

## PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

## Preventing and responding to violence against women: A case study from Vietnam

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**Abstract**

Violence against women (VAW) has significant detrimental effects on the daily lives of women and the overall development of society. Addressing VAW poses a considerable challenge for nations striving to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs). Vietnamese society, deeply influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, continues to perpetuate male preferences. The persistence of gender stereotypes and discrimination shaped by societal norms serves as an underlying cause of VAW in Vietnam. Despite the Vietnamese government's efforts since 2010 to implement prevention and response programs for gender-based violence, the alarming reality is that nearly 63% of women report experiencing at least one form of violence in their lives. However, various obstacles prevent many of these women from seeking legal protection. These obstacles include inadequate support services, burdensome proof requirements, and fear of re-victimization. Thus, the crucial question of how to effectively eliminate VAW in Vietnam remains a major concern, influencing the nation's progress toward achieving the SDGs and upholding its commitment as a member country of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This paper analyzes the obstacles Vietnam faces in its efforts to prevent and respond to VAW, aiming to safeguard women's rights and advance gender equality.

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence; Violence against women; Prevention; Response; Legal protection; Essential support services; Vietnam

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**1. Introduction****1.1. Vietnam's social context**

Gender inequality is prevalent in most countries around the world, and addressing it is recognized as a key sustainable development goal. Vietnam shares common features with other Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and Korea, which have been influenced by Confucianism. Therefore, Vietnam faces similar challenges in promoting gender equality, especially in eliminating discrimination against women. Gender inequality refers to the different treatment of individuals based on their sex, including in societal participation, roles, asset control, and decision-making. In Vietnam, societal norms stemming from traditional beliefs often dictate that women prioritize family over personal well-being and aspirations. The prevailing expectation for women is to defer to male authority, potentially leading to a lack of awareness of or failure to actively assert their legal and policy-granted rights (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2005). Such inequality has also

resulted in adverse effects on human resources, particularly given the significant role of women in the workforce—a pivotal factor for driving economic advancement.

Different gendered roles contribute to the formation of societal gender norms. The most common caregiving and leadership norms in Vietnam are that “women should be primarily responsible for child and family caretaking” and that “women should not be in leadership positions within the workplace” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 13). Gender norms from the past continue to strongly influence the roles of women in the workplace and at home. Persisting gender inequality in the labor market results in disparities in recruitment, compensation, and promotion. Data on employment status reveal a notable disparity favoring men, with a lower percentage of women having access to and obtaining employment.

Based on the employment status, Vietnam’s economic structure shows that only 43% of employed women are wage workers, whereas the corresponding figure for employed men is higher (51.4%). Notably, women’s labor force participation rate is very high in Vietnam (62.3% for women; 75.4% for men), but 67.2% of female workers are employed in the informal sector (UN Women *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the proportion of unpaid family labor for women is more than twice that of men, at 19.4% compared to 9.2% in 2019 (GSO, 2021). In a family, women are required to do the housework and perform unpaid care tasks. A survey by the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS) revealed that 20% of women were unemployed because they were busy with household chores, compared to only 2% of men. Therefore, women are more likely to be responsible for the unpaid work of running a household, which can be both time- and energy-consuming (ISDS, 2015). The 2018 Labor Force Survey revealed that 47.5% of economically inactive women chose this employment status due to “personal or family-related reasons,” compared to only 18.9% of inactive men. Despite the generally high participation of women in the labor market in Vietnam, women continue to encounter unequal opportunities for economic engagement compared to men (General Statistics Office, 2018), thereby indicating an imbalance of power in the labor market.

The norm of favoring males has caused significant gender inequality, such as gender selection and limited access to education for females. As a result, women are more likely to have lower levels of education. According to the ISDS (2015) survey, 70.78% of women had completed a lower secondary school education or less, compared to 60.28% of men. Further, only 29.22% of women had upper-secondary school or higher education compared to 40.33% of men. Further gender norms, such as the notion that a

good wife should follow her husband’s decisions, lead to discrimination against the role of women in their families (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020). Although both men and women reported being involved in decision-making on most family matters, the majority agreed that men have the final say in more important matters, such as land, housing, and the purchase of valuable assets (ISDS, 2015).

Gender norms and stereotypes remain the primary causes of discrimination against women and gender-based violence (GBV). Women and girls are also victims of violence, such as sexual harassment, fueled by notions like “women are flowers for men to pick up.” However, laws preventing women and girls from fully exercising their rights have not still clearly determined sexual harassment in public spaces. The notion of educating one’s wife from the 1<sup>st</sup> day of marriage also encourages men to dominate the decision-making in the family, even using violence as a means to carry out such “education.”

To eliminate GBV and promote gender equality, the Vietnamese government has enacted several laws and policies, including the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Marriage and Family, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, and the Labor Code. In addition, the government has implemented several national programs to promote gender equality, such as the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021 – 2030 and the Action Plan on Gender Equality 2021 – 2025. These laws, policies, and programs aim to ensure that women have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, including education, employment, politics, and health.

Vietnam has also exerted considerable efforts to meet the commitments outlined in international conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Notably, the country is currently considering ratifying the Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 (No. 190). Moreover, the Labor Code (2019) defines sexual harassment in the workplace as a prohibited act, and the employer is responsible for developing internal rules to prevent and respond to any such acts (Decree No.145/2020). These conventions further reflect the Vietnamese government’s commitment to eliminating GBV and promoting gender equality. However, GBV remains a challenging issue, and Vietnam must focus on developing stronger intervention measures to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

## 1.2. Violence against women (VAW) in Vietnam

VAW remains a significant issue in Vietnam. The 2019 *National Study on VAW in Vietnam* revealed that nearly 63% of women have experienced at least one form of GBV

(MOLISA *et al.*, 2020). Women are exposed to various forms of violence. Regarding physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner, 26.1% of women who have been married or are in a relationship have experienced physical violence, whereas 13.3% have experienced sexual violence. Emotional violence by a husband or partner is the most frequently reported form, with almost half of women (47.0%) encountering it at least once and nearly one-fifth (19.3%) in the past year (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020).

Despite Vietnam's first National Program on Preventing and Responding to GBV in 2010, the issue remains prevalent. The 2019 study on VAW compared data from 2010 to 2019, revealing an increase in violence committed by husbands or partners from 10% to 13%. Incidents of physical violence by individuals other than partners increased from 9.9% to 11.4%, whereas sexual violence by others increased from 2.3% to 9.0%. Notably, sexual violence against girls under 15 years increased from 2.8% to 4.4% (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020).

Although Vietnam has implemented a 10-year program dedicated to preventing and responding to GBV, the situation is still a challenge. The following question arises: Why is the number of cases of violence increasing? Gender discrimination and stereotypes are the root causes of VAW. More than one-third of women in Vietnam express traditional beliefs that favor men as household decision-makers. Over half of the female respondents of the 2019 study on VAW (51.8%) believed that a man is justified in physically harming his wife for reasons such as infidelity (45.2%) or neglecting childcare duties (27.0%). Such beliefs are more prevalent in rural areas and among less educated women. Women who have experienced violence are also likely to excuse their husbands or partners for violent behavior. Among those who have experienced physical violence, the most common triggers were "family problems" (50.8%) and "alcohol use" (40.9%), followed by "financial issues" (18.8%) (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020). The belief that women should fulfill their marital duties without the right to refuse their husband's sexual advances persists, with 27% of women still adhering to the notion that a good wife should comply with her husband's wishes even if she disagrees with him (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, Vietnam still does not have reports on rape cases committed by husbands, and 90% of women who experienced sexual violence did not report it or seek help from the system. Many reasons prevent women from seeking protection because violence is considered a private issue and women want to protect the reputation of their families, or the burden of proof or infeasible sanctions (Phan, 2022).

Women who have experienced violence encounter substantial obstacles when attempting to pursue equitable

and rightful resolutions through both formal and informal legal systems. The same is true of individuals seeking essential services, such as healthcare, law enforcement, legal support, and social services. These challenges persist due to deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that permeate traditional, historical, cultural, legislative, and service-oriented responses. For instance, women are frequently urged to compromise on their ambitions for the benefit of their children, and domestic violence is often regarded as a private family matter, with the wife being expected to protect her husband's reputation. The notion of "xấu chàng hổ ai" (both are being shamed) or the traditional belief that a wife should bring pride to her husband, as reflected in Vietnamese folklore, "A man gets rich by his friend and gets pride from his wife," discourages women from reporting such cases, perpetuating the acceptance of violence as commonplace (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020). The primary reason cited by women for not seeking assistance was their belief that the violence they experienced was either normal or not serious—a sentiment expressed by 48.4% of women who did not seek help. Conversely, most women who sought help did so only when they could no longer tolerate the violence (69.7%). In addition, nearly one in five women (19.3%) left home at least once due to a violent husband or partner. These women stayed away for an average of 20 days and mostly sought refuge with their relatives. Reasons for returning included not wanting to leave children behind (50.4%), being asked to return by their partner (26.0%), and forgiving their partner (25.5%) (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence worsened due to social distancing policies. Working from home also imposes a greater burden of housework on women. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced various challenges into people's daily lives, but its impact has been particularly severe on women, both in their professional and domestic roles. As highlighted in a UN Women (2020) report during the early months of the pandemic, women were significantly affected due to their higher representation in insecure jobs, including in the informal sector, where they receive inadequate benefits and protection. Throughout the pandemic, women, girls, and vulnerable populations have faced an elevated risk of GBV due to their limited influence and involvement in household decision-making. This vulnerability was exacerbated by changes in social safety nets, mobility restrictions, and reduced access to information and services. The COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam disrupted the supply of contraceptives and essential medical resources to women, mirroring disruptions in the supply of various goods and services globally (World Bank, 2023). As a result, the challenge of VAW persists in

Vietnam, hindering women from fully exercising their rights.

## 2. Preventing and responding to VAW in Vietnam

### 2.1. Laws and policies

The Vietnamese government has reaffirmed its commitment to recognizing and safeguarding human rights through its membership in several UN conventions, including the UN Convention on Political and Civil Rights and CEDAW. Consequently, Vietnam has developed a legal framework for protecting women's rights and preventing VAW. The country's dedication to fulfilling its international obligations by taking proactive steps to prevent, investigate, and prosecute cases of VAW is evident in its recent legislative and policy initiatives. These efforts extend beyond gender equality and encompass broader concerns such as domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment. This commitment is demonstrated through recent revisions to the Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, and Legal Aid Act (UN Women, 2017).

Developing comprehensive legislation on the prevention of VAW is one of Vietnam's most important tasks. The legal framework for preventing and responding to VAW can be described as follows.

First, the form of VAW is often categorized into four forms: physical, emotional, economic, and sexual. These distinct forms of violence are governed by various legal instruments in Vietnam. They are addressed within different legal frameworks, including the Law on the Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence, the Penal Code, the Law on Human Trafficking, the Law on Children, and several decrees related to handling cases of violence. For instance, Decree No. 144/202/ND-CP, dated December 31, 2021, addresses administrative penalties for violations related to social safety, security, order, social issues, fire prevention, firefighting, rescue, and domestic violence prevention and control.

However, significant flaws exist in the consistent application of gender-sensitive procedures for addressing all forms of VAW. For example, cases of VAW can be handled under different legal procedures, including the Criminal Procedure Code, Civil Procedure Code, and Law on Handling Administrative Violations. This lack of uniformity in the principles governing the handling of VAW leads to inconsistencies and increased risk of victimization. In addition, emerging forms of violence, such as cyber and dating violence, are not currently addressed by existing laws. Consequently, Vietnam urgently requires the development of a comprehensive

legal framework aimed at eradicating all forms of VAW, as mandated by CEDAW.

Second, regarding the place of VAW, various forms of VAW are stipulated by different laws and regulations as follows:

- (i) Domestic VAW: The Law on the Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence, enacted in 2007 and amended in 2022, introduces new forms of domestic violence, notably domestic sexual violence (Article 2[1]). This Law categorizes sexual violence as any sexual act or behavior occurring without consent. However, cultural perceptions often regard sexual relations between spouses as private matters, with the expectation that a woman is responsible for satisfying her husband's sexual needs. Consequently, marital rape is not acknowledged, as there is a prevailing belief that consent to marriage implies consent to sexual intercourse, and this presumed sexual "right" is typically considered irrevocable unless the couple divorces (Skinnider *et al.*, 2017, p. 45). The new amendment also introduces more protective measures and support services for women and children. Article 22 outlines measures to prevent domestic violence and protect and support its victims, including the following:
  - Forcing an end to acts of domestic violence.
  - Requesting the person committing domestic violence to report to the police office of the commune where the violence occurred.
  - Imposing protective orders.
  - Arranging shelters and providing support for essential needs.
  - Providing care and treatment for victims of domestic violence.
  - Offering legal aid, psychological counseling, and training in responding to domestic violence.
  - Providing domestic violence education and control.
  - Offering suggestions and criticism to perpetrators in their communities.
  - Performing community service.
  - Implementing measures to prevent and handle administrative violations according to the law; measures to prevent and protect victims under criminal procedures laws regarding perpetrators.
- (ii) VAW in the workplace: The Labor Code 2019 and Decree No.12/2022 on penalties for administrative violations against regulations on labor, social insurance, and Vietnamese guest workers prohibits sexual harassment. Article 11(3) specifies that a fine of approximately 700 – 1200 USD shall be imposed for acts of sexual harassment in the workplace, if not

subject to criminal prosecution. To promote female workers' rights regarding gender equality, Article 28 of this Decree on regulatory violations against female employees and gender equality stipulates:

(1) A fine of approximately 250 – 500 USD shall be imposed on an employer for:

- a) Failing to ensure gender equality and the implementation of measures to promote gender equality in recruitment, job assignment, placement, training, working hours, rest periods, salaries, and other policies.
- b) Failing to consult with female employees or their representatives when making decisions affecting their rights and interests.

Decree No.145/2020, dated December 14, 2020, which elaborates on some articles of the Labor Code regarding working conditions and labor relations, also stipulates the obligations of employers in developing internal regulations to prevent sexual harassment. According to Article 84(1), sexual harassment is defined as including requests, demands, suggestions, threats, or the use of force to coerce sex in exchange for any work-related benefits. In addition, it includes any sexual act that creates an insecure and uncomfortable work environment, adversely affecting the mental and physical health, performance, and overall life of the victim. This marks the first legal definition of sexual harassment in Vietnam, reflecting the government's increased focus on protecting women's rights and combating sexual violence in the workplace.

(iii) VAW in public spaces: Public spaces are defined to differentiate them from domestic and workplace settings. This clarification helps determine the jurisdiction for addressing cases of violence and provides a legal foundation for their resolution. For example, if a case of sexual harassment occurs in a public space, penalties as stipulated in Decree No. 144/2021/ND-CP will apply, whereas sexual harassment in the workplace will be governed by Decree No. 12/2022.

Third, regarding penalties imposed on perpetrators, acts of VAW are divided into categories including administrative violations and criminal offenses, which can be described as follows:

(i) Administrative violence these are illegal acts committed by individuals or organizations that are not classified as crimes and for which administrative sanctions are imposed according to law. Various regulations govern acts of domestic violence, as well as violence perpetrated by individuals other than family members. Cases of administrative violations fall under the jurisdiction of either the local police

or the Chairperson of the People's Committee at the respective administrative levels. The authority to handle such cases is based on the gravity of the violation and the associated penalties. For example, the Chairperson of the People's Committee at the commune level has the authority to impose fines of up to 250 USD (5 million VND), whereas, at the district level, the Chairperson's competence extends to penalties of up to 2,500 USD (50 million VND) (Article 38, Law on Handling Administrative Violation 2012, amended 2020). For instance, Decree No. 144/2021 includes two distinct articles related to cases of violence, specifying different penalties and jurisdictions. Article 7.3 states,

"A fine ranging from around 100 – 150 USD shall be imposed for any of the following violations: (a) Taunting, teasing, insulting, or humiliating another person, except in cases specified in Point b Clause 2 Article 21 and Article 54 of this Decree; (b) Organizing, hiring, enticing, or tempting another person to cause injuries or bodily harm, or to insult or humiliate another person, without being subject to criminal prosecution."

In cases falling under this article, the Chairperson at the commune level has jurisdiction to handle the matter according to the administrative procedures outlined in the Law on Handling Administrative Violations. However, Article 54 of the same Decree applies in cases involving domestic violence, with more severe penalties. Article 54 addresses acts of defamation within family relationships as follows:

"1. A fine ranging from around 250 – 500 USD shall be imposed for insulting, nagging, or damaging the honor and dignity of a family member; 2. A fine ranging from around 500 – 1,000 USD shall be imposed for any of the following violations: (a) Disclosing or distributing materials or documentation concerning the privacy of a family member to harm their honor and dignity; (b) Using media to tarnish the honor and dignity of a family member; (c) Disseminating and distributing leaflets, articles, photos, or audio materials aimed at harming the honor and dignity of a family member."

The Chairperson of the People's Committee has jurisdiction to deal with cases falling under Article 54. However, if a perpetrator is involved in an administrative violence incident, their actions do not result in a criminal record. This distinction is noteworthy because a wife may be hesitant to report instances of domestic violence, fearing that she would be liable to pay the fines from the family's shared assets. This highlights practical challenges in enforcing the law effectively and contributes to the low number of reported cases.

- (ii) Criminal offenses: VAW is also addressed under the Penal Code 2015 (amended in 2017), which includes various articles such as
- Physical acts of violence: Article 133 on the threat of murder and Article 134 on the deliberate infliction of bodily harm upon another person: “A person who deliberately inflicts bodily harm upon another person and causes 11 – 33% WPI or under 11% WPI in any of the following circumstances shall face a penalty of up to a 3-year community sentence or 6 – 36 months of imprisonment.”
  - Acts of sexual violence: Article 141 on the crime of rape; Article 142 on the rape of a person under 16 years old; and Article 146 on the molestation of a person under 16.
  - Emotional violence: Article 155 on insults to another person.
  - Economic violence: Article 178 on the deliberate destruction of property.

It is worth noting that there is no distinction between crimes committed by husbands/partners or strangers. For example, rape applies to all cases, with a relationship potentially serving as a mitigating or aggregating factor. However, there are no reported cases of marital rape (Huong & Ly, 2022). Other provisions also apply to domestic violence, such as Article 184 on incest and Article 185 on the maltreatment or abuse of one’s grandparent, parent, spouse, child, grandchild, or caregiver.

## 2.2. Ineffective implementation of law in handling VAW

In addition to limitations in the legal framework for preventing and responding to GBV, the ineffective implementation of the law impedes victims of GBV from seeking legal protection and remedies. Notably, a joint United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Government of Vietnam survey (2020) revealed that 49.6% of women who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or partner had never disclosed it to anyone, and 90.4% had not sought help from official support services or authorities. The primary reasons for this include victim-blaming and a lack of gender-sensitive skills among law enforcement officers, particularly when handling cases of sexual violence. For instance, many victims of sexual violence find little support from the criminal justice system, where the attitudes of police, prosecutors, and judges can significantly influence the application of the law and the treatment of victims (Skinnider *et al.*, 2017).

Procedures for handling cases also pose challenges to victims. Victims of violence are often hesitant to report

their cases due to the burden of proof. For example, in a rape case, it is crucial to report the crime to the police before undergoing a medical forensic examination. The examination, which is not mandatory, is conducted by female officers at the investigator’s request to collect evidence. However, a significant challenge arises because these medical examinations often occur more than 24 h after the crime is committed, and DNA evidence must be collected within 72 h. Missing this timeframe may undermine the credibility of the evidence supporting a rape allegation. Therefore, it is essential to collect potential bodily fluids from areas where DNA might not persist beyond 24 h.

Regarding sexual harassment, the Labor Code 2019 and Decree No. 145/2020 address sexual harassment in the workplace, whereas Decree No. 144/2021 covers sexual harassment in public spaces. However, handling sexual harassment cases depends on a company’s internal rules. Under Vietnamese legal regulations, sexual harassment cases fall under different jurisdictions based on the location of the incident—whether it occurs in the workplace or a public space. According to Decree No. 145/2020, a workplace is defined as “any location where the employee works, as agreed or assigned by the employer, including work-related venues such as social activities, conferences, training sessions, business trips, meals, phone conversations, communications through electronic media, employer-provided shuttles, and other locations specified by the employer.” This definition creates challenges in cases that can address sexual harassment that occurs between co-workers, as it may not always be clear whether the employer can handle such a situation. For example, if an employee invites colleagues to their home for a farewell party and commits an act of sexual harassment in a private setting, it is uncertain whether the company can handle such a case because it did not occur in the workplace. Similar challenges arise when a group of employees goes to a karaoke bar, and one employee harasses another. In such cases, determining the appropriate legal framework is challenging, as it may involve Decree No. 144/2021 (addressing sexual harassment in public spaces) or Decree 12/2022 (addressing sexual harassment in the workplace). Consequently, law enforcement officers face difficulties in determining the legal grounds for handling sexual harassment cases.

Another issue is that judgments often lack adequate consideration of the impacts on victims of sexual abuse. Sexual violence is one of the most severe forms of GBV, and victims often encounter significant challenges in seeking legal protection and remedies. The impacts of sexual violence differ from those of other types of GBV,

such as physical or mental violence. Discriminatory social and cultural values, patterns, and practices contribute to the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence (Tan, 2017).

### 2.3. Implementation of the national program on preventing and responding to VAW

The Vietnamese government has been actively working to advance gender equality through a multifaceted approach, which includes establishing a comprehensive legal framework and developing national strategies and programs. One of the key objectives outlined in the National Strategy on Gender Equality from 2021 to 2030, as specified in Resolution No. 28/NQ-CP dated March 3, 2021, focuses on improving family dynamics and addressing gender-based abuse. This objective includes the following targets:

- (1) Reduce the average working hours of women in unpaid housewife and caregiving roles to 1.7 times that of men by 2025 and further reduce it to 1.4 times by 2030.
- (2) Increase the percentage of gender-based domestic violence victims who are identified and have access to basic support services to 80% by 2025 and 90% by 2030.
- (3) Enhance efforts to provide guidance and support to individuals responsible for gender-based domestic violence, aiming to achieve a 50% increase in those criminally prosecuted by 2025 and 70% by 2030.

Vietnam is also implementing the National Program on Preventing and Responding to GBV (2021 – 2025), as stipulated in Decision No. 2232/QĐ-TTg dated December 28, 2021. This program sets a specific objective: to ensure that at least 50% of victims of GBV seek help from support service providers, with the goal of providing support to 100% of those in need.

The Ministry of Labor, Invalid, and Social Affairs has introduced the Peace House Model, and the Law on the Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence (amended in 2022). This statute includes preventive measures that ensure victims have the right to request accommodation in a “Peace House.” However, despite these measures, a survey indicated that 90% of victims did not report the case and seek remedies (MOLISA *et al.*, 2020).

### 3. Discussion

Despite implementing the 2010 National Program on Preventing and Responding to GBV, significant concerns persist among various stakeholders in Vietnam regarding the enduring challenges in addressing VAW and achieving gender equality. This prompts questions about the

effectiveness of the collective efforts stemming from the Program. Many obstacles threaten the success of these efforts to prevent and respond to VAW.

#### 3.1. Difficulty in changing attitudes and behaviors

VAW is a product of gender-based discrimination and is deeply ingrained in the historical disparities between men and women. According to a 2014 UN report, GBV is shaped by prevailing gender norms and attitudes, including expectations related to masculinity and femininity, as well as societal preferences for sons, all of which create a structural environment conducive to such violence (UN, 2014). Gender norms continue to serve as an underlying reason for persistent VAW, particularly in rural and remote regions. The conventional family structure in Vietnam, which has been shaped by Confucianism, continues to marginalize the role of women in both the community and society. For example, in elections for the National Assembly and People’s Council, both male and female voters tend to show a preference for male candidates. Female candidates also face greater bias, particularly when competing for executive roles, which, compared to legislative roles, are the most influential decision-making positions. This bias against female candidates is most pronounced in village elections, where women are less likely to garner voter support if they have a family. However, having a family is viewed as an advantage for male candidates, resulting in a significantly higher proportion of male votes in local elections going to men (UN Women *et al.*, 2021).

Despite Vietnam’s efforts to implement various awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs aimed at addressing VAW and better legally empowering women, the high occurrence of unreported cases of violence underscores the ongoing challenge of effectively addressing and resolving the issue. The Vietnamese government has implemented many programs to raise awareness of GBV by introducing optional courses in the education system from middle schools and promoting gender mainstreaming in educational programs and textbooks. However, Vietnam faces a severe gender imbalance in newborns, primarily driven by a strong preference for sons and the practice of sex-selective abortions. According to the 2019 Census, for every 100 girls born, 111.5 boys were born, placing Vietnam among the world’s five countries with the most significant gender imbalances. In 2020, the UNFPA estimated that approximately 45,900 female births go missing each year in Vietnam due to the country’s high rates of sex-selective abortion (UN Women *et al.*, 2021). This indicates that sons are still being preferred, and women are under pressure to have a son to protect their marriage. Clearly, efforts to shift attitudes and behaviors must continue, and employing mass media and the education system remains vital in eradicating VAW.

### 3.2. Low percentage of men's engagement in preventing and responding to violence

Promoting women's participation is a criterion for promoting gender equality in Vietnam. In 2015, Vietnam introduced a legal requirement that at least 35% of candidates in elections must be women. Although there was a slight 2% increase in the 2016 – 2020 term, this still fell short of meeting the mandated quota. However, there was a significant improvement in the 2021 – 2026 term. During the 2021 elections, female candidates comprised 45.38% of the total number of candidates, and the proportion of female National Assembly Deputies rose to 30.26%. This was the 1<sup>st</sup> time that women's representation exceeded 30%, reaching its highest level since 1976 (UN Women *et al.*, 2021). However, men's participation in efforts to prevent and respond to GBV remains low.

Vietnam's efforts to prevent and respond to GBV have been organized from the national level to the local level through the establishment of the Women's Advancement Committee at the provincial and district levels (Decision No. 1585/QĐ-TTg, dated November 11, 2009). The Committee includes members of different state organs and the Women's Union at the same level. However, there is a significant gender imbalance within this committee, with a limited number of male members. Most GBV programs have been led and executed by women. This is largely due to the perception that these initiatives are designed for women and should be managed by women. There is a prevailing notion that men should primarily focus on labor-intensive tasks and decision-making roles, thereby hindering their involvement in GBV prevention and gender equality promotion programs.

Recently, some provinces have collaborated with UN Women to establish a model of men's engagement in the prevention of VAW, such as the Men's Club of Da Nang Province and Ho Chi Minh City. As Elisa Fernandez, Head of the UN Women's Head of Office in Vietnam, pointed out, attaining gender equality necessitates a fundamental shift in the imbalanced power dynamics between men and women. This transformation involves challenging the established ideas of masculinity and traditional concepts of manhood. It calls upon men to critically examine power structures, not only in their personal lives but also in their interactions with others and within society. Men must acknowledge their role in instigating and assuming responsibility for change (UNDP, 2018). Hence, Vietnam should engage more men in prevention programs to better raise awareness of the need to address VAW.

### 3.3. Obstacles to obtaining protection and access to crucial support services

Providing support services for victims is crucial for ensuring that GBV victims can seek protection and

remedy. Vietnam has developed support models such as Peace House. Some provinces, with technical and financial support from UNFPA, KOIKA, and UN Women, have introduced the "one-shop-stop" model (Huong & Ly, 2022). Victims of domestic violence and children under 16 are also eligible for free legal aid, as prescribed by the Law on Legal Aid 2017.

However, multiple barriers often make victims of violence reluctant to seek support. For example, victims of sexual violence face obstacles when reporting an incident, including harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate misconceptions about what qualifies as "legitimate" rape and a "genuine victim." These stereotypes influence beliefs and assumptions about how an "ideal victim" should act, which, in turn, impacts the assessment of a survivor's credibility and affects how the criminal justice system handles cases related to VAW (UN Women, 2017.25). Victim blaming poses a considerable obstacle to women seeking justice, particularly for GBV victims. Handling cases of violence is challenging for these victims (Huong & Ly, 2022). Domestic violence persists as a private matter within families, often pressuring women to make sacrifices for the sake of their families and to uphold their husbands' reputations. Women in rural areas lacking a stable income may find it challenging to request divorce due to financial dependency.

Gender discrimination and stereotypes also remain challenging issues in women's empowerment because of power imbalances, which impact women's complete and equal involvement in both politics and employment. This situation is further exacerbated by women's dual responsibilities of work and caregiving, particularly with their disproportionate share of domestic and care-related roles. Although awareness campaigns are important, they also have limitations. To create meaningful change, it is essential to address structural factors such as unequal power dynamics (UN Women *et al.*, 2021). To address this, the National Program on Preventing and Responding to GBV (2021 – 2025) set a goal of ensuring that 50% of victims can access support services. If Vietnam is to meet this target, it must establish a comprehensive package of essential support services alongside other measures aimed at eradicating VAW.

## 4. Conclusion

Despite introducing the Law on Gender Equality and the National Program on Preventing and Responding to GBV over the past two decades, Vietnam continues to grapple with the persistent issue of VAW. VAW remains a significant barrier, preventing women from fully exercising their rights and participating in society, which in turn

impedes national development. In the Vietnamese societal context, entrenched gender norms and stereotypes are the primary causes of VAW. To effectively address this issue and move toward gender equality, Vietnam must prioritize the eradication of VAW as a key solution. To achieve this goal, the country should continue promoting awareness of gender equality, increase men's participation in preventing and responding to VAW, establish "one-stop-shop" models, and strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of intervention measures to ensure that victims of VAW can readily seek help and receive effective protection.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## Author contributions

This is a single-authored paper.

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Not applicable.

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