

Dimensions of Marital Conflict in Contemporary Vietnamese Families

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Abstract:

Although marital conflicts are not a new issue, they continue to attract significant attention from researchers. In today's world, under the pressures of life, marital conflicts manifest in more diverse forms. This article provides an overview of the prevalence of conflicts, their manifestations, and the underlying causes in marital life, as well as the consequences of these conflicts on relationships. From this, the author highlights various dimensions of marital conflicts in contemporary Vietnamese families.

Keywords: *marital conflict, conflict, Vietnamese family*

1. Introduction

The family is an essential social institution, crucial for ensuring the stability and prosperity of society when it effectively fulfills the functions expected of it. After 30 years of renovation, Vietnamese society has undergone continuous economic, cultural, and social transformations. These changes are the result of Vietnam's increasingly deep and proactive integration into the globalization process, reflecting the efforts of the Party and the government to lift the country out of backwardness and underdevelopment, advancing towards industrialization. However, these changes have significantly impacted the family, leading to numerous issues such as shifts in family structure, functions, value orientations, and relationships, as well as increasing rates of divorce, separation, conflict, and domestic violence—factors that threaten the stability and sustainability of families.

Statistics from 2023, provided by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), indicate various causes of marital crises: 27.7% stem from lifestyle differences, 25.9% from infidelity, 13% from economic factors, 6.7% from domestic violence, 2.2% from health issues, and 1.3% from prolonged physical separation. All of these crises tend to result in divorce when no resolution can be found.

The statistics also reveal multiple explanations for these issues. Modern lifestyles have greatly impacted family life, eroding traditional behavioral patterns among family members, and weakening relationships, especially between spouses. Additionally, the deterioration of family principles and norms, along with the increasing acceptance of deviant behavior, has become more prevalent. Family members are no longer as committed to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities, leading to a range of social problems that infiltrate families, causing distress for both families and society. The risk of marital breakdown and divorce has become one of the greatest challenges facing Vietnamese families today.

In the current context of international integration, alongside the causes already identified, there are also other factors influencing marital conflicts in contemporary Vietnamese families.

2. Literature Review:

This study reviews notable studies from sociologists on marital conflict, focusing on the main findings such as the prevalence, manifestations, and causes of conflict in marital life, as well as its consequences for the relationship. The discussion then explores the research results, the achievements that can be inherited from previous studies, and the gaps that open new research directions regarding marital conflict in families.

Marital conflict manifests in various ways, depending on the severity of the conflict. [24] said that “Forms of family conflict are highly diverse, ranging from mild expressions like discomfort, silence, and sulking, to more overt reactions like non-cooperation, emotional and verbal abuse, arguments, and physical violence”. According to [21], [30], [8] Some theorists and researchers suggest that conflict is a normal part of marital relationships. Conflict is often considered an inevitable phenomenon that occurs in all relationships [30]. In the research field, distinctions have been made between overt and covert conflict, indicating that conflict is not always expressed outwardly [21], [9]. Most researchers have studied overt conflict displays such as disagreements, arguments, verbal aggression, and physical violence [21], while covert conflict is harder to measure and thus seldom researched. In this study, the researcher focuses on overt and outwardly expressed conflict.

According to [1], [2], [5], [6], [7], four types of behavior in response to conflict are identified: silence; behaviors involving emotional violence (insults, verbal abuse, mockery); behaviors involving physical violence (hitting, pushing, throwing objects at others); and punitive isolation (kicking someone out of the house). Among these four categories, silence is the most common coping mechanism for both husband and wife during conflicts in the study sample.

The highest expression of marital conflict is domestic violence, which involves abusive behavior, beatings, or insults by one or more family members that harm the dignity, health, mental well-being, or life of one or more others [20].

If the family is a special social institution, a microcosm of society, then domestic violence is a specific and small-scale version of social violence. However, the key difference between domestic violence and other forms of social violence is that domestic violence occurs between people who are related by blood or marriage, living under the same roof in what is supposed to be the “home”—a place of happiness. Research shows that not all marital conflicts result in violent outcomes, but in many cases, the root cause of domestic violence is also the cause of conflict between spouses. [15] assessed common marital issues at this stage, finding that the

most frequent problems involve finances, childcare, and sexual matters, while values, commitment, spirituality, and violence were less common concerns. Still, it must be acknowledged that there is a close relationship between conflict and domestic violence: the more conflicts a household experiences, the more likely violence is to occur. [12] point that this relationship is particularly strong in younger households. The victims of domestic violence are often women, with many believing that men have the right to "discipline" their wives (but not the other way around). Due to such beliefs, many women endure marriages filled with violence [1].

Both domestic and international research has pointed to a wide range of causes for marital conflict, which can be divided into the following categories:

First, marital conflict can arise from differences in individual or family characteristics. According to [25], such differences include variables like age, race, class, religion, and values, as well as resources like education level, courtship time, skills, self-esteem, and health. This aligns with previous studies by [4], and [3], which found that marriages where spouses differ in age, religion, and education tend to experience more conflict and lead to higher divorce rates. *Second*, psychological conflicts are considered a fundamental source of marital discord. [16] suggested that personality differences, such as anxiety, depression, or a pessimistic outlook, contribute to conflict within the family. Psychological disagreements, differing needs, and preferences can lead to conflict when couples fail to communicate, compromise, or empathize with each other.

Third, societal changes are viewed as macro-level factors that force families to confront numerous issues, including shifts in family structure, changing value orientations, and increasing rates of divorce, separation, conflict, and domestic violence. These societal pressures create significant challenges for couples as they navigate the tension between old and new, tradition and modernity, renewal and preservation.

Fourth, from a gender perspective, gender inequality is seen as a deep-rooted cause of marital conflict. According to [11], the primary source of conflict and discord in marital relationships is gender inequality, particularly where women bear greater responsibilities but receive little support or recognition from men (husbands). As long as women continue to face oppression and lack respect in marriage, conflict will persist. "As long as traditional gender norms are preserved, family conflict is unavoidable." [20].

In recent years, researchers have also focused on identifying specific, direct causes of marital conflict, such as financial difficulties, differences in education, child-rearing, sexual matters, and alcohol use [19].

Marital conflict directly affects the individuals in the relationship, resulting in psychological distress, emotional rifts, fading affection, and diminished responsibility and enthusiasm for one another. The more severe consequence is domestic violence, with the risk of separation, estrangement, or even divorce. Studies have shown that marital conflict is associated with a range of symptoms, including depression, eating disorders, alcoholism, and excessive drinking outside the home [10]. Marital conflict also seriously affects the quality of family life, the development of children's personalities, and their future prospects [14].

3. Research Methodology

This study utilized in-depth interviews with 30 individuals from the research site in 2023. The interviews were conducted to gather information on marital differences, the causes of conflict, and particularly how the participants perceive their own marital relationships. In addition, the study employed document analysis methods. The sources reviewed include research related to the current state of marital conflicts in families, their causes, and manifestations. It also covered the severity and consequences of these conflicts on marital relationships as well as the methods for resolving conflicts.

4. Results and Discussion

The marital disagreements observed in this study can be categorized into four main groups. The first group involves conflicts arising directly from the marital relationship itself, including mismatches in lifestyle, thought patterns, personalities, and emotional issues between the spouses. The second group consists of conflicts related to economic life, including work, livelihood, and money management. The third group relates to handling relationships and interactions with others, such as parents and friends. Lastly, the fourth group concerns disagreements over child-rearing and education.

Conflicts Regarding Lifestyle, Thought Patterns, and Personality

According to the survey results, married couples in Vietnam today frequently face disagreements over thoughts, lifestyles, and habits of their spouse. Each individual enters marriage with their own personality, thoughts, and lifestyle that have been shaped over time. These differences and incompatibilities can lead to disagreements and dissatisfaction.

[22] shows that after marriage, men tend to maintain their individual lifestyles, habits, and preferences, while women often make more adjustments to accommodate their husbands and maintain harmony in the relationship. The lack of lifestyle and habit adjustments by men after marriage may contribute to the increase in women's dissatisfaction on this matter.

Women, in general, tend to be more dissatisfied with how their husbands express affection and care. Some scholars argue that women have higher expectations for emotional closeness and support within marriage, which men may find difficult to meet. Men are less likely to express affection and engage in activities that strengthen marital bonds, often leading to disappointment for women [16]. Women are more involved in caring for their spouse and expect reciprocal care and attention from their husbands. When these emotional expectations are unmet, women may feel frustrated or dissatisfied with their partners.

"I often feel sad when my husband and I argue, and I cry alone. It's frustrating because it feels like the issues in my heart haven't been fully resolved... I stay upset for days, thinking about the argument for days, not just after it's over." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

"Every time we argue, I feel sad for several days. Even when I'm working, I can't focus because I'm thinking about the argument. I wonder if he's sad too. He probably is, but when he works, he forgets everything, while I keep thinking about it." (Female, 32 years old, businesswoman).

Additionally, marital conflict can be influenced by individual characteristics before entering marriage, such as age, race, class, religion, and values. Variables that reflect personal resources—such as education level, dating duration, skills, self-esteem, and health—also play a role. Marriages where spouses differ in age, religion, and education levels often experience more conflict and are at a higher risk of divorce. In line with previous findings, [18] also suggests that education, occupation, place of residence, and age significantly impact the occurrence and intensity of family conflicts.

The data supports theoretical interpretations that conflicts are less frequent among couples with similar backgrounds and more common in couples with significant differences. This is especially true in families where the wife's income or education level is higher than the husband's.

"My husband and I have a lot of differences, but there's one issue we can't reconcile. I always want him to care about me more. There are times when I'm really busy and exhausted, and I just hope he understands and feels compassion for me. But he views my struggles as something 'normal'... In the early days of marriage, I was extremely disappointed. I thought marrying him would provide both emotional and financial support, but now he sees my hardships and doesn't feel a thing. It's heartbreaking. So whenever I'm too busy and can't manage everything at home, we end up arguing. I blame him for not caring, and he says it's no big deal." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

Negative emotional states in marital relationships are not just momentary; they accumulate over time and become the underlying causes of conflicts between spouses. In other words, emotional aspects between spouses are both a cause and a consequence of marital conflicts.

"Sometimes I regret saying harsh words. Once, I called him 'useless,' and he got angry and stopped talking to me. Later, when I tried to start a conversation, we ended up arguing again. During the argument, I realized he was still upset about what I said. Honestly, I regret it, but I told him it was because he pushed me too far." (Female, 28 years old, civil servant).

Conflicts also occur less frequently when both spouses come from the same region (province), as cultural and lifestyle similarities make interactions and family life smoother. This reinforces the traditional Vietnamese belief that compatibility in marriage is crucial for reducing differences in social status, personal characteristics, and family backgrounds. This cultural wisdom, expressed through sayings like "marriage between equals" or "a matching pot finds its lid," reflects the importance of similarity in ensuring a stable and conflict-free marriage.

Economic Conflicts

Economic conflicts often arise in families where the wife earns more than the husband. The most common disputes involve income contribution and household spending, especially in families where the wife's income exceeds that of the husband. Couples with equal incomes tend to experience fewer conflicts related to finances.

Income is considered a fundamental factor in balancing power between spouses.

When the husband is the primary earner and wants to control and make key family decisions, it often leads to a power struggle between husband and wife. Conversely, when roles are reversed and the wife is the main breadwinner, the husband may feel insecure about his role, which can intensify marital conflicts.

Similarly, issues regarding who manages the family's money are common. In Vietnamese culture, men often view themselves as the heads of the household, and it can be difficult for them to feel comfortable if they earn less than their wives. Women, too, tend to expect their husbands to be better earners. As a result, conflicts over income contributions and family expenditures are more frequent in families where the wife earns more than the husband.

"I was upset with my husband for a while because he stayed home too much. He said he was looking for work but was picky, refusing jobs that didn't suit him. Meanwhile, I was the only one working during a tough time, and we argued a lot about money and expenses." (Female, 50 years old, businesswoman).

"My husband and I also argue about money. He's frugal, but he's not the one managing the household budget, so he doesn't realize how expensive everything is now. School fees for the kids and other costs add up, but he doesn't know that. He's always saying I complain about money all the time. As for his work, I don't interfere, so I don't know much about it." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

Conflicts over Handling Relationships with Others

Regarding caregiving and interactions with both sides of the family, women seem to experience more conflicts with their spouses than men. In traditional Vietnamese society, daughters are often seen as "someone else's child" since women are expected to marry and become part of their husband's family [28]. As daughters-in-law, women are responsible for caring for their husband's family and maintaining good relations with them [13]. Women are typically taught to follow their husband's family's customs and to balance relationships with them [13].

Patriarchal values place significant expectations and demands on women's responsibilities toward their husband's family, which can lead to added pressures and responsibilities for women. As a result, women tend to face more disagreements concerning the care and treatment of parents and both sides of the family than men.

"Honestly, I get really upset when I argue with my husband because he expects me to take care of all family responsibilities, both internal and external. It's all on me, and he doesn't get involved. We've argued about this a lot, but I've come to realize that being stubborn doesn't help. Sometimes being gentler gets better results. A little flattery works with him. There's no need to argue all the time. In those moments when I feel stuck, I go to church and pray that God will enlighten him. I rarely badmouth my husband; that would be a sin I'd have to confess. In our Catholic teachings, we're taught that wives must submit to their husbands, so I try to be patient." (Female, 35 years old, office worker).

"In everyday life, when we have conflicts, my wife and I usually resolve them with a few words. But my wife tends to tell both sides of the family about our issues, turning something small that we could easily resolve at home into a complicated problem with both families getting involved. I end up having to explain to everyone that it's not a big deal. We argue a lot about this, but it always happens again." (Male, 30 years old, civil servant).

Conflicts in Childcare and Education

In daily married life, satisfying physiological and sexual needs, along with fulfilling the reproductive role of maintaining the family line, is crucial for marital happiness. In traditional societies, sexual and reproductive functions were closely intertwined. However, in modern society, thanks to advancements in science and healthcare, couples can now separate these two functions. They have the right to choose how many children they want and when to have them, a right protected by law. Nonetheless, decisions regarding the number of children and the timing of their birth remain a joint responsibility between husband and wife. Disagreements can arise over when to have children and what contraceptive methods to use. Moreover, caring for and educating children, including physical care, teaching knowledge, morals, and lifestyle, is the parents' responsibility. These areas can easily lead to conflicts due to differing parental expectations, goals, and desires in raising children.

In Vietnam, [23] and [29] said that women tend to take on more of the child-rearing and caregiving responsibilities than men. Some scholars argue that this unequal burden on women can reduce their marital satisfaction.

"My husband and I have disagreements about contraception. Neither of us wants more children, but every contraceptive method has its challenges. I prefer external methods rather than things like an IUD, but I'm worried about accidents. As a result, sometimes we avoid intimacy, which is uncomfortable." (Female, 37 years old, homemaker).

Having multiple children increases parental responsibilities. In today's fast-paced and burdensome life, parenting becomes even more challenging. *"Since I had my third child, I've practically abandoned the second one. My husband keeps complaining that our second child is often sick and neglected. But with three kids to take care of on my own, I can't manage it all. My eldest daughter, who's in fourth grade, has to take care of herself, while the two younger ones, aged 4 and 2, keep me constantly busy. The house is always a mess, and I can't keep up with the cleaning. My husband is also busy and can't help much, so we argue a lot about the kids." (Female, 38 years old, government employee).*

When parents have multiple children, conflicts often revolve around caregiving and education. Differences in expectations and parenting styles can lead to disagreements.

"My husband and I often argue about how to raise the kids. When we only had one child, it was easier, but now with a second, they fight all the time. I get stressed, and it causes tension between us. My husband thinks that if the kids don't eat, I should feed them and take care of everything because they're still young. But I believe they should do what they're capable of. Our oldest is 7 and still doesn't eat on his own because we spoiled him. Now the second one is the same." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

"We have conflicts about our children's education. I want them to be independent, but my husband wants me to take care of every little thing for them. I'm not too concerned about them excelling in all subjects at school as long as they focus on learning English. My husband, on the other hand, wants them to excel in everything and hires tutors, which I disagree with. We argue about it sometimes, but it's not a big deal." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

"My husband and I often argue about childcare and education. He says I spoil the kids by buying them unnecessary things, which makes them misbehave. He also uses his busy schedule as an excuse to leave all the responsibilities to me. I have to handle everything, from feeding them to overseeing their schoolwork, and after work, I still have to do house chores. It's exhausting, and sometimes it causes tension between us." (Female, 35 years old, civil servant).

5. Conclusion

The above research and literature offer an overview of marital conflicts in general and within Vietnamese families in particular. Most studies on marital conflicts focus on the current state of these conflicts and their causes, as discussed. However, there has been little systematic research in Vietnam on the various dimensions of marital conflicts or solutions to reduce them. This presents an opportunity for further studies on marital conflicts in contemporary Vietnamese families.

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