

Some Social Issues Facing Workers in Vietnam Today

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ABSTRACT: Workers are a core labor force, playing a significant role in the country's socioeconomic development. However, amidst the strong push for industrialization and urbanization, Vietnamese workers face many complex social issues that directly affect their quality of life, sustainable development, and the nation. These challenges include unstable employment, job shortages, housing shortages, and the lack of cultural and recreational facilities; difficulties in establishing emotional and marital relationships and maintaining family happiness; and an increasing risk of social vices. Identifying and deeply analyzing these issues is crucial to proposing appropriate solutions, improving workers' lives, and ensuring sustainable development goals. This paper focuses on clarifying the four prominent issues mentioned above, providing a comprehensive perspective, and suggesting policy recommendations for the future.

KEYWORDS: Workers, social issues, employment

1. INTRODUCTION

Workers are an essential labor force, representing an advanced mode of production and making a significant contribution to the industrialization and modernization process of every nation. History has shown that during wartime, workers served as a unifying force in society, leading struggles for national liberation, emancipation from colonialism, and the establishment of peace and independence. In peacetime, workers are the main labor force in industrial, construction, commercial, and service sectors - industries with labor productivity and value-added significantly higher than traditional agriculture - thus making a substantial contribution to national economic development.

The pace of economic development and the success of industrialization and modernization efforts in any nation depends greatly on the strength of its workforce. Therefore, caring for, protecting, and addressing the urgent social issues faced by workers is a crucial task to achieve economic, social, and sustainable development objectives.

In Vietnam, social issues affecting workers and laborers have become pressing problems requiring prompt resolution. Vietnam has more than 16 million workers employed in industrial or industrial-like sectors, located in industrial parks and export processing zones (IP and EPZ). The value produced by these workers is increasingly contributing to GDP growth and Vietnam's economic expansion. However, Vietnamese workers face numerous instabilities that could evolve into significant social problems in the future, such as: a high rate of untrained workers due to their predominantly agricultural and rural backgrounds; limited awareness of political, social, and life skills; precarious jobs and harsh working conditions; insufficient wage and social insurance benefits; and a lack of housing and essential social amenities in industrial zones and clusters. Many workers, especially women, lose their jobs despite being of working age. Additionally, social vices among workers and challenges in forming relationships, having children, and caring for their families are emerging concerns.

Given the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, green transformation, digital transformation, and knowledge-based economic development in this era of national rise, these social issues have become increasingly pressing and require focused research and solutions.

This paper aims to explore the current social issues urgently faced by workers in Vietnam today. The research question posed is: What are the urgent social issues faced by workers in Vietnam today? By answering this question, the paper provides valuable information for readers interested in worker-related social issues and labor problems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Workers

The term "worker" generally refers to individuals who perform tasks or provide services for employers or organizations in exchange for compensation. Workers encompass a variety of roles and responsibilities, ranging from manual labor to professional and technical jobs. The concept of the working class has been analyzed extensively in Marxist-Leninist classical works under various names such as wage laborers, the laboring class, the industrial working class, and the proletariat. Classical Marxist-Leninist theorists argue that workers are a product of industrial society, emerging from the industrial revolution and the capitalist mode of production. Under capitalism, the proletariat lacks ownership of the means of production and interacts with the bourgeoisie through the sale of labor. Karl Marx demonstrated that this relationship essentially reflects the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity* by David Harvey, workers are understood as individuals involved in production, using their labor to create value. Workers not only perform specific tasks but also possess creativity and the ability to innovate processes or products. They play a central role in transforming raw materials into useful goods, and their labor is the source of economic value. Harvey also emphasizes that advancements in technology and globalization significantly influence workers' roles in the modern economy [1].

In Vietnam, the concept of workers is defined in the *Collected Documents of the Party* published by the National Political Publishing House in 2008 as follows: "...a large and growing social force, including manual and intellectual laborers, employed in industrial production, industrial-like business, and service sectors, or production and business activities with industrial characteristics" [2]. Within the scope of this paper, workers are defined as individuals hired by employers to perform manual or intellectual labor to produce goods, complete tasks, or fulfill assigned duties. Their relationship with employers is formalized through labor contracts.

Social Issues

Numerous studies have explored the concept of social issues, including Holstein and Miller's *Challenges and Choices: Constructionist Perspectives on Social Problems* (2024), Holstein and Gubrium's *A Constructionist Analytics for Social Problems* (2024), and Bogard's *Explaining Social Problems: Addressing the Whys of Social Constructionism* (2024) [3], [4], [5]. While the definitions may vary, social issues are generally understood as problems that affect a large number of people in a collective manner and are best addressed through coordinated actions rather than individual responses (Hart, 1923) [6].

Social issues are characterized by several key points:

1. They are specific types of problems that affect many individuals rather than just a few.
2. The impact of such problems on individuals may vary, but they require collective or organized human action for resolution.
3. Social issues may arise from the interaction between individuals and their social or natural environment, including conflicts of interest, goals, or lifestyles.

Mazur (2007) argues that social issues are constructed through unique historical and contextual conflicts rooted in personal circumstances [7]. Glyn and colleagues (1996) define social issues as "situations, policies, or trends that: (1) cause suffering or threaten a significant number of people, (2) violate societal norms or moral beliefs, and (3) can be partially or fully remedied through collective action" [8]. Similarly, Kendall (2007) states that social issues are formed through conditions or behavior patterns that demand public attention or collective action to create change [9].

In essence, Hart (1923) emphasizes that a social issue arises when a particular problem becomes an obstacle to achieving individual or collective goals. While these issues may initially affect individuals, their resolution often requires community involvement [6].

Social Issues among Workers

Workers, as a prominent and growing social group linked to industrial production, face a wide range of social issues, including both general human problems and those specific to laborers. Linda A. Mooney, David Knox, and Caroline Schacht, in their book *Understanding Social Problems* (2011), classify these challenges into three categories:

- Health-related issues: Including illnesses, healthcare access, substance abuse, crime, and family problems.
- Inequality issues: Encompassing poverty, economic disparities, unemployment, educational inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender inequality, and sexual orientation.
- Globalization issues: Such as population growth, urbanization, environmental pollution, science and technology, and conflict or terrorism. [11]

This categorization provides a structured understanding of issues at national and global levels. For instance, Steven E. Barkan, in *Social Problems: Continuity and Change* (2016), identifies challenges like crime, war, terrorism, poverty, family dynamics, and rural-urban migration. While these authors present theoretical insights, they also use empirical data to explain the root causes of such issues within a scientific framework [12].

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Labor-related social issues have been analyzed in studies like the ILO report *ASEAN in Transformation: How Technology is Changing Jobs and Enterprises* (2016), which predicts that 56% of jobs in five ASEAN countries (including Vietnam) could be replaced by technology in the next two decades [13]. Other research highlights occupational health hazards in the garment sector and the impact of globalization on labor markets, emphasizing job loss, underemployment, and the precarious conditions faced by workers. Within the scope of this paper, the pressing social issues affecting Vietnamese workers include:

1. Unstable employment and job shortages
2. Housing shortages and a lack of cultural and recreational facilities
3. Difficulties in establishing emotional and marital relationships and maintaining family happiness
4. Increased vulnerability to social vices

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Expert Method

The purpose of this method is to conduct in-depth interviews with experts regarding social issues faced by workers in Vietnam. This approach aims to identify and understand the root causes of these issues and their consequences for workers and society as a whole.

2. Document Analysis Method

Documents serve as a vital source of information, providing researchers with a comprehensive overview of the subject under study. This method allows the author to review previous scientific research and extract relevant content for application in the current study. It also helps establish the research overview, determine the research direction, and suggest feasible solutions for the identified issues.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 54 individuals, including representatives of grassroots trade unions, employers, workers, policymakers, and experts. The objective was to explore the realities of social issues faced by workers, as well as to identify pressing problems requiring attention and resolution.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Employment Issues of Workers

The current state of unstable employment and underemployment among workers in Vietnam is a noteworthy concern, especially in the context of economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and global market fluctuations. According to the report "World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024" by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the labor market has gradually stabilized. The number of employed workers has increased, unemployment rates have decreased, and the average weekly working hours are approaching pre-pandemic levels. However, the ILO warns that this recovery remains fragile, with job growth expected to stagnate and the unemployment rate projected to rise slightly from 5.1% last year to 5.2% this year. These challenges are significant for Vietnam's labor market.

In 2022, 50.6 million workers aged 15 and older were employed. The unemployment rate in 2023 for the working-age population, as well as for youth, showed a decreasing trend compared to 2022. This indicates signs of economic recovery after being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, nearly 1.07 million working-age individuals were unemployed nationwide, a decrease of 14.6 thousand compared to the previous year. The unemployment rate for the working-age population in 2023 was 2.28%, down 0.04 percentage points compared to the previous year. The implementation of comprehensive measures, including Resolution No. 01/NQ-CP, dated January 6, 2023, by the Government on key tasks and solutions for implementing the socio-economic development plan, the state budget estimate, and improving the business environment to enhance national competitiveness in 2023, has contributed to improving unemployment issues.

Table 4: Vietnam's Employment Picture: Current Status and Solutions

Indicator	2022 (%)	2023 (%)
Unemployment rate (working age)	2.32	2.28
Youth unemployment rate (15–24)	7.72	7.63
Underemployment rate	2.21	2.01

(Source: Economic and Forecast Magazine, Vietnam's Employment Picture: Current Status and Solutions)

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Unemployment numbers and rates have declined to pre-pandemic levels. Specifically, the number of unemployed working-age individuals in Q1 2024 was approximately 1.05 million, a decrease of 10.3 thousand compared to the previous quarter and an increase of 5.4 thousand compared to the same period last year. The unemployment rate for the working-age population in Q1 2024 was 2.24%, down 0.02 percentage points from the previous quarter and 0.01 percentage points from the same period last year. This represents the lowest unemployment rate since early 2023 and is equivalent to the levels observed in Vietnam's labor market before the COVID-19 pandemic. Urban unemployment rates have remained below 3% since Q1 2022 (Q1 2022, 2023, and 2024 were 2.88%, 2.66%, and 2.64%, respectively).

The underemployment rate in Q1 2024 increased compared to the previous quarter and the same period last year. January and February are typically the Lunar New Year holiday season in Vietnam, during which many businesses and production facilities temporarily hire additional seasonal workers or increase overtime to meet demand before the holiday. However, after the holiday ends, working hours and the number of workers tend to decrease, leading to higher underemployment rates during this quarter compared to the previous one. This phenomenon has been observed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the underemployment rate in Q1 2019 was 1.17%; in Q4 2018, it was 1.13%; and in Q1 2018, it was 1.52% (according to the ICLS-13 framework). The number of underemployed working-age individuals in Q1 2024 was approximately 933,000, an increase of 26.4 thousand compared to the previous quarter and 47.2 thousand compared to the same period last year. The underemployment rate for this quarter was 2.03%, up 0.05 percentage points from the previous quarter and 0.09 percentage points from the same period last year. In urban areas, the underemployment rate in Q1 2024 was 1.20%, lower than in rural areas (2.58%).

Underemployment poses various social challenges for workers. Unstable jobs and underemployment result in precarious incomes, insufficient to meet basic needs, forcing many workers to find additional sources of income to sustain their families. Many workers resort to cutting expenses, reducing living costs, taking on multiple jobs, or sending their children back to their hometowns for care. Unstable employment and income also deprive workers of cultural, artistic, athletic, and social activities. After work, many workers return to small, cramped rental rooms lacking space for exercise or cultural activities. Some workers report having no social interactions outside of work, limited entertainment, and spending most of their leisure time on their phones. Underemployment and unstable income are key causes of poverty among workers, leaving them impoverished both materially and spiritually.

Housing and Cultural Facilities Issues for Workers in Vietnam

Vietnam's industrial production is rapidly developing, leading to the expansion of industrial zones (IZs) and export processing zones (EPZs) in both number and scale. By the end of 2023, Vietnam had 416 IZs established, with a total natural land area of approximately 129,900 hectares. Of this, around 89,200 hectares are industrial land, while the remainder is allocated for social infrastructure and other facilities. Among these, 296 IZs are operational, covering 92,200 hectares of land, including 63,000 hectares of industrial land.

This rapid development has concentrated workers in IZs, generating significant demand for housing and cultural facilities. To address this, the government has implemented several policies, such as Directive No. 52-CT/TW (2016) and Directive No. 16/CT-TTg (2021), which prioritize housing and cultural welfare for workers. Initiatives include providing low-interest loans, developing social housing projects, and building cultural facilities in IZs.

However, there remains a significant shortage of housing, hospitals, schools, and cultural facilities for workers. For example, only 9 out of 17 IZs in Ho Chi Minh City have cultural and sports facilities, with many underutilized. Nationally, the availability of cultural facilities falls short of planned targets. Despite efforts like Hanoi's pilot social housing project in Kim Chung, many workers still rely on substandard accommodations.

The housing situation for workers has improved slightly since 2023 but remains inadequate. While ongoing projects aim to increase supply, workers face difficulties accessing affordable housing due to limited land availability, insufficient incentives for investors, and bureaucratic hurdles.

The Issue of Workers Facing Difficulties in Establishing Romantic Relationships, Marriage, and Maintaining Family Happiness in Vietnam Today

In the process of development, humans naturally tend to establish and maintain relationships. Interaction with others helps individuals develop their thinking in various aspects. The quality of life is gradually improved through these interactions. However, not everyone fully understands the significance of building relationships in life.

Relationships are an essential part of life, but not all relationships are the same. Some relationships last a long time, while others end quickly. Building a relationship is challenging, but maintaining it is even more difficult. For young people aged 18 to 35, this is an ideal period to form meaningful and long-lasting romantic relationships.

In reality, not everyone possesses the ability to cultivate good relationships. Workers in industrial zones, in particular, face numerous challenges in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships and building happy families.

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According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the rate of single individuals has been increasing rapidly, with a growth of 3.87% between 2004 and 2019. In 2021, Statista Research Department reported that nearly 85% of men aged 20–24 and 61.9% of women in the same age group remained single.

The hectic pace of modern life, work pressure, and unstable incomes make it difficult for many workers, especially young laborers, to find opportunities to socialize and build romantic relationships. After work, many people take on additional jobs, rest, or prefer to relax alone, leaving little time for finding a life partner.

Furthermore, the prioritization of work and career among young people often delays marriage plans. According to a report by Thanh Nien Newspaper in August 2024, many young workers stated that their current schedules leave them with insufficient time for dating or developing romantic relationships.

Additionally, some young workers, despite their desire to start families, lack clear guidance on how to find life partners. Many believe that marriage depends on "fate" rather than actively creating opportunities to meet and build relationships.

Given this reality, social experts believe that raising awareness about the importance of romantic relationships and family happiness is crucial. Policies supporting reduced working hours and creating social venues for workers, particularly young ones, can help address these challenges, contributing to building a stable and sustainably developing society.

The Issue of Social Evils Among Workers

The digital space, including the internet and social media platforms in Vietnam, has witnessed tremendous growth in recent years, becoming an indispensable part of people's lives. As of early 2023, Vietnam had 77.93 million internet users, accounting for 79.1% of the total population. Additionally, the number of social media users reached 70 million, equivalent to 71% of the population. The total number of active mobile connections stood at 161.6 million, equating to 164.0% of the population. Popular platforms like Facebook, Zalo, TikTok, and YouTube not only meet communication needs but also promote the digital economy through advertising, online business, and e-commerce. The digital space has become a vital channel for information, trade, communication, and social connection in daily life, including for workers.

In the future, the development of digital platforms in Vietnam is expected to focus on adopting new technologies and enhancing user experiences. Social media platforms will increasingly integrate artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) to deliver highly interactive features, thereby attracting users and enriching content. Additionally, local social media platforms like Zalo and Lotus are anticipated to grow stronger by creating products and content tailored to Vietnamese culture and needs. E-commerce and livestreaming will also continue to be key trends as businesses leverage social media for sales and brand promotion.

The robust development of the digital space offers numerous benefits for users, including workers, especially in the context of modernization and digitalization. The digital space helps workers stay connected with family, friends, and colleagues, creating a platform for sharing and emotional support, particularly for those working far from home or on shifts. It also provides quick access to information about labor policies, job opportunities, and training programs, enabling workers to enhance their skills. Through community groups, workers can share work experiences, address job-related issues, and learn from each other. Furthermore, the digital space serves as a source of entertainment, helping workers relax after stressful working hours. In contexts where cultural facilities for workers are limited and housing and recreational resources are constrained, the digital space is regarded as a primary cultural channel for laborers.

However, despite its benefits, the digital space also has negative impacts on workers. Excessive use of the digital space can lead to distractions, reducing labor productivity, especially when workers spend too much time browsing the internet or engaging in activities unrelated to their jobs. Moreover, exposure to misinformation or negative content on the digital space can affect workers' mental health, causing anxiety, stress, and decreased motivation. The digital space also creates an environment that can easily be exploited for harassment or violations of privacy, particularly against female workers. Additionally, over-reliance on the digital space can increase feelings of loneliness and depression due to a lack of direct interaction and real-world community connections. These factors can negatively impact workers' mental and physical health, reducing their quality of life and work efficiency, potentially making them more vulnerable to social evils.

In Vietnam, statistics show that the trend of being lured into social evils on the digital space is increasing, particularly among young people and workers who frequently use the internet and social media. With the rapid growth of online platforms, cybercrimes such as fraud, gambling, online prostitution, and extremist propaganda are becoming more accessible and widespread among workers. These malicious groups often exploit the anonymity and ease of connection on the digital space to deceive and lure victims into illegal activities that may not be immediately apparent.

Additionally, the lack of awareness and cybersecurity skills among workers also contributes to the rising risks of falling into these social evils. Workers and young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are more susceptible to exploitation,

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being enticed into illegal activities with promises of financial gain or emotional satisfaction. Such behaviors not only harm individuals but also negatively impact communities and society as a whole.

Cybersecurity experts warn that in the future, social evils in the digital space will continue to pose an increasing threat to workers, especially as they use the internet and social media without adequate knowledge of cybersecurity. Forms of online crimes such as fraud, online gambling, drug trafficking, virtual prostitution, and sexual harassment through the internet are becoming more prevalent and targeted at workers.

Workers, particularly those with limited resources or knowledge of online risks, are prime targets for exploitation by malicious actors, being drawn into illegal activities with the promise of financial rewards or emotional fulfillment. These negative impacts not only affect the psychological well-being and personal lives of workers but can also lead to serious legal consequences. Workers involved in digital evils may face issues such as debt, family breakdowns, deteriorating health, or even arrest and prosecution.

Thus, raising awareness about cybersecurity and educating workers on preventing social evils is crucial to protecting them from these negative impacts.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has identified critical social issues faced by workers in Vietnam, including unstable employment, housing shortages, difficulties in forming relationships, and increased exposure to social vices. These challenges significantly affect workers' quality of life and the nation's sustainable development. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts among government agencies, businesses, social organizations, and workers themselves. Policies should focus on stabilizing employment, improving housing and cultural amenities, supporting workers in building healthy family lives, and enhancing awareness of and protection against social vices.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the study has achieved its research objectives, it has limitations, including a narrow scope of data collection and an insufficient representation of workers' experiences across diverse regions. Future research should expand its scope, employ both quantitative and qualitative methods, and delve deeper into specific issues to propose more practical and effective solutions.

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