

Women's Responses to Domestic Violence
(Qualitative analysis in Hue and An Giang Provinces)

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Abstract

Domestic violence is one of the hardest unresolved problems for both husband and wife in their family, and the same for community and society. Many studies in Vietnam have pointed out the complicated situation of this problem as well as the various causes and consequences of domestic violence. However, there is only little limited national information about the way women respond to domestic violence done by their husbands.

This article concentrates on the understanding of women and their reactions while experiencing violence in their family. Analysis of secondary documents and analysis of qualitative data are used in this article for the 12 in-depth interviews in 2 provinces in the Middle and South of Vietnam (Thua Thien – Hue and An Giang) which were done by a Ministry level project, titled The Impact of Factors of Social and Economical Environment on Domestic Violence Nowadays, conducted by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies (affiliated to the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) in 2017. The article's assumption is that, if women have good knowledge about the reasons leading to their violent conditions, and if women actively find a way to resolve their violent conditions, or if they know how to get the necessary support, then domestic violence will be minimized or eliminated.

Introduction

What will a woman do when she is the victim of domestic violence? In Vietnam, there is not much special research on this issue. The issue of women's reactions in domestic violence is often mentioned as an aspect rather than the main subject (Loi, Vu Manh et al, 1999; Huy, Vu Tuan, 2003; Minh, Nguyen Huu and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editors), 2009; GSO and other agencies, 2010; United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014). There is only a little national information of the way how women respond to domestic violence, including available assistance for them from informal networks such as their family and friends, and from more formal ones such as governmental or non-governmental organizations (GSO and other agencies, 2010: 93). Additionally, other research on domestic violence pays more attention to physical violence, or other types of violence (such as sexual violence), but not much on the type of emotional violence. This situation leads to the poor information about women's responses to sexual and emotional violence.

This article will propose a general answer to the question about women's responses while they are suffering domestic violence through qualitative analysis; it will then also make a suggestion about the need of more large-scale research on this urgent problem. However, the result of this case study is limited in its small scope. By focusing on the two types of domestic violence, physical violence and sexual violence, this paper consists of 4 points: Reviewing the research related to the issue of women's responses to domestic violence; Methods and data analysis of a certain case study; Findings and discussions; Conclusion.

Review

The first challenge for this research is to identify types of violence and to understand the ways how women's response to their own domestic violence. In the process of domestic violence, contradictions appearing and arising is *the first step* (Minh, Nguyen Huu and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editor), 2009)¹. So, in this step, wrong awareness about family contradictions will hide the main part of the picture of domestic violence. Further, it may cause a lack of necessary reaction from the woman to her husband's actions right from the start of the contradiction.

The study on "The husband and wife contradiction in family and its influencing factors" shows that there are quite large differences between husband and wife in their understanding of family contradiction. Education and occupation are two factors which have an impact on their different

awareness of family contradictions. For example, highly educated people, highly respected professionals can talk about family contradictions clearly and more specific. But low-educated people or non-skilled professionals often confuse family contradictions and adjustments in marriage. So that family contradictions are more often considered as negative consequences resolved by violence, rather than something to tackle. Hence, the levels of contradictions in marriage presented in research is often lower than reality (Huy, Vu Tuan, 2003: 148). Similarly, inadequate and wrong awareness of domestic violence often leads to the situation in which numerous women accept they have to endure and live in their own family violence until they are severely and frequently abused (Minh, Nguyen Huu and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editor), 2009).

In the types of family contradictions, maybe because of its private and sensitive nature, family contradictions in sex life are obviously mentioned less than other contradictions (about behaviour, child-raising or household economy). According to Huy Vu Tuan (2003), the degree of inconsistency in sexual matters is not obvious in quantitative studies, but it is very obvious from qualitative studies that it leads to serious consequences in married life. It is possible to say that domestic violence, adultery or divorce may be caused by the husband's or wife's unmet sexual needs.

Regarding the tendency of women to respond to their husbands' violent behaviour, many studies showed that the common behaviour of women who were abused by their husbands is to hide the fact of their abuse and keep silence. Most of them only call for other people's help (their neighbours or relatives), or go to medical centres or the local authority when the family maltreatment lasts too long and is so obvious or has severe consequences leading to serious injuries (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and other agencies, 2008; Minh, Nguyen Huu Minh and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editor), 2009; GSO and other agencies, 2010). For example, the project "Domestic Violence against Women in Vietnam: situation, procession and causes"² proposed a judgement: wives tend to respond with mild conversation and in a calm manner to their husbands' violence or forgive it. Most of them behave in accordance with traditional culture as a " bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit" or "every fault needs a pardon" and they do not want others know their violent situations (Minh, Nguyen Huu and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editor), 2009).

The above findings were reaffirmed in the *National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Vietnam* project conducted by the General Statistics Office and some other agencies in 2010³.

Accordingly, women's suffering in silence while suffering domestic violence is a quite popular reaction for them. The reason is to keep their family's good image and to save their husband's face. Particularly, violence is considered shameful for both women and men if it is sexual violence, emotional violence or economic violence., For sexual violence especially, most of the women interviewed answered that they could not do anything else if they are sexually abused because they want to keep their family happy. They supposed that women have to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs (GSO and other agencies, 2010: 94).

Some qualitative studies also realized that the women's silence, acceptance and tolerance are the most common responds while they were forced to have sex in their married life even though they do not want (Thinh, Hoang Ba, 2006; Phong, Vu Hong, 2006). Remarkably, there is a strong trend according to the result of a large scale quantitative sample analysis which recorded that there are various reactions in sexual relations between wife and husband. Some small-scale studies got new findings on this issue: that there is a positive awareness and attitude in male sexual behaviour. The husband does not coerce his wife and they together understand that sex can only be satisfied when both husband and wife desire and meet the demands of each other (Thao, Nguyen Phuong, 2012). In its turn, that positive awareness and attitude may restrict negative reactions of woman in sexual response.

Another major question is from whom and from whose support do women need in case they do not want to suffer anymore? Generally, women often choose one who can protect them. They often tell their husband's relatives, firstly, that they hope their husband can be advised to be against violence. In contrast, women rarely discuss this sensitive problem with their birth parents. However, a qualitative study shows that the intervention of parents-in-law and other members in the family or the neighbours is often ineffective because domestic violence is generally considered a private matter; even some women are advised to accept violence in order not to shame their birth parents.

Women seldom come and ask for help from community organizations or local governments. According to the *National Study on Violence against Women in Viet Nam*, up to 87.1% of women who were experiencing violence from their husbands said that they have never looked to any agencies/organizations for help. Because what is happening is "normal and not serious" for them, or risks social stigma or dangerous consequences such as their husband could be sent to jail. On the

other hand, women are most likely to come and ask the help from the local leader/ village/commune leader when they suffer severe violence (GSO and other agencies, 2010: 96-99).

The mentioned matters verify that family's and community's attitude towards domestic violence can directly or indirectly encourage or discourage women seeking the necessary help. In other words, family and community are factors heavily influencing domestic violence. Women with their own personal experiences or their observations of other cases can have enough confidence to seek necessary sympathy and support.

Thus, women's responses to domestic violence depend on the level and the type of violence. The women's common reactions to physical violence are maintaining and forgiving with gentle dialogue; their responses to sexual violence are to quietly endure. When women need stronger responses, they try to seek different supports, mainly from informal social networks including family members, friends, and neighbours, but the realistic results are often not helpful, and some even advise women to accept and live with violence (GSO and other agencies, 2010).

Method and Data

This study use qualitative analysis methods. In particular, there are an analysis of secondary documents and an analysis of qualitative data. The violence progression diagram in this article is based on 12 in-depth interviews including 10 women, 1 man and 1 child in Thua Thien – Hue and An Giang Provinces (Vietnam) within the project titled *The impact of factors of social and economical environment on domestic violence nowadays*, conducted by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies (affiliated to the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) in 2017.

Key Findings

Some women are almost lacking awareness of domestic violence, and they themselves cannot even realize the forms of potential family contradictions which will lead to stress and violence. In general, for them “sometimes quarrel with each other about domestic trivia such as debt, drunken husband, impertinent wife... so she got slapped... are normal situations in married life”. That is not a big matter and not violence because the husband has a "righteous reason", and then he tries to appease the wife. In addition, there is no significant injury, and "my husband still loves me, buys food for me after quarrelling" (Woman, 38 years old, An Giang). The consent of the wife to have sex even though she does not want to be perceived as "pampering husband" is given because she does not want to make the husband sad, angry, look for another woman or get a beating (Woman, 31 years old, Hue).

The in-depth interviews show that given the burdensome traditional notions of gender roles, this could be an important factor preventing women from domestic violence. Gender roles have left a deep imprint on women's awareness, which may be a crucial factor preventing women from escaping from domestic violence. It is, women believe, how they have to behave in the way expected by their families, communities and society, and even they themselves also accept bearing with violence to take on gender roles in the best way possible, while this do not happen to their husbands. The responsibility of preserving the family's happiness leans to the women side, and it is not difficult to imagine the pressures the women have to undergo so as to maintain a family with sufficient parents for children, and the women are not judged by their community and society.

“My parents taught me to live with my husband's family of how I dared smile when happy, how I dared cry when sad. Many times I left, but finally I still had to go back because I could not leave my children. I am afraid of people's ridicule if I leave my husband. I have to pamper my husband and let him keep my earned money if I want to be loved. I feel ashamed and dare not to tell the local Women's Union. I do not criticize or sue my husband because I do not want him to be "publicized"⁴, if so, he loses face.” (Woman, 57 years old, An Giang)

"The family is not happy owing to the wife wanting to imitate her friends and surpass her husband." (Man, 49 years old, Hue)

"My mother told that I had to suffer any misery. Everyone will laugh at me if I divorce. My children will be at disadvantage compared with other kids." (Woman, 31 years old, Hue)

"We have been arguing for decades. I have suffered just for my children. As a woman, I have to sacrifice. I am afraid of social assessment. I do not want my children to feel sad. Sometimes I was consider a beater just for defending myself while beaten by my husband . I told my mother-in-law, she replied it was my fault. I wasted money for the local authority in order to warn him but he did not change. Families and children also do not want to lose their faces. Neighbours advised me not to quarrel, not to defend myself." (Woman, 55 years old, An Giang).

Many women seem to play passive roles in responding to domestic violence, and fail to escape the cycle of violence without a way out. They do not realize that a very important determinant of solving their problem is just themselves. In fact, the wife tries to be patient, to pamper her husband as well as to satisfy all his requirements, at the same time seeking help from others until her husband's behaviour is more than she can bear and then the wife protests against it. Unfortunately, under the influence of many factors, the wife returns to the original state of forbearance with the belief of "their bad fate" and then console themselves that "I am in a better situation in comparison with other women" (Woman, 57 years old, An Giang). It can be seen that the theory of the Violence Cycle is working in many of the interviewed cases. However, there are some strange cases without contradiction or serious stress, but which suddenly end up in an explosion of violence, as in the case of Mrs. Nhan below.

What happens if women understand that domestic violence only changes when they alter their awareness and find appropriate ways to control it?

Case 1: Victim suffering from physical violence⁵

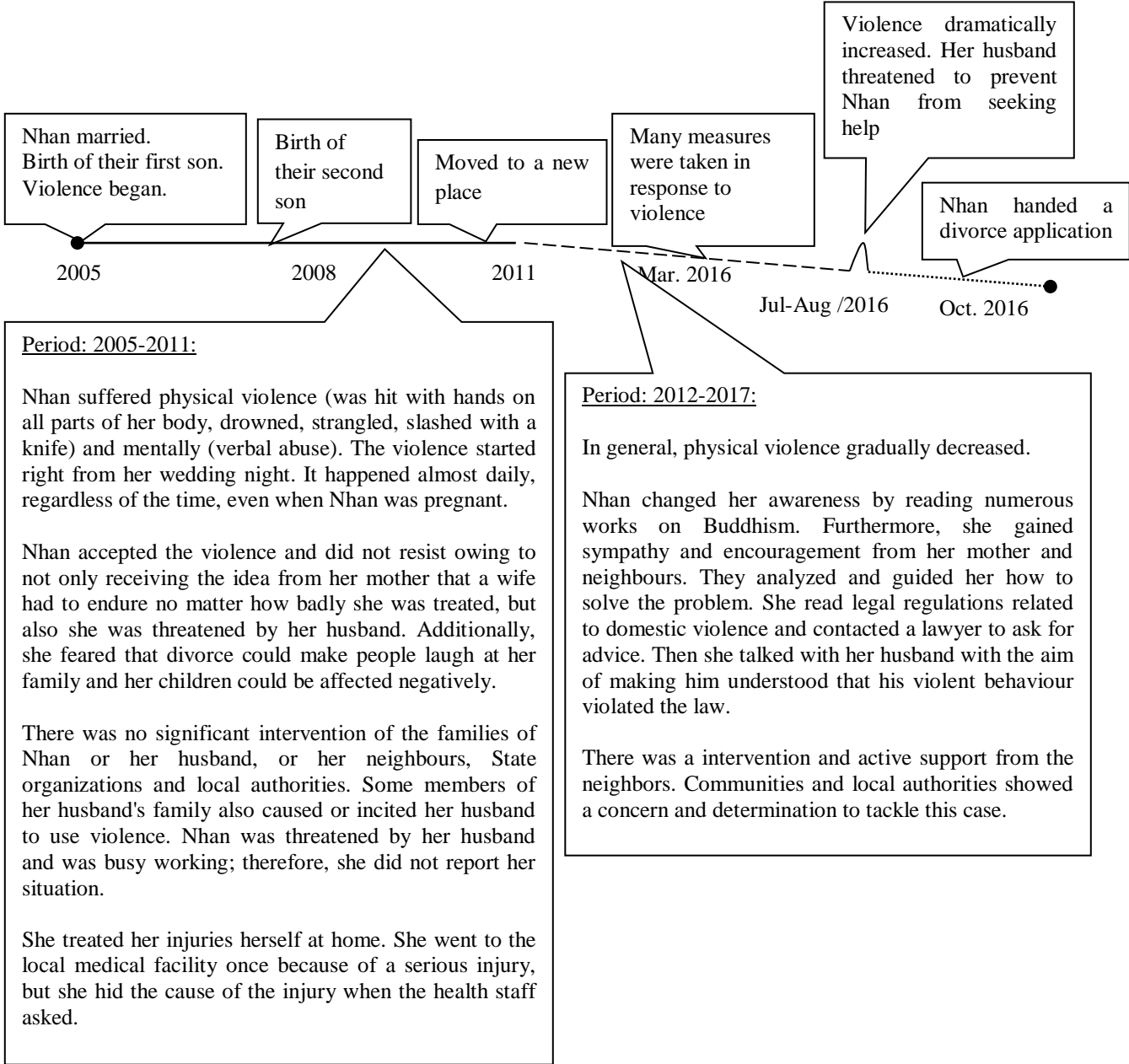
Mrs. Nhan was married at 19 years old. Her husband is 7 years older than her and both work as freelancers. They have two school-aged sons.

Nhan got married in line with the decision of her mother and uncle, so she had no opportunity to understand her husband's character or his family. She was influenced by the concept held by her mother, father-in-law and close relatives that married women must be silent no matter how ill-treated. After marriage, Nhan's husband did not get any jobs for a few years, and Nhan took

responsibility for her family's financial needs (including her husband's needs). The family budget was very tight. But even when returning to work, her husband did not contribute his part to the family finances.

Nhan was beaten by her husband right on the wedding day without reason. Since then, Nhan and her two children underwent severe physical and mental violence for so many farcical reasons, mainly because her husband felt aggravated. Nhan recognised that her husband was addicted to violence.

Physical violence diagram:



For Nhan's case, it reflects the theoretical and practical results of previous studies. Social learning theory explains that children who grow up in a violent environment will tend to copy behaviours from their parents, repeating those in later relationships (Maren E. Hyde-Nolan and Tracy Juliao, 2012). Nhan's husband grew up in a family where his father often used violence against his mother and children. Consequently, the next generation becomes the perpetrator of violence; for instance, the husband's two sisters (Nhan's sisters-in-law) had used violence against their husbands and they also encouraged their brother to beat his wife (Nhan). Several studies affirmed that the husband's childhood experience of violence is a crucial risk factor that lead him becoming a perpetrator later in life. Violent husbands are more likely to have experienced violence during their childhood or having mothers who suffered violence in the past (GSO and other agencies, 2010). Thus, the case of Nhan's husband should be explained by his suffering of violence and witnessing of domestic violence during his younger years, and we can understand how his behaviour of "beating wife and sons like a violent addict", even absolutely without any previous contradiction arising before.

Social control theory may also be applied to explain this case. It is based on the notion that family conflicts arise from the need to have power and maintain individual power in controlling relationships. Accordingly, the more powerful members in a family (such as the father, the parents, and the husband) often threaten or use force or violence to gain obedience from other members (their children or wife). Victims gradually learn how to give up inappropriate behaviours to avoid violence (Maren E. Hyde-Nolan and Tracy Juliao, 2012). Nhan's husband had got his power through violence and reached it through his wife's and two children's fear, submission, and also their self-restraint on risky behaviour: "my mother teaches me how to be docile, not to disturb my father so as to avoid being beaten" (Children, Hue).

Case 2: Victim of sexual violence⁶

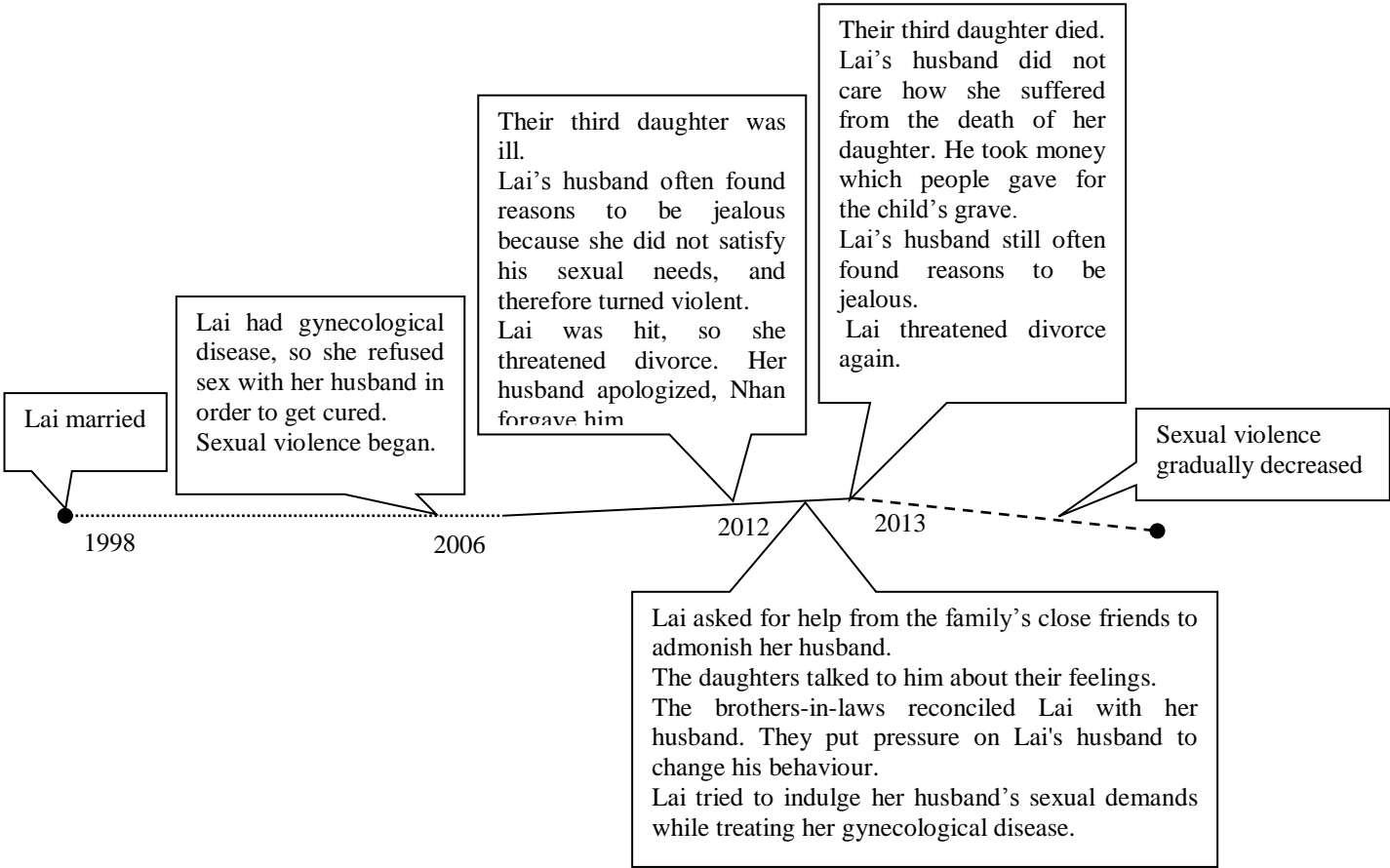
Mrs. Lai owns a grocery shop and her husband is a bricklayer. They have two daughters. Lai's life was quite smooth until she got a gynaecological disease. Lai fail to meet her husband's sexual demands, which is the reason for her husband jealous and violent treatment.

In early period of her disease treatment, owing to her "fear of death", Lai almost refused to have sex. Consequently, her husband coerced her roughly. Lai even sometimes felt she was raped. This made Lai afraid of sex, and she considered it a burden and something to fear in her marriage life.

Lai's husband started to find various reasons to be jealous. Whenever Lai did not satisfy him, he would pick a quarrel with her, defame her, take half a month off work or not care about her.

When Lai recognised that if she satisfied his sexual demands, his behaviour would improve, she tried to do so while treating her gynaecological disease. At the same time, she asked the family's close friends, daughters and brothers-in-law to give him advice. All these had a positive effect: in particular, her husband was less jealous and sexual violence gradually decreased.

Sexual violence diagram:



Studies on sexual violence in married life in Vietnam are limited, therefore, information on women's responses to domestic violence is quite poor, and only some opposite trends are mentioned in the review. It is noteworthy that sexual violence often accompanies physical and emotional violence, which is similar to Mrs Lai case. According to Hoang Ba Thinh, the cause of sexual violence is not only the man's belief that he is the owner of his wife, but also the wife's resignation and their lack of knowledge about couples' sexual health and sexual rights (Hoang Ba Thinh, 2006). Sexual violence may be the consequence of other conflicts in which sex is as a means of control to increase power (Huy, Vu Tuan, 2003).

In Mrs Lai case, her silence lasted until she recognised that refusing her husband even with a reasonable reason also did not help her escape from her violent situation. That forced her to compromise and find another way to deal with the problem. In fact, when the wife completely overcomes her shame and does not hide her sensitive issues, she can solve her problems. However, in Mrs Lai case, the husband's bad treatment only came when his sexual needs were not satisfied: in other words, it was from a single reason. The problem might be more difficult to solve for violent cases which have various reasons. The problem is the wife must satisfy the husband's sexual needs. This may be considered as a certainty in men's notions, or as a "reward" for his efforts to contribute to the family. Hence, when the wife does not meet his requirements, the husband tends to attract the wife's attention by acts that can influence the wife to achieve what he wants.

Many studies have demonstrated that there is a link between the experience of domestic violence of young boys, who are the direct victims of violence or witnesses of domestic violence to their mothers, or with subsequent violent behaviour when they grow up (Whitfield, 2003; Duvvury et al, 2012: 58; Priya et al, 2012: 8. Recited United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014: 15). A study with the participation of 10,000 men in the Asia-Pacific region showed that experiences of childhood violence are closely related to general violence, including participation in criminal gangs, armed fights, and sexual violence against partners (Fulu et al., 2013. Citing United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014: 15). These findings are important evidence to illustrate the spiral nature of violence. Violence is caused by the notion of promoting masculinity and power imposed on the least powerful people, particularly women and children, and all forms of gender violence are interrelated (United Nations in Viet Nam, 2014). These conclusions, along with the analysis of Mrs. Nhan and Mrs. Lai cases, suggest a requirement for more in-depth studies on the consequences of the violence spiral in Vietnam, the relationship between types of domestic violence, and the need for a policy

aimed at children who live in violent families so as to help them have sufficient knowledge and skills to prevent domestic violence.

There was a significant change after Mrs Nhan's awareness after her moving to her new home. The active support of the new community provided a positive impact on her situation. It may be necessary to have more in-depth research on the relationship between living environment and domestic violence in Vietnam.

Nowadays, for various reasons, those studies on domestic violence seem to be more targeted to women than men. This study suggests that there should be more research on men's reactions to domestic violence as a way to make the picture of response to domestic violence complete with the aim of avoiding gender bias.

Conclusion

These findings show that women's responses to domestic violence are quite diverse in their behaviour, and there are some similarities with previous research. This study points out some notable ideas: women can deal with domestic violence when they do not consider themselves as victims but as the decisive factor. Being aware of the root of the problem, proactively finding appropriate solutions and daring to overcome not only those notions that emphasize the weakness and dependence of women, but also the fear and shame in order to seek positive assistance, can help women solve domestic violence. In addition, the multidimensional role of the family and community in supporting women from domestic violence should be studied more.

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1¹ In general, the cycle of domestic violence consists of 4 steps: 1 / Contradiction, 2 / Stress, escalating to violence, 3 / Exploding violence, and 4 / Regretting, blaming (Minh, Nguyen Huu and Anh, Tran Thi Van (co-editor), 2009).

2 This study analyzed quantitative data from three surveys: Quantitative survey on gender-based violence in Vietnam (World Bank, 1999); National Survey on Vietnamese Adolescents and Youth (SAVY) (Ministry of Health, GSO, WHO, UNICEF, 2003); Baseline Survey on the Status of Gender Equality and the Impact of Policies on Women and Men to support Policy Making in Vietnam (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2005); Concurrently, 196 qualitative interviews were conducted in 6 provinces and cities including Ha Noi, Lang Son, Da Nang, Dak Lak, Tay Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City.

3 The National Study on Violence against Women in Vietnam interviewed 4,838 women, representing women aged 18-60 years across the country.

4 In An Giang province, there is a movement of "publicization". This is the policy of the commune police which is applied to cases that still causing violence despite being propagandised and warned. This movement is in collaboration with the Women's Union and Youth Union. If, after being advised three times by the Women's Union (with a written record), the person do not change their violent behaviour, he/she will be invited to a common place in the commune in order to listen to

legal regulations on violations. The invited person must write and sign a commitment not to repeat them.

⁵ The interviewee's name has been changed.

⁶ The interviewee's name has been changed.