building laws and policies. I also hope that the data collected from this survey will continue to be further analyzed to understand different effects of violence on the country’s socio-economic development. The data collected will be very helpful for policymakers, programmers at national and provincial levels, government agencies, social organizations, services providers for GBV survivors, communities and people in the society.”

But perhaps the biggest shift the research team expects to see is in community perception of violence against women and in the willingness of victims to raise their voices and seek help. What was once a hidden issue is now being brought into view because of data.

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