

2020 Asia–Pacific Statistics Week

A decade of action for the 2030 Agenda: Statistics that leaves no one and nowhere behind

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From data to action to impact: How Viet Nam has changed in the decade since the first violence against women prevalence survey

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Abstract:

In 2007, when the Viet Nam Domestic Violence Law was adopted, not many people believed that domestic violence was an issue in the country. That was still the case in 2009 when the government started planning their first violence against women (VAW) survey with support from United Nations agencies, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund. They needed evidence and a baseline to measure the impact of the Domestic Violence law.

A household survey was conducted in 2009-2010, interviewing 5,000 women across the country, with confidentiality and safety given the highest priority. Policymakers and other stakeholders were on board since day one helping to plan the survey, adapt the questionnaire, discuss findings and provide feedback at various stages of analysis and report writing.

In November 2010, the shocking results were launched: one in three women reported physical and/or sexual violence by their husband. The survey also showed that 50% of survivors had never spoken about the violence before the interview and 87% had not sought help.

Even though key stakeholders were on board, the results were a hard pill to swallow. But, as a result, things started to change gradually across the entire country. Powerful partnerships between data producers and users culminated in a national action plan and program of action to stop VAW. Every year in June, the national action month for domestic violence, massive awareness campaigns take place, creating conversation around a taboo topic. Counselling and medical support is now reaching thousands of survivors. Other support services were established under the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Public Security. The Government reviewed the 5-year implementation of the Domestic Violence Law and included domestic violence in their revised Legal Aid Law. Importantly women who live with violence now realize they are not alone, that they are not to blame and that a peaceful life is a human right. This would not have happened without the data.

Now, ten years after the first survey, Viet Nam has just finished their second national VAW survey. The difference this time around is that the government has initiated the survey. They now recognize the problem and the value of data for measuring change and developing effective policies and programmes. The official results are expected in May 2020. This paper shows the impact that ten years of action has had the prevalence of VAW.

Keywords: Data collection, Ethics and safety, Engaging users, Ownership, Policy development

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1. Introduction:

Data play an essential role in policymaking and the value of evidence-based decisions is clear. However, tracing the link between official statistics and policy interventions is not always easy. Statistics are produced and disseminated by national statistical offices and other agencies in response to a need for data, but how they are eventually used is not necessarily known to data producers.

Sample surveys have made it possible to measure complex and taboo topics, such as domestic violence against women. When these data come to light, they are often shocking, and reactions can range from disbelief and denial to confirmed expectations and urgent calls for action. Governments willing to confront this difficult issue know that high-quality data provide the basis for understanding this largely hidden phenomenon and taking appropriate action.

This was realized in Viet Nam, firstly by development partners in 2009 who had seen prevalence surveys work in similar settings, and then by government, which saw the value in the data for Viet Nam and funded the second national survey in 2018. There has been significant investment and action to eliminate VAW in the years between the two surveys and it was hoped that the results would reflect this. The survey findings – to be published in 2020 – found progress had indeed been made, but seeing it clearly meant looking beyond the national averages into the detail of the data.

2. Methodology:

Surveys are the only way to collect data on the prevalence of violence against women (VAW) and thus to get an estimate of the magnitude of the problem in the population. There are two major approaches to collecting population-based data on violence against women using surveys. The first involves “dedicated” surveys that are specifically designed to gather detailed information on different types of violence against women. The second includes a set of questions or a short module on violence against women added to a large-scale survey designed to generate information on broader issues, such as poverty, crime or reproductive health (Jansen, 2016).

In Viet Nam, the “gold-standard” in dedicated surveys – the methodology of the WHO Multi-country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women – has been used with the process being largely the same between the two surveys (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2005). Comparable approaches were taken to recruiting and training of interviewers (with a two-week special interviewer training in both surveys) and safety protocols. Worth mentioning is that in 2018 data were gathered using Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) rather than with paper questionnaires. While sampling strategies and size were similar, another difference is the age range of the sample (see [Table 1](#) [Table 1](#)).

Table 1 Comparison of methods used in 2009-10 and 2018-19 Violence against Women prevalence survey, Viet Nam

	Number of women interviewed	Age range	Collection method
2009-2010 Survey	4,838 (4,561 ever-partnered women)	18-60 years	Personal interview with paper-based questionnaire (in private setting)
2018-2019 Survey	5,976 (5,553 ever-partnered women)	15-64 years	Computer assisted personal interview (in private setting)

Note: ‘Ever-married’ or ‘ever-partnered’ women are those who have ever been married or married/partnered in their lifetime and this is the denominator used for calculating rates of partner violence.

The survey measured women’s experience of violence using a series of behaviour-specific questions about whether any current or former husband or partner had ever perpetrated specific physically, sexually or emotionally abusive acts toward her, exhibited economic abuse or controlling behaviour. The word violence was not used in these questions. Such questions were asked about violent acts that

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had happened at any time in her life (to measure her “lifetime” experience of violence), as well as in the last 12 months (referred to as “current violence”).

Care was taken to keep the violence questions the same as in the first survey as much as possible, including their translation. There was little or no difference in the way the various acts of violence were measured, except for economic violence by husband/partners (many more acts were included in 2018 than in 2010) and the measurement of non-partner violence (not discussed here). For controlling behaviours by partners in 2018 information was also gathered for the last 12 months but in 2010 this was only measured for lifetime.

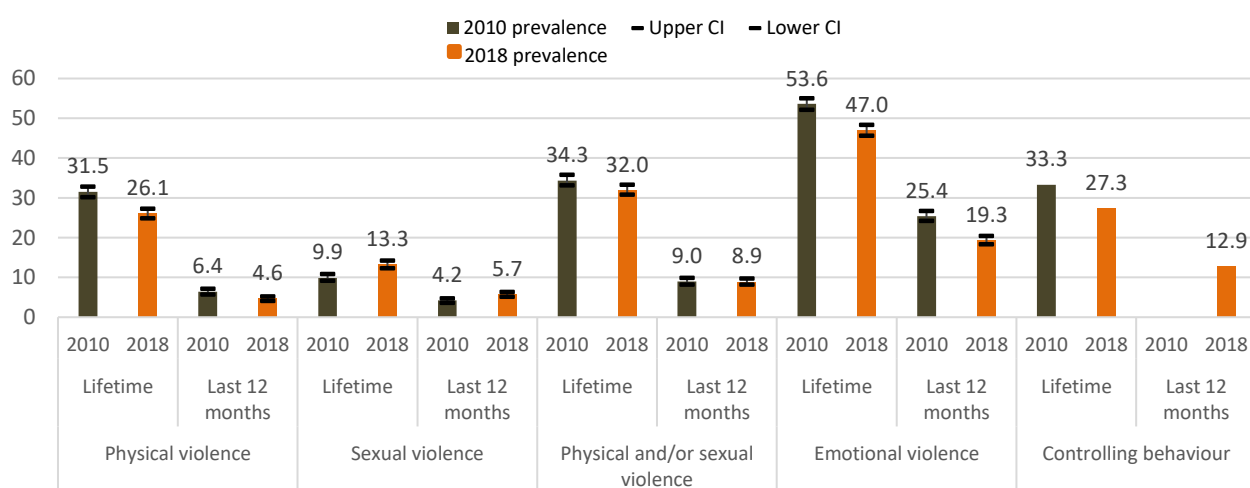
Even with the same methods and same levels of quality of data, it is unlikely to see a big change in lifetime rates of violence after a 10-year interval. In fact, minimal change in lifetime rates should be expected. Once a woman has experienced violence it remains with her for her lifetime and the cohort that was interviewed in 2010 has a large overlap with the cohort that was interviewed in 2018 (the women that were 18-56 years old in 2010 would now be 8 years older and still be eligible to be interviewed).

If there were big differences in lifetime prevalence, there may be another issue with the data. However, the prevalence of violence in the last 12 months is more sensitive to change as this reflects what is happening during only a short period just before the interview. If there are changes in rates of violence, they should be first visible in the patterns of “current violence”.

3. Result:

At first glance, the prevalence of intimate partner violence appears to have shifted but only slightly in ten years. The prevalence of all forms of husband/partner-violence, except sexual violence, are lower in 2018 as compared with 2010.

Figure 1 Prevalence of physical, sexual, physical and/or sexual, emotional violence by a husband/partner and controlling behaviour during lifetime and the last 12 months among ever-married/partnered women, with upper and lower 95% confidence intervals, Viet Nam, 2010 (N=4561, aged 18-60) and 2018 (N=5553, aged 15-64)



Note: Information on controlling behaviours ‘in the last 12 months’ was not collected in the 2010 survey. A confidence interval was not calculated on controlling behaviour in either 2010 or 2018.

There are important differences when looking beyond the national averages. For physical violence, prevalence over a lifetime and in the last 12 months ([Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3. Prevalence of physical violence by a husband/partner during last twelve months among ever-married/partnered women by age group, Viet Nam, 2018 \(N=5553\) and 2010 \(N=4561\).](#))

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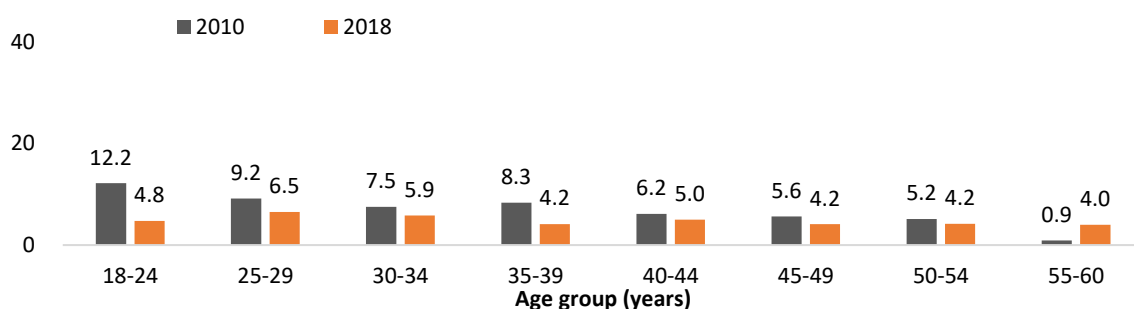


Figure 3) are lower in 2018 among most age groups. This difference is relatively and absolutely larger for younger women up to age 39. For example, 25% of women aged 25-29 mentioned lifetime physical violence by a husband/partner in 2010 compared to 19% in 2018. The differences suggest that especially younger women are now experiencing less physical husband/partner violence compared to women in the same age groups a decade earlier.

Figure 2. Prevalence of physical violence by a husband/partner during lifetime among ever-married/partnered women by age group, Viet Nam, 2018 (N=5553) and 2010 (N=4561).

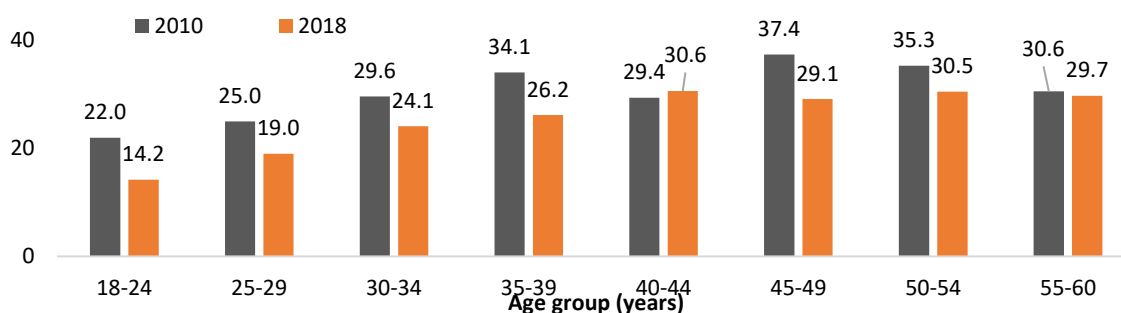
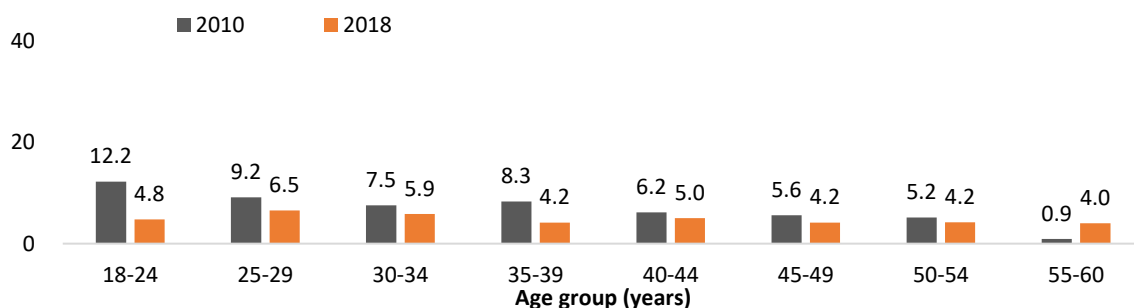


Figure 3. Prevalence of physical violence by a husband/partner during last twelve months among ever-married/partnered women by age group, Viet Nam, 2018 (N=5553) and 2010 (N=4561).



The prevalence of sexual partner violence is lower than for physical violence, but follows a different pattern, increasing from 9.9% (lifetime) in 2010 to 13.3% in 2018. Current rates also went up (4.2% in 2010 to 5.7% in 2018). Rates by age group show that more younger women disclosed experiences of sexual violence that older women (Figure 4 (lifetime) and Figure 5 (last 12 months)). While this does not affect the overall rate for combined physical and/or sexual partner violence (which has gone down in 2018), an explanation being explored is that, in 2010, talking about sex and sexual violence was not done due to the stigma on this topic. It is possible there is less underreporting in 2018, and the apparent higher prevalence rates among the young people is mainly an increased openness in talking about sex and violence (thanks to the intensive campaigns around VAW).

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Figure 4. Prevalence of sexual violence by a husband/partner during lifetime among ever-married/partnered women by age group, Viet Nam, 2018 (N=5553) and 2010 (N=4561).

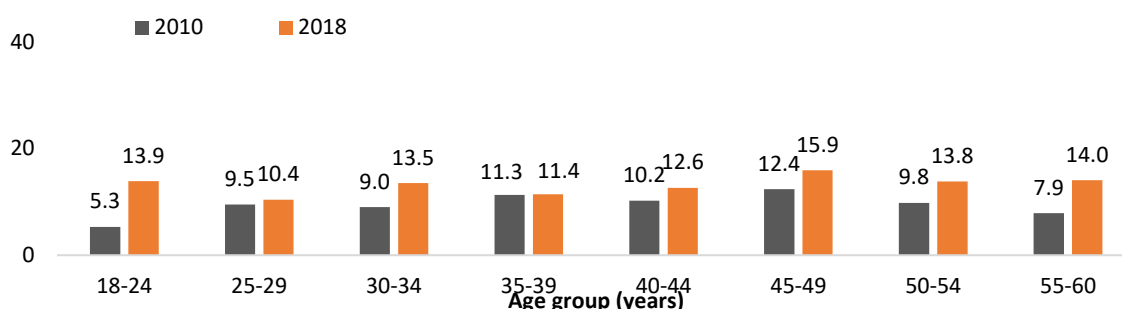
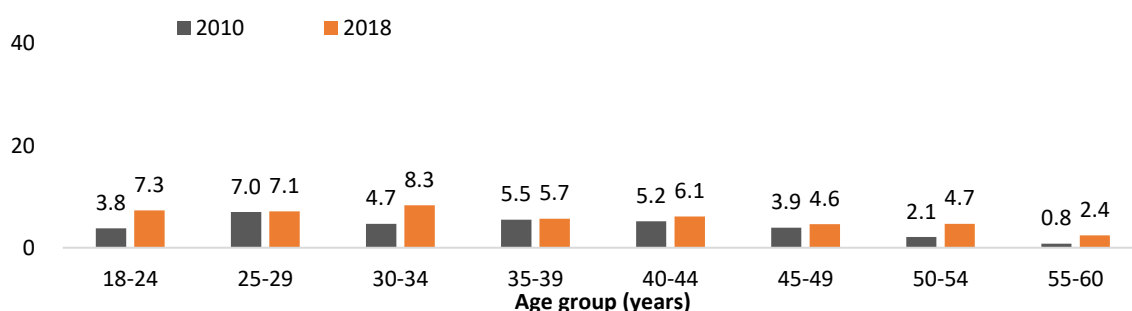


Figure 5. Prevalence of sexual violence by a husband/partner during last 12 months among ever-married/partnered women by age group, Viet Nam, 2018 (N=5553) and 2010 (N=4561).



Attitudes are slow to change. This is evident in the percentage of women who agree with the statement that “a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees”, which is the same in 2018 as it was in 2010 (27% of women agree). When looking by age group however, the difference between young and old women is larger in 2018 and younger women were less likely to hold these views, for example, among women aged 18-24, 11% agreed with the statement in 2018 compared to 14% in 2010.

In 2018, most women (90.4%) who experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband/partner did not seek help. A few (4.8%) went to the police. This is almost identical to the findings in 2010 when 87.1% of women said they had not sought help from authorities and only 5.2% had gone to the police or People’s Committee for assistance.

Although there is not much difference in the proportion of women seeking help between 2010 and 2018 this does not indicate efforts to improve response to husband/partner violence are not making a difference. It should be realized that questions on help seeking have been asked to all women who disclosed physical and/or sexual violence by a husband/partner no matter how long ago, and that policies and interventions have been in place for a relatively short time. The survey would not have been able to pick such changes by asking about help-seeking for violence that happened years ago, compounded by the fact that still only very few women seek help from services for violence.

Ensuring police, health services and other support agencies are available and well-equipped to help women who report experiences of violence is essential. Ongoing investment into training to understand the dynamics of violence against women and promotion of attitude changes so that professionals do not blame victims and excuse perpetrators will result in improved services and use of services by victim survivors. It could be useful to undertake qualitative research with members of the helping professions to better understand any barriers to women reporting violence and asking for help.

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4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations:

It may appear, when looking at national averages, that there has been little change since 2010 despite significant investments and efforts. However, delving into the data reveals that positive changes are taking place. Younger women are consistently indicating less physical violence by husband/partners and more desirable attitudes towards gender norms and violence by a husband/partner. The gap between the experiences of older women versus younger women is widening.

This points to the importance of going beyond national averages to explore where change is happening. The same is true for understanding the phenomenon of VAW from any one survey. Averages only tell a small part of the story and disaggregation by age, location, disability status and other characteristics is essential to see patterns and adjust policy and programs to respond.

The consistency and quality of results for both studies (2010 and 2018) makes them extremely valuable for the evidence-base on violence against women in Viet Nam. Despite the passing of only 10 years, the results show consistent and statistically significant improvements across almost every measure.

The latest data suggest that Viet Nam is on a trajectory towards reducing and eventually eliminating VAW. To be able to truly establish a trend over time, there needs to be a time series with at least three points. With this second survey we have two data points that allow some comparison, but there are factors, limitations and words of caution that should be taken into consideration when interpreting changes between 2010 and 2018.

The 2018-19 data provides new and timely evidence to review, revise, and supplement current policies and laws to reach the most vulnerable groups and specific patterns of violence (e.g. early marriage and dating violence were highlighted among the findings). Persistent lack of seeking help from authorities points to a need for additional resources to understand barriers to help-seeking among all women, especially vulnerable groups such as migrants, ethnic minorities, youth and women with a disability. These and other recommendations will be made as a result of this study.

Once published, stakeholders should promote the availability of the study to the research community in Viet Nam and beyond to encourage use of the data for further research. The complex nature of VAW in any national and sub-national context needs persistent investment in research and strengthening of the evidence base. Many countries across Asia and the Pacific have conducted VAW prevalence studies and an increasing number, more than once. The government of Viet Nam and its partners should be congratulated for their work to shed light on the terrible violence many women face in their own homes and to take persistent action to address it.

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