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The Economic Efficiency of Improving Child Protection Legislation in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines the economic efficiency of strengthening child protection laws in Vietnam during 2020–2025. In this period, Vietnam implemented significant legal reforms aimed at preventing child abuse – including a National Assembly resolution and action plan (2020) and new legislation such as the Law on Justice for Minors (2024) – against a backdrop of persistent child abuse cases and rising public concern. We review these legal developments and analyze their impact using an interdisciplinary approach that combines legal/policy analysis with economic assessment. Drawing on data from Vietnam and comparative cases (e.g. Thailand, the Philippines, and select OECD countries), we identify key economic indicators that quantify the costs of child abuse (healthcare expenditures, social services, lost productivity, etc.) and estimate the potential benefits of enhanced legal

protections. We find that violence against children imposes substantial economic burdens (on the order of 2–3% of GDP in the East Asia–Pacific region), while preventive legal measures – though requiring upfront investment – yield high cost-benefit returns by averting long-term harm. The analysis includes a cost-effectiveness discussion of child protection interventions and a comparative perspective highlighting how similar socio-economic contexts have addressed child abuse. The findings suggest that improving child protection legislation in Vietnam is not only a moral and legal imperative but also an economically efficient strategy that can produce net positive social returns. Policy recommendations are offered to strengthen enforcement, integrate economic considerations into child welfare policymaking, and sustain the reforms' momentum.

Keywords: Economic Efficiency, Improving Child Protection Legislation, Vietnam

Introduction

Child abuse and exploitation present both a profound human rights challenge and a significant socio-economic concern for developing countries like Vietnam. Children who experience abuse often suffer lifelong consequences – from physical and mental health problems to diminished educational and earnings outcomes – which in turn translate into economic costs for society. The period 2020–2025 has seen Vietnam's government and legislature intensify efforts to combat child abuse through legal reforms and policy initiatives, recognizing that stronger child protection is essential for sustainable development. This paper investigates the economic efficiency of such legal reforms, asking: do improvements in child protection laws yield benefits that outweigh their implementation costs? We focus on Vietnam's recent experience, analyzing reforms in its legal framework for child protection and quantifying the economic impacts of child abuse and prevention measures.

Vietnam enters the 2020s with a firm commitment to children's rights, having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and enshrined child protection in its Constitution. Yet, despite prior laws (e.g. the Law on Children 2016) and policies, reports indicate child abuse remains distressingly common. More than 2,000 serious child abuse cases are reported annually in Vietnam, and in recent years high-profile fatal abuse cases have shocked the nation. Surveys reveal that violent discipline is widespread – a UNICEF study found over 68% of children (ages 1–14) have experienced violence at home. Such incidents underscore gaps in enforcement and preventative support under earlier laws, spurring calls for stronger legal measures. Crucially, they also highlight hidden economic costs: abused children often require medical care, protection services, or legal intervention, and they face higher risks of poor educational attainment, unemployment, and criminal involvement later in life. These outcomes impose costs on healthcare, social services, and the justice system, as well as indirect costs like lost productivity and intergenerational poverty.

Against this backdrop, Vietnam's National Assembly and government launched a series of child protection legal reforms

during 2020–2025 to address child abuse more effectively. Notably, in June 2020 the 14th National Assembly issued Resolution 121/2020/QH14 on “continuing to strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of policies and laws on the prevention and combat of child abuse”. This resolution acknowledged the systemic shortcomings and directed all branches of government to take urgent, coordinated action. It was followed by the Prime Minister’s Decision 1472/QĐ-TTg (September 2020), which promulgated a national action plan to implement the resolution, focusing on concrete measures to prevent violence and exploitation of children through 2025. In subsequent years, Vietnam enacted additional legislation: the Law on Justice for Minors (2024) reformed the juvenile justice system to treat under-18s (both offenders and victims) in age-appropriate, rehabilitative ways, and an amended Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (2022) (effective 2023) expanded protections for child victims of family violence. These initiatives represent a holistic strengthening of Vietnam’s legal framework for child protection, spanning criminal justice, social services, and community prevention efforts.

This article proceeds as follows. The Literature Review surveys prior research on the economic impact of child abuse and the cost-effectiveness of interventions, providing context for our analysis. The Methodology section outlines the mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative economic modeling with qualitative legal analysis. We then detail the Legal and Economic Background in Vietnam, describing the state of child protection and relevant economic indicators prior to 2020. The core of the paper is the Analysis of Legal Reforms (2020–2025) in Vietnam, examining the content of new laws and policies and any early evidence of their impact. Next, an Economic Efficiency Analysis evaluates costs and benefits: using available data, we estimate the monetary burden of child abuse in Vietnam and the potential savings or gains from improved legal protections. A Comparative Analysis contrasts Vietnam’s approach and outcomes with those of two neighboring countries (Thailand and the Philippines) and with insights from OECD countries, to draw lessons on best practices. Finally, the Discussion reflects on the findings, policy implications, and limitations, and the Conclusion summarizes why investing in stronger child protection laws is not only a moral imperative but also makes sound economic sense for Vietnam’s future.

Literature Review

Child Abuse and its Economic Impact: A substantial body of literature documents the detrimental effects of child maltreatment on individuals and society. Abused or neglected children are more likely to suffer *long-term health problems*, including mental health disorders (depression, anxiety, PTSD) and chronic diseases, and are at higher risk of substance abuse and suicidal behavior in adolescence and adulthood. They often experience *educational and developmental setbacks*, resulting in lower academic achievement and skill acquisition, which can reduce their productivity and earnings in later life. Fang *et al.* (2015)^[25] and other public health economists have attempted to quantify these effects by estimating the economic burden of child maltreatment in terms of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost and translating that into monetary value. For the East Asia-Pacific region, the estimated economic loss

due to consequences of child abuse was about 2% of regional GDP (based on mid-2000s data). In sensitivity analyses, aggregate costs ranged from roughly 1.3% up to 2.5% of GDP. These figures indicate that child abuse imposes a burden comparable to a significant recession or a major public health problem. In Vietnam specifically, one study estimated that the economic costs associated with child maltreatment could amount to approximately 1.4–2.5% of GDP when considering health, social and productivity impacts. Although such estimates have limitations (data gaps, methodological assumptions), they underscore that the status quo of pervasive violence against children carries *high societal costs*.

Global research also underscores that “prevention pays.” A comprehensive study by Perezniето *et al.* (2014)^[27] for the Overseas Development Institute estimated that the global economic cost of violence against children might be as high as \$7 trillion annually. This staggering figure on the order of 8% of global GDP exceeds the estimated investment needed to implement prevention strategies at scale. For example, the worst forms of child labor worldwide are calculated to cost nearly \$100 billion per year in lost human capital, and the costs of child soldiering are similarly high. These findings align with evidence from high-income countries. In the United Kingdom, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) applied a cost formula (originally developed by Prevent Child Abuse America) to tally both direct and indirect expenses of maltreatment. They found child abuse costs the UK around £12 billion per year in aggregate. This includes direct expenditures on healthcare (for injuries and trauma), child protective services, law enforcement and judicial processes, as well as longer-term costs such as special education, mental health care, foster care, lost productivity, and increased criminal justice involvement when victims later perpetrate offenses. On a per-case basis, the NSPCC estimated a single substantiated abuse case leads to roughly £20,000 in immediate system costs and as much as £60,000 in long-term costs over the individual’s life. Although methodologies differ, studies consistently highlight that *investing in prevention and early intervention yields a high return*: for every currency unit spent on protecting a child or treating a victim, several units of future costs can be saved. Early intervention – such as parenting support programs, therapeutic services for at-risk families, and child helplines – can mitigate harm and prevent further abuse, thereby reducing the need for costlier responses later.

Legal Reforms and Child Protection Outcomes: The literature on legal and policy interventions suggests that robust child protection laws are a necessary but not sufficient condition to reduce abuse. Cross-country analyses in child rights research show that countries which have comprehensive child protection legislation and well-resourced enforcement mechanisms tend to have lower rates of certain forms of abuse over time. For instance, bans on corporal punishment (physical discipline) are associated with shifts in social norms and reductions in physical violence against children. Sweden’s early ban in 1979 is often cited as an example that contributed to generational changes in attitudes and a decline in harsh punishment. More recently, Thailand amended its legal code to explicitly prohibit all corporal punishment of children, reflecting a legal trend in Southeast Asia toward zero tolerance for violence in child-rearing. Studies emphasize that beyond the

letter of the law, *implementation and awareness* are key. Without training for law enforcement and social workers, public education campaigns, and accessible reporting systems, even well-crafted laws may have limited effect. For example, research in Vietnam has pointed out that prior to 2020, shortcomings such as “social indifference” to domestic violence and lack of mandatory reporting requirements hindered enforcement of child protection laws. Legal scholars in Vietnam have argued that penalties for child abuse were too light and legal duties to report abuse were absent, creating weak deterrence. These insights informed the push to amend laws and introduce stricter provisions (e.g. considering criminalizing the failure to report child abuse).

There is also emerging literature on the *economic evaluation of child protection systems*. A notable example is a cost-effectiveness analysis in Thailand (UNICEF, 2023) which examined various child protection funding mechanisms such as kinship care grants, foster care, and family support allowances. By applying a cost-consequence analysis, it assessed how different interventions perform in terms of outcomes for vulnerable children relative to their costs. The Thai study found that family-based care and support programs generally offer better value for money than institutionalization, in line with global evidence that children fare better and at lower cost in family settings when safely possible. Specifically, Thailand’s modest “family-based allowance” (a cash support to poor families to prevent separation) was identified as the most cost-effective tool to improve child wellbeing, although its coverage and amount were limited. Kinship and foster care programs, while beneficial, were more costly per child and thus slightly less cost-efficient, suggesting that scaling up the family-based prevention allowance would yield high returns if abuse and family breakdown can be avoided. These findings illustrate a methodological approach that can be applied to Vietnam: evaluating how resources can be optimally allocated – between preventive services, protective services, and legal enforcement – to maximize positive outcomes for children per dollar spent.

In summary, existing research provides a strong rationale for strengthening child protection: beyond the ethical duty to safeguard children, there is a compelling economic argument that preventing child abuse is far cheaper than dealing with its consequences. Legal reforms are a critical component, especially when they enable effective enforcement and are accompanied by investments in social services. However, the literature also cautions that laws alone do not automatically translate into better outcomes; they must be part of a broader systems approach including community awareness, professional training, and data monitoring. This article builds on these insights by examining Vietnam’s recent reforms and analyzing their economic implications in detail.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods methodology integrating quantitative economic analysis with qualitative legal and policy analysis. Such an approach is well-suited to capture both the measurable economic impacts of child protection reforms and the qualitative context of legal change and implementation challenges.

Legal-Policy Analysis: We first conduct a doctrinal and content analysis of Vietnam’s child protection laws and

policies during 2020–2025. Key documents include National Assembly resolutions, government decrees/decisions, and newly enacted laws (and amendments) relevant to child protection and child rights. We review legislative texts (in translation), official summaries, and secondary analyses to identify the specific provisions aimed at preventing child abuse, protecting victims, and strengthening institutional responses. This analysis is complemented by policy reports from UNICEF, UN Women, and Vietnam’s Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), which shed light on the intended objectives and initial implementation of these reforms. We also examine parliamentary oversight reports (for instance, reports by the Supreme People’s Court on the outcomes of Resolution 121/2020) to gauge how the reforms have been put into practice. The legal analysis is qualitative, focusing on the nature of changes (e.g. new criminal offenses or penalties, new child protection services, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, etc.) and any early indicators of effectiveness (such as increased prosecution rates or more cases detected and serviced).

Economic Analysis: For the economic efficiency component, we use a cost-benefit framework. This involves two main steps: (1) Estimating the economic costs of child abuse in Vietnam (the “problem scenario”), and (2) Estimating the costs of interventions/legal reforms and their benefits in terms of cost savings or avoided losses (the “solution scenario”). In practice, precise cost-benefit calculations are limited by data availability; thus, we rely on a synthesis of existing data and modeling from prior research, applying it to the Vietnam context. We gather indicators such as: the prevalence of different forms of child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect) in Vietnam; the average immediate cost per case (medical treatment, social services, legal process); and the long-term costs per victim (e.g. lost productivity or additional healthcare/education needs over a lifetime). Sources for these include UNICEF and MOLISA statistics (e.g. number of reported cases, helpline call volumes), international studies adapted to Vietnam’s demographic and economic profile (such as Fang *et al.*’s regional DALY-based cost estimates), and any Vietnam-specific research (for instance, cost estimates mentioned by local experts or Vietnam-based economic studies if available). We also consider government budget data on child protection where accessible, to know how much is being spent on prevention and response (though detailed budget breakdowns were sparse, so we note qualitative trends such as reports of underfunding in some provinces).

Using these inputs, we construct a conceptual cost-benefit model: for example, we may estimate the annual economic loss due to child abuse in Vietnam in USD or as a percentage of GDP (drawing from regional % of GDP figures and adjusting to Vietnam’s GDP), then compare that to the estimated cost of implementing reforms (e.g. training new social workers, running awareness campaigns, enforcing new laws). Benefits of reforms are measured in terms of averted costs – if better laws and enforcement reduce the incidence of abuse or mitigate its severity, how much future cost is saved? We also incorporate *intangible benefits* (improved quality of life, justice for victims, international human rights compliance), acknowledging these are not easily monetized but are critical to policy decisions.

Quantitative data analysis methods include simple extrapolation and scenario analysis rather than original econometric modeling. For instance, we present scenarios such as: “If the new legal measures lead to a 10% reduction in child abuse cases over five years, and each prevented case saves X amount in costs, what total savings result and how do these compare to program costs?” We rely on ranges to account for uncertainty, providing lower-bound and upper-bound estimates (e.g. using the 1.36%–2.52% of GDP range from literature as plausible bounds for annual losses).

Comparative Method: The study includes a comparative analysis with two other countries (Thailand and the Philippines, plus references to OECD benchmarks). For these cases, we use a case-study approach: reviewing secondary literature and reports to summarize each country’s legal reforms in child protection and any documented economic analyses of those reforms. This comparative lens serves two purposes. First, it provides contextual validation: if similar reforms elsewhere yielded measurable economic benefits (or challenges), those insights can inform expectations for Vietnam. Second, it allows a benchmarking of Vietnam’s efforts relative to peers – identifying, for example, if Vietnam’s public spending on child protection as a share of GDP is lower or higher than in Thailand/Philippines, or if certain legal provisions (like mandatory reporting laws or age of consent laws) are in line with regional standards.

Qualitative data (expert opinions, qualitative outcomes) are also incorporated. We reference statements from UNICEF officials and Vietnamese authorities that, while not quantitative, provide insight into perceived effectiveness and priorities. For example, we note UNICEF’s advocacy points (e.g. closing definitional gaps such as the legal definition of “child” being raised to under 18) and local experts’ critiques of enforcement gaps.

By triangulating these methods – legal analysis, economic modeling, and comparative case studies – we aim for a comprehensive assessment. The methodology is constrained by data limitations (Vietnam does not yet have a full cost of violence study specific to children, for instance). Where data is lacking, we are transparent about assumptions and draw on global proxies. This approach aligns with guidance from international organizations that stress the need for more economic evidence on violence prevention in low- and middle-income countries. Ultimately, the methodology is designed to answer not only “what laws changed and what do they do?” but also “what are the expected economic implications and are the reforms a worthwhile investment from a societal perspective?”.

Legal and Economic Background in Vietnam

Child Protection Landscape Before 2020

Prior to the recent reforms, Vietnam had established a basic legal architecture for child protection, yet faced ongoing challenges in implementation. Vietnam was one of the earliest countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, reflecting a strong formal commitment to child rights. The 1991 Law on Child Protection, Care and Education and its 2004 update provided foundational protections, and the current Law on Children (2016) further aligned domestic law with the CRC. The 2016 Law on Children (effective from June 1, 2017) was a milestone that, among other things, introduced a clear definition of what constitutes child abuse: “any act that

causes harm to the health, life, dignity, or development of a child” including violence, sexual abuse, exploitation, trafficking, neglect, and abandonment. It also set forth children’s rights to participation, protection, and development, and delineated responsibilities for parents, communities, and authorities in safeguarding children.

Despite these legal provisions, incidence of child abuse remained high and in some respects rising, indicating gaps between law and reality. MOLISA data showed that each year around 2,000–2,500 cases of serious child abuse (violence, sexual abuse, trafficking, etc.) were reported and handled by authorities in the late 2010s. The true number of incidents is likely higher, as abuse often goes unreported; Vietnam’s child protection hotline (Telephone Number 111) was receiving on the order of 30,000 calls per month pre-pandemic, and surged to 40–50,000 calls during COVID-19 lockdowns when domestic violence risks increased. High-profile tragedies raised public outcry. For example, in late 2021, an eight-year-old girl (N.T.V.A.) in Ho Chi Minh City died after prolonged abuse by her father’s fiancée, and in early 2020, a three-year-old in Hanoi was beaten to death by her mother’s boyfriend. Such cases, widely reported in media, underscored severe failures in early detection and prevention – neighbors and teachers later admitted they noticed signs of abuse but did not intervene in time.

Several systemic issues were identified by Vietnamese experts and the National Assembly’s own oversight in 2019. These included:

- **Cultural attitudes:** Traditional views on discipline meant that corporal punishment and harsh parenting were often seen as private family matters, leading to a “social indifference” where even witnesses of abuse hesitated to report it, considering it not their place to interfere. Studies found many Vietnamese parents (influenced by how they were raised) believed in physical punishment for behavior control, contributing to the fact that over two-thirds of children experienced violent discipline at home.
- **Under-reporting and Lack of Mandatory Reporting:** Vietnam’s criminal laws did not explicitly mandate professionals or individuals to report suspected child abuse (outside of general provisions against failure to report certain serious crimes). This legal gap meant teachers, neighbors, even local officials sometimes stayed silent or were unsure of their duty to act. This was especially problematic given most abuse occurs in homes or closed settings where third-party reporting is the main hope of rescue.
- **Lenient Penalties and Legal Loopholes:** The Penal Code (2015, amended 2017) certainly criminalized violence against children – abusive caregivers could be prosecuted under charges like “ill-treating or persecuting a dependent person,” “intentionally inflicting injury,” or even murder in extreme cases. Punishments ranged up to life imprisonment or death in the worst cases (e.g. murder of a child), illustrating that the law on paper was strict. However, for many mid-range abuse offenses, the penalties were modest (for instance, only 1–3 years imprisonment for the crime of “persecuting” a child under Article 140). Courts could also suspend sentences in extenuating circumstances. Analysts argued this failed to deter offenders – many abusers did not fear serious consequences, especially if the child’s injuries were not catastrophic. Moreover,

until 2017 the age of a “child” in some statutes was inconsistently defined (Vietnam’s Law on Children defines child as under 16, which left 16–17 year-old adolescents outside certain protections), though the Law on Justice for Minors later addressed this for judicial proceedings.

- **Resource Constraints in Child Protection Services:** Vietnam’s social service workforce dedicated to child protection was (and remains) limited. Child protection units exist at provincial and district levels under MOLISA’s Department of Child Affairs, but staffing and training are thin relative to need. Many localities relied on part-time or volunteer collaborators to monitor vulnerable children, which UNICEF and others noted is insufficient for serious case management. Shelters and crisis centers for abused children exist (often run by NGOs or mass organizations) but coverage is spotty outside major cities.
- **Coordination Issues:** It was recognized that the multi-sector nature of child protection – involving police, courts, health, education, and labor/social affairs agencies – required stronger coordination. Cases sometimes fell through cracks due to poor information-sharing between schools, local police, and child welfare authorities.

Economically, the late 2010s in Vietnam were characterized by robust growth and a push towards upper-middle income status. Vietnam’s GDP growth averaged around 6–7% annually (apart from the brief pandemic dip), and the government increasingly framed social issues in terms of human capital investment. Children (approximately 30% of Vietnam’s ~98 million population) are seen as the future workforce who will drive the “demographic dividend.” Economic arguments for child protection began to surface in policy dialogues: policymakers acknowledged that abused children may contribute less to the economy later and often require more public expenditure (healthcare, welfare or even incarceration costs) if the cycle of abuse is not broken. For instance, a 2019 national study on violence against women in Vietnam included, for the first time, an analysis of economic costs of domestic violence, signaling a broader interest in quantifying the cost of violence (though that study focused on women, similar logic applies to children). However, prior to 2020, Vietnam had not yet conducted a dedicated study on the economic cost of child abuse. As a proxy, global and regional estimates were referenced: Vietnamese officials were aware of research like the East Asia-Pacific economic burden study (2% GDP loss to violence against children) and global figures highlighting billions lost to violence.

In summary, by 2020 Vietnam had a relatively strong legal intent to protect children (solidified in laws and international commitments), but the practical efficacy of those protections was limited. Rising public awareness, partly due to shocking abuse cases, created momentum for change. The stage was set for Vietnam’s government to “move from commitment to action,” strengthening laws and – importantly – their implementation, with an eye on not only social outcomes but also the development gains from better protecting its young generation.

Triggering Reforms: National Assembly Oversight in 2019

A pivotal moment leading into the 2020 reforms was the National Assembly’s special oversight inquiry on child abuse in 2019. The NA’s Committee on Culture, Education, Youth, and Children conducted a review of how existing policies were being implemented nationwide. The findings were unsparing: the oversight report pointed out many of the issues described above and concluded that stronger action was needed at all levels. It highlighted inconsistencies in local enforcement (some provinces were proactive, others lagged), and it called for clearer delineation of duties among ministries and local authorities to avoid diffused responsibility. National Assembly deputies, galvanized by the evidence and public concern, pressed for a formal resolution to mandate improvements. This directly resulted in Resolution 121/2020/QH14, passed on June 19, 2020, which became the blueprint for the next phase of reforms.

Analysis of Legal Reforms (2020–2025)

During 2020–2025, Vietnam implemented a series of legal reforms and initiatives specifically aimed at strengthening child protection and reducing child abuse. We analyze the major reforms chronologically and substantively:

Resolution 121/2020/QH14 and National Action Plan (2020)

Resolution 121/2020/QH14 (June 2020) – issued by the 14th National Assembly – was a sweeping call to action entitled “*On continuing to strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of policies and laws on child abuse prevention and control.*” This resolution was a direct outcome of the oversight described earlier. It acknowledged the persistently high rates of child abuse and identified shortcomings in enforcement of existing laws. Crucially, Resolution 121/2020 set out specific tasks and targets for various branches of government.

- The National Assembly itself was tasked to continue perfecting the legal framework. For example, the NA was to consider any necessary amendments to laws to plug gaps (such as adding mandatory reporting provisions or increasing penalties, as had been proposed). It also required periodic supervision reports on child abuse handling.
- The Government and Prime Minister were instructed to develop a detailed National Action Plan on child abuse prevention (2020–2025) to implement the resolution. This plan was to allocate responsibilities to each ministry and set timelines (some very immediate, e.g. certain tasks to be done by Q4 2020).
- **Sectoral Duties:** The resolution spelled out duties for key ministries. For instance, the Ministry of Public Security was urged to improve investigation procedures for crimes against children and ensure child-friendly interrogation processes. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) was assigned to incorporate child protection in school programs and by late 2020 issue a program on preventing abuse in the school environment. (MOET did comply, introducing guidelines on school-based child protection and establishing school psychological counseling offices, as noted by subsequent reports.) The Ministry of

Information and Communications was asked to coordinate campaigns to raise awareness and to strengthen protections in cyberspace (a nod to online abuse issues). MOLISA was tasked with bolstering the child protection officer network and improving the helpline's reach.

- The Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuracy (the judiciary and prosecution) were also given targets – notably to expedite adjudication of child abuse cases and improve the quality of trials. The resolution demanded that child abuse cases not be allowed to languish and that the conviction rate for guilty perpetrators improve.
- The resolution even addressed mass organizations (like Women's Union, Youth Union) and local People's Committees to mobilize community-based child protection systems and supervision.

Following this resolution, the Prime Minister's Decision 1472/QĐ-TTg (Sept 28, 2020) approved the *National Action Program on Prevention and Combat of Violence and Child Abuse for 2020–2025*. This was effectively the Government's implementation plan. It laid out numerous specific actions, for example:

- Developing separate protocols to handle child abuse in the online environment, recognizing emerging threats via the internet and social media.
- Conducting nationwide training for commune-level child protection staff and volunteers by 2021.
- Establishing inter-sector child protection committees at provincial levels to ensure Police, Education, Health, and Labor sectors meet regularly on child cases.
- Setting quantitative goals, such as reducing the share of children experiencing violent discipline at home, and increasing the number of detected and assisted abuse victims.
- It also included public communication initiatives (e.g. campaigns urging “zero tolerance” for child abuse, so bystanders report rather than remain silent – echoing UNICEF's call for such a shift).

Implementation of Resolution 121 was closely monitored. By late 2021 and 2022, the Government reported back on progress, citing for instance that MOET had indeed rolled out a school-based child protection program by Q4 2020 in compliance with the resolution. They also reported an uptick in detection of cases and more inter-agency cooperation. Notably, by 2023 the Supreme People's Court could report concrete improvements: *97.8% of child abuse cases brought to court since 2020 had been resolved (verdicts issued), exceeding the NA's target*. This was attributed to the court system prioritizing those cases and new judicial reforms (discussed below) that made trials more effective. The successful completion rate (and timely trial rate) is a tangible outcome; previously, many cases dragged on or were not prosecuted vigorously. Now, nearly all cases are being handled within statutory time limits, indicating a strengthened enforcement climate.

Criminal Law Amendments and Reporting Obligations

Although a comprehensive amendment to the Penal Code specifically on child abuse did not occur in this period (Vietnam's Penal Code was last majorly amended in 2017), discussions initiated by Resolution 121 did result in some legal adjustments:

- In 2020–2021, guiding documents were issued to clarify that *failure to report* certain forms of child abuse could be prosecuted under existing laws. For example, while the Penal Code's Article 390 (failure to report a crime) did not list child abuse per se, the Ministry of Public Security issued guidance urging that those who conceal or ignore known child abuse might in some cases be charged with “covering up crimes” or administrative penalties. This is more of a policy guidance than a legal reform, but important.
- Heightened penalties: Courts, perhaps responding to public pressure, began imposing stricter sentences within the existing ranges. The notorious HCMC case (of the 8-year-old girl) ended with extremely harsh sentences: the abuser received life in prison (initially death was sought) and the father received a long prison term as an accomplice. This signaled a de facto toughening of consequences, even if not yet codified.

Concurrently, Vietnam updated the Law on Handling of Administrative Violations in 2020 and subsequent decrees to impose fines for acts like not reporting abuse or for lesser acts of violence that don't reach criminal level. For instance, in 2021 a decree increased fines on parents or guardians who use violence to discipline children, as part of domestic violence prevention efforts. While not as deterrent as criminal charges, these administrative sanctions contribute to a framework that says any violence against children is punishable.

Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (2022 Amendment)

Recognizing the close link between child abuse and domestic violence, Vietnam overhauled its domestic violence law in late 2022 (Law No. 13/2022/QH15, effective July 2023). The new law broadened the definition of domestic violence to cover many forms of abuse suffered by children within the family:

- It lists 16 groups of acts as domestic violence, expanding beyond physical harm to include emotional abuse, forced isolation, and neglect of caregiving obligations. Notably, acts like “*forcing family members to witness violence*” (which causes psychological trauma to children even if they are not the direct target) and “*failing to care for or educate children or leaving them uncared for*” are explicitly defined as domestic violence now. This means a parent who severely neglects or abandons a child can be held legally accountable as committing domestic violence – an important clarification.
- The law strengthened protective measures for victims. These include restraining orders (ban on contact by the abuser), emergency shelter provision, free healthcare for injuries, psychological counseling, legal aid, etc.. For child victims, these provisions ensure that if a child is removed from an abusive home, there are mechanisms to keep the perpetrator away and to support the child's recovery.
- It also mandates better coordination and community involvement. For example, local police are now required to promptly respond to domestic violence reports and can impose immediate measures like temporary removal of the abuser from the home. Commune-level officials and social organizations (like

mediation groups) are given roles in monitoring and intervening early.

- Importantly, the amended law encourages reporting by *anyone* who witnesses violence – shifting from the earlier view that domestic issues are private. While it stops short of criminalizing non-reporting (unless it falls under a general crime), it creates an expectation and path for neighbors or relatives to alert authorities.

For children, the DV law's relevance is that a large proportion of child abuse occurs at home by parents, step-parents, or relatives. With this law, Vietnam sends a strong message that such abuse is not a private family matter but a societal concern, and it equips authorities with tools to intervene quickly (e.g., removing a violent father from the household rather than the child having to flee). It is also aligned with the “zero tolerance” approach advocated by UNICEF: immediate notification of authorities and removal of either victim or perpetrator to stop violence.

Law on Justice for Minors (2024)

One of the most significant legal reforms in this period is the passage of the Law on Juvenile Justice (referred to in media as the Law on Justice for Minors, enacted 2024). This new law created a specialized legal regime for individuals under 18 who are either in conflict with the law or are victims/witnesses in criminal cases. From a child protection standpoint, the law's key contributions include:

- **Child-Friendly Procedures:** It mandates that child victims of abuse must be treated with sensitivity and care in all legal proceedings. For instance, children may provide testimony via video link to avoid face-to-face encounters with abusers; the law ensures courtrooms and police stations have child-sensitive interview rooms. Judges and police dealing with minors receive specialized training. The idea is to prevent *secondary victimization* – the trauma a child can suffer from the investigation and trial process itself.
- **Diversion and Rehabilitation for Juvenile Offenders:** While not directly about child abuse, this aspect ensures that children who commit offenses (some of whom have themselves often been abuse victims or grown up in violent environments) are given rehabilitative measures rather than harsh punishment. Over time, this could reduce societal violence. The law introduces alternatives to prosecution for minors and emphasizes education and community-based rehab over detention.
- **Raising the Definition of “Child” in Justice Matters:** Previously, Vietnam's definition of a child in the Law on Children was “under 16”. The Juvenile Justice law effectively uses “under 18” for its scope, aligning with international standards. This closes a loophole where 16–17 year-olds were not treated as children under certain protective laws. Now, a 17-year-old victim of sexual abuse, for example, gets the same protective legal treatment (privacy, support, etc.) as a younger child.
- **Confidentiality and Media Restrictions:** The law reinforces that information on cases involving minors is confidential. Identities of child victims cannot be exposed publicly, and trials may be closed sessions. This was partly in response to some sensational media coverage in the past that risked exposing victims.

UNICEF hailed the Law on Justice for Minors as a “breakthrough” in humanizing Vietnam's justice system for

children. It shows the influence of a *child-rights approach* in legislation – viewing children as rights-holders who need special protection, rather than just passive subjects. By ensuring abused children are treated with dignity in court, it encourages more victims to come forward and cooperate in prosecuting offenders (reducing the impunity that often surrounds child abuse). The Supreme People's Court noted that drafting this law and preparing the courts for it was among the measures that helped improve trial outcomes for child abuse cases.

Online Child Safety Measures

The 2020–2025 period also saw attention to child protection in the digital realm. Vietnam's rapid digitalization (over 70 million social media accounts, one-third owned by minors) has brought new risks: cyber-bullying, online grooming and sexual exploitation, exposure to harmful content. In response:

- The government issued Decree No. 56/2017/ND-CP (in 2017, just before our focus period) providing guidelines on the 2016 Children Law regarding children's online privacy and safety, including requirements for parental consent for processing children's data. Building on that, by 2024 a new Decree (No. 147/2024/ND-CP) was released on management of internet content/services, which included specific protections for minors. This decree tasks service providers (like social networks) with preventing children's access to inappropriate content and enforcing age restrictions.
- Vietnam's Cybersecurity Law (2018) also has provisions that prohibit distribution of content that incites children to violence or vice, and it requires companies to cooperate in removing child sexual abuse material. Enforcement remains challenging, but legally, Vietnam is establishing liability for tech companies regarding child safety.
- There is a rule (under the decree/law) that ostensibly prohibits children under 16 from creating social media accounts without adult supervision. In practice this is hard to enforce (age verification issues are noted), but it provides a legal basis to potentially hold platforms accountable if they knowingly allow underage users.
- Recognizing the difficulty of strict bans, Vietnam is piloting a “four-party partnership” model involving government, tech companies, schools, and families to collectively protect children online. While more of a policy approach than law, this model is being encouraged by resolutions and plans.

These digital-focused measures complement the traditional child protection laws, acknowledging that abuse can happen in virtual spaces as well. For example, online grooming or cybersex trafficking (where perpetrators manipulate or pay children to produce sexual images) has been a real issue in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. By 2021, Vietnam reportedly worked with international partners (like Interpol and tech companies) to crack down on online child sexual exploitation. Legally, offenders engaged in producing or disseminating child sexual abuse materials are prosecuted under pornography and trafficking laws. So while there wasn't a single “Online Child Protection Act”, the combination of cybersecurity regulations and child law provisions filled some gaps.

Other Notable Initiatives (2020–2025)

In addition to formal legislation, Vietnam undertook various programs:

- **National Committee on Children:** The Prime Minister's National Committee on Children (established in 2018) was active in this period, monitoring implementation of the action plan and coordinating between ministries.
- **Capacity Building:** Thousands of police officers, teachers, and social workers received training on child-friendly and gender-sensitive approaches to handling abuse cases, often with support from UNICEF and NGOs.
- **Community Models:** Provinces experimented with community-based child protection networks. For example, Ho Chi Minh City in 2025 reported on its *Child Protection Association* and initiatives like shelters for high-risk girls (e.g., the "Little Rose" shelter) and pilot support for children with disabilities, which address broader child welfare but also the protective environment. These models often feed into policy as best practices.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Vietnam's media and education system ramped up messaging against child abuse. School curricula were updated to include skill lessons on preventing sexual abuse (teaching children how to recognize and report inappropriate behavior). The Youth Union and Women's Union ran grassroots campaigns promoting positive parenting to reduce violent discipline.

By the end of 2025, Vietnam's child protection legal framework is considerably stronger than it was in 2019. The reforms addressed legal gaps (e.g., aligning age definitions, listing emotional abuse as punishable, formalizing victim support), increased the accountability of both officials and community (through clearer duties to act), and improved coordination. From an enforcement perspective, early results are encouraging: more cases are being handled and reported. However, challenges remain – ensuring *sufficient funding* for these initiatives, changing deeply ingrained social norms, and extending services to rural and remote areas are ongoing tasks. We will next assess the economic efficiency of these reforms: are they delivering value in terms of benefits outweighing the costs?

Economic Efficiency Analysis

Improving child protection is fundamentally a moral imperative, but it is also instructive to analyze it through an economic lens: do the benefits of reducing child abuse (in monetary terms) justify the investments made in legal reforms and child protection systems? Our analysis suggests that the economic benefits far outweigh the costs, making these reforms highly efficient in economic terms. We break down the analysis into: (1) the costs of child abuse in Vietnam (*status quo ante*), (2) the costs of implementing reforms, and (3) the benefits/savings achieved or anticipated from the reforms.

Costs of Child Abuse in Vietnam: Status Quo Ante

While Vietnam-specific cost data is limited, extrapolating from global research and the country's context yields a sobering estimate of how much violence against children may be costing the economy if unaddressed. Using the earlier mentioned regional estimate of ~2% of GDP lost to consequences of child maltreatment, we can approximate

Vietnam's losses. Vietnam's GDP in 2020 was around USD 271 billion; 2% of that is about \$5.4 billion per year. This figure would encompass healthcare costs for injured children, judicial and incarceration costs for perpetrators (and juvenile offenders who often have abuse histories), child welfare services, and the lost productivity of victims (due to lower educational attainment, disability, or premature death in worst cases). If we consider a range from 1.4% to 2.5% of GDP (the bounds from various studies), the cost could be \$3.8 to \$6.8 billion per year for Vietnam (using 2020 GDP) – a significant toll. For context, \$5 billion is greater than the annual budget Vietnam spends on its entire education system, meaning the "cost of inaction" on child abuse is extremely high relative to public expenditures. On a per-case or per-child basis, if we apply the NSPCC's methodology (from the UK) scaled to Vietnam's income level, we can attempt a rough calculation: The UK estimated ~£80k (~\$100k) long-term cost per abuse victim in a high-income context. In Vietnam, incomes and costs are lower, but the relative impacts can still be profound. Perhaps a severe abuse case might incur \$10k in immediate system costs (medical, investigation, temporary care) and tens of thousands in long-term losses (lost earnings, chronic health treatment, etc.). For example, a Vietnamese child who drops out of school due to abuse may lose, say, 5–10 years of expected future income – easily \$20–30k in present value, if not more, given Vietnam's rising wages. Considering Vietnam sees ~2,000 serious cases reported yearly (and many more unreported or less severe cases), the aggregate individual impact is massive.

An important component is healthcare costs: abused children often require emergency care for injuries and ongoing mental health services. Vietnam's health insurance system and out-of-pocket payments share these costs. Chronic conditions stemming from abuse (like trauma-induced depression or PTSD) can also reduce a person's productivity and increase healthcare usage over a lifetime. Education costs come in when abuse leads to grade repetition, special education needs, or institutional care for a child who cannot remain at home. Social services and legal costs include the operation of child protection hotlines, social workers' salaries, law enforcement investigations, court procedures, and incarceration of offenders (e.g., jailing a child abuser for years has a direct cost to the state, though arguably a necessary one).

In Vietnam's context, one should also note *demographic and social costs*. Vietnam is counting on a healthy, skilled workforce to drive growth. Widespread childhood trauma and violence can erode the quality of that future workforce – something economists model as a hit to *human capital*. If ~68% of children experience some violence at home (not all severe, but still detrimental), that's potentially two-thirds of the next generation carrying some burden that might reduce their cognitive development or social skills. Translating that into GDP impact is complex, but it certainly suggests that even incremental improvements in childhood safety could have broad economic payoffs (e.g., higher school completion rates, better labor force participation).

Costs of Implementing Legal Reforms and Child Protection Measures

What investments has Vietnam made for these reforms? They fall into a few categories:

- **Legislative and Training Costs:** Drafting new laws and policies (staff time, consulting experts) and training

thousands of relevant personnel (judges training on the Juvenile Justice law, police training on child-friendly practices, etc.) involve financial outlays. International partners like UNICEF and UNODC often support these, but the government also allocates budget. For instance, after Resolution 121, a portion of the state budget was directed to MOLISA to expand the community collaborators network and to the courts for specialized training. This is measured in millions of dollars, not billions – relatively small compared to the cost of abuse. If Vietnam spent, say, \$5 million on training and public awareness campaigns over 5 years, that is minimal relative to the potential savings.

- **Service Provision Costs:** This includes funding for the child helpline 111 (which the state increased after 2020 to handle more calls), establishing more shelter spaces, and hiring more social workers or child protection officers in provinces. Vietnam's spending on child protection as a subset of social welfare is hard to pinpoint but traditionally has been low. A thematic report (cited by UNICEF) noted that provincial budgets for child protection were even *decreasing* in some poorer provinces in the mid-2010s, implying under-investment. Post-2020, the government likely boosted funding somewhat (for example, funding the National Action Plan activities, supporting the inter-sector committees). Let's estimate Vietnam might have increased child protection spending by a few million dollars per year. Even a \$10 million annual increment – which is probably generous – would still be only a fraction of the multi-billion costs of abuse.
- **Enforcement Costs:** Stronger law enforcement (more vigorous investigations, prosecutions) has costs: more forensic tests, possibly more people incarcerated. However, these are part of regular budgets of police and courts. They may have reprioritized rather than needing entirely new resources. The justice system did modernize (e.g., investing in video conferencing and case management), but that benefits all cases, not just child abuse cases.
- **Opportunity Costs:** One might argue that if resources (human, financial) are directed to child protection, they aren't being used elsewhere. But given how small a slice child protection has been (compared to, say, infrastructure spending), this is not a serious trade-off in macroeconomic terms. Moreover, many child protection efforts align with other social goals (for instance, supporting a family to prevent child removal can also alleviate poverty, which is a goal on its own).

In summary, the costs of reform implementation are modest in financial terms. Qualitatively, the biggest “cost” is the effort to change systems and mindsets – which involves political will and societal engagement more than large sums of money. Even if Vietnam devoted, hypothetically, \$50 million over five years to all these measures (legislation, training, services, etc.), this would still pale in comparison to the annual losses due to child abuse (which we estimated in the billions). Thus, from a cost-benefit stance, it appears highly favorable.

Benefits and Cost Savings from Improved Child Protection

The benefits of improved child protection legislation manifest in both tangible economic savings and intangible

social gains:

1. **Reduction in Incidence of Abuse:** Stronger laws and enforcement are expected to deter potential abusers and encourage earlier reporting and intervention. If incidence goes down, each prevented case saves the immediate and long-term costs associated with that case. It is still early (2025) to measure a clear downward trend in Vietnam's abuse prevalence; changes in social norms and crime rates take time. However, there are positive signs:
 - In 2023, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security noted an increase in reported cases but interpreted that as better detection and willingness to report, which is a step towards addressing the issue. Over time, as awareness rises, actual incidence should start falling. For a scenario, if Vietnam could reduce serious child abuse cases by even 10% (200 cases/year fewer, out of ~2000), and if each case avoided conservatively saves ~\$50k in lifetime costs, that's a \$10 million future saving – likely more when considering ripple effects. A more dramatic reduction (say 50% fewer cases over a decade) would save hundreds of millions over the lifetimes of those would-be victims.
 - Some specific forms of abuse have been targeted: e.g., campaigns against sexual abuse may reduce child pregnancies and STDs, which have quantifiable health cost savings. Tougher prosecution of offenders could incapacitate serial abusers, preventing them from harming multiple victims (each victim prevented is an economic saving).
 - International evidence suggests legislative reforms like raising the age of consent (as the Philippines did) or banning violent punishment correlate with declines in those abuses. If Vietnam aligns its “child” definition to under 18 more broadly (as advocated), more 16–17 year-olds will be protected from exploitation (labor or sexual) under child-specific provisions, potentially reducing those cases and their associated harm.
2. **Mitigation of Harm for Victims:** The legal reforms put in place better support for victims (medical care, counseling, legal aid). While this is a cost initially, it produces economic benefits by helping children recover and become healthy, productive adults rather than experiencing lifelong impairment. For example, an abused child who receives timely therapy and is placed in a safe environment is far more likely to stay in school and hold a job later than one who is left unaided and drops out due to trauma. So the reforms improve *outcomes for victims*, which translates into regained productivity. We might not measure it immediately, but 5–10 years down the line, these children will fare better economically because of the interventions now.
 - To illustrate: if better support can halve the number of abuse victims who drop out of school, that has a huge payoff. Each student who completes secondary education and perhaps vocational training will earn significantly more over their lifetime than if they had quit at primary school due to abuse-related issues.
 - In financial terms, preventing one youth from falling into delinquency or chronic unemployment

(common outcomes for unaddressed trauma) saves society costs of potential crime and welfare dependence, and adds an active contributor to the economy.

3. Efficiency gains in the Justice System: Interestingly, the reforms like the juvenile justice law are making the justice process more efficient (cases processed faster, fewer appeals or wrongful convictions). Faster resolution of cases saves government resources (shorter pre-trial detentions, less backlog) and also has an indirect economic benefit by delivering justice swiftly (which can deter crime sooner and give closure to families, enabling them to move on and be productive rather than stuck in lengthy proceedings). The reported statistic that *100% of child abuse cases were tried on time and nearly 98% resolved* means legal efficiency – fewer delays that cost money.
4. Long-term Human Capital Improvements: The ultimate benefit – hard to put in exact dollars today – is a generation of children growing up with less trauma and more trust in societal institutions. These children are more likely to become well-adjusted, educated, and innovative members of the workforce. Conversely, high levels of untreated childhood trauma have been linked to higher incidence of mental illness and even lower economic output on a macro scale. Vietnam's emphasis on child protection now can yield dividends in the 2030s in terms of a more capable labor force. If Vietnam's GDP in 2035 is, say, \$800 billion (projected growth), even a 1% increase due to a healthier, safer childhood environment would mean \$8 billion more output – a very large benefit.
5. Social and Fiscal Benefits: Reducing child abuse can alleviate strain on various public systems:
 - Healthcare: fewer injury treatments, psychiatric treatments.
 - Criminal justice: possibly lower youth crime if the cycle of violence is broken (children who are not abused are less likely to become violent offenders themselves). This was mentioned by NSPCC as well – breaking the intergenerational cycle yields savings in adult criminal justice costs.
 - Social services: fewer children needing foster care or state institutional care if families are supported to keep children safe at home.
 - Productivity: parents (especially mothers) often have to miss work or become less productive if dealing with a child's abuse aftermath. Reducing abuse spares families those disruptions. It also avoids some very tragic economic costs like funeral expenses and lost lifetime income in cases where children die from abuse (120 child deaths from abuse in 2 years were noted each of those is not only a human tragedy but also a loss of future contributions).

In broad terms, the cost-benefit balance is overwhelmingly positive. If we attempt to quantify: suppose Vietnam's reforms and efforts over 2020–2025 cost (for sake of argument) \$50 million in total. The benefit needed to justify that is small relative to the scale of the problem: preventing just 10 severe abuse cases (with lifetime cost ~\$100k each) per year for 5 years and improving outcomes for a few hundred victims could by itself approach that. The reality is likely in the thousands of cases prevented or mitigated over

the coming years, so the benefit-to-cost ratio could be very high (possibly on the order of 10:1 or more in the long run). This aligns with global findings that every dollar in prevention can save multiple dollars in response and lost productivity later.

One can also consider cost-effectiveness: If outright cost-benefit is hard to measure, we ask: for a given budget, what is the best way to reduce harm? The reforms, by focusing on low-cost but high-impact measures (like legal changes, training, coordination) target the root enabling factors of abuse rather than expensive downstream spending. For example, compare two approaches: (a) building more orphanages to take in abused kids, or (b) preventing abuse so kids don't need to be removed. Approach (b), which Vietnam is moving toward by strengthening family and community prevention, is far more cost-effective as per evidence (as seen in Thailand's analysis where family support was better value than institutional care). Vietnam's increasing use of kinship care grants or social relief to help vulnerable families is in line with that thinking, though such programs in Vietnam are still nascent or small-scale.

In conclusion, improving legal protections for children in Vietnam is economically efficient by all indications. The benefits (reduced healthcare burden, improved educational outcomes, higher future earnings, etc.) clearly outweigh the modest costs of policy implementation. Moreover, many benefits compound over time – a child saved from abuse today might in adulthood raise children of their own in a safe environment, breaking a vicious cycle and creating a virtuous one. Those second-generation benefits multiply the returns on current investments.

It is important to acknowledge some benefits are qualitative and not easily monetized: the psychological well-being of children, the justice and peace of mind for families, the societal stability that comes from protecting the vulnerable. These are immensely valuable even if we don't attach a dollar figure. In economic terms, we could consider them improvements in the quality of life or reductions in "misery index" factors. A society where children are safe is more likely to be prosperous and harmonious – a foundational benefit that underpins all other economic activity.

Thus, from a cost-benefit perspective, Vietnam's course of action in 2020–2025 appears not only justified but imperative. The next section will compare how Vietnam's approach and efficiency considerations stack up against other countries' experiences.

Comparative Analysis with Other Countries

To contextualize Vietnam's efforts and glean lessons, we examine two countries with similar socio-economic contexts – Thailand and the Philippines – and also reference examples from OECD countries. These comparisons highlight both the common challenges in child protection and some innovative strategies that have proven successful.

Thailand

Thailand, like Vietnam, is an upper-middle income country in Southeast Asia with strong family traditions and faced with issues of child abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Thailand's legal framework for child protection has some parallels: the Child Protection Act of 2003 established mechanisms for protecting children in need, and Thailand too has a history of violence against children in homes, schools (corporal punishment), etc. In recent years, Thailand has stepped up reforms and can offer a comparative perspective:

- **Legal Reforms:** Thailand fully outlawed corporal punishment of children in all settings by 2019, amending its Civil Code to remove any justification for physical discipline. This legal stance is stronger than Vietnam's current law (Vietnam prohibits violence but hasn't explicitly banned all corporal punishment in the home). The Thai experience shows that a clear ban, combined with public education, can gradually shift attitudes – though enforcement relies on public awareness since such acts happen in private.
- **National Strategy:** Thailand adopted a new National Child Protection Strategy (circa 2021–2022), aiming to reform prevention and protection services, much like Vietnam's action plan. Both countries realized the need for multi-sectoral coordination. Thailand's strategy emphasizes strengthening social welfare services and community surveillance of at-risk children.
- **Economic Investment and Analysis:** UNICEF Thailand conducted an Investment Case Analysis of Child Protection in 2023 (cited earlier) which provides a quantitative look at funding mechanisms. One key finding was that the cost of inaction is high: *child maltreatment was estimated to cost Thailand about 3.4% of GDP* per year (since Thailand is an upper-middle income country in the region, this corresponds to roughly 480 billion Thai Baht lost annually to consequences of abuse). This figure, drawn from the same regional study we used, was effectively leveraged by child advocates in Thailand to argue for more budget to child protection. It underscores for Vietnam that as it grows economically, the absolute cost of not preventing child abuse will likewise grow. Vietnam could similarly use such data to justify budget increases (e.g., investing 0.1% of GDP in prevention to save 2% of GDP in losses).

The Thai analysis also revealed which interventions give the “best bang for the buck.” For example, it showed that family-based allowances (small cash transfers to poor families to support childrearing) were very cost-effective in improving child outcomes. However, it noted the current benefit levels were low; increasing them could further improve outcomes while still remaining cheaper than foster or institutional care. Thailand's foster care grants were more costly and gave diminishing returns beyond a point. Vietnam can draw from this by considering the introduction or expansion of its own family support programs – Vietnam currently has some social assistance for poor families and scholarships for disadvantaged kids, but not an outright child grant. Such economic measures, though not “law” in the strict sense, complement legal protection by reducing stressors (like poverty) that often correlate with abuse risk.

- **Outcomes:** It is relevant to see if Thailand's actions have reduced abuse rates. Comprehensive national data are hard to compare, but Thailand's Ministry reports suggest improvements in identification of cases and increased usage of child helplines post reforms. Thailand historically had very high rates of violent discipline and sexual abuse incidences (a 2015 VAC survey in Thailand showed about 3 in 4 children experienced some form of violence). By focusing on prevention (including a campaign to end corporal punishment and address online abuse), Thailand is aiming to reduce those numbers in the coming decade.

Continuous monitoring will tell how successful these efforts are.

- **Trafficking and Exploitation:** Thailand, as a regional hub, had serious issues with child trafficking and exploitation (e.g., in the commercial sex industry). Legal reforms in mid-2010s stiffened penalties for trafficking and provided more victim support. Vietnam can learn from Thai efforts in cross-border cooperation and law enforcement training to combat child trafficking – an area Vietnam also contends with to some extent (especially trafficking of girls to neighboring countries). Both countries work with UNODC on this front.

In summary, Thailand's approach shows the importance of pairing legal measures with social investments. It also provides evidence that *investing in child protection is cost-saving*, which Vietnam can use to bolster its own case domestically. Culturally, Thailand and Vietnam share respect for family privacy, so changing public attitudes is a challenge in both. Thailand's outright ban on corporal punishment may be something Vietnam considers to further signal that any violence against children is unacceptable.

The Philippines

The Philippines is another Southeast Asian nation (lower-middle income) that has grappled with high levels of violence against children. A 2016 National Baseline Survey on VAC in the Philippines found around 80% of children had experienced some form of abuse (physical, psychological or sexual) in their lifetime a startling figure that spurred significant action.

- **Legal Reforms:** The Philippines implemented a comprehensive framework:
 - It passed the Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act (Republic Act 7610) way back in 1992, which criminalizes child abuse and outlines penalties. But enforcement was inconsistent.
 - A landmark recent reform was Raising the Age of Sexual Consent from 12 to 16 (Republic Act 11648, signed March 2022). Prior to this, the Philippines had one of the lowest ages of consent in the world, which hampered prosecution of sexual exploitation of teens. Now, sexual activity with anyone under 16 (unless the partner is close in age and also a minor) is statutory rape, significantly strengthening protections for adolescents. Vietnam's age of consent is 16, which is now on par, but Vietnam might consider following suit if there's advocacy to raise to 18 (though most countries stick to 16).
 - The Philippines also has strict anti-human trafficking laws (RA 9208 and its amendment RA 10364), and given that online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) became prevalent (with perpetrators abroad paying to direct abuse via the internet), they enacted laws to address cybercrimes against children. For example, RA 9775 (Anti-Child Pornography Act of 2009) requires ISPs to block child sexual abuse material and mandates reporting.
 - The Philippine Plan of Action to End Violence Against Children (2017–2022) was a holistic strategy involving 21 agencies, aiming to implement recommendations from the national

survey. It included enhancing laws (like those above), improving services, and educating the public. Vietnam's action plan is analogous, and Vietnam can observe how the Philippines coordinated so many stakeholders, including faith-based organizations and local government units, in implementation.

- **Comparative Challenges and Innovations:** The Philippines shares some cultural and practical challenges with Vietnam (such as high prevalence of physical discipline and a decentralized governance structure). One innovation in the Philippines has been the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC) – local councils in each village mandated by law to respond to children's issues. This is somewhat similar to Vietnam's child protection committees at commune level. The effectiveness varies by locality, but where active, BCPCs have been key in early intervention. Vietnam's push to strengthen grassroots child protection collaborators is akin to making such local mechanisms work.

Another effort by the Philippines is integrating child protection in disaster response, since the country faces many natural disasters. They ensure during emergencies, there are child-friendly spaces and protection services to prevent abuse and trafficking that tend to spike in crises. Vietnam, also disaster-prone, might find this relevant, as events like floods or the COVID-19 pandemic can increase abuse risk (which indeed happened during COVID as noted).

- **Enforcement and Social Norms:** The Philippines has seen some improvements. The enforcement of laws like the new consent age has led to arrests of older men in cases that previously would have been dismissed. Community reporting of abuse seems to be rising thanks to campaigns like “#ReportVAC”. However, as with Vietnam, many Filipino children do not disclose abuse due to stigma or fear. Both countries recognize that beyond law, empowering children to speak up (through school programs, helplines) is crucial. In the Philippines, the *Child Helpline 1383* and dedicated police units (Women and Children Protection Desks) help route cases into the legal system. Vietnam's equivalent helpline (111) and police Child Protection officers serve a similar role.
- **Economic Perspective:** The Philippines has not published a full economic cost study specific to VAC to our knowledge, but it's reasonable to assume similar or higher GDP percentage losses, given the very high prevalence found. The government and UNICEF in the Philippines focus more on prevalence reduction than cost, but one could argue the case economically: if 80% of children experience violence, that's potentially affecting 80% of the next workforce's productivity in some way – clearly unsustainable for development. The Philippines spends money on child protection largely through its social welfare department and justice system. Like Vietnam, budgets are tight; much of the heavy lifting financially comes from international aid or NGOs (e.g., UNICEF, Save the Children funding training, shelters, etc.). This highlights a common issue: legal reforms need funding to be effective. Comparative lesson: the Philippines has mobilized donor support extensively – Vietnam might also leverage international partnerships (which it does, as seen by UNICEF's

involvement in advising law changes and pilot models).

In summary, the Philippines' case reinforces several points for Vietnam:

- Modernizing legal definitions (like age of consent, online exploitation) can close loopholes exploited by offenders.
- A national action plan with multi-sector involvement is key, but must trickle down to empowered local child protection committees.
- Social behavior change is a long-term endeavor; legal changes should be accompanied by mass communication to shift norms on corporal punishment, sexual violence, etc.
- From an efficiency standpoint, prevention in communities (Philippines tries to use faith leaders, youth groups for awareness) is more cost-effective than responding after harm.

OECD Countries (Selected Insights)

Looking at OECD countries (higher-income contexts) provides a view of what a more developed child protection system can achieve and the economic returns realized:

- **Comprehensive Services and Mandatory Reporting:** Many OECD nations have decades-old systems of mandatory reporting of child abuse (teachers, doctors, etc. are required by law to report any suspicion) and professionalized child protective services. This results in high reporting rates – for example, the United States sees over 4 million child maltreatment referrals per year nationwide after instituting such laws (though not all are substantiated). While the U.S. still has significant child abuse issues, early interventions (foster care, family interventions) potentially save larger costs down the road. CDC studies in the U.S. estimated the *lifetime cost per victim of nonfatal child maltreatment* at about \$210,000 (2010 dollars), factoring in health care, special education, lost productivity, and crime. This kind of data has been used to argue for more investment in prevention programs like home-visiting for new parents, parenting classes, etc., which have been shown to be cost-effective (some yield returns of up to \$5 saved per \$1 spent by reducing later abuse and neglect).

For Vietnam, implementing certain elements of the OECD approach – like mandatory reporting – could have significant impact. As noted, Vietnam's current law doesn't punish non-reporting well, whereas many OECD countries treat failure to report as a misdemeanor or similar. Introducing that (with proper protections to avoid false reporting) could improve detection. The economic rationale is: it's cheaper to investigate a report and provide some services early than to wait until a child is seriously harmed.

- **Public Expenditure:** OECD countries typically spend more on child and family welfare services. For instance, in some European nations, childcare and protective services spending can be over 1% of GDP. That's orders of magnitude more than Vietnam currently spends. But those nations arguably reap benefits: they generally have lower intentional injury and youth crime rates, meaning less burden on their economies from those issues. A study in the UK (as referenced) calculated an annual £10–£12 billion cost of child maltreatment. This spurred the UK government to invest in early intervention (the Troubled Families Programme, etc.). If we compare, Vietnam currently

likely spends only a few million dollars at the central level on dedicated child protection programs. As Vietnam's economy grows, increasing public investment toward even 0.1% of GDP on child protection (which would be ~\$100 million) could dramatically expand services – still a fraction of what OECD spend but a big jump for Vietnam – and yield benefits exceeding that cost.

- Outcomes: Many OECD countries have seen declines in certain forms of child abuse over the past few decades (though better reporting can sometimes make it seem otherwise). For example, physical abuse cases and child fatalities have trended down in countries like Germany or Sweden, often attributed to strong legal norms (corporal punishment bans, etc.) and supportive services. These positive outcomes correlate with economic gains in a broad sense – lower healthcare costs, more stable families contributing to society, etc.
- Successful Legal Reforms: A relevant example is Sweden's corporal punishment ban (1979) which was the first in the world. Studies decades later found Swedish youth had lower rates of acceptance of violence and lower rates of physical child abuse injuries compared to earlier generations. While not entirely eliminating abuse, it's credited with a cultural shift. Another example: Australia's recent actions – not OECD-wide yet but as noted in Nhan Dan, *Australia banned social media access for under-16s as of late 2022*, based on research linking social media use to mental health harms. Vietnam referenced this when discussing protecting youth online. If such a policy proves beneficial in reducing cyberbullying-related depression or self-harm, it's something Vietnam might consider through a localized approach (though enforcement is tricky).
- Economic Justification for Reforms: OECD countries often require impact assessments for new legislation. For child protection laws, the impact analysis usually highlights cost savings from preventing worst-case scenarios. For example, a government might justify spending \$50 million on a national family support program by showing it could reduce foster care placements by X%, saving \$100 million. Vietnam can take a page from this: when proposing new policies (like expanding social work services), including an economic justification can help rally support in the Ministry of Finance and others.

In conclusion, the comparative analyses show that Vietnam's current reform path is consistent with global trends: emphasizing prevention, clarifying laws, and investing in child-centered justice and services. Countries like Thailand and the Philippines, which have similar social contexts, demonstrate both the successes and the work still to be done – reminding Vietnam that enforcement and cultural change require persistence. OECD experiences offer a vision of a mature child protection system and reinforce the core argument that preventing violence against children is a wise economic investment in any society. They also illustrate that legal reforms must be coupled with adequate funding and implementation capacity to realize their potential, a point Vietnam should heed as it consolidates its 2020–2025 gains.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that Vietnam's efforts from 2020 to 2025 to strengthen child protection laws are justified not only on humanitarian and legal grounds but also on economic efficiency grounds. However, important questions and considerations arise regarding *sustainability, implementation, and generalizability* of these reforms.

Effectiveness of Reforms: Early evidence suggests the legal reforms have made an impact. The judicial system's high resolution rate of child abuse cases and increased reporting signal an improvement in enforcement. Yet, it is crucial to ask: are these reforms actually reducing the *occurrence* of child abuse, or are they mainly improving the response to abuse after it happens? Ideally, success means fewer children being abused in the first place. It may be too soon to observe a statistical decline in incidence; typically, after awareness campaigns and legal changes, reported cases might rise (due to better reporting) before they fall. Continued monitoring is needed. The discussion in Vietnam should remain focused on outcomes (safety and wellbeing of children) rather than just outputs (number of laws passed, cases prosecuted). If in a few years data show a reduction in children experiencing violence at home (e.g., the percentage of children subject to violent discipline drops from 68% to, say, 50% or lower), that would validate the preventive impact and yield large economic and social benefits.

Resource Allocation and Funding: Our economic analysis showed how relatively low-cost the reforms were relative to the benefits. However, a potential risk is *under-resourcing*. If Vietnam's government does not allocate sufficient budget to, for example, hire the social workers mandated by the action plan or fund the shelters and counseling required by the DV law, then the laws could underperform. There is some evidence of this concern: provinces with limited budgets might not fully implement the new programs. Economic efficiency arguments can be used to lobby for more funding – convincing decision-makers that spending on child protection is an investment with high returns. Partnerships with international donors can help fill short-term gaps, but ultimately domestic funding is needed for sustainability. Vietnam is likely to increase its social spending as its economy grows (and as it aims to achieve SDGs and upper-middle income status); ensuring child protection gets its due share will be important. In discussion with policymakers, emphasizing the cost savings (e.g., how many dollars in health or police costs can be saved per dollar spent on a social worker) could encourage budget allocations.

Inter-sector Coordination: One theme that emerged is the importance of coordination across agencies and levels of government. The NA resolution was a strong top-down driver compelling coordination. But coordination is not a one-time task – it needs structures and accountability. The comparative look at the Philippines and Thailand, as well as Vietnam's own experience, shows that local level action is where policies meet reality. Vietnam's challenge will be to maintain momentum at the grassroots. Regular meetings of child protection committees, timely data sharing (for instance, schools sharing info with child affairs officers about any suspected abuse), and community vigilance must become routine. Economically, improved coordination is an efficiency gain: it avoids duplication of efforts and closes

protection gaps, basically doing more with the same resources. If two departments can handle a case jointly rather than separately, that's a more efficient use of personnel. The discussion here involves how to incentivize local officials – possibly via integrating child protection outcomes into their performance metrics or through awards/recognition for localities that excel in protecting children.

Cultural Change and Education: Law is a blunt instrument if societal attitudes don't evolve alongside it. One might question whether legal reforms can really penetrate long-standing cultural norms about discipline and family privacy. The experience of countries that banned corporal punishment suggests it can take a generation for attitudes to shift, but shift they do when reinforced by education. Vietnam has begun addressing this in school curricula and media campaigns. It might consider even more creative approaches: engaging influencers, religious and community leaders to speak out that kindness and non-violence are part of Vietnamese values (indeed, Vietnam has cultural teachings that can be invoked, such as the traditional emphasis on love and care within the family). The concept of “zero tolerance” for violence that UNICEF promotes essentially needs to become a social norm. Over time, this would yield a self-reinforcing effect – less tolerance for abuse means more deterrence and thus fewer cases, which in turn normalizes non-violence.

Data Collection and Evaluation: We noted the lack of Vietnam-specific economic data. As part of sustaining these efforts, Vietnam could invest in better data collection on child protection indicators. Conducting a national survey on violence against children (similar to what the Philippines did) would provide a baseline to measure progress. It would also give more granular data on which to base future economic evaluations (for example, measuring the prevalence of consequences like school dropout or teen pregnancy attributable to abuse, then costing those). Also, establishing a centralized case management information system could help track outcomes of interventions. From a research perspective, Vietnam has the opportunity to lead in the region by perhaps doing a dedicated economic study of VAC in the coming years, which would sharpen the economic efficiency case further and guide resource allocation to the most cost-effective interventions.

Comparative Advantage and Shared Learning: Vietnam can also deepen cooperation with regional neighbors on child protection. By sharing what has worked (its juvenile justice reforms, for example) and learning from others (like the Philippines' reporting mechanisms or Thailand's investment models), countries can accelerate progress. There is an ASEAN framework on social welfare that includes child protection; Vietnam could champion regional commitments which might attract funding and technical support. Child abuse often has cross-border elements (child trafficking, online exploitation networks), so joint efforts enhance efficiency by pooling resources.

Risks and Unintended Consequences: Any policy reform carries risks. One risk is *over-reliance on legal solutions* without proportionate support services. If laws are strict but a child victim has nowhere to go (no shelter or foster care available), we might inadvertently cause harm by removing a child from an abusive home only to place them in an inadequate alternative. It's a delicate balance, and Vietnam must ensure the expansion of its protective services network

keeps pace with enforcement. Another potential unintended effect could be under-reporting if people fear draconian outcomes (for instance, a mother might hesitate to report her husband's mild abuse of a child if she thinks he'll be jailed for years; she might prefer counseling or mediation). The system should be nuanced enough to handle cases along a spectrum – not every case should result in incarceration; sometimes family-based solutions and education are more appropriate. Vietnam's approach via the family/community level and the DV law's inclusion of measures like counseling for perpetrators, suggests an understanding of this nuance.

Long-Term Commitment: The period studied (2020–2025) can be seen as a launching phase for intensive reforms. The discussion should highlight that protecting children is a long-term commitment. Political will can wax and wane with leadership changes or shifting public priorities. It will be important for Vietnam to institutionalize these reforms so they endure – for instance, by continuing to update laws in line with evolving challenges (e.g., new forms of online abuse in the future), by training new generations of social workers, and by ensuring that the legal gains (like raising the treatment of minors to under-18) are not rolled back. Embedding child protection in Vietnam's broader development agendas (such as its Socio-Economic Development Plans, human capital development programs) will help maintain momentum. Given the demonstrated economic advantages, one can argue that *child protection is integral to Vietnam becoming a high-income country by mid-century*, since a society cannot reach its full potential if a significant portion of its children are left behind due to abuse and trauma.

In conclusion of this discussion, while Vietnam's progress is commendable and largely on a positive trajectory, continuous improvement and adaptation are needed. The economic efficiency of these reforms is evident – money spent on protecting children is money saved many times over – but to fully realize those efficiencies, Vietnam must maintain a comprehensive approach: strong laws, effective enforcement, adequately funded services, and ongoing public education. The reforms of 2020–2025 lay a strong foundation; building on it will require unwavering commitment and possibly more innovative solutions to emerging challenges. The next section concludes with final remarks and recommendations distilled from the entire analysis.

Conclusion

Vietnam's experience in 2020–2025 demonstrates that strengthening child protection legislation can yield significant socio-economic benefits, reinforcing the principle that protecting the rights and well-being of children is both a moral duty and a sound investment in the country's future. During this period, Vietnam enacted important legal reforms – from a National Assembly resolution that galvanized multi-sector action, to new laws addressing juvenile justice and domestic violence – which collectively have begun to address the gaps in the child protection system. Our analysis finds that these reforms are already contributing to more effective responses to child abuse (e.g., quicker prosecution of offenders, better support for victims) and are poised to reduce the incidence and impact of abuse in the long term.

Economically, the rationale for such reforms is compelling. Child abuse and neglect inflict heavy tangible costs on any society: Vietnam likely lost on the order of 2% of its GDP to the repercussions of violence against children, a burden carried in healthcare, social services, and lost productivity. By contrast, the costs of implementing legal protections and preventive services are relatively minimal – and produce high rates of return. Prevention and early intervention can save many times their cost in averted expenditures and preserved human capital. In Vietnam's case, even a modest reduction in child maltreatment as a result of these reforms would translate into millions of dollars saved and, more importantly, healthier and more productive lives for thousands of children.

Comparative insights from Thailand, the Philippines, and OECD countries underscore that Vietnam is moving in the right direction. Like its neighbors, Vietnam has recognized that laws must evolve to confront contemporary challenges (such as online exploitation and entrenched social norms of violent discipline), and that investing in children's protection is integral to development. International experience supports Vietnam's approach of combining legal deterrence (strict laws and penalties) with supportive measures (counseling, social support, public education). The success stories abroad also remind us that sustained commitment is required – many countries took decades of consistent policy effort to substantially lower rates of child abuse and to mainstream a culture of child rights.

For Vietnam to maximize the economic and social gains from its 2020–2025 reforms, the following recommendations emerge from this study:

- **Ensure Robust Implementation and Funding:** Laws on paper must be matched by action on the ground. Vietnam should continue to train and expand its cadre of child protection workers (social workers, police specialists, prosecutors, judges) and allocate sufficient budget to child protection programs. This includes investing in family strengthening and poverty alleviation initiatives that address root causes of abuse. Such spending will yield long-term savings by preventing harm; as noted, investing even a small fraction of GDP now can avoid far greater losses in the future.
- **Enhance Data and Monitoring:** Establish clear indicators and regularly collect data to track progress in reducing violence against children. Conducting a national survey on children's experiences of violence (e.g., in 2025 or 2026) would provide a post-reform baseline to evaluate impact. Improved data will also allow for more precise economic evaluations in the future, strengthening the case for continued or increased interventions.
- **Continue Legal Reforms as Needed:** Legal reform is not one-and-done. Vietnam should remain vigilant to emerging issues. For example, considering explicit mandatory reporting provisions, revisiting the definition of a child in all laws to uniformly be under 18 (following through on aligning with CRC standards), and constantly updating cyber laws in line with technological changes. The legal framework should be reviewed periodically with inputs from child rights experts to ensure it remains comprehensive and effective.
- **Promote Cultural Change and Public Awareness:** Legal

changes must be internalized by society. Multi-channel, nationwide advocacy campaigns should continue, aiming to change attitudes toward corporal punishment, gender biases, and silence around abuse. Empowering children with knowledge of their rights and how to seek help is equally important. Over time, a Vietnam in which every child and adult understands that violence against children is unacceptable will be a safer, more prosperous Vietnam.

- **Leverage International Cooperation:** Vietnam can leverage technical assistance and best practices through ASEAN, UNICEF, and other bodies to bolster its child protection system. Joint initiatives (for example, on combatting online child exploitation or trafficking) can improve efficiency by sharing resources and information across borders. Additionally, participating in international studies or pilot programs (such as cost-effectiveness trials of parenting interventions) could yield valuable insights for policy fine-tuning.

In conclusion, Vietnam's strides in improving child protection legislation in the first half of the 2020s reflect a commendable commitment to its children and to its future development. The evidence suggests these efforts are economically prudent, with benefits that will reverberate across public health, education, and labor productivity in years to come. The reforms have laid a strong legal and institutional foundation. The task ahead is to build on this foundation – to translate laws into consistent practice, to support families and communities in nurturing children free from violence, and to maintain the political and fiscal priority on child protection. If Vietnam stays this course, it can expect not only to better fulfill its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child but also to reap the rewards of a healthier, more capable young generation driving the country's progress. In sum, the economic efficiency of improving child protection is evident: it is an investment that yields invaluable returns – in saved lives, in thriving adulthood for today's children, and in the strength of the nation's human capital. Such an investment is one that no nation can afford to neglect, and Vietnam's actions affirm that it recognizes this fundamental truth.

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