



Global Scientific and Academic Research Journal of Economics, Business and Management

ISSN: 2583-5645 (Online)

Frequency: Monthly

Published By GSAR Publishers

Journal Homepage Link- <https://gsarpublishers.com/journals-gsarjebm-home/>



A Raising Futures: Combating Outdated Norms Through Education in Vietnam

By

Nguyen Minh Trang¹, Nguyen Ngoc Diep², Hoang Quynh Huong³

¹Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

^{2,3}Foreign Language Specialized School



Article History

Received: 05/09/2025

Accepted: 09/09/2025

Published: 11/09/2025

Vol –4 Issue – 9

PP: -09-18

Abstract

In many rural and mountainous areas of Vietnam, especially in ethnic minority communities, traditional practices still hold a central position in social life, shaping how the community views the role, rights, and status of children. Practices such as early marriage, son preference, spiritual rituals for newborns, and the belief that “spare the rod, spoil the child” are not only considered cultural norms but are also closely tied to moral values and community honor. Education in Vietnam has emerged as a critical tool for combating outdated social and cultural norms, creating pathways for a more inclusive and equitable future. This paper examines how national reforms and local initiatives have addressed entrenched practices such as rigid gender roles, rote learning, ethnic exclusion, and hierarchical teacher-student relationships. At the systemic level, the adoption of competency-based curricula and participatory assessments has marked a significant departure from traditional rote memorization and exam-focused evaluation, fostering critical thinking and creativity. Furthermore, investments in inclusive education, including bilingual approaches for ethnic minority students, highlight Vietnam’s efforts to promote cultural respect and equity. These combined strategies reflect a broader educational transformation that not only improves learning outcomes but also reshapes societal values, equipping future generations to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Outdated Norms, Education, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's rural and mountainous regions, particularly those in the Northwest and Central Highlands, are home to a significant portion of the country's ethnic minorities and remain economically marginalized despite national development. These areas are home to a significant share of the country's ethnic minority population and continue to exhibit the highest levels of poverty, despite national progress in poverty reduction (World Bank, 2022). People living there often suffer from limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, further exacerbating poverty and social inequality. Many rural and ethnic-minority communities in Vietnam continue to experience constrained access to quality education, healthcare, and stable employment, which sustains poverty and widens inequality despite national progress in development (World Bank, 2022). Although ethnic minorities represent about 15% of Vietnam's population, they account for approximately 47% of the poor. Poverty is heavily concentrated in mountainous regions with 28.6% in the Northwest, 17.4% in the Northeast,

and 15% in the Central Highlands, areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities (Tap Chi Cong San, 2022).

Beyond economic deprivation, these communities are shaped by deeply rooted cultural norms, many of which have not evolved alongside national modernization efforts. Such norms play a central role in defining children's place in society and continue to shape educational outcomes in profound ways. To understand how these beliefs impact children's development and learning, it is necessary to examine the persistence of traditional customs in daily life. The persistence of such beliefs means that efforts to reform education or social development in these areas often encounter quiet but strong resistance from within the community itself. One of the most visible manifestations of traditional customs is the phenomenon of early marriage. Equally concerning is the prevalence of violent discipline in both family and educational settings. Besides, gender stereotypes also create a clear gap in children's access to education. In many places, investment in boys' education is still prioritized, while girls are expected to do housework or get married early. As a consequence, girls are not only deprived of opportunities to develop their



capacities but also restricted from entering socially significant domains, such as careers, political participation, and community leadership, due to early marriage and entrenched gender biases (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021). Another under-recognized challenge is the lack of understanding of children's mental health. Many parents in remote areas still believe that symptoms such as prolonged sadness, insomnia, or behavioral disorders are just "childish," "weak souls," or "caused by evil spirits," instead of seeing them as signs that medical or psychological intervention is needed. Lack of access to professional psychological support services has left many children suffering from trauma in silence without support (UNICEF Viet Nam, 2023).

It can be seen that these influences, ranging from early marriage and gender stereotypes to emotional abuse not only hinder children from learning and developing comprehensively but also deepen generational and gender inequality. When outdated values are still considered the "norm" in family and community life, children, especially girls, will easily be pushed out of the educational space to enter the roles that society has predetermined. To break this cycle, educational interventions cannot stop at building schools or distributing books; they must go deeper into challenging the underlying beliefs that bind children's futures. However, this does not occur within a uniform context. Regions differ drastically in their material resources and social attitudes. Nowhere is this divergence more evident than in the growing developmental and ideological gap between Vietnam's urban and rural areas.

2. Literature review

Outdated social norms, defined by scholars such as Bicchieri (2006) and UNICEF (2023) as long-standing cultural beliefs and practices that constrain basic human rights, remain prevalent in many rural and mountainous regions of Vietnam, deeply shaping the lives of children and adolescents. These norms include rigid gender roles, early marriage, the use of corporal punishment, and cultural resistance to mental health discourse and other modern values. While rooted in tradition, such norms may present tensions with contemporary frameworks emphasizing children's rights and holistic development (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018; UNICEF, 2020). Gender expectations, particularly the prioritization of domestic responsibilities for girls, are closely tied to early marriage and school discontinuation. These practices limit agency and perpetuate cycles of poverty and gender inequality. Corporal punishment similarly remains normalized as a disciplinary tool, despite growing evidence of its harmful effects on psychological and behavioral outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Meanwhile, cultural resistance to mental health discourse discourages help-seeking, leaving many young people without adequate support (VNAMHS, 2023).

Bicchieri's (2006) distinction between descriptive norms (what people do) and injunctive norms (what people think should be done) helps explain their persistence. In rural communities, these norms are reinforced through family

expectations, peer behavior, and institutional practices, creating feedback loops that sustain them even as legal frameworks evolve. Existing literature has documented prevalence and consequences extensively (UNICEF, 2020; Girls Not Brides, 2024), but less attention has been given to mechanisms of change. Mackie et al. (2015) and the UNICEF–UNFPA Manual (2022) emphasizes that transformation occurs when communities observe shifts among peers, engage in dialogue, and receive reinforcement from trusted groups. This highlights the potential of community-based education not only as a channel for knowledge but also as a catalyst for normative change.

Educational disparities describe the uneven distribution of learning outcomes and access to educational resources among children from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. These gaps are shaped by factors such as family investment, economic conditions, and can be intensified by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately influencing social mobility. (Blanden, Doepke, Stuhler 2023). Education is widely recognized as a multidimensional process that not only delivers knowledge but also nurtures values, skills, and attitudes. According to UNESCO (2015), education develops the full potential of individuals, preparing them for both personal fulfillment and social participation. When examining marginalized groups, the World Bank (2018) emphasizes that education must ensure equity, accessibility, and inclusiveness, particularly for children in disadvantaged communities. These perspectives highlight that disparities in education are not only about physical access to schools but also about differences in quality, inclusivity, and the ability of institutions to respond to learners' diverse needs.

Educational disparities refer to systematic differences in learning opportunities and outcomes between groups of students. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, structural and social contexts shape access to quality education, often prioritizing urban over rural learners. In rural areas, limited access to high-quality facilities, textbooks, and digital infrastructure exacerbates inequities compared to urban schools (UNESCO, 2021). Theories of justice also shed light on why disparities persist. Rawls (1971) argues that fairness in education requires compensatory support for disadvantaged groups so that equal opportunity becomes meaningful rather than nominal. Complementing this view, Sen's (1999) *capability approach* frames education as a means to expand real freedoms and choices, underscoring that children in disadvantaged areas must not only attend school but also gain the substantive ability to thrive. These theoretical insights suggest that teachers and community norms play a pivotal role: they can either reinforce inequality through biased expectations or foster empowerment by ensuring all students regardless of background have genuine opportunities to succeed.

In rural contexts, disparities manifest not only through limited facilities and teaching resources but also through the influence of community expectations and social norms on students' academic trajectories. According to Coleman's seminal *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* (1966),

differences in learning outcomes are not solely determined by school resources but also by family background and community norms. Teacher quality and pedagogical practices are central mediators of these disparities, as argued by scholars such as Hanushek, who emphasize the decisive role of teacher effectiveness in shaping learning outcomes. Teachers, as both knowledge transmitters and role models, play a crucial role in shaping student achievement; as Vygotsky (1978) emphasized in his *sociocultural theory of learning*, learning is deeply embedded in social interaction and community values, suggesting that rural norms can either empower or constrain student aspirations.

Education has also been theorized as a transformative force for social change. Freire (1970) conceptualizes education as a liberating practice that raises students' critical awareness of their social realities and empowers them to transform those realities. In this sense, curricula that promote life skills, critical thinking, and inclusivity function not only as academic tools but as vehicles of social empowerment. UNICEF emphasizes that, in disadvantaged contexts, equitable education must integrate gender equality, child protection, and life skills as core elements of sustainable development. Freire's critical pedagogy highlights how education can foster critical thinking and empower individuals to challenge structural inequalities. The integration of life skills and inclusive curricula is theorized to enhance learners' agency, preparing them to participate more fully in social and economic life. Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, highlighted that education fosters critical consciousness (*conscientização*), enabling learners to challenge social inequalities and transform their communities. Inclusive education models further reinforce this transformative role by addressing the diverse needs of marginalized learners (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

At a broader systemic level, OECD highlights that effective education systems must provide lifelong learning opportunities for all, especially for marginalized groups, to promote both equity and resilience. Interdisciplinary approaches further enrich this discussion. The Human Development Theory (UNDP) regards education as a pillar of human flourishing and social well-being, while the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) views education as an investment with long-term economic and societal returns. Together, these perspectives underscore the dual role of education: to expand individual capabilities and to generate collective benefits for communities. NGOs and government interventions are often grounded in human capital theory, which views education as an investment that generates individual and collective benefits. Previous reform efforts and pilot programs suggest that when designed inclusively, education can reduce social inequalities and catalyze rural development. For example, pilot programs such as BRAC's non-formal schools in Bangladesh have shown how community-based models improve literacy outcomes in underserved areas (Chowdhury et al., 2002). Similarly, Vietnam's *Program 135*, which focused on disadvantaged communes, demonstrated the potential of targeted investment

in both infrastructure and teacher training to reduce disparities (World Bank, 2011). These initiatives align with human capital theory (Becker, 1964), which posits that investment in education yields long-term economic and social returns, especially when directed toward marginalized populations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative synthesis approach, combining literature review and secondary data analysis. Specifically, it draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, reports from international organizations (e.g., UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA), and national survey data to map the persistence of outdated norms and assess the potential of education as a change agent. Descriptive statistics from large-scale surveys are used illustratively, while the main method is conceptual analysis of existing theoretical and empirical works. By synthesizing cross-disciplinary evidence, this approach enables the study to identify common patterns, highlight research gaps, and generate a framework for understanding how culturally embedded educational interventions may contribute to normative change.

4. Results

4.1. Outdated Norms and Their Social Impact

The persistence of outdated social norms in Vietnam reflects both descriptive and injunctive dynamics described by Bicchieri (2006). Despite legal reforms and policy initiatives promoting child rights, evidence shows that practices such as early marriage, corporal punishment, and mental health stigma remain widespread in rural and ethnic minority communities. A 2019 survey of 2,894 ethnic-minority households in Vietnam found that traditional stereotypes such as the notion that girls do not need to be educated directly led to child marriage, school dropout, and restricted social interaction, thereby undermining both educational outcomes and long-term wellbeing (W. Montague Cobb-NMA Health Institute, 2022). According to the 2020 Survey on Sustainable Development Goals for Children and Women (SDGCW), 72% of Vietnamese children aged 1–14 have experienced some form of violent punishment at home, including 41% subjected to physical punishment and 64% to verbal aggression (General Statistics Office & UNICEF, 2021). These practices are often justified as discipline rather than violence, creating a social environment where harm is normalized and efforts to foster a safe, non-violent educational culture are significantly hindered. The prolonged existence of outdated traditional norms not only reflects cultural patterns but also poses significant harm to children's holistic development, physically, psychologically, and academically. Data from the 2020–2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), jointly conducted by UNICEF and Vietnam's General Statistics Office, reveal that kids raised in households practicing physical punishment and reinforcing gender-based stereotypes are more likely to experience long-term psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, and diminished academic confidence. The majority of child marriages occur in rural and ethnic minority zones, with the Northern Midlands and mountainous areas reporting a rate of 23.1% for women aged 20–49 marrying before age 18 (United

Kingdom Government, 2025). A report by UNICEF Viet Nam (2020) reveals that in northern mountainous provinces such as Ha Giang and Lai Chau, the rate of girls marrying before the age of 18 reaches 23%, nearly three times the national average. This practice often leads to the direct consequence that children, mostly girls, must drop out of school and leave the educational environment to assume the roles of wife and mother before they are physically and mentally ready (Girls Not Brides, 2024).

Table 1. Prevalence of Outdated Social Norms Affecting Children and Adolescents in Vietnam

Issue	Indicator
Child marriage	1 in 6 girls married before age 18 nationwide; >20% among ethnic minorities
Corporal punishment	72% of children aged 1–14 experienced physical/psychological punishment at home
Mental health stigma	<10% of adolescents with significant symptoms seek professional help

Authors compiled

UNICEF (2023) reported that one in six girls in Vietnam is married before the age of 18, with prevalence significantly higher among ethnic minority groups, where rates exceed 20% (Girls Not Brides, 2024). These findings confirm theoretical perspectives that cultural expectations surrounding gender roles, particularly those prioritizing domestic responsibilities for girls, continue to drive school dropout and early marriage cycles, reinforcing structural inequalities. Similarly, corporal punishment remains a normalized form of discipline. According to the Sustainable Development Goals Children's Well-being Survey (SDGCW, 2021), 72% of Vietnamese children aged 1–14 experienced physical or psychological punishment at home. This aligns with Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor's (2016) findings on the harmful effects of physical discipline, highlighting a gap between modern child protection frameworks and entrenched family practices. The persistence of such practices illustrates Bicchieri's (2006) argument that norms endure because individuals perceive both that "others do it" and that "others think they should do it." Mental health remains another area where cultural stigma hinders progress. VNAMHS (2023) reports that less than 10% of adolescents with significant mental health symptoms seek professional help, due to societal expectations that prevent the recognition or addressing of mental health problems.

According to press reports, the Central Highlands region, particularly the mountainous areas and the central part of the Highlands is facing a shortage of more than 6,500 qualified teachers across all educational levels (Tran, K. March 2025).

In 2022, the net attendance rate at the upper secondary level was 82.4% in urban areas, compared to only 74.1% in rural areas (Tran, K. March 2025). Earlier, research also revealed disparities: As of 2022, net attendance rates at primary school stood at roughly 98% in both urban (98.4%) and rural (98.3%) areas but the gap widened sharply at higher levels: while about 91.4% of urban youth reached lower secondary, only 89.9% of rural youth did, and for upper secondary, the rural rate was 74.1% compared to 82.4% in urban zones (a 8.3 percentage point gap). Completion rates reflect this trend: upper secondary graduation is reported at just 46.4% in rural areas versus 74.8% in urban areas, a nearly 28.4 percentage point difference (Unicef, 2021). These figures indicate that rural students are significantly less likely to continue their education at higher levels, reflecting, at least in part, the limited availability and quality of qualified teachers in rural areas.

The digital divide further exacerbates inequality in education. While urban students often have access to stable internet connections and modern technological devices, their rural counterparts face limited connectivity and a shortage of digital tools. This disparity became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning became the primary mode of education. Students in rural areas struggled to attend virtual classes, submit assignments, or engage in interactive learning, leading to significant setbacks in academic progress. According to Internet Society Pulse (2025), internet access remains significantly unequal between urban and rural areas, with 82% of urban residents connected compared to only 64% in rural regions. Although the gap in home Internet access has narrowed over time (from 25% to 9%), it still stands at around 9 percentage points (*Vietnam Law and Legal Forum Magazine*, 2024), limiting equal opportunities for online learning. Specifically, during Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 1.5 million students lacked both connectivity and digital devices, providing clear evidence of the digital divide's impact on educational inequality (Nguyen, D. D., Phan, T. H., & Ha, M. T. C, Sep 2022). Poverty significantly increases the risk of school exclusion, with children from the lowest income households being up to six times more likely to be out of school compared to their wealthier peers. Child labor - particular in rural and disadvantaged families - prevents around 25 - 55% of children aged 7 - 14 from accessing education, while more than 15% of adolescents aged 15 - 17 drop out to earn a living (Hoang Kim, K., & Nguyen Thu Dung, 2021). This situation is especially common among ethnic minority communities, where as many as 84% of child laborers are concentrated in rural areas, disrupting schooling and increasing the likelihood of early dropout (*Vietnam works to end child labor*, June 2025).

4.2. Education as a Change Agent

In recent decades, Vietnam has been investing heavily in education for remote and highland areas, especially to support ethnic minority communities who face barriers in access and quality. The government has launched major programs such as the construction of integrated boarding schools in 248 land-

border communes, each costing about USD 6.5 million and equipped with classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, dining halls, and sports facilities (VOVWorld, 2025). Alongside infrastructure development, students in these areas are provided with free lunches and tuition exemptions at certain levels, while teachers receive special salary allowances to encourage them to work in disadvantaged zones. National Target Programs have also funded hundreds of new schools, dormitories, and sanitation facilities, as well as training for thousands of teachers in modern and digital teaching methods (Vietnam.vn, 2024). Complementing these efforts, international organizations like the Asian Development Bank have invested USD 93 million to upgrade high schools in mountainous and delta regions (NGO Centre, 2021), and UNESCO has supported Vietnam's commitment to allocate at least 20% of its state budget to education (UNESCO, 2023). NGOs and private initiatives add another layer of support, such as Hanoi's Marie Curie School, which provides scholarships to train English teachers from Hà Giang's Mèo Vạc District or the Lawrence S. Ting Memorial Fund, which has equipped schools nationwide with computer labs to bridge the digital divide. Innovative projects, like the AI-powered teacher training program GameAid, are also being piloted to boost digital literacy among rural educators (Reddit, 2024). Altogether, these combined efforts highlight Vietnam's multi-faceted strategy to improve access, quality, and equity in education for its remote and highland populations.

Equally important are the roles of teachers and community norms in shaping educational outcomes. In communities that emphasize academic achievement, students often receive encouragement and reinforcement from both educators and families. Conversely, in contexts where immediate financial contributions are prioritized over schooling, children may drop out early to support their households. Teachers in under-resourced settings are also more likely to experience burnout, further reducing the quality of education delivered. Schools providing a forum for dialogue among teachers, parents, and community leaders can create conditions for collective reevaluation of practices considered normal, such as early marriage, corporal punishment, or gender discrimination (UNICEF Viet Nam, 2022). Evidence shows that when *communities actively participate* in program design and implementation rather than passively receiving it, the speed and depth of social attitude change rise markedly (UNICEF Viet Nam, 2023). Thus, for schooling to effectively challenge harmful customs, it must be envisioned not merely as a service but as a socio-cultural intervention, rooted in community participation and internal transformation. Teachers are at the center of the educational process. Their pedagogical methods, professional competence, and personal attitudes directly influence how effectively students absorb knowledge. A teacher who employs interactive and student-centered approaches can foster curiosity and critical thinking. Similarly, teachers' attitudes toward students can also motivate learners to reach their academic goals. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Training trained 200 ethnic minority teachers in the Central Highlands to strengthen pedagogical skills and cultural responsiveness. Fluent in local

languages and traditions, these teachers bridged communication gaps and adapted lessons to students' contexts, which improved classroom engagement and learning outcomes (The Orchid, Sep 2024).

Teachers in remote and highland areas of Vietnam play a crucial role in bridging the educational gap for ethnic minority and disadvantaged communities, but they face significant challenges. Many schools in mountainous provinces such as Hà Giang, Điện Biên, and Đắk Lắk are located in difficult-to-access regions, where teachers often must travel long distances through poor infrastructure to reach their students. To encourage teaching in these areas, the government provides special allowances, ranging from 35% of the salary for secondary and vocational teachers to 50% for primary school teachers, along with housing and hardship benefits (LawNet, 2023). However, despite these policies, teacher shortages remain common due to the harsh living conditions, limited professional development opportunities, and lack of modern teaching resources. In response, Vietnam has been investing in training programs to improve teacher quality in disadvantaged regions. The National Target Program has supported thousands of teachers through training in digital literacy, new teaching methods, and culturally inclusive education to better serve ethnic minority students (Vietnam.vn, 2024). Non-governmental organizations also contribute by offering scholarships and development programs, such as the Marie Curie School initiative that trains students from Hà Giang to become English teachers in their hometowns (Vietnam News, 2024). Innovative approaches are emerging as well, including AI-powered training platforms like GameAid, which use gamified digital tools to help rural teachers prepare lessons and improve classroom practices (Reddit, 2024).

Rather than functioning separately, teaching practices and community expectations are intertwined, mutually reinforcing the patterns of inequality observed in rural school: when parents prioritize early labor contributions or uphold gendered norms such as girls excelling in domestic duties over academics teachers may internalize these values and teach accordingly, inadvertently stunting both academic performance and personal development (e.g., placement into lower-tier tracks, fewer opportunities for extracurricular or leadership roles). As a result, even within the same national curriculum, ethnic-minority students in rural schools consistently underperform relative to both urban peers and urban-based ethnic-minority students. Integrating life skills and critical thinking into school curricula helps students become more proactive and confident learners. Instead of relying solely on rote memorization, students are encouraged to question, analyze, and apply knowledge in real-life situations. This approach not only prepares them academically but also equips them with problem-solving and decision-making skills essential for future careers and everyday challenges.

Inclusive education also plays a crucial role in ensuring equal opportunities for all learners, especially children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By

creating classrooms where diverse needs are addressed, schools foster empathy, collaboration, and social responsibility among students. Such an environment empowers marginalized groups to access quality education, breaking cycles of inequality and building a more cohesive society. A study by Hai Nguyen Xuan, Thao Do Thi, Ngoc Tran Thi Bich, and Hang Le Thi Thuy (2023) presents an innovative inclusive education model tailored for children with disabilities in Vietnam. The authors propose the implementation of "support chambers" dedicated spaces within schools that offer individualized assistance, curriculum adaptations, and targeted interventions enabling students with disabilities to actively participate in general education settings. These chambers also foster collaboration by bringing together teachers, parents, healthcare professionals, and community members, serving as hubs where educational, social, and life skills support is coordinated. Through this model, children with disabilities not only gain access to suitable learning materials and instruction but also develop independence, communication skills, and peer relationships, all of which are critical for holistic personal development in inclusive environments

4.3 Achievements

Vietnam has made notable progress in combating outdated norms through education by implementing both localized projects and national reforms. One significant initiative is the GENTLE project, which applies gender-responsive, play-based learning to challenge traditional gender roles in early childhood education. Implemented in provinces such as Quang Ngai, Quang Nam, and Kon Tum, the project has developed a toolkit for teachers, provided training and mentoring, and engaged parents in awareness-raising activities. As a result, it has been scaled up to 153 kindergartens, trained 1,831 teachers, and positively influenced the learning environment of more than 32,000 children (Vietnam Times, 2021). The project has also shifted parental behaviors, with fathers becoming more involved in childcare and household responsibilities, while children showed greater confidence, communication, and enthusiasm in class (Vietnam Times, 2021). Beyond local initiatives, Vietnam has also carried out systemic reforms to move away from rote learning, focusing instead on competency-based curricula and participatory assessments. Since 2016, a new competency-based curriculum has emphasized critical thinking, skills development, and technology integration, while assessment reforms introduced in 2014 replaced score-focused evaluations with more comprehensive approaches that prioritize student progress and growth (Tran & Vu, 2021). Together, these initiatives highlight Vietnam's efforts to address both entrenched social norms and outdated teaching methods, creating a more equitable and progressive educational environment.

Table 2. Programs and outcome

Initiative	Goal / Approach	Outcomes & Reach
GENTLE	Gender-	153 kindergartens;

Project	responsive play-based learning	1,831 teachers trained; >32,000 children; improved norms & behaviors
Curriculum Reform (2016–)	Competency-based, skill-focused education	Shift from rote learning toward critical thinking and real-world skills
Assessment Reform (2014–)	Participatory, progress-oriented evaluation	Emphasis on student growth rather than ranking or scores

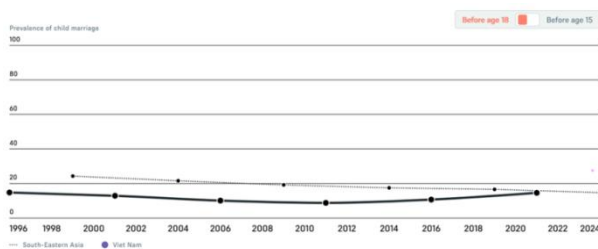
Authors compiled

The VNEN model has been shown to promote participatory and collaborative learning behaviors. Dang et al. (2022) found that VNEN significantly increased non-cognitive skills, particularly among ethnic minority students in the short term. Another study observed that VNEN students were more likely to ask questions and engage in peer feedback, with these behaviors persisting as students transitioned to lower secondary school (Vu et al., 2024). Projects were supported by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and implemented in partnership with the World Bank and the Mekong Development Research Institute, reoriented class instruction around student-centered, interactive methods. Studies report that implementing the VNEN model in approximately 2,500 primary schools led to increased classroom "talk-aloud" behaviors, peer discussion, and use of reflective questions indicators of enhanced metacognitive and analytical thinking across diverse student populations, including ethnic minorities.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role in bridging educational gaps, especially in disadvantaged regions. They provide scholarships that directly reduce the financial burden on underprivileged families and encourage children to stay in school. For instance, the Institute for Vietnamese Culture and Education (IVCE) established the *Rural Villages Scholarship Foundation*, awarding about 400 annual scholarships (worth ~200 million VND) to students in central provinces like Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị, alongside earlier initiatives building schools and funding students in the Central Highlands (Vietnamese American National Gala, 2006). Many NGOs also invest in building schools and libraries in rural and remote areas, improving both access and infrastructure. Saigon Children's Charity has made a profound impact in addressing educational inequality across Vietnam. From 1992 to 2022, the organization has built 222 kindergarten and primary schools in disadvantaged areas and provided comprehensive support, including scholarships, textbooks, uniforms, and even health assistance to over 43,000 children and young people to help them stay in school and thrive (Saigon Children's Charity, 2019)

Simultaneously, NGOs such as Plan International have launched Gender-Responsive School programs in remote provinces (e.g., Ha Giang), integrating gender awareness, reproductive health, life skills, and child protection into school curricula. These initiatives also empower girls to resist early marriage and expand their academic aspirations. These projects aim to protect ethnic minority adolescents and young people from becoming victims of early and forced marriage. The government also remains the primary driver of equitable education through policy and funding. Tuition exemption and fee reduction policies for poor students directly address financial inequality and ensure that economic hardship does not prevent access to schooling. In Vietnam, for example, Program 135 has been introduced to support particularly disadvantaged communes. Program 135, initiated in 1998, targets the most vulnerable communities, aiming to improve infrastructure, enhance education access, and raise awareness for better living standards. This program addresses typical causes of poverty among ethnic minorities and aims to reduce inequality between these groups and the majority population. (Phung, T. D., & Pham, T. M. 2022). Such initiatives demonstrate the government's recognition that long-term national development requires narrowing urban-rural disparities in education.

Figure 1. Child marriage ratio in Vietnam



Source: *childmarriagedata.org*

Additionally, some support for technological resources, such as donating computers and providing internet access, enables students in under-resourced areas to connect with modern learning tools, thus narrowing the digital divide. From 2006 - 2017, The Lawrence S. Ting Memorial Fund has significantly contributed to bridging the digital divide in Vietnam's education sector. Through its "Moving Forward with IT" program, the Fund has established 122 computer labs equipped with over 2,700 computers across 89 schools in 63 provinces. This initiative has benefited more than 200,000 students, providing them with essential access to information technology and enhancing their learning experiences (Lawrence S. Ting Memorial Fund).

5. Discussion

Previous reforms in Vietnam suggest that education can act as a lever for normative change when it emphasizes life skills, critical thinking, and inclusive curricula rather than rote learning (Jha & Kelleher, 2006; UNESCO, 2023). Pilot programs by NGOs and government bodies, such as bilingual education and community-based life-skills training, have shown promise in challenging early marriage and rigid gender roles while also improving school participation (UNICEF,

2021). However, evaluations consistently note barriers such as limited teacher training, short-term funding, and cultural resistance, underscoring that sustainable change requires long-term community engagement and systemic policy support (World Bank, 2019).

Overall, when compared with the theoretical frameworks, the Vietnamese context clearly illustrates how outdated norms are maintained through family expectations, peer influence, and institutional practices. Yet, as highlighted by Mackie et al. (2015) and the UNICEF–UNFPA Manual (2022), meaningful change becomes possible when communities witness peers adopting new behaviors and when dialogue is facilitated by trusted local actors. From my perspective, addressing outdated norms cannot rely solely on top-down legal prohibitions. Although laws against child marriage or corporal punishment are essential, they remain ineffective without parallel grassroots interventions. Educational approaches that engage parents, teachers, and community leaders are particularly critical. Embedding life skills, gender equality, and mental health awareness into curricula, together with community dialogues, could begin to break the feedback loops that sustain these harmful practices. This highlights education not only as an area impacted by outdated norms but also as a powerful mechanism for challenging and transforming them.

One major driver of educational disparities is the difference in quality and access between urban and rural areas. Urban schools tend to benefit from better infrastructure, more qualified teachers, and greater exposure to technology. In contrast, rural areas often face shortages of trained educators, outdated facilities, and limited internet access. As a result, students in rural settings may struggle to compete academically with their urban counterparts, creating a cycle in which geographical location dictates future opportunities. In rural areas, the lack of adequate educational infrastructure remains a pressing issue. Many schools suffer from deteriorating buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and limited facilities such as libraries or science laboratories. Without access to proper learning environments, students in these regions often face significant disadvantages compared to their urban peers. This infrastructural gap not only restricts the quality of instruction but also discourages active learning and exploration, as students cannot access resources essential for developing critical thinking and practical skills. For instance, Vietnam's schools still have many substandard classrooms, especially in remote areas. Official data show that around 87.4% of classrooms are in permanent buildings (Tạp chí Giáo dục, 2023). This implies roughly 12.6% (~59,500 out of ~465,500) remain semi-permanent or temporary (Tạp chí Giáo dục, 2023). In many mountainous provinces the situation is worse – for example, Tuyên Quang, Cao Bằng, Đắk Nông, Bình Phước and Sóc Trăng each had only ~48–55% permanent classrooms (Báo Nhân Dân, 2019). In short, a substantial number of rural schools still lack fully safe, permanent classrooms.

Teacher distribution also contributes to educational disparities. Highly qualified teachers are disproportionately concentrated in urban centers, where working conditions,

career opportunities, and salaries are more attractive. In contrast, rural schools frequently struggle with shortages of skilled educators and rely on less experienced staff. This imbalance creates unequal learning outcomes, as urban students benefit from exposure to advanced teaching methods, while rural students may lack proper guidance. Over time, this unequal distribution perpetuates systemic inequality in educational achievement and future opportunities.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the persistence of outdated social norms in Vietnam and their impact on children and adolescents, particularly in rural and ethnic minority communities. While legal reforms and child protection policies exist, cultural expectations surrounding gender roles, early marriage, corporal punishment, and mental health stigma continue to influence behavior and educational outcomes. At the same time, educational disparities across regions and communities amplify the effects of these norms, with access to quality, inclusive, and gender-sensitive education remaining uneven. However, emerging initiatives, such as community-based programs and curricula integrating life skills, gender equality, and mental health awareness, demonstrate the potential for education to act as a transformative force. Therefore, rather than relying solely on top-down legal measures, meaningful change requires engagement at the grassroots level, including the involvement of parents, teachers, and local leaders, alongside culturally grounded interventions. These efforts illustrate that education in Vietnam can then do more than reflect old social norms—it can help challenge and change them, creating fairer and more inclusive opportunities for children.

References

1. Báo Nhân Dân. (2019, October 4). *Removing difficulties in school facilities*. Nhan Dan Newspaper. <https://nhandan.vn/thao-go-kho-khan-co-so-vat-chat-truong-lop-hoc-post372845.html> [in Vietnamese]
2. Bicchieri, C. (2006). *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Blanden, J. (2023). Educational inequality. In E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, & L. Woessmann (Eds.), *Handbook of the economics of education*
4. (Vol. 6, pp. 1–49). Elsevier. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1574069222000034>
5. Center for Community Support and Development Studies, Real-Time Analytics, & United Nations Development Programme. (2024, June 28).
6. *E-governance performance in 2023 and the need to close the digital divide*. Vietnam Law and Legal Forum Magazine. <https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/e-governance-performance-in-2023-and-the-need-to-close-the-digital-divide-72056.html>
7. Dang, H.-A. H., Glewwe, P., Lee, J., & Vu, K. (2022). *The impact evaluation of Vietnam's Escuela Nueva (New School) program on students' cognitive and non-cognitive skills* (GLO Discussion Paper No. 1017) [Working paper]. Global Labor Organization. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/248704/1/GLO-DP-1017.pdf>
8. DeJaeghere, J., Dao, V., Duong, B.-H., & Luong, P. (2021, February 8). *Inequalities in learning in Vietnam: Teachers' beliefs about and classroom practices for ethnic minorities* (RISE Working Paper No. 21/061). RISE Programme. <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/inequalities-learning-vietnam-teachers-beliefs-about-and-classroom-practices-ethnic.html>
9. General Statistics Office (GSO), & UNICEF. (2021). *Survey on the Sustainable Development Goals for Children and Women in Viet Nam 2020–2021* (SDGCW). GSO & UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/reports/viet-nam-sdg-indicators-children-and-women-survey-2020-2021>
10. General Statistics Office of Vietnam. (2019, October). *Press release: Preliminary results of the 2019 population and housing census*. General Statistics Office of Vietnam. <https://www.nso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2019/10/press-release-preliminary-results-the-2019-population-and-housing-census/>
11. Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>
12. Girls Not Brides. (2024). *Child marriage in Viet Nam*. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/vietnam/>
13. Hai, N. X., Thao, D. T., Ngoc, T. T. B., & Hang, L. T. T. (2023). Developing inclusive education support models for children with disabilities in Vietnam. *International Journal of Elementary Education*, 12(2), 43–52. <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/15005/the-impact-evaluation-of-vietnams-escuela-nueva-new-school-program-on-students-cognitive-and-non-cognitive-skills>
14. Hoang Kim, K., & Nguyen Thu Dung. (2021). Child labor and poverty reduction in Vietnam: Issues and policy implications. *Lentera Hukum*, 8(3), 471–502. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356674264>
15. Institute for Vietnamese Culture and Education. (2019, August 27). *Scholarship foundation set up for rural Vietnamese students*. Vietnam News. <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/534599/scholarship-foundation-set-up-for-rural-vietnamese-students.html>

16. Internet Society. (2025). *Country report for Viet Nam*. Internet Society. <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/en/reports/VN>
17. Jha, J., & Kelleher, F. (2006). *Boys' underachievement in education: An exploration in selected Commonwealth countries*. Commonwealth Secretariat.
18. Lawrence S. Ting Memorial Fund. (n.d.). *Moving forward with IT*. <https://www.lstf.org.vn/en/what-we-do/education/moving-forward-with-it/>
19. Lotus Project. (2022, October 5). *The rural decline: The Vietnam case study*. Lotus Project. <https://www.lotus-project.org/blog/2022/10/5/the-rural-decline-the-vietnam-case-study>
20. Mackie, G., Moneti, F., Denny, E., & Shakya, H. (2015). *What are social norms? How are they measured?* UNICEF Office of Research – Innocent <https://cnxus.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/04/42009203020Whole20What20are20Social20Norms.pdf>
21. Nguyen, D. D., Phan, T. H., & Ha, M. T. C. (2022, September). *Tackling unequal access to digital education in Viet Nam during the COVID-19 pandemic* (ADB Development Case Study No. 2022-3) [PDF]. Asian Development Bank Institute. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366065547>
22. Phung, T. D., & Pham, T. M. (2022). *Programme-135: Addressing poverty and inequality in Viet Nam*. Mekong Development Research Institute. <https://mdri.org.vn/publications/programme-135-addressing-poverty-and-inequality-in-viet-nam/>
23. Plan International Vietnam. (2025, August 25). *Workshop held to review projects on gender-based violence protection for adolescent girls*. Vietnam Times. <https://vietnamtimes.thoidai.com.vn/workshop-held-to-review-project-on-gender-based-violence-protection-for-adolescent-girls-80956.html> [in Vietnamese]
24. Reddit. (2024). *AI-powered teacher training GameAid project in Vietnam*. Reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/VietNam/comments/1gh17pw>
25. Tap Chi Cong San. (2022). *Poverty reduction in Viet Nam: Challenges and solutions*. Communist Review. https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/web/english/culture-society/-/asset_publisher/nI7yCFQ01T3T/content/poverty-reduction-in-viet-nam-challenges-and-solutions
26. Tạp chí Giáo dục. (2023, December 7). *Fundamental and comprehensive education reform: Facilities still fail to meet demand*. Journal of Education. <https://tapchigiaoduc.edu.vn/article/88251/211/doi-moi-can-ban-toan-dien-giao-duc-co-so-vat-chat-van-chua-dap-ung-nhu-cau/> [in Vietnamese]
27. The Orchid. (2024, September 19). *Education inequalities in ethnic minority groups* [Blog post]. The Orchid. <https://sites.google.com/view/orchidto/blogs/education-inequities-in-ethnic-minority-groups>
28. Tran, K. (2025, March 13). *Addressing education inequality in Vietnam: Barriers and policy suggestions*. King's Think Tank Spectrum. <https://kingsthanctank.spectrum.wordpress.com/2025/03/13/addressing-education-inequality-in-vietnam-barriers-and-policy-suggestions/>
29. Tran, N. T., & Vu, Q. T. (2021). Curriculum and assessment reforms in Vietnam: Moving beyond rote learning. In Y. Zhu & D. Tan (Eds.), *Education reform in Asia* (pp. 85–103). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93951-9_5
30. UNESCO. (2023). *Vietnam steps up investment in education with UNESCO support*. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/vietnam-step-investment-education-unesco-support>
31. UNESCO, & UNFPA Vietnam. (2022). *Training of trainers on comprehensive sexuality and life skills education*. UNESCO & UNFPA. <https://vietnam.unfpa.org/en/news/training-trainers-comprehensive-sexuality-and-life-skills-education>
32. UNFPA, & UNICEF. (2018). *Ending child marriage, empowering girls: Policy brief for Viet Nam*. United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/reports/ending-child-marriage-empowering-girls>
33. UNICEF. (2016, March 17). *Bilingual education is a gateway to equality in Vietnam*. UNICEF Viet Nam Blog. <https://unicefvietnam.blogspot.com/2016/03/bilingual-education-is-gateway-to.html> [in Vietnamese]
34. UNICEF. (2020). *Child marriage in Viet Nam: An analysis of available data*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/media/8676/file/Child%20marriage.pdf>
35. UNICEF. (2021, December). *Gender transformative education: Reimagining education for a more just and inclusive world*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/gender-transformative-education>
36. UNICEF. (2023, November 21). *Mental health care for Viet Nam's young generation needs enhancing*. Vietnam News. <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/1636864/mental-health-care-for-viet-nams-young-generation-needs-enhancing.html>
37. UNICEF, & General Statistics Office. (2021). *Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2020–2021: Survey findings report*. UNICEF & GSO. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/media/9576/file/Ful%20report%20-%20MICS%206.pdf>
38. UNICEF, & UNFPA. (2022). *Manual on social norms and change* (2nd ed.). UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/manual-social-norms-and-change>

39. UNICEF Viet Nam. (2020). *Violence against children in Viet Nam: Key findings from the National Survey (MICS 2019–20)*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/media/8656/file/Child%20discipline.pdf>
40. UNICEF Viet Nam. (2021, December 21). *Viet Nam factsheet* [PDF]. UNICEF. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iuIQ2rci_BU6gvz_L6d-qQWDxNmzA5U/view
41. UNICEF Viet Nam. (2022). *Education for sustainable development – Inclusive learning for all programmes*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/inclusive-education>
42. UNICEF Viet Nam. (2023). *Changing children's lives – Education highlights & results*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/unicef-results-2023>
43. United Kingdom Government. (2025, July). *Vietnam country policy and information note: Unaccompanied children (Accessible version)*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vietnam-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-unaccompanied-children-vietnam-july-2024-accessible-version>
44. Vietnam National Institute of Mental Health, & Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research. (2023). *Vietnam Adolescent Mental Health Survey (V-NAMHS) report*. <https://qcmhr.org/docman/reports/15-vnamhs-report-eng-15-feb-2023/file>
45. Vietnam News. (2024). *Ha Noi-based school nurtures future English teachers for remote mountainous district*. Vietnam News. <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/1637279/ha-noi-based-school-nurtures-future-english-teachers-for-remote-mountainous-district.html>
46. Vietnam Times. (2021, March 8). *Understanding gender inequality through playful education*. Vietnam Times. <https://vietnamtimes.thoidai.com.vn/understanding-gender-inequality-through-playful-education-31369.html> [in Vietnamese]
47. Vietnam.vn. (2024). *Momentum for comprehensive educational development*. Vietnam.vn. <https://www.vietnam.vn/en/don-bay-phat-trien-giao-duc-toan-dien> [in Vietnamese]
48. Vu, K., Dao, V., DeJaeghere, J., & Glewwe, P. (2024). Collaborative learning in the Vietnam Escuela Nueva model and students' learning behaviors: A mixed methods longitudinal study. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 106, Article 103017. <https://escuelanueva.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Collaborative-learning-in-the-Vietnam-Escuela-Nueva-Model-and-students-learning-behaviors-A-mixed-methods-longitudinal-study.pdf>
49. W. Montague Cobb–NMA Health Institute. (2022). Socio-cultural norms and gender equality of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-022-01393-5>
50. World Bank. (2019). *Growing smarter: Learning and equitable development in East Asia and Pacific*. World Bank Publications. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/313331524827682600/pdf/Growing-smarter-learning-and-equitable-development-in-East-Asia-and-Pacific.pdf>
51. World Bank. (2022). *Vietnam poverty and equity assessment: From the last mile to the next mile*. World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099115004242216918/pdf/P176261155e1805e1bd6e14287197d61965ce02eb562.pdf>