

Symbolic pride and physical suffering: an explanation of gender-based violence in Vietnam

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Research issue

Research shows that violence against women is prevalent in Vietnam. About 30% to 58% of ever-married women report having experienced at least one of the three types of violence (physical, sexual and emotional) in their life by their husband. Research also shows that many women suffered from violence kept silent and most of them did not seek assistance from the formal supporting system such as local authorities, policemen and Women's Union in cases of violence. The level of justification of violence is high. 30% to more than 60% of women and men accept violent treatment to a wife from their husbands in at least one situation. Being unfaithful and having unrespect manner to mother in law are the most acceptable reason for a man to beat his wife. Gender inequity is considered the main cause of tolerance attitude toward violence.

Legal regulations on gender equity and violence of Vietnam have not brought significant changes on attitude and practices regarding gender equality and gender-based violence at community and household levels. In the above mentioned national study in Vietnam, 60% of women with physical or sexual violence know about the Gender Equality Law and the Law on Domestic Violence prevention and control, they often cannot use these laws to claim their cases because they do not know the details of these laws. In cases they know, they find the procedures of reporting and case handling unclear and irrelevant to the Vietnamese cultural context.

Research questions

- How are enduring and justification of gender-based violence constructed in the context of Viet Nam?
- Why are responses of supporting system in the cases of gender-based violence often low and ineffective?

Research methodology

The study is developed based on Bourdieu's concept on 'habitus' and symbolic violence. People think and act in a certain ways because of the dispositions which are formed by the socio-culture, political and economic structures and norms and reproduced through experiences and practices. Because people are not aware of these disposed structures and norms, they function as a form of symbolic violence which is invisible and is hard to deal with.

The field work was conducted in seven communes of a district of a coastal district in North Central Viet Nam. 208 in-depth interviews (IDI) with 76 ever married women, 3 unmarried young women, 29 ever married men, 18 health providers and 43 members of gender-based violence support systems at district and commune levels were undertaken in the study. Most of people were interviewed one time but some of them were interviewed two, three and four times. In addition, 21 focus-group discussions (FGDs) were organized with married women (10), married men (6) and local leaders (5). All participants are Kinh ethnicity. Among the 66 married women, ranging from 23 to 62 years of age (average age 38), 50 are abused. Of the ten FGDs with married women (between six and eight per group), four were with abused women and six with other women within the

community who either had not been abused or had not revealed it.

All IDIs and FGDs were recorded with consent of interviewees except five. The recorded IDIs and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were thematically coded using ATLAS.ti program.

Findings

Hope is an important source to keep the women stay

IDIs and FGDs in the study show that while feeling desperate about their situation, most of the women in the study insist to stay in their relationship with a strong hope that the violence will be ended at some points and they and or their children will get a better life. No matter how serious is the violence, and even women who admit that they are beaten and abused day and night and they have no love with their husband, the women always find the moments when their husband is a 'nice', 'kind' and 'non-violent'. This gives them strong hope for change in their husband. Hope of older women is based on the support of their growth-up children (son) and the natural physical weakness with age of their husband.

Suffering in the name of pride

While the hope for ending violence plays an important role for the women to delay their decision to seek for external support and/or to end the abusive relationship, the pride of being a good women, of being an intact and successful family and of being a progressive and cultural commune are essential in creating a high level of justification of the violence and taking away women's alternatives except staying with her violent husband.

The pride of being a good woman is significant in helping them to keep their head up in the case of violence and voluntarily maintain their caring in the family. They are proud that no matter how serious is the violence that they suffered and how their husband treats them they always fulfil the tasks of an 'obeyed wife and dutifully daughter in law' (*vợ hiền, dâu thảo*). They always put the interest and benefit of their children and family ahead their own. They are very proud of their capacity to refrain (*nhịn*) in the cases of violence. They proud as this capacity help them to achieve the noble goal which is to maintain a family. Viewing from this point, the women see themselves even better than other women who are not suffered from violence because they still can do all this in the violence situation. While patriarchal and its attributes such as hot temper and alcohol consumption are seen as strongly associated with violence. Marriage to a patriarchal man is also considered a woman's success.

At family level, the dominant idea of intact and happy family pressures the women to hide their violent situation and sacrifice themselves for the family and their children. Main purpose of intervention of local authority in the cases of violence is to reconcile the couple and convince them to stay together. Divorce is seen as the last and undesirable resort. Family members and local authorities often try to slow down the approval of divorce even they know that the woman is suffering from violence by the husband.

At commune level, the pride of progressive and 'cultural' communes can make the local authorities deny the violence situation and discriminate the women who are suffered from violence.

Influences of pride in the responses to violence situations

The ambiguity of the women's pride and patriarchal values contribute greatly to normalization and acceptance of violence and to people's response to the cases of violence. Women, men and people whose roles are supposed to support the women are consistent that women beating is justifiable in some situations. Women

who do not follow the virtue standards of the women are often blamed and do not get support from people in the community and local authority in case they are beaten by their husband. People also find hard or impossible to intervene if they see that the woman is beaten because of her fault. Moreover, the pride also has its hierarchy. The intervention is often for the benefit of the community not of the women. Women are also conflicted on how to react in the cases of violence: should they talk back or act back when their husband beats them or should they just follow the traditional image of a good woman as a passive victim and wait for people's merci as well as the change of the husband.

Conclusions and recommendations

The gender subordinate position of women make them more vulnerable to violence by their husband. The socio-culture, political and economic structures and norms predispose to attitude and responses of the women and other people who are supposed to support them in the cases of violence and determine limited options for the women. 'Hope' and 'pride' are important mechanisms for the women to survive in their seems 'no way out' situation. The 'pride' contributes also to maintaining their 'hope'. State and local bodies who work on gender equity and violence prevention nevertheless encourage and reinforce these hopes and prides and thus make a counter-impact. Intervention programs should work on this ambiguity of 'hope' and 'pride'. Unpacking the gender stereotype for both women and men and promoting diversity can help women and people who support them to envision more effective options in the cases of violence.