



Country Report

# Towards Safer Schools for Children: Vietnam

Preventing Violence Against Children in  
Schools in South and Southeast Asia



Coalition for  
Good Schools





## About Coalition for Good Schools

The Coalition for Good Schools is a collection of leading Global South practitioners committed to preventing violence against children (VAC) in and through schools across Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Coalition elevates insights and evidence-based interventions in order to provide critical tools, data and best practices for sustainable, local solutions. This ten-country document review series has been initiated by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools, coordinated by Samya Development Resources Private Limited (SAMYA).

The Asia Hub commissioned 10 country reports on the state of VAC in and around schools in the broader region, in collaboration with core partners in each context. Each report provides an overview of how violence manifests in educational settings, explores contributing social, cultural and economic factors for VAC in each context, and provides a brief review of the policy landscape, national leadership and strategy for ending violence. While school violence is the primary focus, violence in other physical and online settings is explored. These reports are thus developed for all those working on the issue of VAC, particularly for those who see schools as an ideal entry point for its prevention.

These 10 reports are developed to stand alone, and are summarized in a scene-setting “Synthesis Report” which can be found on our website at [www.coalitionforgoodschools.org](http://www.coalitionforgoodschools.org).

## Acknowledgements

This series of reports, produced by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools presents background information, infographics and key resources that aim to foster change and development in both schools' settings and communities in the field of prevention of Violence Against Children across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. This would not be possible without the diverse inputs of practitioners and researchers throughout each context. The Asia Hub is grateful to the following people for their contributions:

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# The Country Profile

# VIETNAM

## Population



**98.2**

Million (2021)<sup>1</sup>

## Leading ethnic groups



**85.32%**

Vietnamese

**1.92%**

Tay

**1.89%**

Thái

**1.51%**

Mường

**1.45%**

Hmong

**1.37%**

Khmer

**1.13%**

Nùng

**0.93%**

Dao

**0.78%**

Hoa

**3.7%** (2019 census)<sup>2</sup>

Others

## Languages



Vietnamese

## Age Structure



**23.9%**

0-14 years

**15.22%**

15-24 years

**45.7%**

25-54 years

**16.46%**

55 years and above

## GDP per capita



**\$4,087**

(2022)<sup>3</sup>

## Poverty Rate



**4.8%**

(2020)

## Literacy rate



**95.9%**

## Key Findings

- ❖ Despite 20 years of legal bans, physical and psychological violence from teachers continues in schools, and bullying from peers remains common in Vietnam.
- ❖ 96.7% of students report having witnessed violence while at school; numerous other studies show a majority of children having witnessed or experienced school violence themselves.
- ❖ Gender norms around masculinity and femininity have been shown to lead to students using types of violence within and across their gender group.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hanoi.aics.gov.it/en/vietnam-2/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_in\\_Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_Vietnam)

<sup>3</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/vietnam/gdp-per-capita#:~:text=Vietnam%20GDP%20per%20capita%20The%20Gross%20Domestic%20Product,percent%20of%20the%20world%27s%20average.%20source%3A%20World%20Bank>

## Overall snapshot of violence against children in Vietnam

Violence against children (VAC) has been found to be highly prevalent in Vietnam, including in Vietnam's schools, although available data varies widely. Lifetime prevalence estimates for different types of VAC range from 7.1% to 59.9% and past-year prevalence ranges from 2.6% to 31.8% (Tran et al., 2017). The 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) findings show that 68.4% of children (aged 1-14 years) in Vietnam experienced some form of violent discipline and 58.2% experienced psychological aggression.<sup>4</sup>

This same study by UNICEF revealed that over half of Vietnamese students' dislike school due to violence, including physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers. There are no national statistics on school bullying available; however, a survey conducted by UNESCO in 2016 indicated that 51.9% of all students reported having experienced at least one kind of violent behaviour in the last six months. LGBTQIA+ students reported receiving harsher treatment at school; 71% had been physically abused and 72.2% verbally abused.<sup>5</sup>

Comprehensive data on the kind and prevalence of child sexual abuse remains lacking in Vietnam. One study showed that child maltreatment of all kinds was extremely common in Vietnam, with rates of emotional abuse reaching 31.8% and sexual abuse reaching 2.6% (Tran et al., 2018). According to data from the National Study on Domestic Violence in Vietnam, 3.0% of women had been sexually abused as girls before turning 15. According to the 2019 National Study on Violence Against Women in Vietnam, this increased to 4.4%. Hoang Ba Thinh, director of the Centre for Population Studies and Social Work at the Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities, noted that over 50% of school-going girls exhibiting violent behaviour said their parents do not show much care for them and 15% said they received no care from their parents. Nearly 85% of school-going girls who had been in physical altercations at school said the violence also occurred in their families.<sup>6</sup>

## Prevalence of different forms of VAC

### 1. Corporal Punishment

The Law on Education in Vietnam has prohibited corporal punishment in schools since 2005. Nevertheless, it continues to be practised. The Young Lives longitudinal study found that in Vietnam, 20% of 8-year-olds and 1% of 15-year-olds reported they had witnessed other children being physically punished and 59% of 8-year-olds and 13% of 15-year-olds indicated they had personally experienced physical punishment from a teacher in the previous week. Boys (28%) were more likely to experience physical punishment than girls (11%). Those living in urban areas were at higher risk than those in rural regions (29% vs. 18%), and those attending private schools (33%) were more likely to experience physical punishment than those in public schools (19%).

In addition, according to the MICS (2020-21) data, more than six in every ten children are punished by psychological aggression and four out of 10 children are punished physically. The most severe form of physical punishment (hitting a child on the head, ear or face, hitting a child vigorously and repeatedly) was reported by 1.6% of children. This data also showed that boys are more likely to be violently punished than girls, both physically and psychologically.

The Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs Children's Bureau report that 120 children died because of violent acts in 2020 and 2022 alone, with many of them suffering from severe

<sup>4</sup> General Statistics Office and UNICEF (2015). Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014, Final Report. Available at [http://mics.unicef.org/news\\_entries/21](http://mics.unicef.org/news_entries/21)

<sup>5</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246927>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7351/file/Ending>

cases of abuse. A startling 2,000 child abuse instances are reported to authorities each year; perpetrators are often those the children know and trust, and countless cases go unreported and unaddressed.

According to UNICEF Vietnam (2020), violent discipline in the home is still widespread, with over 68% of children aged one to 14 experiencing some form of violence at home by their parents or caregivers. Most people agree that using violence as a form of discipline is acceptable and children who witness violence in their homes are unlikely to speak up or ask for assistance. Family violence is mainly caused by patriarchal social standards that uphold violent masculinity and gender hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> More than seven in every ten children aged 1-14 years were subjected to at least one form of psychological or physical punishment by household members in the month before the MICS survey. In Vietnam, some researchers have suggested that violence at home is also strongly correlated with bullying in classrooms and students.

## 2. Peer violence and bullying

A study on school bullying by the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training found that bullying in Vietnam was actually rising. According to a report by Plan International (2015), 96.7% of students reported having witnessed violence or violent episodes while at school.<sup>8</sup> A 2019 UNESCO report also found that 21.8% of school children had been engaged in some form of physical altercation with another student and 28% had been assaulted while at school.<sup>9</sup>

Recent data from the Ministry of Education and Training show about 1,600 incidents of students fighting inside and outside of schools in a single academic year. A brawl involving 5,200 pupils is said to have occurred and 11,000 students were expelled due to the incident (Thu Phuong, 2019). According to the Criminal Police Department and the Ministry of Public Security, in the first quarter of 2019, there were 310 school violence cases, mainly against lower secondary and high school students (Thu Phuong, 2019). This issue is typically most prevalent in secondary education.

Other small-scale studies have confirmed that (i) school violence is common; (ii) forms of violence among students include physical, psychosocial and sexual violence as well as bullying; and (iii) students with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity or expression are also reported to be targeted for violence (Hang et al., 2013). Another previous study suggested that approximately one-third of students at secondary and high schools experienced victims, bullies or bully victims at both times (Tran et al., 2019).

## 3. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has also spread in Vietnam. It is estimated that more than 60% of children in the country have access to the Internet, which has increased the likelihood of children being bullied online.<sup>10</sup> A survey on VAC by UNICEF and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG, 2019) reported having experienced online bullying at a rate of 21%, and 75% of them were unaware of any helpline or service they might use if they became the victim of cyberbullying or other forms of online violence. Another survey conducted by the Internet and Society Research Program (VPIS, 2017) revealed that 78% of Vietnamese internet users acknowledged having either experienced or heard of hate speech on social media; 61.7% had either witnessed or experienced firsthand and 46.6% had been the target of fabricated or slandered information.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF Viet Nam, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and University of Edinburgh (2016). Understanding the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children in Viet Nam.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Violence-in-schools-normal-for-Vietnamese-students-18227.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366483>

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-launches-first-programme-on-child-protection-online/202661.vnp>

## 4. Sexual violence and harassment

In Vietnam, childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is becoming more widely recognised as a significant problem. Studies show that every year, over 2,000 children are sexually assaulted, with females making up over 80% of the victims (Le-Trung & Tran-Thi, 2019). Reports state that the issue impacts children from various regions and socioeconomic levels. According to one study, many young people are unaware of the risks associated with sexual abuse and frequently are unable to identify potential offenders, such as instructors or strangers (Do et al., 2019).

Cultural and societal perspectives often hinder the communication and examination of CSA, hence complicating the issue further and silencing reporting of incidents (Sanjeevi et al., 2018). Research indicates that girls are more likely than boys to fall victim to child sexual abuse, where roughly 80% of sampled child sexual victims of exploitation in Vietnam were found to be girls (Le-Trung & Tran-Thi, 2019). This is of course recognising that boys might be less likely to come forward with CSA because of social shame and apprehension of being seen as 'weak' or being perceived as homosexual (Ho, 2022).

## Drivers of VAC in Vietnam

### 1. Normative factors

Cases of violence against girls, boys and adolescents are widespread. Violent discipline by parents is also accepted within communities. The exploitation of children, including child labour, sexual exploitation and trafficking, are serious concerns that often go unnoticed. In Vietnam, male chauvinism and the high value placed on men's dominance and masculinity are at the heart of school violence and bullying. A 2016 UNESCO study highlighted how assertions of masculine strength can motivate violence, as well as the indirect devaluing of women and femininity through the disdain for male femininity.

Schoolchildren who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes are at risk of being bullied, with 12.9% of perpetrators citing their victims' deviation from gender stereotypes as a motivating factor for violent behaviour. Gender norms around masculinity and femininity also led to students using types of violence within their gender group, with research confirming that schoolboys are far more likely to display physically abusive behaviour than girls. According to a 2010 study by Dang, teacher punishments also reflect traditional gender values. In this study, it was found that a schoolboy is more likely to receive corporal punishment from his teacher, while a girl may face emotional violence such as yelling, scolding, or verbal insults for the same mistake.

Some violent behaviour, such as boys fighting with schoolmates, is more tolerated by both teachers and students. At the same time, girls can expect more severe judgment for the same behaviour due to the widespread perception that girls should be 'gentle'. Reinforcement of male dominance and acceptance of violence fuel sexual violence and harassment by male teachers and students. The same 2016 UNESCO study reported that male students were frequent perpetrators of sexual violence. Similarly, sample studies in 2014 in Vietnam's biggest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, discovered that 73% of schoolgirls and female students aged 16 to 23 were repeatedly whistled at and teased by males and 20% of those aged 16 to 18 had been sexually harassed at school. There is a Vietnamese saying: "A flower is meant to be plucked; a girl is meant to be teased." This saying reflects attitudes that are often used to justify male sexual violence and harassment towards females, implying that girls must simply accept such behaviour. As a result, they experience far higher rates of sexual abuse and harassment than boys.

## 2. Sexuality

Research on violence against LGBTQIA+ students has also been conducted in Vietnam. One such study conducted by the Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) included 520 LGBTQIA+ people with an average age of 21, where 41% of participants reported experiencing violence or discrimination at either a university or a school.<sup>11</sup> According to research conducted on 168 LGBTQIA+ street kids by Save the Children and the Institute of Social and Medical Study, prejudice towards these adolescents at home and school may raise their chance of being homeless.<sup>12</sup> They faced a significant danger of violence on the streets, at home and school. Of the LGBTQIA+ adolescents in the survey, only 15.9% had completed post-secondary education, 47.8% had only completed lower secondary education, 27.6% had only completed primary school and 8.7% had not attended any schooling. According to a UNESCO report in 2016 exploring responses to violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, it was found that 44% of LGBTQIA+ students perceive homophobic and transphobic stigma in school as serious.<sup>13</sup>

## 3. Poverty

In Vietnam, the quality of education in poorer regions remains low, with dropout and repetition rates remaining high. Students primarily drop out of school because their families cannot afford the tuition fees and are left with no choice other than to leave.<sup>14</sup> According to the Sprouts Project, many schools in poorer areas are in bad condition and do not provide sufficient education for children. Sometimes, the school facilities are so inadequate that students choose not to attend school.<sup>15</sup>

Socioeconomic deprivation also has some association with the prevalence of corporal punishment, although more systematic studies are needed to fill the evidence gap. 10% of carers see physical punishment as required for teaching children and they are more likely to be from the lowest quintile and lack formal education (MICS data, 2020-21). According to Essa Bar et al. (2015), a more significant percentage of CSA victims come from lower socioeconomic groups. Several risk variables increase the likelihood of CSA in families experiencing financial hardship. There is a correlation between a low socioeconomic class and a higher likelihood of many forms of child maltreatment, including sexual abuse. Financial hardship may stress parents and restrict their capacity to watch over and help their children (Tran et al., 2021).

## 4. Conflict

Vietnam's protracted war history is another distinctive feature. Male citizens of Vietnam between the ages of 18 and 45 were required to serve in the military, regardless of their ethnic background. According to Leone (2018) and Miller & Rasmussen (2010), there is evidence linking exposure to war to mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions are linked to abuse of children and dysfunctional parenting (Smith, 2004; Stith et al., 2009). Additionally, there is considerable evidence linking prior military service to abuse.

The American War in Vietnam also had a significant impact on children and their education. Many children became homeless during this time and schools were shut down due to the fighting. While the country has recovered from the conflict, the impact of the conflict on children's education remains.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population. (2012). Case Study on Sexuality and Law in Viet Nam. Ha Noi: CCIHP

<sup>12</sup> Save the Children and Institute of Social and Medical Studies. (2015). Being LGBTQIA+ Young People in Vietnam: Life on the Streets and the Light through the Crack. Ha Noi: Viet Nam Country Office.

<sup>13</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244652/PDF/244652eng.pdf.multi>

<sup>14</sup> <https://project-sprouts.com/poverty-in-vietnamese-schools-and-why-we-give-school-supplies/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/media/66581/file/Violence-against-children-in-education-settings-in-SouthAsia.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2016/02/the-vietnam-war-children-at-war.html>

## Prevention and Response to VAC

According to UNICEF in Vietnam, there is a lack of coordination between the ministries responsible for dealing with VAC and forms of domestic violence. Domestic violence in particular is under the mandate of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, while VAC and/including gender-based violence (GBV) cases are under the mandate of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). There appears to be very little coordination or collaboration between these ministries to address these issues cohesively and comprehensively. The legal framework addressing various forms of VAC have not been clearly defined, such as issues relating to corporal punishment, neglect, child pornography and trafficking.<sup>17</sup>

### Institutional Mapping of the country to deal with VAC



## Policy, priority and strategy for the way forward

The Vietnamese government has enacted various pieces of legislation, policy and action plans to address VAC and GBV, such as the Law on Gender Equality (2007), the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (2007), the National Strategy on Gender Equality (2016- 2020) and the National Plan of Action on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (2014-2020).<sup>18</sup>

As part of the efforts to protect children from violence, in 2021, the Vietnamese Government established the first cyberbullying protection system for children. Under the programme, businesses were encouraged to develop information security to protect children online. Furthermore, the government has established a national child protection hotline, 111. It aims to establish a digital skills training program to teach children how to use the internet safely.<sup>19</sup>

Vietnam currently has laws against cyberbullying, such as the Law on Cybersecurity (2018), the Law on Children (2016) and regulations governing coordination between the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Information and Communications regarding the reporting, handling and investigation of child abuse, as well as the tracking of data about child sexual abuse on the internet. By 2023, Vietnam has published several laws that either directly or indirectly govern the safety of minors online, including initiatives to stop child sexual abuse online and aid affected youth. The Law on Children, which went into force on June 1, 2017, is the official instrument that directly governs child protection. This law contains comprehensive guidelines for protecting children online and implementation procedures.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7351/file/Ending Violence against Women and Children in Viet Nam.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7351/file/Ending_Violence_against_Women_and_Children_in_Viet_Nam.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> ibdi

<sup>19</sup> <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-launches-first-programme-on-child-protection-online/202661.vnp>

Two primary hotlines for domestic abuse, Sunshine and Peace House, saw a notable increase in the number of calls received during COVID-19. By the summer of 2020, the figures had doubled from the year before, as pandemic restrictions made women and children more vulnerable to violence throughout Vietnam.

A 'Blue Heart' campaign was initiated in June 2020 by UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women and the Vietnamese government to raise awareness of and support for the victims of violence against women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign's primary goals were to inform and motivate communities about the value of taking proactive steps to safeguard women and children from abuse and to report any such events to the appropriate authorities.

In 2020, the campaign generated almost 100 million public engagements across digital media thanks to amplified messaging for influencers. The Government of Viet Nam has made efforts towards ending VAC through these campaigns and policies, however inter-ministerial collaboration and close collaboration with civil society is required to make significant gains.

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## Suggestions on the Way Forward

As the understanding of safety in educational environments continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of schools as spaces where non-violent and just societies can be co-created. The findings presented here aim to inform a growing network of national and regional practitioners, policymakers, civil society groups, researchers and funders committed to preventing all forms of violence within Vietnam's schools.

While the Coalition for Good Schools encourages stakeholders to review the full recommendations outlined in the regional synthesis report, insights from the Asia Hub highlight key areas for action:

- **Education delivery system as an entry-point:** *The education system offers a strategic avenue for the prevention of violence against children. Effective multi-sectoral government action at the national level is crucial for catalysing these interventions.*
- **Children's experience and agency:** *Prioritising children's lived experiences within schools and fostering their agency should be central in education policies and interventions.*
- **Whole-school approach:** *Implementing a comprehensive, whole-school strategy that nurtures a positive school culture and upholds the inherent dignity of every child can produce long-term outcomes. Meaningful engagement with teachers, school staff, and the local community is essential for the success of such initiatives.*
- **Knowledge generation and dissemination:** *Ongoing documentation, sharing, and expansion of knowledge and evidence is vital for deepening understanding of effective interventions, strengthening local efforts and supporting scale through the education sector.*

There are proven solutions to end violence, and with collective effort, violence can be prevented within our lifetime. Efforts from Plan International, World Vision, and UN agencies have been promising. Government and a heavily constrained civil society in Vietnam must continue to work hand in hand to ensure that safe schools are a priority for all children. Innovation should be encouraged, and effective foundational interventions should incorporate several core elements:

- **Recognising schools' role in nurturing and developing children's potential.**
- **Promoting justice, equality, and empathy as foundational school values.**
- **Affirming children's rights and agency within the educational context.**
- **Supporting progressive pedagogies that encourage positive change.**
- **Honouring the dignity of every child, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, caste, creed, or other categorisations.**

Prevention programmes must also adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the overlapping and reinforcing characteristics that shape children's unique experiences of violence. This approach recognises that certain groups of children may face increased risks and that the severity and frequency of violence can vary considerably.

While sometimes sites of violence, schools also hold significant potential as primary sites for learning and implementing strategies to prevent it. School-based initiatives can yield multiple positive outcomes, serving as catalysts for broader change.