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Natalie Peters

Date

Intimate Partner Violence and “Family Harmony”: The Tension Between Endurance, Divorce,
and Child Wellbeing in Vietnam

By

Natalie Peters
MPH

Global Health

Kathryn Yount
Committee Chair

Monique Hennink
Committee Member

Intimate Partner Violence and “Family Harmony”: The Tension Between Endurance, Divorce,
and Child Wellbeing in Vietnam

By

Natalie Peters

Bachelor of Arts
Harvard University
2009

Thesis Committee Chair: Kathryn Yount, PhD

An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Natalie Peters

Thesis Committee Chair: Kathryn Yount, PhD

Background: Since 1982, the Vietnamese government has enacted a series of laws and policies to advance women’s equal rights in the family context, including specific strategies for eliminating violence against women in the home. Yet, few women exposed to IPV seek legal recourse. Although several studies have shown that societal gender norms and cultural emphasis on family harmony hinder women from seeking recourse, there is a gap in the literature on the influence of children on women’s recourse-seeking decisions.

Objectives: This study explores the influence of children on women’s decision-making in regards to recourse seeking for IPV and to describe how this factor interacts with previously identified decision-making inputs. Currently, no qualitative study has examined the impact of children’s wellbeing on this decision-making process.

Methods: The qualitative data from this thesis is drawn from an original parent study on recourse seeking for IPV among women in My Hao district, Vietnam. Data from 20 female cognitive interviews were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and grounded theory.

Results: The impact of violence on children is a primary factor in women’s decisions related to recourse seeking for IPV. Whether or not a woman chooses to seek divorce depends on whether or not she can successfully mitigate violence through personal regulatory behavior. If she cannot, she then weighs factors related to her children’s wellbeing to decide if divorce or endurance is the best option: frequency and severity of violence, likelihood of child custody, perceptions on the necessity of both parents, and potential direct negative impacts on children from endurance or divorce.

Conclusions: Vietnamese women are reluctant to seek divorce for fear of social, physical, and mental negative impacts on children. Although women agree that exposure to violence has a negative impact on children, current legal policies and social norms make divorce potentially more damaging overall to children’s wellbeing. Implementation of policies that better support single women, and community dialogues to raise awareness of the negative health impacts of violence on children to give this factor more weight in the decision-making process, is vital to shift the decision-making balance toward legal recourse-seeking.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health issue for women, affecting 15-71% of women globally throughout their lifetimes (Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2008). Women in Vietnam suffer a disproportionate share of IPV, with 34.4% of women reporting experiences of IPV in their lifetimes, according to a national survey on IPV conducted in 2010 ((GSO), 2010). Adverse health affects from IPV to both women and children are widely documented (Campbell, 2002; Ellsberg et al., 2008; Fry, McCoy, & Swales, 2012; Fulu, Jewkes, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013; Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999; Nygren, Nelson, & Klein, 2004; Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Romito, Molzan Turan, & De Marchi, 2005; J. L. Smith, 2005; Taft, Small, & Hoang, 2008; Taft, Watson, & Lee, 2004; Vung & Krantz, 2009; Vung, Ostergren, & Krantz, 2009) with children potentially impacted irreversibly by exposure to repeated violence (Cleaver, Unell, & Aldgate, 1999; Edleson, 1999; Hester, Pearson, & Harwin, 2000; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Saunders, 2003), yet research on how women consider the impact of violence on their children when making decisions related to recourse-seeking is surprisingly scarce. In an era of increased attention to IPV, recognizing the role of children in decision-making for women suffering from IPV is vital for effective and sensitive intervention.

Customary Vietnamese values prioritize women's roles as wives, mothers, and protectors of family harmony, often pressuring women to endure violence rather than seek legal recourse (Jonzon, Vung, Ringsberg, & Krantz, 2007; Vu, Schuler, Hoang, & Quach, 2014; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). Although Women's Unions and local Reconciliation Groups exist to support women and resolve conflict, respectively, these groups are limited in their power and primarily serve to maintain "family harmony" instead of guiding

women toward legal recourse options for IPV ((Le, 2000; Schuler et al., 2006; Schuler, Trang, Ha, & Anh, 2011; Vu et al., 2014). Social expectations to maintain marital union also are high, so that women face possible discrimination and isolation if they choose to seek any form of legal recourse for IPV (Bui et al., 2004; Horton & Rydström, 2011; T. H. Nguyen, 2012; Visaria, 2000; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

Women in Vietnam face numerous challenges in seeking recourse for IPV. They must balance cultural expectations of maintaining “family harmony” with the personal desire to protect their children and themselves. To better understand women’s recourse-seeking decision-making, this study focuses on the following question:

- How does the impact of violence on children impact women’s decisions related to recourse seeking for IPV?

To answer this question, the investigator explored women’s process of decision making in relation to IPV recourse seeking and women’s perspectives on the impact of violence on children. The following sub-questions guided exploration:

- What are women’s experiences and perceptions of IPV recourse seeking?
- What are women’s views on the impact of IPV on children?
- How do women’s views of the impact of IPV on children guide women’s recourse-seeking behaviors?

Purpose Statement

Several studies have explored the factors that influence when and how women seek recourse for IPV in Vietnam, but none have analyzed systematically the impact of children’s

wellbeing on this decision-making process. This study identifies sociocultural factors that influence women's decisions regarding recourse seeking, investigates women's views on the impact of IPV on children, and explores how the combination of sociocultural factors and impact of IPV on children influence recourse seeking decision-making for IPV.

Significance Statement

This research will enhance an understanding of how perceptions of the impact of IPV versus divorce on children influence women's decisions about whether or not to stay in a violent relationship or seek recourse. Until women's processes of decision-making are clarified, intervention and policy cannot target key issues that make women reluctant to pursue legal recourse for IPV. Given the significant adverse health effects for women and children and the possibility for intergenerational IPV perpetration, it is crucial that women feel comfortable pursuing this recourse. The findings from this study will inform interventions and policies to encourage, support, and protect women and their children in process of legal recourse seeking.

CHAPTER 2: COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review investigates the background and context of IPV in Vietnam to inform qualitative research on recourse seeking decision-making among Vietnamese women. Central topics of investigation included IPV as a public health issue, IPV in Vietnam, legal and cultural factors related to recourse seeking for IPV in Vietnam, and the impact of IPV exposure on children. Investigation of the literature on these four topics will inform qualitative data analysis research on how children's wellbeing impacts women's decision making regarding recourse-seeking for IPV. The author searched the literature using Emory's Academic Search Complete and PubMed with search terms "intimate partner violence," "Vietnam," "recourse-seeking," and "children" in various combinations. The search identified 17 key articles related to the central topics, with additional sources nested within these. The body of literature covered the prevalence of IPV and its significance as a public health issue; IPV prevalence in Vietnam; Vietnam's economic, legal, and cultural context and the relationship of these factors to IPV recourse-seeking; and the impact of IPV on children. Current research underscores the importance of IPV as a public health concern in Vietnam, and factors influencing women's recourse seeking strategies. A gap of knowledge exists in the role that the impact of IPV on children plays in women's decision-making processes regarding legal recourse seeking.

Public health significance of IPV

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is gaining attention globally as a significant public health concern. Intimate partner violence refers to physical, sexual, or psychological harm or threats of physical or sexual harm by a current or former partner or spouse

of the same or opposite sex (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002). Recent studies estimate that 15-71% of women report lifetime exposure to physical or sexual IPV globally, and adverse health outcomes are common (Ellsberg et al., 2008). Epidemiological and clinical studies have found that IPV results in negative health outcomes such as chronic pain, gynecological problems, gastrointestinal disorders (Campbell, 2002; Heise et al., 1999) and psychiatric problems (depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidality) (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Romito et al., 2005). Women's reproductive health and pregnancy outcomes can also be poor, resulting in miscarriages, preterm birth, low birth weight (Bacchus, Bewley, & Mezey, 2001), and abused women are more likely to seek pregnancy terminations (Bacchus et al., 2001; Campbell, 2002; Taft et al., 2004).

Impact of IPV on children

In addition to its impact on women, IPV can have serious negative health consequences for children and young people in the home (Taft et al., 2008). Exposure to IPV includes direct and indirect observation, such as overhearing arguments or seeing wounds (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Children in homes with IPV are more likely to be directly abused, and witnessing violence can have negative behavioral, psychological, and biological consequences (Nygren et al., 2004; J. L. Smith, 2005). Studies have shown that children exposed to IPV have an increased risk of developing emotional dysfunction, such as depression, anxiety, and phobias (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999) and of developing cognitive problems, such as mental health impairment, learning disabilities, language impairments, reduced ability to concentrate, and other neurocognitive deficits (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996; McAlister-Groves, 1999; Peled, 2000; Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012). Children are also at risk of developing social and behavioral problems,

including the reduced ability to problem-solve and empathize and increased aggressive behavior (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Kolbo et al., 1996; McAlister-Groves, 1999; Peled, 2000). Exposure to parental IPV in childhood is further associated with suicide ideation (Fry et al., 2012) and with acceptance and justification of IPV in adulthood (Vung & Krantz, 2009; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Anh, et al., 2014).

Perhaps most importantly, research has shown an association between experiences of violence in childhood and later perpetration of violence in adulthood (Fulu et al., 2013; Vung & Krantz, 2009; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Anh, et al., 2014). Children exposed to IPV may learn how aggression can be “functional” in intimate relationships (Graham-Bermann & Brescoll, 2000; Holden, 2003; Osofsky, 2003), which may lead to their own perpetration and tolerance of violence as an adult (Ehrensaft, Cohen, & Brown, 2003; Markowitz, 2001; S. M. Smith et al., 2000; Vung & Krantz, 2009; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Anh, et al., 2014). The cycle of violence can be further understood within the frame of *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977), as described by Vung and Krantz (Vung & Krantz, 2009), in which boys learn to use violence, while girls learn to tolerate it (Jewkes, 2002; Martin, 2002; Wareham, Boots, & Chavez, 2009; Wood, 2001). Men’s exposure to violence in childhood is associated with later justification of IPV, and with perpetrating IPV in adulthood (Yount, Pham, et al., 2014; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Anh, et al., 2014), while women who experience IPV during childhood may be more accepting of violence within future intimate relationships (Vung & Krantz, 2009).

Exposure to domestic violence has both a short and long-term negative impact on children (Cleaver et al., 1999; Edleson, 1999; Hester et al., 2000; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Saunders, 2003), and the impact can endure even after safety is secured (Holt et al., 2008).

Furthermore, parenting quality may be compromised in households with IPV, since parents may not be able to meet the child's needs (Buchbinder, 2004; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; McIntosh, 2002; Mullender et al., 2002), and abused mothers may suffer from depression and stress that negatively impact her ability to parent (Holden, 2003). For example, abused mothers may not be able to provide children with the trust and security they need for healthy development (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000, 2001) and they may be more likely to abuse children themselves, either intentionally or unintentionally (Holden, Stein, Richie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998).

IPV in Vietnam

Vietnam has a high reported lifetime prevalence of physical IPV against women, with studies indicating that over one third of married women are beaten by their husbands (Luke, Schuler, Mai, Vu Thien, & Minh, 2007; Vung, Ostergren, & Krantz, 2008; Vung et al., 2009). Most cases of violence are severe and repeated, with 6% of cases in need of hospital care for injuries (Vung et al., 2009). Figures from the first national survey of IPV in 2010 suggest that 32.7% of women in rural Northern Vietnam and 34.4% of women nationally report lifetime exposure to physical or sexual IPV, with 8.3% reporting exposure to IPV in the past one year ((GSO), 2010; Vung et al., 2008), which exceed levels of IPV elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Yount & Carrera, 2006). Of the third of women in Vietnam who reported experiencing physical IPV, over half say their children witnessed it, and 23.7% reported that their children experienced physical maltreatment at least once by the husband ((GSO), 2010). IPV in Vietnam occurs in urban and rural settings and across all social strata (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002).

Legal and political context of Vietnam

Vietnam has undergone drastic economic and social change since the state's 1986 transition from socialism to an expanded market economy (*Doi Moi* or 'renovation'), with promotion of the private sector, implementation of state enterprise, and the underscoring of women's equal rights in the family context (Le, 2000; G. o. Vietnam, 2001). This political shift has led to a stronger emphasis on gender equity, but has had mixed implications for gender norms and relations (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004).

Vietnam was one of the first signatories of the 1982 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (W. Vietnam, 1998), and has since then followed a consistent strategy for the advancement of women. In the 1980s, the government enacted two laws to prohibit physical violence against women and children (*The Law on Marriage and Family* [1986], *Penal code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam* [1989]), but these laws have had limited impact due to inconsistent enforcement (Rydstrøm, 2003; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). In 1995, the government endorsed the *National Plan for Advancement of Vietnamese Women* (Khiet, 2000), and in 2002, IPV was officially recognized as an obstacle to development. Reduction of violence against women was included in Vietnam's Millennium Development targets (Kabeer, Anh, & Loi, 2005), which specified objectives to achieve gender equality, including elimination of violence against women in the family (G. o. Vietnam, 2001). In 2007, the National Assembly adopted a new law on domestic violence, which defined acts of psychological, physical, sexual, and economic violence, including IPV, and specified strategies for prevention and intervention (Assembly, 2007; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). The government has taken some actions to implement the law, such as the development of national plan of action and the issuance of several decrees and circulars (D. Gardsbane, Vu, Taylor, & Chanthavysouk, 2010; Schuler et al., 2014). The

Vietnamese media have commented on issues of violence against women—including rape, sexual coercion, and IPV—drawing increasing attention to the nature and consequences of these types of violence. Official recognition of IPV at the national level signifies its political importance (Weldon, 2002), as noted by Yount et al., “redefines intimate partner violence as a crime rather than a legitimate ‘discipline’” (Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). As a result, what was once considered a private problem has since become a significant public issue (Le, 2000; Taft et al., 2008).

In addition to adopting a legal framework founded on gender equality, Vietnam has created institutions to support women. The “cultural family” has been developed as a way to improve women’s equal rights and benefits in the family (G. o. Vietnam, 2001) and refers to families that fulfill certain behavior criteria, such as no drug or alcohol abuse, two-child maximum, no violence, and no divorce. Families who meet these criteria receive a certificate from local authorities (Jonzon et al., 2007), and a “department for social evils prevention” has been set up within the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs to fight “damaging lifestyle behavior” (Jonzon et al., 2007). A tradition also exists of forming local reconciliation groups to support couples, both at the village and commune levels. These groups consist of 5-8 trusted community members representing local unions—often Women’s Unions—who intervene and attempt to reconcile the couple by visiting the couple’s home (Loi, Huy, Minh, & Clement, 2000).

Despite a progressive legal framework based on principles of gender equity and institutions and programs designed to support women’s advancement, inegalitarian gender norms persist (Kabeer et al., 2005; T. P. T. Nguyen, Khuat, & Le, 2011; Schuler et al., 2011; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014) and gender-based violence is still one of the

most problematic manifestations (Minh et al., 2004). Numerous Vietnamese laws protect women's rights and suggest ways for women to access recourse (*1999 Vietnamese Population Council Report to WHO*), but many women remain unaware of these options, and outside cities, local reconciliation councils are involved in settling IPV rather than guiding women to legal recourse (Taft et al., 2008). Many women may still be taught to blame themselves for IPV and be pressured to uphold images of femininity and family harmony (Bui et al., 2004; T. H. Nguyen, 2012), so that exposed women may keep silent and avoid recourse (D. Gardsbane et al., 2010; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). Even the Women's Unions, which promote women's educational, political, and economic advancement, urge women to pay attention to their traditional role of maintaining patrilineal hierarchy and family harmony (D. Gardsbane et al., 2010; Schuler et al., 2006), thereby reinforcing traditional gender inequity. Local Reconciliation Groups and Women's Unions are untrained in IPV advocacy, and their role is in reconciliation and family preservation, not divorce (Le, 2000). In fact, reconciliation organizations consider a gender-based violence intervention to be a failure if the couple ultimately requests a divorce (Schuler et al., 2011). The desire to be considered a happy family or "cultural family" may further incentivize women and others in the community to hide IPV rather than fix it, since women often keep silent and avoid seeking help to not reveal what is happening in the family (Jonzon et al., 2007). Thus, policies that promote the ideal of the happy family over women's rights also reinforce traditional gender constructions that view women's identities as primarily wives, mothers, and custodians of family harmony (D. Gardsbane et al., 2010)

In addition to the governmental and cultural emphasis on "reconciliation," economic and legal factors further complicate the feasibility of divorce. Although the *Constitution, Law on*

Marriage and Family, and the *Law on Land* stipulate equal rights over property and land allotment for men and women, only 10-12% of the 12 million farmers given land-use certificates were women in 2002 ((CEDAW), 2005). Women often lack awareness of their land rights, and are hindered in exercising these rights by traditions that identify men as head of household (Vu et al., 2014). Although the 2003 *Law on Land* requires land certificates to bear the names of both husband and wife if the land is jointly owned, implementation of this law has been challenging (Assembly, 2003; Vu et al., 2014). Lack of access to property also means that women are at a disadvantage when seeking child custody. The *Law on Marriage and Family* states that child custody depends on negotiation and agreement of both parties in the case of divorce. If the two parties cannot agree on child custody, the court will decide based on the child's wellbeing (Assembly, 2000). Women who lack stable income and housing may also feel pressured to give up child custody for the sake of the child (Vu et al., 2014). Ex-husbands are not legally required to provide financial support for their children, and no support systems exist to house single mothers after divorce (Vu et al., 2014). Leaving children in the care of violent husbands and stepmothers is a real possibility after divorce, making divorce even less attractive for women in violent relationships (Vu et al., 2014). Although laws exist to deal with perpetrators of IPV, the law puts responsibility for exercising rights on victims of violence, and enforcement has been poor (Assembly, 2007; D. Gardsbane et al., 2010).

Cultural factors influencing IPV in Vietnam

Despite the new economic reality—over 70% of women participate in the labor market and constitute 52% of the workforce—men usually hold the dominant position both within and outside of the household (Long, Hung, & Truitt, 2001; U. Vietnam, 2000). Women are still expected to maintain family happiness and harmony and are responsible for continuing the

husband's family line (Schuler et al., 2006). Current gender relations are influenced both by Confucian values, which emphasize the subordinate role of women, and by Communist party ideology, which calls for equality of the sexes under the law (Johansson, 1998; Thinh, 2001). The family is considered to be the core of Vietnamese society, and the interests of the family are put ahead of the individual (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004). Traditional Confucian values require women to put the collective good before their individual needs, and to avoid anything that would cause family shame, making them vulnerable to abuse (Ho, 1990). Traditional gender norms and legends of sacrificial Vietnamese heroines encourage women to endure violence to preserve a 'happy family' for children (Thomas, 1999), while popular stereotypes portray men as hardworking virile fisherman, drinking, smoking, and speaking loudly, with patriarchal authority at home (Schuler et al., 2011). Traditional gender norms about the "three subjections" (*tam tong*) require women to be faithful to their husbands all their lives, no matter what, and to therefore feel uncomfortable morally with the idea of divorce (Vu et al., 2014). Confucian principles of patrilineal hierarchy also define men as *inside lineage*, while women are *outside lineage*, so that men are the symbolic and practical *pillars* of the house (*tru cot*) (Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014) and maintain authority over patrilineal rituals and important decisions (Bui et al., 2004; Khuat, Le, & Nguyen, 2010; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). Women are expected to display gentle and pleasant demeanor, and a husband may punish his wife if she does not meet expectations (Khuat et al., 2010; T. H. Nguyen, 2012; Rydstrøm, 2003). Physical and psychological abuse can be "normalized," whereby women punish themselves for not being good enough, and men may justify violence as a means to "teach" women to behave (Krantz, Phuong, Larsson, Thuan, & Ringsberg, 2005). For example, men may consider arguments with parents-in-law a more serious behavior transgression than something

like not finishing domestic work because it reflects badly on *him*—that he has failed to “teach” his wife to respect elders (Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014).

Taoist ideas about the body further reinforce Confucian principles of familial gender hierarchy, linking women with coolness (*lanh*) and men with heat (*nong*) (Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). These ideas highlight expectations of proper masculine and feminine behavior, and may excuse male violence (Rydstrøm, 2003; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). “Cool” women are expected to demonstrate endurance (*chui*) and self-denial (*nhuong*), which may pressure women to suffer IPV without seeking recourse (Rydstrøm, 2003; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). The concept of honor is strong in Vietnamese society, and upholding the family’s honor is the woman’s duty. It is considered a wife’s responsibility to protect the noble image of her husband and to hide her husband’s faults (Schuler et al., 2014). This responsibility is further reinforced by the Women’s Union and by the government’s promotion of the “cultural family” and “cultural village” (Schuler et al., 2006). The theme of the happy family pervades society at all levels, and appears frequently in newspapers and magazines and in the form of political slogans (Gammeltoft, 1999). As a result, most women endure violence, and if they do seek help, they seek only informal support from family and friends.

The common perception that violence by husbands against wives is a private matter to be kept within families places additional pressure on women to be silent. Women are hesitant to disclose violence publicly for fear that disclosure will ruin their families’ honor, and since women’s identities are tied closely to family reputation, they prioritize the family despite abuse (Grover, 2009; Naved, Azim, Bhuiya, & Persson, 2006; Rashid, 2007; Visaria, 2000). Furthermore, a woman’s failure to meet behavior expectations may incite blame—both from

herself and others—and the idea that punishment is warranted (Bui et al., 2004; Horton & Rydström, 2011; T. H. Nguyen, 2012; Visaria, 2000; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014)). Telling others details of past or present violence could harm views of her character and impact assistance from others, who may not intervene if they think that a woman has “poor” character (Snell-Rood, 2015).

As a result, IPV is surrounded by silence. A recent national survey indicates that 87% of women who experienced IPV did not seek support, and only 2.2% said they had sought recourse from local authorities ((GSO), 2010; Schuler et al., 2011). Neighbors and local institutions, such as reconciliation groups, are reluctant to intervene because of the possible outcome of family break up and the risk to their own reputation, so they contribute to keeping IPV hidden and isolating IPV victims (Schuler et al., 2006; Schuler et al., 2011). Thus, although legal structures are available for recourse, women do not often utilize these resources. Women do not consider divorce to be a viable option, and they fear that taking any action may lead to this. Ambiguous laws around child custody, child support, and property division can leave divorced women child- and property-less, and the resulting social stigmatization can remove the little support that women have within the community (Snell-Rood, 2015).

Summary & purpose of research

The high prevalence of IPV in Vietnam and adverse health effects from IPV to women and children are widely documented, with children potentially impacted irreversibly by exposure to repeated violence. Yet, research on how women consider the impact of violence on their children when making decisions related to recourse seeking is surprisingly scarce. In an era of increased attention to IPV, recognizing the role of children in decision-making for women suffering from IPV is crucial for effective and sensitive intervention. In Vietnam, traditional

values prioritize women's roles as wives, mothers, and protectors of family harmony, often pressuring women to endure violence rather than seek legal recourse. Although Women's Unions and local Reconciliation Groups exist to support women and resolve conflict, respectively, these groups are limited in their power and primarily serve to maintain "family harmony" instead of guiding women toward legal recourse options for IPV. Social expectations to maintain marital union are also high, so that women face possible discrimination and isolation if they choose to seek any form of legal recourse for IPV.

Several studies have explored the factors that influence when and how women seek recourse for IPV in Vietnam, but none have systematically analyzed the perceptions about impact of children's wellbeing on this decision-making process. This study identifies sociocultural factors that influence women's decisions regarding recourse seeking, investigates women's views on the impact of IPV on children, and explores how the combination of these inputs influence recourse seeking decision-making for IPV. The purpose of this research is to better understand how women make decisions regarding recourse seeking for IPV. This study focuses on the following question:

- How does the impact of violence on children impact women's decisions related to recourse seeking for IPV?

To answer this question, the investigator explored women's process of decision-making in relation to IPV recourse seeking and women's perspectives on the impact of violence on children. The following sub-questions guided exploration:

- What are women's experiences and perceptions of IPV recourse seeking?
- What are women's views on the impact of IPV on children?

- How do women's views of the impact of IPV on children guide women's recourse-seeking behaviors?

Until women's processes of decision-making are clarified, intervention and policy cannot target key issues that make women reluctant to pursue legal recourse for IPV. Given the significant adverse health effects for women and children and the possibility for intergenerational IPV perpetration, it is crucial that women feel comfortable pursuing this recourse. The findings from this study will inform interventions and policies to better encourage, support, and protect women and their children in process of legal recourse seeking.

**Intimate Partner Violence and “Family Harmony”: The Tension Between Endurance,
Divorce, and Child Wellbeing in Vietnam**

By

Natalie Peters

B.A., Harvard University, 2009

Thesis Committee Chair: Kathryn Yount, PhD

Contribution of Student

For the manuscript titled, *Intimate Partner Violence and “Family Harmony”: The Tension Between Endurance, Divorce, and Child Wellbeing in Vietnam*, I performed a review of the literature, served as principle writer, conducted data analyses, and created all tables and figures for the manuscript.

Abstract

Background: Since 1982, the Vietnamese government has enacted a series of laws and policies to advance women's equal rights in the family context, including specific strategies for eliminating violence against women in the home. Yet, few women exposed to IPV seek legal recourse. Although several studies have shown that societal gender norms and cultural emphasis on family harmony hinder women from seeking recourse, there is a gap in the literature on the influence of children on women's recourse-seeking decisions. *Objectives:* This study explores the influence of children on women's decision-making in regards to recourse seeking for IPV and to describe how this factor interacts with previously identified decision-making inputs. Currently, no qualitative study has examined the impact of children's wellbeing on this decision-making process. *Methods:* The qualitative data from this thesis is drawn from a parent study on attitudes about IPV among women and men in My Hao district, Vietnam. Data from 20 female cognitive interviews were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and grounded theory. *Results:* The impact of violence on children is a primary factor in women's decisions about recourse seeking for IPV. Whether or not a woman seeks divorce depends on whether she can successfully mitigate violence through personal regulatory behavior. If she cannot, she then weighs factors related to her children's wellbeing to decide if divorce or endurance is the best option. These factors include the frequency and severity of violence, likelihood of obtaining child custody, perceptions on the necessity of both parents, and potential direct negative impacts on children from endurance or divorce. *Conclusions:* Vietnamese women exposed to IPV are reluctant to seek divorce for fear of social, physical, and mental negative impacts on children. Although women agree that exposure to violence has a negative impact on children, current legal policies and social norms make divorce potentially more damaging overall to children's wellbeing. Implementing programs and policies to better support single women and to raise awareness of the negative health impacts of violence on children is vital to shift the decision-making balance toward legal recourse-seeking.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence, children, divorce, endurance, Vietnam*

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined by the WHO as any act of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by a current or former partner whether cohabiting or not, is a significant public health issue for women, affecting 15-71% of women globally throughout their lifetimes (Ellsberg et al., 2008). Women in Vietnam suffer a disproportionate share of IPV, with 34.4% of women reporting experiences of IPV in their lifetimes, according to a national survey on IPV conducted in 2010 ((GSO), 2010). Adverse health effects from IPV to women and children are well known (Campbell, 2002; Ellsberg et al., 2008; Fry et al., 2012; Fulu et al., 2013; Heise et al., 1999; Nygren et al., 2004; Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Romito et al., 2005; J. L. Smith, 2005; Taft et al., 2004; Vung et al., 2009), with children potentially impacted irreversibly by exposure to repeated violence (Cleaver et al., 1999; Edleson, 1999; Hester et al., 2000; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Saunders, 2003), yet research on how women consider the impact of violence on their children when making decisions related to recourse-seeking is scarce. In an era of increased attention to IPV, recognizing the role of children in decision-making for women suffering from IPV is vital for effective and sensitive intervention.

Customary Vietnamese values prioritize women's roles as wives, mothers, and protectors of family harmony, often pressuring women to endure violence rather than seek legal recourse (Jonzon et al., 2007; Vu et al., 2014; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). Although Women's Unions and local Reconciliation Groups exist to support women and resolve conflict, respectively, these groups are limited in their power and primarily serve to maintain "family harmony" instead of guiding women toward legal recourse options for IPV (D. Gardsbane et al., 2010; Le, 2000; Schuler et al., 2006; Schuler et al., 2011). Social expectations to maintain marital union also are high, so that women face possible discrimination and isolation

if they choose to seek legal recourse for IPV (Bui et al., 2004; Horton & Rydstrøm, 2011; T. H. Nguyen, 2012; Visaria, 2000; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014).

Furthermore, although avenues for legal recourse exist, laws to prohibit physical violence against women and children have historically been inconsistently enforced (Rydstrøm, 2003), and outside of cities, few women have been aware of the options for recourse available to them (Taft et al., 2008). Ambiguous laws around child custody, child support, and property division also leave divorced women child- and property-less, and the resulting social stigmatization can remove the little support that women have within the community (Snell-Rood, 2015). Thus, although legal structures are available for recourse, women do not often utilize these resources.

Gender-based violence continues in Vietnam, despite a progressive legal framework based on principles of gender equity, and institutions designed to support women's advancement (Kabeer et al., 2005; Minh et al., 2004; T. P. T. Nguyen et al., 2011; Schuler et al., 2011). Although divorce is upheld by Vietnamese law (Le, 2000), a strong desire to maintain family harmony and perceptions about proper child rearing remain potential barriers to divorce in the context of IPV. The purpose of this research is to understand better how women's assessments of their children's wellbeing influence women's decisions about recourse for IPV. Currently, no systematic analysis has examined the influence of children's wellbeing on this decision-making process. Research is needed to understand better how women's assessments of children's wellbeing impacts women's recourse choices to inform interventions and policies that support and protect women and children in the context of IPV. This study focuses on women's experiences and perceptions of recourse seeking in response to IPV, their views about the impact of IPV on children, and on how these views guide women's recourse-seeking behaviors.

Methods

DATA COLLECTION

This secondary data analysis is part of a larger study with the overall goal of developing better data collection instruments to understand men and women's attitudes around IPV in Vietnam. The data come from 20 cognitive interviews conducted with married women in four communes of My Hao district in Hung Yen province. My Hao is primarily a rural district located 30 kilometers from Hanoi, and represents periurban areas in Vietnam in its political and community organizations. Organizations such as the Local People's Committee, Women's Union, Youth Union, Peasants' Union, and Fatherland Front are all active in these communes, as are Reconciliation Groups (*to hoa giai*), which are designed to resolve conflicts. Members of the Reconciliation Groups usually consist of the chair of the Local People's Committee, the local village head, and representatives from the Women's Union and Fatherland Front (D. Gardsbane, Vu, S. H., Taylor, K., & Chanthavysouk, K. , 2010). As is typical in other communes, couples must go through a "reconciliation" process before a divorce is accepted in the court (Schuler et al., 2014).

The initial phase of qualitative data collection consisted of open-ended interviews (OI) with 10 women and 10 men ages 18-49 years and four focus group discussions (FGD) with four age groups (women ≤ 35 years, women > 35 years, men ≤ 35 years, and men > 35 years). Preliminary analysis of OIs and FDGs informed the creation of the cognitive interview guide. The second phase of qualitative data collection consisted of open-ended cognitive interviews (CI) with 20 men and 20 women individually, also varying in age between 18-49 years. The CI guide included several sections. The first section presented 13 statements about a wife's recourse seeking and intervention by others after exposure to IPV in differing situations, to which informants could agree or disagree. Recourse options included silence or inaction, seeking

informal support from family or friends, seeking formal help outside the family, and intervention by others. The second section asked questions about attitudes toward women's recourse seeking after exposure to IPV that differed in severity and intent, laws pertaining to IPV, and women's rights. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then transcribed and translated into English by senior Vietnamese researchers with extensive prior experience in this region and with qualitative research methods. For more details on the original data collection and initial analysis, see the Schuler et al. article *Recourse seeking and intervention in the context of intimate partner violence in Vietnam: a qualitative study* (Schuler et al., 2014). This analysis was determined to be IRB exempt because it is an analysis of secondary data and all data were de-identified prior to analysis. For this secondary analysis, the open-ended cognitive interviews from the secondary data collection phase are used to best explore informants' decision-making strategies. Cognitive interviews best capture detailed reasoning processes, which are the subject of interest in this analysis. Cognitive interview informant characteristics are outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Cognitive interview informant characteristics

Informant #	Age	Education	Occupation	No. of children
1	28	Grade 12	Self-employed grocer	1
2	44	Grade 10	Unknown	2
3	28	Grade 9	Self-employed tailor	2
4	22	Grade 9	Worker at rice cake company	1
5	38	Unknown	Worker, farmer	3
6	48	Grade 9	Farmer	2
7	29	Grade 12	Unknown	1
8	37	Grade 9	Unknown	3
9	21	Grade 9	Garment worker	0
10	49	Grade 12	Unknown	2
11	45	Grade 12	Head of Women's Union	Unknown
12	45	Grade 7	Unknown	Unknown
13	42	Grade 10	Unknown	Unknown
14	31	Grade 10	Unknown	2
15	34	Grade 12	Saleswoman	2
16	39	Grade 12	Self-employed tailor	2
17	22	Grade 10	Saleswoman	1

18	33	Grade 9	Worker at rice cake company	2
19	24	Grade 9	Freelance worker	2
20	41	Grade 9	Farmer	1

ANALYSIS

Coding

The author first reviewed and memoed the 20 cognitive interview transcripts to identify concepts, processes, and events in the data. Using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding techniques (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the concepts, processes, and actions relating to the assessments of impact on children of recourse decision-making recurring across interviews were developed into codes and categories. Initial open coding identified 26 concepts, processes, and actions relating to underlying causes of IPV, recourse options for IPV within and outside the family, attitudes on enduring violence, reasons why violence might be justified, the importance of maintaining family harmony for the husband's honor and the family's reputation, and the importance of enduring violence to protect children's wellbeing, among others. Axial coding collapsed authorities into *external resolution*, as authorities were the main form of external resolution discussed by informants. Axial coding also collapsed *acceptance/forgiveness* into the code *endurance*, as it became apparent that *acceptance/forgiveness* was a common form of *endurance*, and collapsed *gender roles* into *responsibility*, since gender roles were seen as a reason for responsibility. *Reputation* was collapsed into *judgment/shame*, since the two concepts were indistinguishable across the data. The definition of *impact on children* was expanded to include all references to children and the data recoded with this new definition so that further analysis could draw on all possible data relating to children. This code was collapsed into *maintaining the peace*, since the impact on children was cited as a reason for maintaining the peace. Codes were organized into two major

categories of *causes of IPV* and *perceived resolutions*, which was divided into two resolution sub-categories of *internal* and *external* (**Table 2**). Codes with the most repetition across the data were identified and explored for further nuance and depth in descriptive analyses. Finally, selective coding identified *maintaining the peace* as a “core” code integrating all codes, setting the stage for later thematic analysis and grounded theory development.

Table 2. Code organization matrix

CATEGORY ^b		CODE ^a
Causes of IPV		Alcohol “It’s normal” ^c “No reason” ^c “The good reason”^c Intention Income Honor Education Mental health
Perceived Resolutions	Internal	Endurance^d [Acceptance/Forgiveness] ^f Fear Acceptability Responsibility [Gender roles] ^f Honor Judgment/Shame [Reputation] ^f Injury/Severity/Frequency Maintaining peace^d Impact on children^d
	External	External resolution^d [Authorities] ^{d,f} Gender equity Law Divorce^d

^aInitial codes from open coding

^bCategories developed during axial coding to organize codes

^cIndigenous codes from informants

^dCodes with frequencies above 5% across coded data using MAXQDA code statistics

^eCode with highest frequency across data using MAXQDA code statistics

^fCodes later subsumed into bolded codes

Thematic Analysis

To identify major themes in the data relating to maternal assessments of the impact on children of recourse seeking in response to IPV, several methodologies were used. Central themes in the data were identified using cutting and sorting (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), top 10 list (Saldaña, 2012), word-by-word co-occurrence (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and the study “trinity”

method (Saldaña, 2012). First, all data coded as *endurance* or *maintaining the peace* were printed and cut. These excerpts were then sorted into meaningful piles, organized by whether the data described who should endure or maintain peace, when a person should endure or maintain peace, why a person should endure or maintain peace, or how a person should endure or maintain peace.

These categories led to the selection of a “trinity” (Saldaña, 2012), or three overarching themes of the study: endurance to mitigate violence, divorce to escape violence, and negative impact on children. The author then used word co-occurrence methodology in MAXQDA (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) to investigate the relationship between endurance of violence (keyword “endure” or “accept”) and the impact of violence on children (keyword “children”), and the relationship between divorce (keyword “divorce”) and impact of violence on children (keyword “children”). The first search outputted 541 occurrences of the word “endure” or “accept” alone. The next search outputted 66 co-occurrences within 2 sentences in 9 interviews using the keywords “endure” and “children,” and 124 co-occurrences within 2 sentences in 15 interviews using the keywords “accept” and “children,” for a total of 190 co-occurrences of “endure” or “accept” and “children” out of 541 references to endurance, or 35% of these references. The third search outputted 373 occurrences of the word “divorce” alone. The next search output 204 co-occurrences within 2 sentences in 19 interviews using the keywords “divorce” and “children,” for a total of 204 co-occurrences of “divorce” and “children” out of 373 references to divorce, or 55% of these references. Clearly, children are an important aspect of endurance and divorce for informants, for when they discussed one topic, they often discussed the other as well.

Code overlap analysis with MAXQDA further revealed the close relationship between the codes *endurance*, *maintaining the peace*, and *impact on children*, as well as the relationship

of the latter to *divorce*. The code *impact on children* intersected most often with codes *endurance* (14 intersections), *divorce* (9 intersections), and *maintaining the peace* (8 intersections),

reaffirming the connection between endurance, maintaining peace and the impact on children, and highlighting the connection between divorce and the impact on children.

Finally, all data referring to children were retrieved using the code *impact on children*, and 10 “top” quotes (Saldaña, 2012) were chosen for their representativeness of the data at large. For each excerpt, a more abstract theme that encapsulated that excerpt was assigned. The themes were organized into three overarching categories—issues that supported endurance of IPV over divorce, issues that supported divorce over IPV, and issues that introduced additional nuance to the decision-making process. **Table 3** shows selected excerpts, themes, and overarching categories.

Table 3. Top ten excerpts, themes, and categories

CATEGORY	THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTE
Support endurance of IPV over divorce	Endurance for the sake of children	<i>She should accept her destiny to keep her harmonious family. She should endure because of her children. (CI 15)</i>
	Children’s need for both parents	<i>It is better to live with their parents though they beat each other. Every child needs living with its parents. (CI 19)</i>
	Divorce damages children’s reputations	<i>Then, when their children grow up, the children will get bad reputation of having a father who beats their mother to an extent that she had to report to the village head. (CI 14)</i>
	Father’s right to the children	<i>The wife is not allowed to bring up her children. The husband has the right to bring children up...so the wife has to accept. (CI 12)</i>
	Divorce has negative impact on children	<i>The children they try drugs and become addicted, thieves and drop out. (CI 8)</i>
	Exposure to IPV has negative impact on children	<i>Wife beating affected on mental development of the children living with these parents. Wife beating may become children’s obsession. (CI 7)</i>
Support divorce over endurance of IPV	One parent is better than exposure to IPV	<i>It is sure that seeing father often beats their mother has a more negative influence on the children than living with only one parent. (CI 11)</i>
	Children copy father’s behaviors	<i>What things children have been seen much influenced in their characteristic and attitude afterward because parents like a mirror for their children look at and follow. (CI 7)</i>
	Injured mother cannot care for children	<i>If the woman gets injured, she cannot take care of herself let alone her family. (CI 16)</i>

Support factor	Frequency and severity of beating	<i>But it depends on the beating frequency, much or little. For example, parents' divorce is better for children than watching daily beating of their parents...if the father beats the mother daily, the children will be affected.</i> (CI 14)
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The retrieved and organized data were then micro-coded based on these themes to identify the frequency of each theme. **Table 4** shows the total number of mentions of the theme, the number of mentions among informants agreeing that IPV has a more negative impact on children than divorce (“Agree”), the number of mentions among informants disagreeing that IPV has a more negative impact on children than divorce (“Disagree”), and among informants who said which was worse depended on the situation and could not come to a conclusion (“Depends”).

Table 4. Frequency of theme mention by informant category: Agree, Disagree, or Depends

Theme	Total	Agree	Disagree	Depends
Endurance for the sake of children	25	1	14	10
Children's need for both parents	27	5	15	7
Divorce damages children's reputation	4	1	0	3
Father's right to the children	3	0	3	0
Negative impact of IPV on children	45	19	9	17
Negative impact of divorce on children	3	1	1	1
One parent is better than exposure to IPV	27	17	0	10
Children copy father's behaviors	3	2	0	1
Frequency & severity of beating	32	16	0	16
Injured mother cannot care for children	6	0	0	6

Note. Some informants mentioned more than one theme.

Selection of the top two themes from each group revealed the issues of greatest import for each category of informant. For informants in the “Agree” category, who agree that exposure to IPV is worse for children than divorce, *Negative impact of IPV on children* and *One parent is better than exposure to IPV* are the most commonly stated sentiments. For example, one informant states,

“For children, seeing their father beating their mother seriously and the beating causes some wounds affects their children's psychology.” (*Informant #5, age 38, worker and farmer*)

And,

“Living with their mother after divorce their children are happier and do not have to witness their father beating their mother.” (*Informant #5, age 38, worker and farmer*)

For these informants, the negative impact of IPV on children is the primary concern, and the women agree that living with one parent is preferable to exposure to violence. For informants in the “Disagree” category, who argue that divorce is worse for children than exposure to IPV, *Endurance for the sake of children* and *Children’s need for both parents* are the most commonly expressed issues. One informant represents these themes well with her statement,

“She should accept a brutal husband like him for their children to have both father and mother.” (*Informant #12, age 45, completed grade 7*)

For these informants, children’s need for both parents is the overriding concern, so women emphasize the importance of enduring conflict to preserve the family. For informants in the “Depends” category, who are indecisive as to which situation is worse, *Negative impact of IPV on children* and *Frequency and severity of beating* are the most commonly expressed factors in the decision-making process, but all of the themes are addressed. Many of these informants stress that the negative impact of exposure to IPV and divorce are equal for children, as expressed by this informant:

“I think both situations negative influenced on children because in the first circumstance, when frequently seeing their father beat their mother, children will be affected by negative thinking. If the couple separates, the children only grow up with only mother or father, their feelings can be hurt... Thus, it is very difficult to determine which situation has a greater negative influence on them as each circumstance has individual effects.” (*Informant #3, age 28, completed grade 9, self-employed tailor*)

These informants also emphasize that exposure to IPV is only worse if the beating is severe and frequent, often defined as daily beating. One informant expresses the sentiment well:

“If the father beats the mother daily, the children will be affected. Frequently watching the father beats the mother will influence on children’s development.” (*Informant #19, age 24, completed grade 9, freelance worker*)

For these informant, children are only affected negatively from IPV if the beating is *frequent*.

This is a critical distinction, because if the beating is not frequent, then living with both parents is considered preferable. One informant's statement below is representative of others in this group:

“In divorce cases, the child has his mother's love, but not his father's love. Therefore, the woman should separate or divorce from her husband only if she cannot fix their relationship and she has no other choice...But it depends on the beating frequency, much or little. For example, parents' divorce is better for children than watching daily beating of their parents. But the father beats the mother only occasionally, not daily.” (*Informant #14, age 31, completed grade 10*)

For these informants, which situation worse—exposure to IPV or divorce and living with only one parent—depends on the frequency of beating. If beating is infrequent or light, then a woman should endure the relationship, but if the beating is serious or frequent, then she should seek divorce. In contrast, women in the “Disagree” category do not mention the frequency or severity of beating, since, ostensibly, their decision to choose exposure to IPV as worse than divorce assumes that the frequency and severity of beating is not extreme. Informants in the “Disagree” category instead emphasize forgiveness, acceptance, and endurance to reduce the prevalence of more frequent and severe violence in the home. One informant expresses this approach well:

“If she doesn't endure, the conflict gets serious, the couple is not happy and neither are their children.” (*Informant #20, age 41, completed grade 9, farmer*)

Although many of these informants recommend enduring violence to keep children with both parents—usually for the sake of children's happiness and learning—they do not specify the severity or frequency of the violence that they are encouraging women to endure.

It is important to note the themes with the highest frequencies. *Negative impact of IPV on children* was the most often mentioned, with a total of 45 occurrences throughout the data.

Although the informants differed in their decision as to whether IPV had a more negative impact on children than divorce, they did not disagree that IPV has a negative impact on children.

Frequency and severity of beating was also mentioned frequently, with a total of 32 occurrences. As stated above, this theme was of particular importance to those in the “Agree” and “Depends” categories, whose choices and vacillations, respectively, depended on this factor. Interestingly, *Children’s need for both parents* and *One parent is better than exposure to IPV* were both mentioned 27 times, the former primarily by “Disagree” informants and the latter by “Agree” informants. Again, this highlights the central tension for women as they decide which situation is better for their children. *Endurance for the sake of children* comes in next with 25 occurrences, again supported primarily by those who believe that it is essential for children to be raised by both parents.

Comparative analysis

The author then conducted a comparative analysis to investigate the thought processes of women who agreed that the impact of IPV on children was worse than the impact of divorce on children, those who disagreed, and those who could not decide. This was especially important for the majority of informants who changed their minds throughout the interview. All excerpts referring to children were again reviewed and this time sorted to fit into the three categories of “Disagree,” “Agree,” or “Depends.” Informants in the “Disagree” category felt that divorce had a more negative impact on children, while informants in the “Agree” category felt that IPV exposure had a more negative impact on children. Informants in the “Depends” category vacillated in their opinion, and qualified each response with certain situational factors that might lead to one conclusion or another. Some came to a tentative conclusion, while others refused to choose. Each of these categories was reviewed using the Glaser and Strauss *constant comparison method* to glean unifying patterns and themes, including factors that caused informants to waver in their decision (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Direct Negative Impacts on Children Analysis

To clarify women's decision-making on divorce in relation to the direct impact on children, the impact of either IPV or divorce on children was analyzed. Any specific reference to an impact of IPV or divorce on children was categorized into the categories shown below (**Figure 1**). Any reference to children becoming "unhappy," "sad," "miserable," or "depressed" or having "negative thinking" or "hurt feelings" was categorized as "Sadness." Any reference to the impact of either IPV or divorce on children's ability to learn or on children dropping out of school was categorized as "Poor learning." Any reference to children feeling "worry," "fear," "stress," "pressure," "frustrated," "insecure," or "self-pity" was categorized as "Anxiety." Any reference to children lacking a mother and a father was categorized as "Only one parent." Any reference to mental health, psychological development, or "mind unstable" was categorized as "Mental health." Any reference to children becoming "bad" or "spoilt" (such as leaving home or becoming thieves or drug addicts) was categorized as "Off course." Any reference to an effect on children's future reputation or to children feeling embarrassed or ashamed was categorized as "Damaged reputation." Any reference to quarreling parents not having time to properly care for or attend to their children was categorized as "Care challenges." Similarly, any reference to a father not taking care of his children after remarriage as a result of divorce is categorized as "Care challenges." Any reference to children being beaten by their father as a result of IPV or by their stepmother as a result of divorce was categorized as "Beaten." Any reference to an injured mother's inability to care for her children if she is seriously injured or killed was categorized as "Non-functional mother." Any reference to children copying their fathers' violent behavior was categorized as "Learnt behavior." The frequency of these references in all data selected from the *Impact on children* code is shown in **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1. Frequency of references to direct negative impacts of divorce versus IPV on children

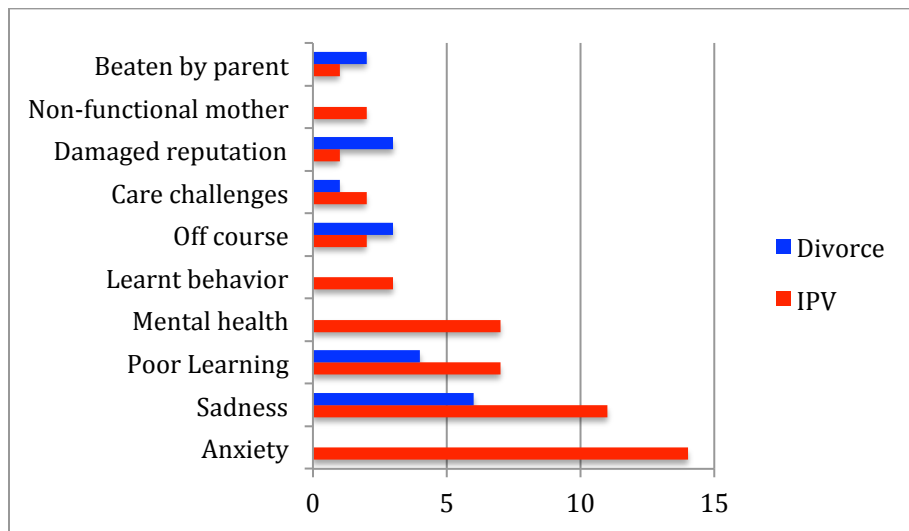


Figure 1 shows that the direct negative impacts of IPV on children are higher in all categories except for “Beaten by parent,” “Future reputation,” and “Off course.” This graph confirms, therefore, that direct negative impacts of IPV on children are actually viewed as more detrimental than direct negative impacts of divorce, despite overall indecision on the part of many informants.

Results

While earlier analysis by Schuler et al. focused on the pressure to preserve family image as the sole motivator for enduring violence, further analysis reveals that women are additionally—and perhaps more so—motivated by protection of their children. Interestingly, protection of children also serves to justify divorce if children are considered better protected in a divorced setting. The data suggest, therefore, that children are a powerful factor in the decision to endure IPV or seek recourse.

Impact of Exposure to IPV versus Divorce on Children

The three categories identified in the analysis—Agree, Disagree, and Depends—illustrate the three ways that children influence decision-making.

- *Category 1: Agree*

Informants in the “Agree” category believe that the negative impact of IPV on children is ultimately worse than the negative impact of divorce. These informants explain that exposure to IPV will have negative emotional and cognitive influences, with an emphasis on depression, self-pity, and inability to concentrate. Two informants add that sons may copy their father’s behavior, while daughters may learn to be afraid of males—both of which could continue the cycle of violence in the home (Fulu et al., 2013; Vung & Krantz, 2009). Six informants express that children will be better off in a divorced home with no violence and will develop fine with one parent. One informant even states that, with no fighting, one parent can *better* care for his or her children. It is important to note that all informants except one specify that it is the negative impact of severe or frequent violence that is worse than the impact of divorce on children. These informants still express a preference for endurance until violence can no longer be mitigated.

- *Category 2: Disagree*

Informants in the “Disagree” category believe that the negative impact of divorce on children is ultimately worse than the negative impact of IPV. These informants begin by stressing the idea that a woman should endure beating to protect her children’s wellbeing. For example, one informant states that if a woman doesn’t endure, the conflict may escalate so that women and children experience more violence. Similarly, another informant suggests that a woman run away when her husband is hot-tempered to protect herself and her children. Still another informant adds that women must endure so that they can “make money and continue to raise their children.” One informant explains that if a woman divorces, she may not keep custody

of her children, so she must endure to protect her children from further abuse by a stepmother. Each informant then goes on to explain that children are negatively impacted by divorce, and emphasizes the importance of living with both parents for children's optimal emotional and cognitive health. Informants maintain that children from divorced families are more often "spoilt," and that divorce has a negative impact on children's reputations. One informant adds that children living only with their mother will not listen to their mother, and that if a father remarries, he will not take care of the children. It is important to note that several of these informants mention that living with both parents is ideal only if the beating is light and/or infrequent, and most still acknowledge the negative impact of IPV on children. Thus, it seems that these informants choose endurance as preferable to divorce under the assumption that beating is light and infrequent. These informants also express the importance of mitigating violence in the home as much as possible via endurance and submissive behavior.

- *Category 3: Depends*

When asked about the impact of beating versus divorce on children's wellbeing, many women wavered on which situation was worse. Of the 20 informants, almost one third (7) felt that in some situations, witnessing violence had a greater negative impact on children, but in other situations, divorce had a more negative impact on children. A complicated response from one informant highlights the ambivalence felt by many of the women regarding which was worse, and the complex situation of divorce. She begins by saying that parents who often beat each other "makes their children frightened or obviously affects them [more] than growing up with one parent," but later says:

"For children, it is better to live with both the mother and the father. However, seeing their father beating their mother makes them frightened, affects their spirit and that they cannot concentrate to study...*it is better to live with their parents though they beat each other. Every child needs living with its parents.*" (Informant #19, age 24, completed grade 9, freelance worker)

From the opposite direction, another informant explains that children will be “very sad and frustrated” from seeing their parents fight, and conflicts “have huge impacts on children,” but later adds that separation has a *more* negative influence because then “children can only live with either father or other.”

Informants in the “Depends” category, like those in the “Disagree” category, often begin with the sentiment that women should endure conflict to protect children’s wellbeing. However, it is important to note that these informants focus on actions that would prevent or mitigate violence (not express anger, give in to arguments, hide, talk to husband, etc.), *not* endurance of violence itself. In fact, one informant suggests that a woman should not endure beating if she does nothing wrong, and another informant adds that a woman should not endure because she may be injured and then not able to care for her children. Although all of these informants agree that beating negatively impacts children more than growing up with one parent, two informants also state that it is better for children to live with both parents. All except one suggest that divorce is necessary as a result of *serious* or *frequent* beating that cannot be resolved internally, since the impact of this type of violence on children is considered more negative than divorce. Three informants add that if a woman is injured or killed (most likely a result of serious beating), she cannot take care of her children, so she should seek divorce. Thus, these informants feel strongly both that children should live with both parents *and* that violence negatively impacts children. It is the frequency and severity of beating that leads these informants to choose either endurance or divorce. Mild or infrequent beating is less negative than divorce, but severe or frequent beating is more negative than divorce.

Importance of Mitigating Violence

It is notable that women who believe that divorce usually or always has a more negative impact still emphasize the importance of mitigating conflict when possible. These women mention the importance of forgiving their husbands and enduring beating when possible to reduce their children's exposure to violence:

“[A mother] has to endure and sacrifice herself for her children and for children's learning.”
(Informant #15, age 34, completed grade 12, saleswoman)

Thus, they, too, feel that exposure to violence has a negative impact on children, but they feel that divorce is ultimately worse. Women who think exposure to violence usually or always has a more negative impact on children still emphasize the importance of saving the marriage when possible, and do not necessarily condone divorce. One woman describes how, now that she and her husband have children, she always asks for forgiveness even if he is wrong to keep the peace and “prevent their children from the effect of wife beating.” Another woman explains that even if a woman feels angry many times, “she has to accept for the couple to live with their children happily.” Two informants explain how it is imperative that mothers endure beating, because otherwise the conflict may escalate and affect the children's wellbeing. Some of these women suggest doing whatever possible to placate the husband and mitigate conflict in the household by asking for forgiveness or seeking only insider support as long as this course of action is feasible.

Frequency & Severity of Beating

In all three categories, frequency and severity of beating emerge as important factors in the decision to endure or divorce. Informants in the “Disagree” category seem to assume that frequency and severity of violence is low, while informants in the “Agree” category seem to assume that frequency and severity of violence is high. Informants in the “Depends” category give multiple answers depending on the frequency and severity of violence they imagine exists in the hypothetical situation. If severity and frequency are believed to be high, then they advise that

a woman seek divorce because the negative impact of repeated violence on children will be worse than the impact of living with one parent. If the severity and frequency are low, however, then she should endure conflict so that the children can grow up with both parents, which is still considered ideal. The impact of mild or infrequent beating on children is considered to be less negative than the impact of divorce and single parenthood. These informants have difficulty choosing which situation—divorce or exposure to IPV—is worse because they do not know the exact conditions of the violence, and their answers change throughout the response as they consider whether the frequency and severity are high or low. Informants in both the “Agree” and “Depends” categories emphasize the frequent or extreme nature of the beating they are referring to, as these adjectives indicate that the woman could no longer endure the marriage. Descriptors such as “frequently,” “repeatedly,” “daily,” “causes some wounds,” “seriously injured,” “only if the woman cannot endure anymore,” and “often” provide justification for the women to seek divorce. When the interviewer asks how women define “often,” responses vary, but the threshold is high. The minimum definition of “often” is a beating “once or twice a month or once a week,” while the maximum definition of “often” means the husband beats his wife every day. All of the women define “often” within this interval, with the majority suggesting that “often” means 1-3 times per week. Thus the threshold for divorce seeking is high even among women who believe exposure to violence to have a greater negative impact on children, since only frequent beating is considered a reason for divorce. It is again important to note that all informants emphasize the importance of mitigating violence in the home as much as possible. Mitigation methods include enduring beating to prevent escalation, asking for forgiveness to “keep the peace,” accepting negative situations, and only seeking insider support rather than drawing in outside attention.

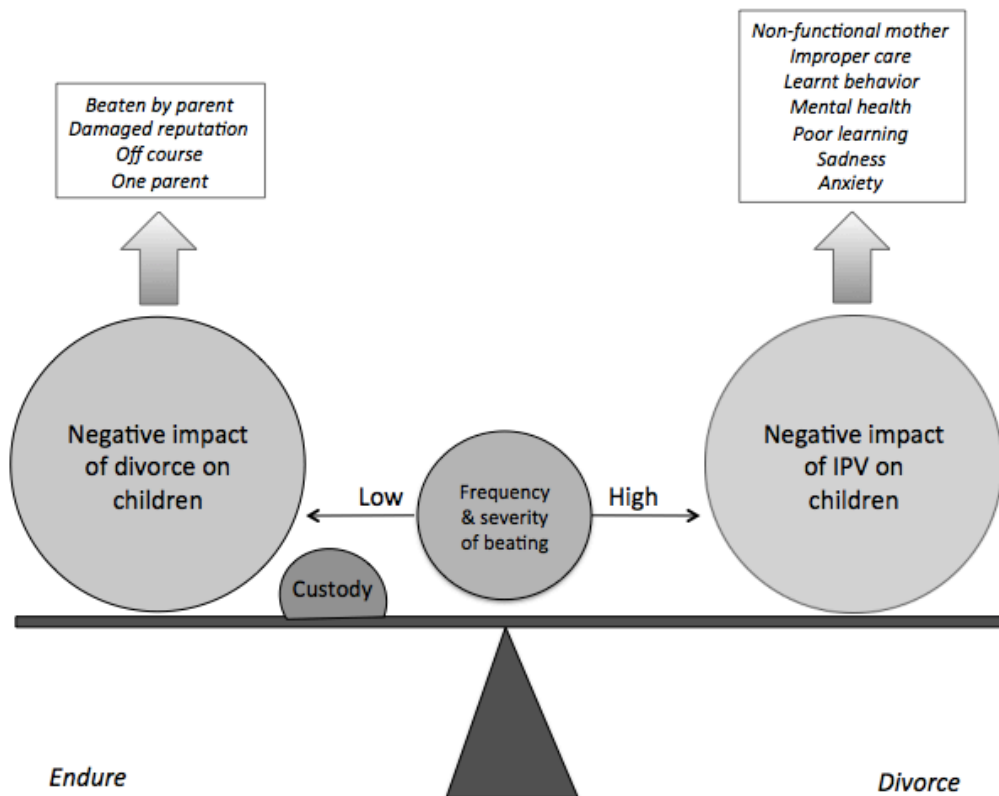
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Development of conceptual framework

Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the thematic and comparative analyses of the data were used to construct a conceptual framework that explains the influence of children's wellbeing on women's recourse seeking behavior in the context of IPV. The Recourse decision-making seesaw model (**Figure 2**) represents the balancing women face when deciding which action is best for their children—to endure or to divorce. The model is a seesaw, with the decision to endure on the left and the decision to seek divorce on the right. As expressed by many of the informants, both exposure to IPV and divorce have negative impacts on children. Which is worse depends on numerous situational factors, first among them the frequency and severity of beating. Additional factors include considerations for the child's reputation, the need for both parents, potential for beating by a parent, and ability to care for the child, among others. To construct the model, direct negative impacts on children from **Figure 1** were assigned to either the *Negative impact of IPV on children* or *Negative impact of divorce on children* weight on the seesaw, depending on which situation had a higher frequency of that direct impact. The weight of either side varies depending on the extent to which the woman believes one of the direct impacts to be a concern. The seesaw also teeters to the right or left based on *Frequency & severity of beating*, which lies above the fulcrum and shifts to weigh down either the left or right sides depending on whether the frequency and severity of beating is high or low. If the beating is not serious and/or the frequency is low, then the model tilts to the left and a woman may choose to endure a violent relationship. If the beating is serious and/or the frequency is high, then the model tilts to the right and a woman may choose to seek divorce. Another important factor—*Custody*—also influences women's recourse behaviors, so this factor lies on the left as a constant weight toward endurance, since women fear

losing custody of their children upon divorce. Which way the seesaw ultimately rests depends on the combined effect of all factors, and may change over time for one woman depending on the value she places on the factors, the likelihood of her retaining child custody, and the current frequency and severity of beating.

Figure 2. Recourse decision-making seesaw model: Endurance versus divorce



This model allows a clear visualization of the explicit tradeoffs women make between endurance and divorce to best protect their children's wellbeing. It is possible for one factor, such as *Damaged reputation*, to weigh the seesaw entirely toward endurance if a woman believes that a damaged reputation alone will have a more negative impact on her child than all other factors. What is particularly interesting here is that more potential negative impacts exist for IPV than for divorce on children, yet the weight of *Custody* and other negative impacts of divorce on children remain heavy and thus influential in the decision-making process. Factors such as *One*

parent and *Damaged reputation* are extremely weighty factors, and reflect the cultural pressure to maintain an intact “harmonious” family and to avoid social discrimination.

Theory validation

To verify the conceptual diagram, the author combed through each of the interviews to check whether the data confirmed the relationship between the two behavior choices and the influencing factors. For example, the author confirmed that informants who expressed that IPV had a more negative impact on children than divorce also expressed a preference to seek divorce because of this impact. Similarly, the author confirmed that informants who expressed that divorce had a more negative impact on children than IPV exposure also expressed a preference to endure. Informants expressing different combinations of factors were each checked to ensure that the decision made fit the model algorithm. Using Lindesmith’s strategy of searching for examples that falsify the theory (Lindesmith, Strauss, & Denzin, 1978), the data were checked for any instances in which informants came to an unexpected conclusion, given the stated concerns and references to the severity and frequency of violence. All interview data confirmed the above model.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to investigate the impact of children’s wellbeing on women’s decision-making regarding recourse in the context of IPV. The author found that Vietnamese women choose to conform or not conform to cultural expectations of family harmony strategically, weighing the relative costs of endurance and divorce on children to make recourse decisions. Costs of divorce include potential property loss, social discrimination, and loss of control over children, while costs of endurance include continued violence and lost

potential to buffer violence against children. Because exposure to violence and divorce have adverse effects for children, which situation is worse depends on the level and frequency of violence, likelihood of child custody, and on individual circumstances that may increase or decrease the weight of negative impacts from either IPV or divorce on children for that particular family, such as a community's support of divorced women or a woman's joint land ownership.

The informants agreed that both IPV and divorce have potential negative impacts on children, and expressed that several of the potential direct negative impacts on children could be a result of either situation. Overall, more direct negative impacts were mentioned as a result of IPV, but one of the potential negative impacts of divorce—*One parent*—appears to be extremely influential in women's recourse decisions in the context of IPV. Almost all of the informants expressed the sentiment that for a child to live with both parents was ideal, and that the negative impact of IPV would have to be quite frequent or severe for the breaking up of the family and subsequent single parent household to be preferable. This finding is in keeping with findings in the literature on the importance of maintaining family harmony for women and the pressure women feel to protect family reputation, both for their own identities and for their husbands, despite abuse (Gammeltoft, 1999; Grover, 2009; Naved et al., 2006; Rashid, 2007; Rydström, 2003; Schuler et al., 2006; Schuler et al., 2014; Visaria, 2000; Yount, VanderEnde, Zureick-Brown, Minh, et al., 2014). This article adds to this body of knowledge that women endure violence not only to uphold cultural expectations of family harmony, but also to protect the wellbeing of their children.

Although research has demonstrated the negative health impact of violence on children (Fry et al., 2012; Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012), the negative effect of community isolation and stigma resulting from a damaged reputation may be just as great, and could result in a similar

degree of negative health effects due to social discrimination (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Juster, McEwen, & Lupien, 2010; Williams, Yan, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). The negative impact of divorce on children is contested in the literature, with the negative impact of divorce usually a result of the preceding conflict, and not the divorce itself (Amato, 2000). But if the divorce is associated with increased stress or conflict, those children show more problems than children in high-conflict non-divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Thus if women anticipate increased stress as a result of social discrimination or land and shelter rights, or that their children may face increased stress and conflict in the home of the father and stepmother, then divorce may be a less satisfactory option for children than enduring violence. Although most women agree that exposure to violence has a negative impact on children, many of them feel that children will be better off in a two-parent home that is accepted in society.

Given the current legal, economic, and government policies and negative impacts on children, divorce is not a wise option for many Vietnamese women. Women experiencing IPV cannot simply leave their husbands due to potential loss of land rights and the risk of losing control of children, on the one hand, and due to potential direct negative impacts on children, such as children becoming disadvantaged, on the other. It is ostensibly better for women to tolerate a certain level of violence and utilize the limited services of reconciliation services until the negative impact on themselves and their children outweighs the alternative negative impacts of divorce. Only when violence becomes frequent and serious—defined by most informants as several times a week, and as beating that injures the mother in a way that limits her ability to care for her children, respectively—is divorce considered the best option. In sum, Vietnamese women act out of explicit tradeoffs to maximize the wellbeing of their children, and by extension,

themselves. Until legal, economic, and social advantages of divorce or other legal recourse against violent husbands outweigh the disadvantages, many women will understandably endure IPV until the IPV becomes frequent or extreme before seeking divorce, if it all.

Limitations

Because this was a qualitative study based solely on cognitive interviews, the data are not intended to be generalizable but rather to generate hypotheses for future testing. Nevertheless, the data from study informants of all types yielded a consistent understanding of the decision-making process for women in the context of IPV. It is possible that informants chose not to express views more accepting of divorce for minor violence for fear of interviewer judgment, but this is unlikely given the hypothetical nature of the questions and the various ways in which informants were asked about certain scenarios to glean the most accurate opinion from the informants.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The findings from this study provide insight into the careful calculations women make to decide which action—endurance or divorce—will provide optimum wellbeing for their children. To make this calculation, women weigh the perceived negative impacts of exposure to IPV and the alternative negative impacts of divorce. This study's findings suggest that which is worse depends on numerous factors that can be summarized into four main categories.

Firstly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the severity and frequency of violence. If the severity and frequency of IPV is high, then the negative impacts of IPV on children are considered worse than divorce, so that a woman with children will likely

choose to divorce to protect her children. Conversely, if the severity and frequency of IPV is low, a woman will likely endure violence in the home to protect children from the alternative negative impacts of divorce. The definitions of severe and frequent violence vary by participant, but are generally understood as severe enough to cause injury and at a frequency of at least once per week. The informants' tendency to prefer endurance to divorce until violence is frequent and severe is not surprising given current cultural attitudes and institutions that encourage women to endure violence until reconciliation and endurance are impossible. Secondly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on her perception of the direct negative impacts of IPV and divorce on her children. If a woman considers the direct negative impacts of IPV on her children to be higher than the alternative direct negative impacts of divorce, then she may choose divorce to protect her children from potential emotional, behavioral, and cognitive problems, as well as from learning the father's behaviors. If, however, a woman considers the direct negative impacts of divorce to be higher than those of exposure to IPV, then she may choose to endure IPV to protect her children from those anticipated impacts. Thirdly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the importance that woman places on raising children in a two-parent home. If a woman considers a high-conflict, two-parent home to be at all times preferable to a low-conflict, one-parent home, then she will likely choose to endure IPV regardless of other factors. If, however, she views a one-parent home to be preferable, and while not ideal, better for children than an environment of violence, then she will consider divorce over endurance. Finally, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the importance that woman places on reputation. Given the importance of family reputation in Vietnamese society, this factor bears considerable weight. Several informants directly expressed fear that children in divorced households would suffer from a damaged reputation, while others

simply expressed an otherwise inexplicable need for children to live with “both parents.”

Damage to a child’s reputation would be particularly injurious given both the psychological strain children might suffer as a result of social discrimination, but also as a result of the damage to the family’s support from the community overall, should emergency support be needed.

The results from this study show that most women believe that more direct negative effects of exposure to violence exist for their children than direct negative effects of divorce. However, the negative impact of divorce on children may be greater overall given the importance of reputation and social acceptance for wellbeing in Vietnamese society. Taken together, the findings offer hope for future attitudes of women and communities that support divorce *to protect children*. Previous studies have drawn attention to the influence of the cultural expectation of a “happy family” image on women’s recourse decision-making (Jonzon et al., 2007; Schuler et al., 2014; Schuler et al., 2011), where women are reluctant to seek recourse to preserve this image. The findings from this study demonstrate how women’s desire to care for their children also may drive decisions about recourse. The key difference between the two is that in choosing divorce to protect the wellbeing of children—rather than because they are simply breaking the family structure for personal reasons—women who seek divorce might be better supported by their communities. The emphasis on children aligns well with women’s cultural roles as mothers and protectors of “family harmony,” since women experiencing IPV do all in their power to mitigate violence, thereby protecting harmony, or to escape violence, via divorce. If violence in the home has essentially damaged real family harmony, and communities agree that exposure to IPV has serious negative impacts for children, then community members might actually support women to seek divorce from violent husbands.

Unfortunately, current legal issues (re: child custody, land rights, child support, law enforcement), and social issues (re: emphasis on reconciliation and resulting social isolation and stigmatization if one chooses to reject this model) mean that divorce may currently have a more negative impact on women and children than enduring situations of domestic violence.

Recommendations

To make divorce less detrimental, the Vietnamese government, media, and non-governmental organizations should address social and legal obstacles to divorce. Firstly, these groups should raise awareness of the negative impacts of exposure to violence on children. If communities and local reconciliation groups are aware of the negative impacts of exposure to interparental violence on children, they may understand the benefit of divorce versus attempted reconciliation. These groups also should be educated on the IPV generational cycle and the importance of allowing parents in conflict to separate to prevent children's exposure to violence. Again, communities and reconciliation groups may better support divorce if they understand the negative consequences for children of exposure to IPV. Secondly, Vietnamese media should emphasize the importance of a *truly* harmonious family, not a family that is outwardly harmonious but internally high-conflict. Billboards, television programs, and radio shows should stress that a peaceful, single-parent family is better than an intact, high-conflict family. Thirdly, programs and media should sensitize community members and Women's Groups that *all* domestic violence is wrong and harmful, not just protracted and extreme violence. As divorce becomes more attractive legally and socially, it is likely that more women will seek divorce even for less serious violence, but this message can begin to spread the concept that any and all IPV should not be tolerated. Fourthly, the Vietnamese government should raise awareness of the law among Women's Groups, local reconciliation groups, and communities. The government should

train Women's Groups in the legal process of divorce, so that members can guide women in the complicated process if they come for advice. The government should, similarly, provide local authorities and reconciliation groups with detailed legal protocols and the power and responsibility to prosecute violent husbands so that violence cannot continue after divorce is sought. Though the cultural norm of women maintaining family harmony has made change difficult, renewed emphasis on the importance of divorce *for the sake of children* may garner wider support and action from these groups. The 2007 *Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control* should also be better enforced so that perpetrators of IPV are held accountable for their actions, and new policies should be instituted to better enforce joint land ownership and protect women's rights to child custody. Finally, Vietnamese programs and media should harness the role of women as mothers to emphasize child protection from IPV. Because the role of women as mothers is rooted culturally, this message may be widely accepted as a reason to support women who seek divorce as a result of IPV.

For now, choosing divorce is a complex and risky option for many Vietnamese women. Women make explicit choices to optimize the wellbeing of themselves and their children, which may mean enduring violence to protect children from the negative impacts of divorce. In the meantime, women and their children will suffer the negative emotional, mental, and physical impacts of IPV. Only when policies and attitudes change will divorce become a realistic and advantageous option for Vietnamese women experiencing IPV.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Cognitive interview informant characteristics

Informant #	Age	Education	Occupation	No. of children
1	28	Grade 12	Self-employed grocer	1
2	44	Grade 10	Unknown	2
3	28	Grade 9	Self-employed tailor	2
4	22	Grade 9	Worker at rice cake company	1
5	38	Unknown	Worker, farmer	3
6	48	Grade 9	Farmer	2
7	29	Grade 12	Unknown	1
8	37	Grade 9	Unknown	3
9	21	Grade 9	Garment worker	0
10	49	Grade 12	Unknown	2
11	45	Grade 12	Head of Women's Union	Unknown
12	45	Grade 7	Unknown	Unknown
13	42	Grade 10	Unknown	Unknown
14	31	Grade 10	Unknown	2
15	34	Grade 12	Saleswoman	2
16	39	Grade 12	Self-employed tailor	2
17	22	Grade 10	Saleswoman	1
18	33	Grade 9	Worker at rice cake company	2
19	24	Grade 9	Freelance worker	2
20	41	Grade 9	Farmer	1

Table 2. Code organization matrix

CATEGORY ^b		CODE ^a
Causes of IPV		Alcohol "It's normal" ^c "No reason" ^c "The good reason" ^c Intention Income Honor Education Mental health
Perceived Resolutions	Internal	Endurance ^d [Acceptance/Forgiveness] ^f Fear Acceptability Responsibility [Gender roles] ^f Honor Judgment/Shame [Reputation] ^f Injury/Severity/Frequency Maintaining peace ^d Impact on children ^d
	External	External resolution ^d [Authorities] ^{d,f} Gender equity Law Divorce ^d

^aInitial codes from open coding

^bCategories developed during axial coding to organize codes

^cIndigenous codes from informants

^dCodes with frequencies above 5% across coded data using MAXQDA code statistics

^eCode with highest frequency across data using MAXQDA code statistics

^fCodes later subsumed into bolded codes

Table 3. Top ten excerpts, themes, and categories

CATEGORY	THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTE
Support endurance of IPV over divorce	Endurance for the sake of children	<i>She should accept her destiny to keep her harmonious family. She should endure because of her children. (CI 15)</i>
	Children's need for both parents	<i>It is better to live with their parents though they beat each other. Every child needs living with its parents. (CI 19)</i>
	Divorce damages children's reputations	<i>Then, when their children grow up, the children will get bad reputation of having a father who beats their mother to an extent that she had to report to the village head. (CI 14)</i>
	Father's right to the children	<i>The wife is not allowed to bring up her children. The husband has the right to bring children up...so the wife has to accept. (CI 12)</i>
	Divorce has negative impact on children	<i>The children they try drugs and become addicted, thieves and drop out. (CI 8)</i>
	Exposure to IPV has negative impact on children	<i>Wife beating affected on mental development of the children living with these parents. Wife beating may become children's obsession. (CI 7)</i>
Support divorce over endurance of IPV	One parent is better than exposure to IPV	<i>It is sure that seeing father often beats their mother has a more negative influence on the children than living with only one parent. (CI 11)</i>
	Children copy father's behaviors	<i>What things children have been seen much influenced in their characteristic and attitude afterward because parents like a mirror for their children look at and follow. (CI 7)</i>
	Injured mother cannot care for children	<i>If the woman gets injured, she cannot take care of herself let alone her family. (CI 16)</i>
Support factor	Frequency and severity of beating	<i>But it depends on the beating frequency, much or little. For example, parents' divorce is better for children than watching daily beating of their parents...if the father beats the mother daily, the children will be affected. (CI 14)</i>

Table 4. Frequency of theme mention by informant category: Agree, Disagree, or Depends

Theme	Total	Agree	Disagree	Depends
Endurance for the sake of children	25	1	14	10
Children's need for both parents	27	5	15	7
Divorce damages children's reputation	4	1	0	3
Father's right to the children	3	0	3	0
Negative impact of IPV on children	45	19	9	17
Negative impact of divorce on children	3	1	1	1
One parent is better than exposure to IPV	27	17	0	10
Children copy father's behaviors	3	2	0	1
Frequency & severity of beating	32	16	0	16
Injured mother cannot care for children	6	0	0	6

Figure 1. Frequency of references to direct negative impacts of divorce versus IPV on children

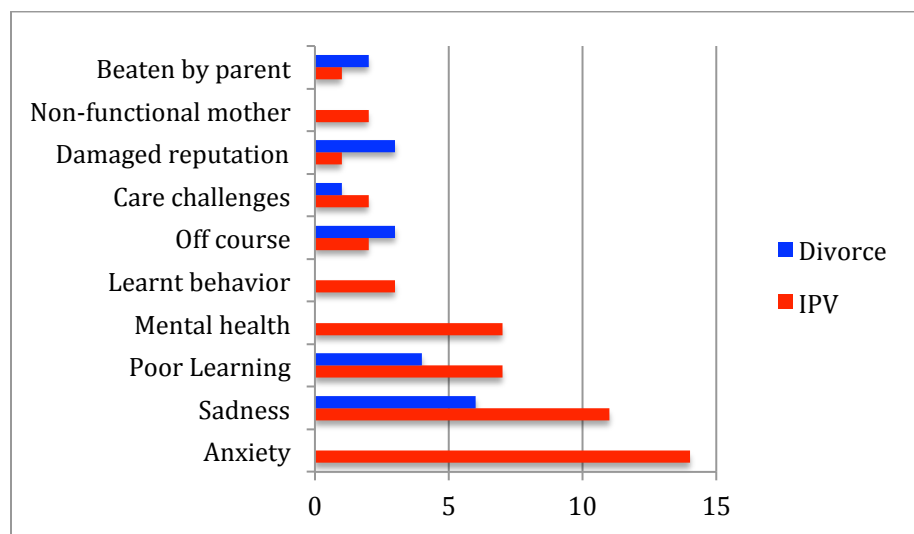
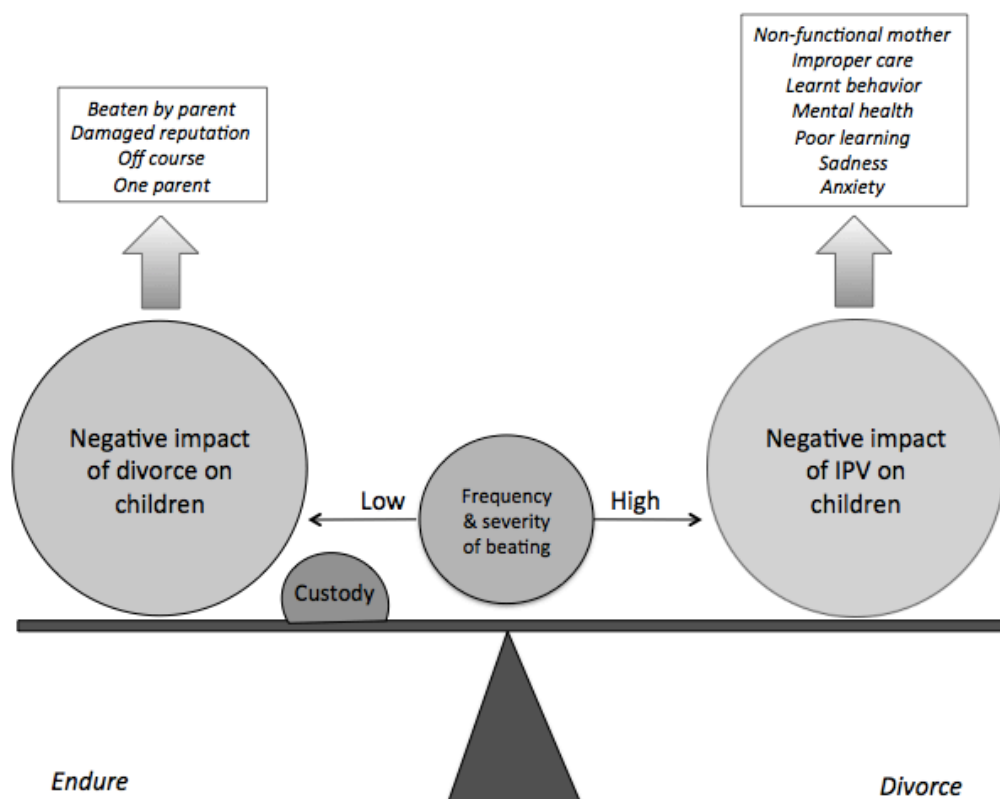


Figure 2. Recourse decision-making seesaw model: Endurance versus divorce



CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION AND PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide insight into the careful calculations women make to decide which action—endurance or divorce—will provide optimum wellbeing for their children. To make this calculation, women weigh the perceived negative impacts of exposure to IPV and the alternative negative impacts of divorce. This study's findings suggest that which is worse depends on numerous factors that can be summarized into four main categories.

Firstly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the severity and frequency of violence. If the severity and frequency of IPV is high, then the negative impacts of IPV on children are considered worse than divorce, so that a woman with children will likely choose to divorce to protect her children. Conversely, if the severity and frequency of IPV is low, a woman will likely endure violence in the home to protect children from the alternative negative impacts of divorce. The definitions of severe and frequent violence vary by participant, but are generally understood as severe enough to cause injury and at a frequency of at least once per week. The informants' tendency to prefer endurance to divorce until violence is frequent and severe is not surprising given current cultural attitudes and institutions that encourage women to endure violence until reconciliation and endurance are impossible. Secondly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or to seek divorce depends on her perception of the direct negative impacts of IPV and divorce on her children. If a woman considers the direct negative impacts of IPV on her children to be higher than the alternative direct negative impacts of divorce, then she may choose divorce to protect her children from potential emotional, behavioral, and cognitive problems, as well as from learning the father's behaviors. If, however, a woman considers the direct negative

impacts of divorce to be higher than those of exposure to IPV, then she may choose to endure IPV to protect her children from those anticipated impacts. Thirdly, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the importance that woman places on raising children in a two-parent home. If a woman considers a high-conflict, two-parent home to be at all times preferable to a low-conflict, one-parent home, then she will likely choose to endure IPV regardless of other factors. If, however, she views a one-parent home to be preferable, and while not ideal, better for children than an environment of violence, then she will consider divorce over endurance. Finally, a woman's decision to endure IPV or seek divorce depends on the importance that woman places on reputation. Given the importance of family reputation in Vietnamese society, this factor bears considerable weight. Several informants directly expressed fear that children in divorced households would suffer from a damaged reputation, while others simply expressed an otherwise inexplicable need for children to live with "both parents." Damage to a child's reputation would be particularly injurious given both the psychological strain children might suffer as a result of social discrimination, but also as a result of the damage to the family's support from the community overall, should emergency support be needed.

The results from this study show that most women believe that more direct negative effects of exposure to violence exist for their children than direct negative effects of divorce. However, the negative impact of divorce on children may be greater overall given the importance of reputation and social acceptance for wellbeing in Vietnamese society. Taken together, the findings offer hope for future attitudes of women and communities that support divorce *to protect children*. Previous studies have drawn attention to the influence of the cultural expectation of a "happy family" image on women's recourse decision-making (Jonzon et al., 2007; Schuler et al., 2014; Schuler et al., 2011), where women are reluctant to seek recourse to

preserve this image. The findings from this study demonstrate how women's desire to care for their children also may drive decisions about recourse. The key difference between the two is that in choosing divorce to protect the wellbeing of children—rather than because they are simply breaking the family structure for personal reasons—women who seek divorce might be better supported by their communities. The emphasis on children aligns well with women's cultural roles as mothers and protectors of “family harmony,” since women experiencing IPV do all in their power to either mitigate violence, thereby protecting harmony, or to escape violence, via divorce. If violence in the home has essentially damaged real family harmony, and communities agree that exposure to IPV has serious negative impacts for children, then community members might actually support women to seek divorce from violent husbands.

Unfortunately, current legal issues (re: child custody, land rights, child support, law enforcement), and social issues (re: emphasis on reconciliation and resulting social isolation and stigmatization if one chooses to reject this model) mean that divorce may currently have a more negative impact on women and children than enduring situations of domestic violence.

Public Health Implications

The findings from this study indicate that women are driven in their recourse decisions related to IPV by a determination to protect and provide for their children. This finding can be used to inform policies and interventions designed to protect women from IPV by providing a clearer understanding of women's concerns regarding divorce and thereby mitigating the negative impact of divorce on children. Using these insights, the Vietnamese government can devise policies to better protect women's rights to joint land ownership and child custody and to build awareness of the negative impacts of IPV on children at both the community and the individual levels. The Vietnamese government and non-governmental organizations can design

programs that encourage communities to support women seeking divorce, and programs that support children and single parents in divorced homes. As a result of these programs and policies, prevalence, justification, and perpetration of IPV in Vietnam may decline, as women and children separate themselves from violence in the home. Women may suffer fewer physical, mental, and emotional health consequences of IPV, and children may be spared permanent damage from exposure to IPV in childhood.

To make divorce less detrimental for women experiencing IPV, the Vietnamese government, media, and NGO programs should address both social and legal obstacles to divorce. Firstly, these groups should raise awareness of the negative impacts of exposure to violence on children. If communities and local reconciliation groups are aware of the negative impacts of exposure to interparental violence on children, they may understand the benefit of divorce versus attempted reconciliation. These groups also should be educated on the IPV generational cycle and the importance of completely removing children from exposure to violence to interrupt this cycle. Again, communities and reconciliation groups may better support divorce if they understand the negative consequences for children of exposure to IPV. Secondly, Vietnamese media should emphasize the importance of a *truly* harmonious family, not a family that is outwardly harmonious but internally high-conflict. Billboards, television programs, and radio shows should stress that a peaceful, single-parent family is better than an intact, high-conflict family. Thirdly, programs and media should sensitize community members and Women's Groups that *all* domestic violence is wrong and harmful, not just protracted and extreme violence. As divorce becomes more attractive legally and socially, it is likely that more women will seek divorce even for less serious violence, but this message can begin to spread the concept that any and all IPV should not be tolerated. Fourthly, the Vietnamese government

should raise awareness of the law among Women's Groups, local reconciliation groups, and communities. The government should train Women's Groups in the legal process of divorce, so that members can guide women in the complicated process if they come for advice. The government should, similarly, provide local authorities and reconciliation groups with detailed legal protocols and the power and responsibility to prosecute violent husbands so that violence cannot continue after divorce is sought. New policies should also be instituted to better enforce current laws against perpetrators of IPV, to better coordinate and enforce joint land ownership, and to protect women's rights to child custody. Finally, Vietnamese programs and media should harness the role of women as mothers to emphasize child protection from IPV. Because the role of women as mothers is rooted culturally, this message may be widely accepted as a reason to support women who seek divorce as a result of IPV. Findings from this research have indicated that women are guided in their recourse decision-making based on which option will be best for their children, so highlighting women's roles as mothers first and foremost may provide support for women experiencing IPV to seek divorce.

For now, choosing divorce is a complex and risky option for many Vietnamese women. Women make explicit choices to optimize the wellbeing of themselves and their children, which may mean enduring violence to protect children from the negative impacts of divorce. In the meantime, women and their children will suffer the negative emotional, mental, and physical impacts of IPV. Only when policies and attitudes change will divorce become a realistic and advantageous option for Vietnamese women so that women and children can live free from the negative health impacts of IPV.

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