

CHILD HELPLINE VIETNAM: A SOLUTION TO CULTURAL ELEMENTS CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM OF CHILD PROTECTION, CARE AND EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes cultural elements and their influence on child protection, care and education in Vietnam. What may be considered as child abuse elsewhere is often considered acceptable methods of child discipline in the Vietnamese context. This results in many cases not being reported for immediate intervention, except in cases where it is manifestly clear from bodily and mental evidence that the child has suffered serious violence and abuse. Although Vietnam has a legal framework and services for the protection of children, it is not easy for victims of child abuse to access them. Child Helpline, Vietnam, is one organization, which works to facilitate the development of better child protection, care and education in the country.

Keywords: Child Violation, Child Abuse, Child Helpline, Legal Framework, Cultural Elements.

CULTURAL FEATURES IN RELATION TO CHILDREN'S PROBLEMS

Children are always given the first priority care in many countries in the world. In Vietnam, children are compared to the image of 'bamboo shoots' that need special care to grow up strong. Children are the future generation who will continue to assume the roles of the previous generation to protect and develop the country. Being aware of the paramount importance of child protection and care, Vietnamese Government has paid a special attention to the development of the child protection system. Children are always in need of protection, care and education. They are at high risk of being violated, maltreated, and sexually abused. The Viet Nam 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey¹ showed that 'more than 68 per cent of children aged 1-14 years in Viet Nam are subjected to at least one form of psychological or physical punishment. Male children experienced physical discipline (48.5%) more than female children (36.6%). Children from the poorer households and those whose mothers had low education were more likely to experience at least one violent psychological or physical punishment'.

Children violated or sexually abused suffer both psychological and physical consequence, and more seriously, they may be traumatized for the whole life as can be evidenced in many previous scientific studies such as those by Briere & Elliott Kevin, 2003, by Lalor & Rosaleen McElvaney, 2010². Children physically and sexually abused suffer a lot of psychological symptoms and behavior disorders, including low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, self-injury, substance abuse and etc. Tissue or organ lesions, if left unidentified and untreated, may cause serious health risks or even death. In some cases, the scars may lead to psychological obsession. The task to identify problems happening to children in order to provide early intervention is challenging, since children are unable

to reveal their problems, especially, in child sexual abuse cases. Being a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international conventions, Vietnam takes seriously, the responsibility of protecting children and their families, ensuring their basic rights through the system of child protection, education and care, which includes legal regimes, policies and services. Although the child protection system of Vietnam has improved, there remain many problems in prevention and early intervention for children who are violated, abused, exploited and neglected.

Cultural tolerance seems to assume that parents have right to do what they want with their children, people being reluctant to interfere in domestic matters that they think is not their concern. In Vietnamese families, children are the future hope and as such, they are expected to grow up according to set expectations. This means that they are expected to be good children at home, good students in school and successful adults in society. The warning of 'sparing the rod and spoiling the child' is well recognized in Vietnamese society.

People think that the best way to stop children from going against what adults want is to apply harsh discipline. This results in physical and verbal assault which includes insulting, labeling, slapping, punching or using of whatever objects at hand, including belt and even chopsticks and spoons. This way of thinking is deeply ingrained in people's minds and becomes a feature of culture. Parents use physical discipline when children are stubborn or naughty or who truant or have poor grade or do whatever to cause parental displeasure.

For parents, physical punishment seems to be a good way to manage children because it scares them from repeating unwanted behaviors. This way of upbringing is considered normal and accepted by the community and society. Physical punishment is preferably used at home and in school to force children to do what parents and teachers feel is good for them. However, people do not realize that physical punishment can cause consequences to children in their development.

The family functions like a bassinet where children are brought up in and cared for since birth. The family is where children live with their parents and other family members, where they should feel safe and warm. Children who receive love and care from their parents will be healthy and live a useful life when they become adults. Sadly, not all children receive such love and care from their family. Yet, children are most vulnerable in the family because they live at their parent's pleasure and have little self-defense. In domestic violence, children suffer beyond the possibility of assessing how much hurt they have endured. Child violation occurs in many areas throughout the country, even in big cities where people should be aware of such wrongful behaviors but are conditioned into accepting that such acts are normal. Many cases happen without interference from neighbors or local authorities who prefer not to interfere in private family matters. This belief prevents people from acting to help children or to report cases of abuse.

Child violation also happens as a result of parents' belief in their right to their own children. Parents hold that they have the exclusive right to children whom they have given birth to, brought up and taken responsibility for. They are unaware of child protection laws stipulating the duty of care and education and rights of children. Often, children become victims of violence when their parents release their stress and anger in daily life on them, though the child may not have committed any fault. Moreover, since people believe that the responsibility for protecting, caring and educating children belong to parents and that domestic matters are none of their concern, neighbors and local

authorities abstain from ‘interfering’ even when they suspect that children are neglected or abused at home, unless the case is manifestly serious with clear signs of law violation or which causes community outcry. Other than in those circumstances, children are helpless in protecting themselves in their homes.

As can be seen from above, providing early intervention for children in domestic situations is challenging chiefly because of public ignorance and apathy. The Ministry of Public Security reported that within the 5 years from 2011 to 2015, about 8,200 cases of child abuse were recorded in the country, of which 5,300 cases (65%) were about sexual abuse. Notably, the number of cases of male sexual abuse has increased. Most abusers have a close relationship to such children and their families. Numbering among them are step-fathers, friends of parents and teachers³. Children and their parents are therefore unguarded.

Of every case reported, there are many more that are unreported, due to many reasons. Children are often threatened with revenge should they tell anyone of what they have suffered. Abusers regularly scare children with physical threats. To keep the abuse secret, they will convince children that no one would believe them and they will even be punished for their presumed guilt. In consequence, abused children do not dare to reveal their stories to anyone, even to their parents. Reported cases are mostly from third parties who may accidentally witness wrongful acts, or from parents who discover marks and signs on their bodies.

In Vietnam, traditional communal culture is much respected, especially in rural areas where community relationships are strong. People from different hamlets or villages know each other very well. The relationship is so close that neighbors are considered siblings. The spirit of being ‘better a neighbor near than a brother far off’ is embedded in people’s philosophy of life. Neighbors are willing to help each other to overcome difficulties. A matter of a family in a village is also regarded as the matter of the community. The development and industrialization of the country, has however made changes in people’s lifestyle and circumstance. Big cities are expanding into rural areas. Traditional values are replaced or filtered out by the modern way of life. Relationship among neighbors is therefore not as strong as it has hitherto been. Each family tends to be independent and isolated from others. People pay little attention to each other. Hence, cases of child abuse may be hidden, due to a lack of attention from the community.

Migration from rural areas to big cities has become a popular trend. Rural families move to big cities in the hope of finding a better life for their children. However, life in big cities is not easy, since concerns about housing, employment, and children’s study are always the common experience of migrants. Since they have to struggle to earn a living, they have no time to take care of their children. Neglected children are likely to be exposed to social evils because they are not mature enough to understand and avoid danger. Many find themselves lured into unwanted sexual encounters by false promises.

Bonds between people in families and communities are important in Vietnamese culture. Relational ties among family members, friends, and neighbors are so close that it is common for close family associates to express affection towards children by hugging, kissing or other intimate contacts. Much abuse may happen without protest from children who are socialized into normalizing such physical expressions. It is difficult for children to distinguish abusive behaviours from love especially when

abusive adults ply them with sweets, biscuits or other tokens of presumed affection. Culture impacts the implementation of child protection laws. The reported cases mentioned above are just the tip of the iceberg. Many other cases go unreported. Such daily unreported occurrences around the country serve as a warning to us about the urgency to protect children from neglect and abuse. Cultural tolerance hinders the provision of early intervention service because most cases are not discovered in time to be sufficiently addressed.

CHILD VIOLATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON CHILDREN'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

‘Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.’ (Bandura, 1977)⁴. According to Social Learning Theory, children learn from the environment through observing the behaviours of ‘influential models’ such as parents, teachers, friends and movie characters, regardless of whether the behaviours are appropriate. Exposure to aggression in the home, community and the mass media invites imitation. It is little wonder that increasingly, children resort to violence to get their way. In Vietnam, the rate of juvenile delinquency is increasing with more and more serious cases. Juvenile offenders are getting younger and more dangerous. Children socialized into violence generally have low self-esteem, lack confidence and are often afraid for their own safety⁵. In contrast, children brought up in families where they are loved and well taken care grow to be well adjusted and responsible adults. Many children who cannot stand violence from their parents leave home to live on streets and doing manual work to earn their daily living. Their desire to escape conflict-ridden homes leave them at the mercy of ill-intentioned adults in street corners who prey on them, Without parental or adult supervision, such children are subjected to physical and sexual abuse and are sooner or later led to crimes, drug addiction, gambling and illegal activities.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ITS DEVELOPMENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Child sexual abuse is an alarming issue in Vietnam. The growth of a market-oriented economy has changed people’s way of life. Internet communication is replacing face-to-face engagement. Anyone can meet total strangers in cyberspace. At a vulnerable age, children lack sufficient discrimination to sense danger and to screen out dangerous encounters especially with pedophiles. At the same time, many parents are ignorant of Internet dangers or at a loss of how to protect their children from straying into unhealthy social media platforms. They are not sufficiently informed about child development to realize that in the emerging teen years, a child becomes naturally curious about matters of a sexual nature. Vietnamese parents are uncomfortable talking to their children about sex. Sex education is generally unavailable, especially in remote areas. Meanwhile, pornographic materials in the Internet, in print form and as video products are increasingly commonplace and widely available. Young people are corrupted by such early access to such products, contributing to the increasing incidence of child sexual abuse. Most of the cases are all the more serious because of late reporting or identification.

Studies about child sexual abuse have noted deleterious effects on the child’s mental and psychological well-being. Abused children suffer from guilt when they hold themselves accountable

for what has happened to them and may even be suicidal. They may suffer from sleep, eating and anxiety disorders as well as acting out behaviors in school and in public or may become tensed and anxious with strangers.

CHILD HELPLINE VIETNAM

Child helpline has been successfully operating in many countries. According to the Child Helpline International Foundation (CHI), the global network of CHI includes 181 members in 147 countries⁶. In countries affected by Tsunami, earth quakes, nuclear disasters, drought and forest fires, CHI plays an important part in supporting child victims.

Child Helpline Vietnam operates through diverse media channels including broadcast and print media. Its services are aimed at public education, advocacy and the protection and support of at-risk children and their families. It provides counseling and other psychological services. To keep the issue of child protection in the public eye, it collects and publishes data on child abuse. It also publishes statistics pertaining to its work in child protection.

Child Helpline Vietnam was established as an effective channel for children to tell their stories without being threatened or judged, since it handles cases coming to its attention with great sensitivity and ensures confidentiality for child victims. Children make calls to the hotline to get support and prompt intervention. Stories of violence, abuse and exploitation considered too shameful to be revealed to police or other authorities are in this way, available to the helpline's staff when child victims call because they believe that help is available at the other end of the line. Child Helpline Vietnam also purposes to reach children and their families in far off islands and remote rural areas where services are not yet developed or cannot be accessed due to geographical distance.

Having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other international conventions, Vietnam is committed to ensuring children's rights in the country. For this to happen, it is necessary to improve the system of social welfare and child protection. In cooperating with CHI to establish a helpline in 2004, Vietnam has become the 52th member country in the United Nations to do so⁷.

The helpline is a public service supported by the State to provide information, psychological counseling, and consultancy to children and families needing such service. In line with the system of child protection, the helpline contributes to mitigate risks of children being abused and support recovery. The line is especially aimed at protecting children in difficult circumstances and children living in remote ethnic areas as well as facilitating the implementation of the rights of the child through providing to parents and guardians, knowledge and skills in child upbringing and care. In short, Child Helpline Vietnam is serving both children and adults through solving problems related to children. Besides, the line also works as a source of information to agencies to support programmes and policies for children.

At present, the social welfare and child protection system in Vietnam is providing services at 3 levels. The responsibility for identifying children at risk or children in need of special protection belongs to the People's Committee at the communal level. However, identification of these subjects seems to be difficult because of cultural tolerance. Moreover, violence against children and cases of child abuse and exploitation are sensitive issues which families prefer to keep out of the public eye. For Vietnamese people, 'it is best to wash one's soiled linen at home'. Therefore, these problems are

often not reported by children, their guardians or family members and consequently, not officially solved.

The three levels of work mentioned above are divided in the following manner: Level one service is aimed at preventing child exploitation, abuse and neglect and other forms of violence through public education. This service supports families, preventing them from breaking up and provides parent education so that families are able to take responsibility for caring for their children. Community awareness programmes are organized in local People's Committees, Government ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Health. In addition, socio-political organizations such as Women's Union and Youth Union are also active in providing parent education with support from Child Helpline Vietnam.

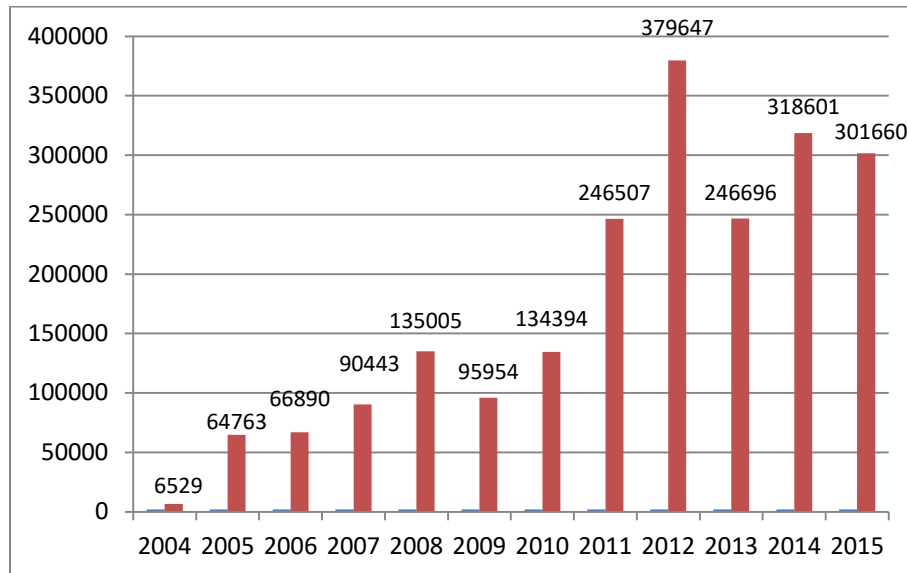
Communication activities are implemented in different ways through media, distribution of leaflets and organization of local meetings and health care events for children and their families during summer holidays, including nutrition consultancy and vaccinations for mothers and children. There are also activities preventing families from separation or break-up. For example, the competition of 'cultural families' at the locality is organized every year to uphold the honour of families that meet the standards such as families having no conflicts among the members, good relationship with neighbors, not involved in social evils.

Level two service focuses on early intervention for children at risk of abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect. The most commonly used means is supporting finance for poor families.

Level three service concentrates on urgent intervention for children and families at high risk of being harmed, including child protection services such as guardianship, foster and intensive care in public institutions.

The Number of Calls by Children and Their Parents

Since its establishment, the Child Helpline has helped many children and parents from different areas in Vietnam. The number of calls provides a baseline indication of the frequency children need protection and help.

Figure 1: Total Calls by Year

Consolidated report 2015 by the Department of Child Protection and Care

In the 10 years from 2004 to 2015, the Child Helpline Vietnam received nearly 2,100,000 calls from children and parents throughout the country, most of which were for psychological consultancy and child protection but also for assistance in family relationship difficulties and reproductive health concerns. Cases are identified and promptly dealt with. That more than 3,000 incidents involving children abused, subjected to violence, trafficked, neglected and abandoned were intervened and supported shows the effectiveness of the helpline and the urgent need for such a service in Vietnam. The child helpline enables children to tell their problems to a trusted source, contributing to identifying cases and reporting to functional agencies to meet the urgent need of children. As it can be seen the number of calls climbed up dramatically from 6,529 calls in 2004 to 246,507 calls in 2011 and reached a peak at 379,647 calls in 2012. Although in the year 2015, the number of calls registered a slight dip to 301,660 calls, the demand of children and adults for such a call-in services is on an upward trajectory.

Diverse callers have reached out to the Helpline for assistance. Besides children and parents, there are many others, some to report and others for consultancy of varying nature. Its geographic scope spans across rural, ethnic areas to big cities and far off islands. The line supports all persons wishing to report problems related to children, regardless of geographical distance. Free calls are received from poor areas which enable callers to access initial support services. In the past 10 years, most of calls were made by children (about 69% of total calls). This reflects the increasing need for help to children. The rates of calls from children in remote, ethnic areas and children in special circumstances have risen dramatically. Out of the total calls from children, those aged from 15-18 years made the most calls to the helpline, accounting for 34.1%, followed by children aged 11-14 years old, registering about 24.5% of calls. Calls made by adults accounted for 31%, including those from parents, guardians, teachers, social workers and concerned people.

In the last years, the Child Helpline Vietnam has developed very rapidly in terms of quantity and quality of services. Compared to 2004 when the line was first established – there were 6,529 calls then – the figure has increased to 301,660 calls in 2015. In 2016, the number of cases which received support and intervention services continued to rise. Compared to the preceding year, in the first six months of 2016, the line intervened in 12 more cases than it did during the period before⁸.

Along with provision of consultancy and support while the child is on the line, the Helpline has opened offices, screening and providing treatment for children who have psychological problems and mental disorders arising from sexual abuse, violence and trafficking. At the present moment, although Centre-based service provides treatment to an average of only 2 cases a month, this is set to rise. In addition to provision of consultancy, the hotline has trained skills for children and parents in needed, including parenting skills and life skills. Case management aids in the proper disposition of cases. For serious cases, the line will contact the local police and local authority figures such as People's Commune Committee members to offer urgent intervention; for children at risk, the line will submit profiles to local authorities and cooperate with them to support these children.

Because of the helpline, many cases that have hitherto been left unresolved have now reached successfully resolutions. As an example, some time back, a call was made by a man from an ethnic minority group who reported that his 12-year-old daughter was sexually abused by a young boy living nearby. Consequently, the daughter was pregnant but the boy and his family refused to take any responsibility. They even insulted the girl's family. The Helpline staff supported and guided the father to submit documents to the local police agency and the local office of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. A year after the report, the abuser was arrested and sentenced to jail.

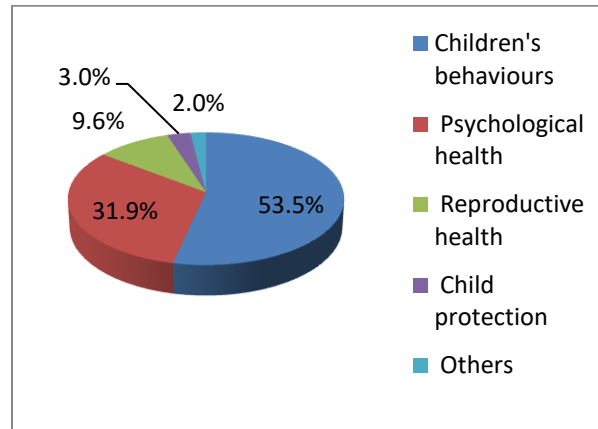
Another case of successful intervention concerns a young girl in Hanoi who was repeatedly sexually assaulted resulting in her pregnancy. She contemplated suicide after being insulted by her family and discriminated against by neighbors and classmates. The abuser threatened her many times and when confronted, denied any involvement. Consultants of the line reported the case to the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social affairs and the police agency for support and intervention. The girl was then sent to a shelter near Hanoi and received psychological assistance. Her family was also provided with assistance to coordinate with relevant agencies to resolve the problem. This resulted in the abuser being charged in court.

Problems related to Children from Calls to the Child Helpline

Children have legitimate demands for parental and societal care and protection, rights to accessing basic services of education, health care, and good living conditions to develop to the fullest extent. The Constitution of Vietnam and current laws related to children stipulates responsibilities of family, community and society for child care, protection and education, but in fact, the implementation of child protection services under international standards is still facing difficulties. For many children in special circumstances and children living in remote, ethnic areas, it seems to be hard to access public services as well as early intervention service due to difficult living conditions, terrain, and diversified culture. Moreover, socio-economic resources are not enough to support the system of child protection. The Helpline is only useful when children and families install a line at home and have a phone. However, in some remote, mountainous areas and islands, it is impossible to use the Helpline since the telephone network has not yet been established there.

In the past years, the child helpline has received many calls from children and adults. The statistics of calls during the past 10 years shows the urgent demand of children and adults for support. The records are categorized into five different groups, namely, child and adult conduct, psychological and physical problems, reproductive health and sex, child protection, and other miscellaneous problems.

Figure 2: Children's problems reflected via calls



Consolidated report 2015 by the Department of Child Protection and Care

The pie chart above shows various kinds of problems from calls made by children and their families. Most of the calls were about the conduct of children, accounting for 53.5% of the total calls. Although Vietnam's socio-economic development has achieved remarkable success, this has come with associated negative consequences. People are busy earning money, spending little time on taking care of children and family. Family relationship, therefore, is not on as secure a ground as it was in the past. Children lacking parental care and supervision are growing up poorly adjusted, dropping out of school, joining gangs, playing computer games and exhibiting behavioral problems. The percentage of calls concerning children's psychological and physical problems – 31.9% of total calls – demands urgent societal attention. This figure showed the concern of parents on problems related to psychology and physiology of children was rather big. Parents who lack parenting knowledge and skills are difficult to deal with children's problems related to psychology and physiology, especially, in their different stages of biological development. The rate of calls for reproductive health and sex accounted for 9.6%. Child protection accounts for only 3% of calls, of which 70% were relevant to sexual abuse and violation against children. The rest rate of the calls (2.0%) was related to other problems such as study-related issues and choice or over-involvement in recreational activities.

Difficulties in the Operation of the Child Helpline

Although child helpline has achieved success in supporting children and their families, contributing to the improvement of the system of child protection in Vietnam, there have been many difficulties in its implementation. The number of calls for child protection was only 3% of total calls. This means that there is insufficient publicity of the Helpline. Many people, including especially children, are not aware of the ability of the helpline to solve serious problems. Although the number of calls from children-at-risk and children in special circumstances is increasing every year, the rate is still low.

Child Helpline has consolidated information and provided CHI with monthly data about children's problems and demands as well as outcomes of child protection and care system on children. However, studies about policy, planning, programme development and quality improvement are limited in quantity and quality. Furthermore, collaboration and exchange of data between the Child Helpline and the child protection and care system is still weak. There is currently no data linkage between the Child Helpline and the State management agencies.

The development of services to stamp out human trafficking and psychological mistreatment for children requires the Child Helpline to have qualified human resource with skills and professional knowledge to support children and parents. As the number of calls to the line keeps its pace of steady increase from year to year, higher number and quality of support staff is needed. The Child Helpline needs more professionals in clinical psychology, counseling and therapy. Currently, the total number of full-time and part-time staff working for the child helpline is 20 persons. These staff works in 3 shifts per 24-hour cycle. All staff members hold bachelor degrees in either special education, psychology or social work.

CONCLUSION

Although there have been difficulties and challenges during the implementation of the Child Helpline, it has enjoyed multi-disciplinary cooperation from international organizations, including the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and NGOs such as Plan International Organization to research and develop programmes and projects towards contributing to the development of the child protection system in Vietnam. In addition, the line has received interns from different universities that provide training in social work, special education and psychology. In summary, this paper describes cultural elements and its impact on the implementation of the system of child protection and care. The Child Helpline was established as a good solution to identify children's problems for timely support as well as to provide early intervention services to children and their families. As such, it is gratifying to note that the Child Helpline has supported thousands of children at risk of physical and sexual abuse and contributed to their healing.

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