

Strengthening Child Protection and Social Work in Vietnam

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Vietnam is undergoing a significant transformation in its child protection efforts, marked by the implementation of the 2024 Decree on Social Work (Vietnam Government Portal, 2024). This decree, together with the Law on Children (2016) (Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs - MOLISA, 2016), lays a comprehensive legal foundation for protecting children's rights and delivering high-quality social work services. These reforms underscore the government's recognition of social work as a critical pillar in safeguarding children and supporting families.

Current Challenges in Child Protection Despite these advancements, child protection remains a critical priority due to several enduring challenges. Approximately 68.4% of children aged 1 to 14 have experienced caregiver violence (UNICEF, 2023). Cultural norms emphasizing obedience often silence children's voices, and rapid socioeconomic changes have introduced new vulnerabilities, such as increased family stress, child labor, and exploitation, particularly in rural and underserved communities.¹

Urbanization and rapid economic transition have also created instability for families and children. Issues like unemployment, poor access to services, and child exploitation are rising - especially in rural and marginalized communities, where safety nets are minimal. These circumstances compromise children's development and increase their exposure to harm.

A particularly vulnerable group includes children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and those from migrant families. These children often face additional layers of discrimination and have limited access to healthcare, education, and protection

¹ General Statistics Office (GSO) [Viet Nam] and UNICEF. (2020). *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019–2020, Survey Findings Report*. Hanoi, Viet Nam: GSO and UNICEF.

services. Barriers such as language, mobility, and systemic exclusion make it difficult for them to receive adequate support (UNICEF, 2022).²

Recent Legislative Developments The 2024 Decree on Social Work introduces national standards and guidelines for professional social work services across health, education, and community settings (Vietnam Government Portal, 2024).³ This policy seeks to formalize the presence of social work in institutions, such as schools and hospitals, to address mental health needs, social crises, and child protection concerns in a timely manner. Accompanying the decree are two guiding circulars from Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and Ministry of Health (MOH):

- MOET's Circular emphasizes the integration of counseling and social work positions within educational institutions to improve psychological well-being and offer preventive interventions for students (MOET Circular, 2024).^{4,5}
- MOH's Circular mandates the inclusion of social work services in hospitals. Services include psychosocial counseling, support for vulnerable patients, and family-centered care planning (MOH Circular, 2024).⁷ Institutions such as Bach Mai Hospital have pioneered models combining outreach and direct support for families in need (MOLISA, 2023).⁸

These measures represent a more comprehensive response to child welfare needs and set a precedent for inter-sectoral collaboration. However, effective enforcement relies on coordinated leadership and resource availability.

Implementation Gaps A key challenge lies in the enforcement of policies. With the dissolution of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the transfer of responsibilities to the MOH, the system is adapting to a new structure (Decision No. 729/ QĐ-BYT & 732/ QĐ-BYT, 2025).

Vietnam's social work system is evolving within the broader context of government restructuring and policy reform. Previously, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and

² UNICEF. (2022). *The Rights of Every Child: Children with Disabilities, Ethnic Minority Children, and Children Affected by Migration in Viet Nam*. Hanoi, Viet Nam: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Vietnam.

³ Government of Vietnam. (2024). *Decree No. 110/2024/ND-CP on Social Work*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Government of Vietnam.

⁴ Government of Vietnam. (2023). *Circular No. 29/2023/TT-BGDDT on the Integration of Counseling and Social Work Positions in Educational Institutions*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Ministry of Education and Training.

⁵ UNICEF Vietnam. (2023). *UNICEF applauds Viet Nam's progress on the establishment of social work and counseling positions in Health and Education institutions*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/press-releases/unicef-applauds-viet-nams-progress-establishment-social-work-and-counseling>

⁶ UNICEF Vietnam. (2023). *Vietnam Country Office Annual Report 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/152206/file/Vietnam-2023-COAR.pdf>

⁷ Ministry of Health. (2015). *Circular No. 43/2015/TT-BYT on the Organization and Operation of Social Work Units in Hospitals*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Ministry of Health.

⁸ Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. (2023). *Report on the Implementation of Social Work Services in Healthcare Institutions*. Hanoi, Vietnam: MOLISA.

Social Affairs (MOLISA) was the primary body overseeing child protection and social services. However, following the 2025 ministerial reorganization, MOLISA no longer exists as a standalone ministry. Its functions have been transferred to specialized departments under the MOH and other relevant bodies.⁹¹⁰

Two key agencies now play prominent roles in the administration of child protection and social work:

- Administration of Maternal and Children's Affairs (AMCA): On March 4, 2025, the Minister of Health issued Decision No. 729/QĐ-BYT, establishing AMCA as a specialized agency under the MOH. AMCA is tasked with advising the Minister on state management and implementation of laws and policies related to maternal and child health, child care and protection, early childhood development, and children's participation in decision-making processes.¹¹
- Administration of Social Protection: Also formalized under Decision No. 732/QĐ-BYT issued on March 4, 2025, the Administration of Social Protection is a specialized agency under the MOH. This agency is responsible for managing and implementing policies related to social assistance, the protection of vulnerable groups, and the development of social work practices within the health sector.¹²

At the provincial level, social work centers continue to deliver services including counseling, rehabilitation, and reintegration, especially for vulnerable children and families. However, these services remain disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, with limited outreach in rural and mountainous communities.

Yet, disparities persist. While urban centers benefit from institutional infrastructure, rural areas still face limited access to trained personnel and basic services. A 2023 UNICEF Vietnam report noted that only 35% of rural schools had access to social workers, compared to 78% in urban areas (UNICEF, 2023).¹³

Strategic Recommendations To strengthen child protection, four core strategies are essential:

1. Strengthen Enforcement: Increase budget allocations for child protection units and provide mandatory training for frontline staff and local authorities.¹⁴

⁹ Government of Vietnam. (2025). *Decree No. 42/2025/ND-CP on the Functions, Tasks, Powers, and Organizational Structure of the Ministry of Health*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Government of Vietnam.

¹⁰ PS Engage. (2025). *Government Overhaul in Vietnam*. Retrieved from <https://ps-engage.com/vietnam-government/>

¹¹ Ministry of Health. (2025). *Decision No. 729/QĐ-BYT on the Establishment of the Administration of Maternal and Children's Affairs*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Ministry of Health.

¹² Ministry of Health. (2025). *Decision No. 732/QĐ-BYT on the Establishment of the Administration of Social Protection*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Ministry of Health.

¹³ UNICEF Viet Nam. (2023). *Vietnam Country Office Annual Report 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/152206/file/Vietnam-2023-COAR.pdf>

¹⁴ UNICEF. (2020). *Child Protection Systems Strengthening: Approach, Benchmarks, and Interventions*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/documents/child-protection-systems-strengthening>

2. Enhance Public Awareness: Implement culturally relevant nationwide education campaigns that inform communities about children's rights and abuse prevention. Community leaders, teachers, and parents should be trained to recognize signs of abuse and refer cases appropriately.¹⁵
3. Integrate Economic Support: Ensure that vulnerable families benefit from financial aid programs by simplifying application processes and aligning support with child welfare goals. Programs such as conditional cash transfers could be expanded to encourage school attendance and reduce child labor (ILO, 2022).¹⁶
4. Improve Data Systems: Establish centralized, real-time data collection tools to monitor trends in abuse and policy impact, particularly in underserved regions. Data should be disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity, and disability to inform tailored interventions.^{17,18}

The Role of Social Work Social work is central to the child protection system in Vietnam. Case management practices - assessment, planning, intervention, and monitoring - are applied across hospitals, schools, and community services. Social workers are increasingly recognized as key actors in identifying at-risk children and facilitating long-term support.

According to the MOLISA, 55% of child accidents occur at home. To address this, MOLISA introduced the Safe Home model under Decision 548, which outlines 33 safety criteria across six categories. A home must meet at least 23 of these, including 15 mandatory criteria, and report no child injuries within a year to be certified. MOLISA also collaborates with the MOH and the MOET to implement the Safe Community and Safe School models. As of now, nearly 6 million households, 10,218 schools, and 1,824 communities have met the respective safety standards.¹⁹

A case highlighted by the UK Home Office (2024) describes how Vietnamese authorities intervened to rescue children trafficked for labor in a northern province. Through collaboration with social workers and local services, the children received shelter, counseling, and reintegration support, while their families were offered financial assistance to reduce vulnerability to future exploitation. This case reflects

¹⁵ UNICEF Viet Nam. (2022). Vietnam Country Office Annual Report 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/136511/file/Vietnam-2022-COAR.pdf>
 UNICEF. (2014). Ending Violence Against Children: Six Strategies for Action. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/66906/file/Ending-Violence-Against-Children-Six-strategies-For-Action.pdf>

¹⁶ International Labour Organization. (2022). *The Role of Social Protection in the Elimination of Child Labour*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40ipec/documents/publication/wcms_845168.pdf

¹⁷ UNICEF. (2021). *Child Protection Strategy 2021–2030*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/104416/file/Child-Protection-Strategy-2021.pdf>

¹⁸ UNICEF. (2022). *Improving Data for Women and Children*. Retrieved from https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Improving-data-for-women-and-children_2022.pdf

¹⁹ Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). (2023). *Annual Report on Child Protection Activities*. Hanoi, Vietnam: MOLISA <https://vietnamnews.vn/opinion/1582914/molisa-building-a-safe-environment-for-children-is-an-essential-task.html>

Vietnam's institutional efforts to address child exploitation, despite ongoing enforcement challenges.²⁰

In addition to emergency interventions, social workers play a preventive role by working with schools to implement life skills training, conduct family counseling, and mediate school drop-out risks. Preventive work is critical to reducing long-term harm and building resilience among children and families.

Workforce and Capacity Building Vietnam currently has around 30,000 social workers. However, many lack formal training or professional accreditation. The social work education system is evolving, with over 50 universities now offering degree programs, and MOET actively pursuing standardization (MOET Circular, 2024).²¹

International partnerships have played a pivotal role in advancing social work education in Vietnam. Notably, the Social Work Education Enhancement Program (SWEPP)—a collaborative initiative involving San José State University, USAID, Cisco Systems, and eight Vietnamese universities—has significantly contributed to capacity building through faculty training, curriculum development, and improved technological infrastructure (Nguyen & Hugman, 2021; Nguyen & Yamada, 2019).²²

Despite this progress, gaps remain. Rural provinces often struggle to attract and retain qualified personnel due to lack of incentives and infrastructure. Providing scholarships, establishing rural training centers, and recognizing social work as a civil service profession could help address these shortages.

Looking Ahead Despite structural challenges, Vietnam has made considerable strides toward building an inclusive, professional, and responsive child protection system. Continued investment in rural outreach, training programs, and culturally aligned care models is critical to advancing these gains.

Cross-sectoral collaboration will be key moving forward. Building alliances between health, education, justice, and civil society organizations can strengthen referral pathways, promote shared accountability, and optimize resource use. Leveraging

²⁰ UK Home Office. (2024). *Country Policy and Information Note: Unaccompanied Children, Vietnam*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vietnam-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-unaccompanied-children-vietnam-july-2024-accessible-version>

²¹ Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). (2024). *Circular on Social Work Education Standardization*. Hanoi, Vietnam: MOET.

²² Nguyen, T. T. L., & Hugman, R. (2021). *Social work education in Vietnam: Developments and progress*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352911038_Social_work_education_in_Vietnam_developments_and_progress

Nguyen, T. T. L., & Yamada, A. M. (2019). *Social work education in Vietnam*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335509581_Social_work_education_in_Vietnam

technology for remote support and virtual case monitoring can also improve service reach.

Conclusion The vision for child protection in Vietnam is clear: every child should grow up in a safe, supportive environment that nurtures their development and protects their rights. Achieving this vision requires coordinated efforts from government institutions, social workers, educators, and civil society. With the legal frameworks in place and a growing foundation for social work, Vietnam is positioned to turn its policy commitments into lasting, impactful change.

Building a future where no child is left behind will depend on continuous evaluation, policy innovation, and sustained public commitment. Empowering children, supporting families, and equipping professionals with the right tools are all steps toward a safer, more inclusive Vietnam for generations to come.