

Sexual violence in Vietnam: Issue of the present but rooted from the past

A snapshot of sexual violence in Vietnam and its causes



Talking about sexual violence, in general, is always a sensitive and hard-to-say topic. That is especially true in Vietnam. Data about sexual abuse is poor and primarily from qualitative researches. The most recent national survey on violence against women reported 13 percent of married women experienced sexual violence from their husbands. A study of 2000 women and girls in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city in 2015 shows that 87 percent of women and girls suffer from sexual harassment in public places. Starting with an assumption that sexual abuse emerged as a product of socio-cultural and historical progress, we sat down with Dr. Khuat Thu Hong - an expert with 40-year experience in this field, to explore its root causes. The interview also examines the responses of different actors to sexuality-related conflicts and

reveals obstacles to the absent widespread of the #Metoo debate in Vietnam.

RLS: Thank you, Dr. Hong, for taking the time to join us at the interview today. First of all, could you provide a brief overview of the sexual violence situation in Vietnam?

Khuat Thu Hong: Talking about sex itself is particularly tricky in Vietnam; let alone sexual violence. For Vietnamese people, this topic is sensitive and private. People tend to dodge the subject or keep silence when being questioned about their sexual life, or sexuality-related conflicts if any. Nevertheless, incidence of sexual violence is increasingly reported recently, for example, a study in 2015 revealed that 87% of women and girls have encountered sexual harassment at public places. According to 2019 national study on violence against women, one in eight women experienced sexual violence by a current or former husband in her lifetime, 9 percent of women have experienced sexual violence by non-partner since age of 15 and 4,4 per cent women reported experience sexual abuse as a child. In my opinion, those figures are far from reality, and just the tip of the iceberg. Victims rarely talk about the incidence or seek help. Stigma and negative community's judgement are the primary barrier for them to speaking out or seeking help.

There is another reason why the reported prevalence of sexual violence is low. Vietnamese people are not fully aware of different types of sexual violence; this explains why many people don't even realize themselves being victims of sexual abuse. No one argues if physical attacks for sex like rape, are sexualized violence, but people will hesitate about the cases of forced sex within marriage, forced use of contraception and sexual harassment. People believe that, it is woman's obligation to satisfy her husband's sexual desire whenever he wants, or using a contraceptive method to avoid unwanted pregnancy is women's responsibility. Sexual harassment is often seen as unavoidable because men cannot control their "natural" sexual urge and because women born to be teased by men.

With 54 ethnic groups of people, and 63 provinces, Vietnam has quite many regional sub-cultures. How do you think the sexual violence situation varies group by group, region by region?

According to 2019 national study on violence against women, one in three women experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, almost one in ten women experienced the violence within last 12 months. This is more prevalent in rural than urban areas. Young women aged between 25-34 years old are more likely to experience violence within last 12 months compared to other age groups. Sexual violence among women with disability is higher than women without disability. There is one in five women with disability reported experiencing sexual violence by their husband or partner while the prevalence among women without disability is one in eight. The same study found that violence against

women is more prevalent in Central Highland and Red River Delta compared to other regions of the country.

There is some evidence of sexual violence against men and members of LGBT community, but women are still the primary target.

A National Study on Domestic Violence against women in Vietna in 2010 mentions that 42% of women in the Southeast region of Vietnam suffered from domestic violence, including sexual abuse, while this number with Hmong ethnic group was only 8%. What do you make of this?

I must say, our understanding of ethnic groups regarding this issue, so far, is quite limited. For Hmong people, after getting married, women are treated as “property” of husbands’ families. Hmong women have limited voices and powers in families. Forced marriage is still prevalent in their community. When girls are at the ages of 13 or 14, parents start pushing them to marry. Therefore, I think the 8% does not accurately reflect the reality.

Regarding the difference among regions, gender inequality is more severe in the northern provinces than the southern side. Northern Vietnam borders with China, so understandably, and has been heavily influenced by Confucian doctrine. Confucianism was adopted as official ideology of feudal state of Viet Nam since 10th century and its remnants still persist until present day. Neo-Confucianism, that flourished under the Song dynasty and spread to Viet Nam, was extremely draconian to women. According to Neo-Confucianism, a woman’s chastity is more valuable than her life, she should rather die if being tainted.

South Vietnam was closer to South-east Asian culture - which though neither significantly values women, is more relaxed and less compliant to Confucian ideology. With the time, the conservative, draconian Confucian practice gradually faded away. For instance, it is not compulsory and necessary to have sons to worship ancestors - the custom has traumatized women of the north for centuries. Instead, southerners accept for their daughters to perform this ceremony. Family relationships are accordingly more open and relax.

From what you said, past events definitely have their part in sexually victimizing women. Could you share some milestones of the sexualized violence progress in Vietnam history, apart from the aforementioned Confucian influence?



The gender-based conflict has not been a topic of interest in Vietnam history research, and very few historical documents recording this issue can be found.

Let's take a closer look to the French colonial era, and the resistance against the US. Beside the colonial looting and exploitation, there were rumors that they committed sexual violence. Has there been any research on this? Do you think the wars of the 20th century exacerbated this issue?

In any wars or conflicts, sexual violence inevitably happens. In some parts of the world, sexual violence is used systematically as a weapon of war. Still, I do not think the wars against France and America in the 20th century were belonging to this case, though there was evidence of sexual violence reported. However, to be honest, I believe the issue was not well documented. In the border conflict in 1979, however, several documents more or less revealed that sexual violence against women was severe. Yet, it needs more supporting research and systematic evidence to conclude this issue. Unfortunately, because the topic is too sensitive, it receives little attention from scholars and researchers. For years, I have been trying to dig into this issue, I still haven't got access to the right sources of information.

What are other socio-cultural factors that reinforce the situation of sexualized violence situation in Vietnam?

In Vietnamese society, the family is the most important value. We are educated to nurture our family and to defend it at all costs. This social viewpoint, however, at its extreme, tightly

binds women to sexist prejudices. Women who do not get married have no value. Women who are unable to have children are seen as defect. Women must sacrifice for their family's sake and their home because, without a family, a woman is nobody. In the thought of Vietnamese people, a virtuous woman would hold her family above all, even when this family is the source of her physical and mental sufferings. The virtuous woman would never let her children grow up without a father even when that very father of her child is the one who beat her everyday. All explain why many women choose to tolerate sexual violence in silence for years.

Women are implicitly expected to be innocent and pure and "intact" before marriage, although sex before marriage may be no longer viewed as a taboo. However, women who have lost their virginity would be seen as tainted. For that, women who have sex before marriage would be dependent on their boyfriends who would manipulate them because they were "easy". For that, parents of an abused girl would suppress their anger and pain, accepting the small sum of compensation from the perpetrator, rather than suing him and revealing terrible things that happened with their child. Because they are afraid when there is a rumour about her being "raped", "abused", or "touched", who will marry her then?



Dr. Khuat Thu Hong at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung office in HanoiPhoto: private

Dr. Khuat Thu Hong is director of the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS) and chair of the Gender-based Prevention and Response Network in Viet Nam (GBVNet). Currently she is leading the team of national experts to draft National Strategy for Gender Equality. Ms. Hong was trained in psychology and later obtained her Ph. D. in family sociology. She has dedicated her whole life to studying gender, youths, reproductive health, and sexual violence.

Week responses to sexualized violence

How would an ordinary woman respond when she realized she was a victim of sexual violence? Is there any group of women standing up to protest?

Unfortunately, victims are likely to choose keeping silence due to social stigma and the fear of losing their family, reputation, or falling into even worse situation after divorce/breakup. The likewise response also applies to parents of sexually assaulted minors.

Very few people dare to speak up, and usually, they are those who are accept to lose everything. The victims know they will not receive support, but will be blamed by the community. Women can accuse their husbands of physical violence or of being an economic dictator, an alcoholic, or a gambler, yet how dare they report their husbands of sexual abuse? It would be extremely embarrassing to even think about it.

Can you tell us some actions from government of Vietnam in response to sexual violence?

The government has been well aware of this matter. Provisions on sexual violence can be seen in several laws and regulations, such as the law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, the Labor Code, the Criminal Law. Recently, in the Resolution, number 6 of Judges Council of the Supreme People's Court provides a more detailed definition of various types of sexual violence against including rape, forced sex and molestation. Previously, the rape crime was defined very narrowly, as penile-vaginal penetration. The new Labor Code in 2019 also has several provisions on sexual harassment at the workplace.

However, I think the responses from the government are still not strong enough. Furthermore, even the government has enacted relevant laws, but enforcement is another story. Some legal enforcement officers in charge do not comprehend this issue insightfully, and understandably, as a product of the society, they handle sexual abuse cases with sociocultural prejudices. There is a story of a husband who suspected his wife being cheating on him. He wrapped a blanket around his wife's hip and burned her with petrol, as his way of punishment. The family called the police to report the crime, who commented that he would do the same if his wife betrayed him.

What is your evaluation of feminism movements in Vietnam? Are they efficient enough to fill in the above policy gaps, genuinely support and empower women?

I can say that there have not been feminist movements in Viet Nam. First, the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU) was not born from women's movement but was founded by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to serve its political purposes. Therefore, while VWU is actively promote women's advancement and protect the rights of women, it's true purpose is to mobilize women to serving political objectives.

Movements like #Metoo, while spread wide in many part of the world, is not well expanded in Viet Nam, and has not received political support. Perpetrators like Harvey Weinstein are myriad in Vietnam, but with political power that bails for them, they will not go to court. Overall, feminist movement is still very weak, but some feminist groups actively fight against gender based violence in general and sexual violence in particular by mobilizing public to hold the government accountable in this matter. Anyway, feminist movement must be nurtured to be grow through mobilizing women for change. Only when women are able to speak up for themselves and unite into political forces, advancements can be made.

However, I believe there is a slow but positive transformation. Now that women are more independent financially, and mentally stronger, they are more and more aware about their rights and actively strive for gender equality. More local NGO and activist groups are joining hands to address this issue. I am quite confident about the positive changes in near future.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) is a major political foundation in the Federal Republic of Germany tasked primarily with conducting political education for progressive social development. RLS Southeast Asia- Hanoi office works Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to support participatory, socially just, and ecologically sustainable societies.

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