

## ‘Brocade Silhouette in the Dark’ and the Possibility of Consent-Based Sex Education in Vietnam

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the possibilities and limitations of consent-based sex education in Vietnam through the lenses of high-context communication, gendered silence, and culturally embedded norms of femininity. Drawing on theories of consent and scholarship on silence and high-context cultures, the study analyses Vietnam’s most recent government training manual on comprehensive sexuality education, issued by the Ministry of Education and Training and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Using a feminist critical discourse-analytic framework, the paper investigates how the manual constructs consent and sexual desire, with particular attention to the implications for girls’ sexual agency and safety. While the curriculum adopts progressive, rights-based language aligned with global standards and emphasises voluntariness, mutuality, and explicit consent, the analysis reveals significant tensions between discourses of consent and desire, and between these Western frameworks and Vietnamese cultural norms that prioritise indirectness, relational harmony, and female modesty. Moreover, although desire and pleasure appear in the curriculum, they are largely framed through biological and risk-oriented discourses, limiting their potential to support meaningful sexual agency. The article argues that without cultural grounding and attention to structural gender inequality, consent-based sex education risks reproducing silence rather than disrupting it. The study contributes to multicultural education and student affairs by highlighting the need for culturally responsive, context-specific approaches to sexuality education in non-Western settings.*

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**Keywords** consent-based sex education, high-context communication, gendered silence, culturally responsive pedagogy

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### INTRODUCTION

“Brocade Silhouette in the Dark,” a translation of the Vietnamese proverb *Áo gấm đi đêm*, is a widely taught saying with the literal meaning “no one can see your glory.” As documented in the 1897 *Maxims and Proverbs Book* (Huynh, 1897), the proverb traditionally conveys the idea that one’s accomplishments ought to remain unnoticed or that extravagant acts should not be performed at inappropriate times. Over time, however, the expression has been adapted in Vietnamese contemporary discourse to describe the quiet, unrecognised labour of Vietnamese women (Ngoc Binh, 2011). In my own upbringing, my mother invoked this proverb as a moral lesson, namely to pursue upward mobility and care for loved ones discreetly, without seeking recognition or inviting social scrutiny. Born into a generation shaped by the Confucian doctrine of *tam tông, tứ đức* (“Three Obediences and Four Virtues”), which prescribes women’s obedience to father, husband, and son

while performing skilful domestic work, refined demeanour, polite speech and virtuous character (Nguyen, 1998), she navigated these constraints strategically. Discretion became not only a virtue but also a tactic, allowing her to create space for agency, particularly in supporting her natal family, without transgressing dominant gender norms.

However, in a sense, the proverb has come to evoke a broader cultural expectation that women's virtues, sacrifices, and aspirations are expressed through modesty, restraint, and silence. Scholars have documented how women's contributions remain invisible across both historical narratives (Duong, 2001; T. M. H. Ngo, 2024) and scholarship on women at home (Atsufumi, 2015; Gammeltoft, 2016; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005) and abroad (Ade, 2021; Bui, 2003; Hoang, 2011; Kim & Shin, 2018; Liu, 2025). This idealisation does more than celebrate women's endurance, it reframes silence, self-denial, and sacrifice as expressions of love and moral virtue. As Shohet (2021) explains, this idealisation of "love" becomes a mechanism through which gender inequality and exploitation are normalised, as women's silence and self-denial are recast as moral virtues rather than symptoms of systemic injustice (p. 29). In this way, narratives that transform women's suffering into evidence of devotion ultimately serve to sustain gender inequality and legitimise women's oppression.

This silence persists in the face of severe harm, including sexual and domestic violence. Pham (2015) identifies the intertwined reasons for this continued silence, including media stigma against survivors, the belief that sexual compliance is a woman's duty, and inadequate support services. To break this damaging cycle of oppression and violence affecting generations of Vietnamese women, it is essential to question whether new forms of sex education can disrupt deeply ingrained norms of silence. As Vietnam begins to introduce consent-based frameworks aligned with global rights-based standards (UNESCO, 2023), these models assume that individuals, especially girls, can clearly articulate boundaries and refusal. Yet such expectations may sit uneasily within a cultural environment where modesty, indirect communication, and emotional restraint remain highly valued. This tension raises the central question of whether consent-based sex education can help reduce harms experienced by Vietnamese girls and women and enhance their agency.

To move beyond silence and advocate for girls' sexual agency, this paper examines how consent and desire are constructed in Vietnam's emerging sex-education landscape by conducting a feminist critical discourse analysis of a single but influential government training manual, the Ministry of Education and Training's *Tài liệu tập huấn giáo dục giới tính toàn diện* –Comprehensive Sexuality Education Training Manual (2022). Drawing on scholarship on high-context cultural communication, gender norms, and the politics of silence, the paper analyses how the manual conceptualises consent and desire and considers the cultural implications of these constructions. It concludes by reflecting on what culturally responsive, contextually grounded sex education might require in Vietnam.

## **OVERVIEW OF VIETNAM'S HIGH-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION STYLE AND SEX EDUCATION DEMAND**

### **The Writer's Positionality**

From my own experience as a scholar from the Global South studying in Western academic institutions, I have observed that such environments can sometimes encourage young scholars to distance themselves from their intellectual identities and to question their own ways of knowing. This experience reflects broader concerns about the privileging of Western epistemic authority in global knowledge production. Tuck and Yang (2014) critique Western research paradigms as forms of “invasion” (p. 812) and call for expanding “the space for other forms of knowledge, thought-worlds to live” (p. 814). In that spirit, before examining Vietnamese communication and sexual communication, I begin with my own positionality as the writer.

I grew up learning not to talk about sex, neither in public spaces nor even at home. Even a simple question such as “where are babies from?” was treated as shameful and inappropriate and policed through “shhh,” red faces, and awkward silences. The first formal lesson about female reproductive anatomy I encountered was in middle school in the early 2000s. After five long class periods, we were hurried into the school hall, where all the girls were gathered for a single session covering the uterus, ovaries, menstruation, and the basics of pregnancy. The hall was packed, the projected images were too small, the booklet was too abstract, and the content was too disconnected from our lives to be meaningful. Everything was rushed; we were hungry and ready to leave. The boys, however, lingered afterwards to collect the girls’ discarded booklets out of curiosity. Ironically, boys were given no opportunity to learn about sexual reproduction. Vietnamese institutions at the time seemed to assume that sexual harm concerned only girls, and that pregnancy was solely a girl’s responsibility.

Institutional ignorance did not prevent children from learning about sex. I learned about it informally at a very young age through childhood play with a neighbour boy who had pieced together fragments of adult behaviour from co-sleeping in the cramped, one-bedroom Soviet-built apartments where many Hanoian families lived. We mimicked gestures we did not comprehend, playing house and being mom and dad. Yet that innocence did not shield me from fear. The fear of getting pregnant from role-playing husband and wife was real and detrimental. That fear and shame have prevented me from exploring my own sexual preferences and desires to this day.

### **Rethinking Consent in Vietnam Historical and Social Context**

I assume the experience I have shared is not unique. For many girls of my generation and earlier whose families endured war, hunger, displacement, and nation-building after successive conflicts (including wars against French colonial rule, Imperial Japan, U.S. Imperialism, and the Sino-Vietnam war, and the U.S. embargo) (A. Ngo, 2016; Tran, 2012), sex was trivialised compared to life-and-death realities. In such contexts, women’s roles in society were, as Duong (2001) claims, “often buried” (p. 268), let alone discussions of their sexuality or reproductive autonomy. I wonder whether girls in my generation might have been better able to protect ourselves had we learned the language of negative consent instead of silence.

According to MacKinnon (2016), the answer is likely “no”. Consent alone cannot prevent sexual violence. Teaching girls to say “no” more clearly, even if delivered early and confidently, would not have protected them in the absence of institutional support, parental attention, or the dismantling of patriarchal norms (MacKinnon, 2016), especially in long-standing Confucian gender hierarchies (Nguyen, 1998). The problem is not that women fail to express refusal, but that women’s refusal has

never carried equal social or legal weight. Consent is theoretically constructed to be a free, autonomous choice, but in reality, it is shaped, even coerced, by systemic male dominance. When legal frameworks were designed by and for men, women's experiences were "beneath notice" (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 1281). Socially, sexuality itself is organized through inequality. Women are socialised to accommodate while men are taught to pursue. Women learn to eroticize submission, men to eroticise dominance (MacKinnon, 1990). In such conditions, asking whether a girl can simply "say no" overlooks the reality that "no" is often not heard, not believed, or not permitted. These structural forms of oppression make consent an unreliable safeguard, particularly in the context of Vietnam where gender equality has been limited historically and remains so today.

### **High-Context Communication Norms and Gendered Silence in the Construction of Sex Education in Vietnam**

Understanding Vietnamese cultural communication norms and gendered silence is fundamental to imagining what meaningful sex education in this country can look like. In the seminal work *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall (1976) argues that communication systems are culture-specific and can be categorised as "high-context" and "low-context" cultures. Low-context societies depend on directness and explicit verbal information, reflecting a more individualistic ontology of the self and a more fragmented social sphere (Muir et al., 2018). Conversely, individuals in high-context cultures have identities deeply embedded within family, kinship, and community and communicate with more sensitivity to preserve face (Muir et al., 2018). Importantly, speakers in high-context cultures avoid direct refusal or confrontation, and decisiveness is often viewed as impolite or disruptive (Nguyen, T. P. L., 2020).

In Vietnamese culture, silence can signal respect, deference, disagreement, refusal, discomfort, or strategic withdrawal, depending on context (Nguyen, T. P. L., 2020). The burden, however, falls on listeners to interpret these cues correctly. These norms have particular implications for Vietnamese women and girls, since feminine virtue is often linked to emotional restraint, modesty, and the preservation of social harmony. Vietnamese daughters are taught to be observant, compliant, and attentive to others' needs. These traits are embedded in the ideal of "skill, look, speech and virtue" (*công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*) (Nguyen, 1998; Slote & De Vos, 1998). Yet silence does not necessarily signal passivity. As Minh-Ha (2010) argues, it constitutes "the language of silence," not opposed to speech but "a choice not to verbalize, a will not to say, .... a means of communication of its own" (p. 12).

Silence thus becomes both a communicative resource and a socially sanctioned performance of femininity. As politeness, silence and direct refusal (*nói thẳng*) may embarrass or offend others. As safety, maintaining harmony can be a protective strategy in hierarchical relationships where disagreement is risky. As social competence, the ability to "read the room," anticipate expectations, and respond subtly means emotional maturity. Yet these same norms severely limit a girl's ability to assert boundaries or explicitly say "no." Compounded by patriarchal structures that further weaken the force of implicit refusals, Vietnamese girls are instructed to keep distance from men ("giữ khoảng cách với đàn ông"), avoid going out after dark ("không đi chơi khuya"), and preserve their chastity ("giữ mình," "giữ gìn trinh tiết"), as if their safety and virtue were solely their own responsibility (Drummond, 2006; Quach, 2008).

This tension illustrates the broader challenge of applying Western consent frameworks in high-context cultural settings. Recently, consent has been incorporated into Vietnam's formal legal and policy frameworks. For example, the Ministry of Health's (2024) Decision No. 3261/QĐ-BYT recognises consent within reproductive health practices. However, "just say no" is unrealistic in a society where communication is relational, indirect, and embedded in communal norms. Even the most explicit verbal refusal cannot dismantle the social conditions that normalise male entitlement and female acquiescence. In this context, I concur with MacKinnon's argument that teaching girls to say "no" without simultaneously transforming the systems that make refusal unsafe or socially impossible is not empowerment but abandonment.

### **The Pressing Need for Comprehensive Sex Education in Vietnam**

A substantial body of scholarship and public-health reporting indicates that Vietnam faces an urgent need for systematic, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive sex education. Sexuality has been treated as a sensitive and often taboo topic within households and schools, resulting in pervasive gaps in adolescents' knowledge (Nguyen, 2009), as well as disinterest in sex and passivity in sexual encounters among young women (Quach, 2008). These gaps persist despite rapid sociocultural change, and the need to address them has intensified as today's youth population is larger and becoming sexually active earlier (Anh Thu, 2022).

According to Nguyen (2009), Vietnamese adolescents receive minimal sexual information from parents or caregivers. Interviews with youth reveal a widespread fear of parental judgment, shame, or moral reprimand when attempting to seek information about sexual matters, while parents display their own discomfort, often citing embarrassment, insufficient knowledge, or the belief that discussing sex may encourage early sexual activity. Parents may view children who want to learn about sexuality as "bad/morally wrong" (*hư hỏng*) (Do et al., 2017). Consequently, adolescents frequently rely on peers or social media, which increases the likelihood of misinformation and harmful practices (Do et al., 2017).

Beyond the family sphere, mainstream media underscore these concerns about the lack of an official sex-education curriculum. National outlets such as *Nhan Dan Newspaper* (2023) characterise sex-education efforts in schools as both insufficient and delayed (*thiếu và muộn*). Although sex education has been discussed since the 1990s, it has never been implemented as a standalone, comprehensive curriculum. Instead, content is fragmented across biology units, moral-education lessons, and ad hoc extracurricular sessions (*Nhan Dan Digital Newspaper*, 2025). Teachers themselves often report discomfort, lack of training, and fear of community backlash (Ngoc Vu, 2018).

Against the backdrop of Confucian ideals of modesty, family honour, and sexual restraint, the need for a comprehensive, dialogic, and gender-responsive sex education curriculum in Vietnam is structural. Vietnamese adolescents, especially young women, under expectations to uphold family honour, discretion, and sexual chastity, are vulnerable to misinformation, coercion, and violence. Addressing this requires equipping young people with accurate knowledge, critical awareness, and the confidence to articulate sexual agency, while remaining attentive to cultural dynamics. Without such an integrated approach that engages rather than ignores these systemic barriers, sex education risks becoming ineffective or even counterproductive, creating new tensions between institutional

knowledge and lived cultural norms and leaving young people with fragmented understandings of self and sexuality.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Rationale for Selecting and Interrogating the Current Official Sex-Education Manual**

To date, Vietnam still lacks an official, nationwide sex-education curriculum. Although some aspects of bodily development and physical health are introduced in the early-grade curriculum, these lessons do not constitute sex education in any substantive sense (Bich Thanh & Tue Nguyen, 2024). In the absence of a formal nationwide curriculum, various international organisations have attempted to provide sex-education content; however, these materials are often culturally misaligned (Blair, 2025). Consequently, sex education in Vietnam is not yet shaped by a coherent curricular framework but rather through a patchwork of policy documents, training materials, and externally funded initiatives. These texts therefore become critical sites for examining the emerging direction of sexuality education, particularly how key concepts such as consent and desire are defined, framed, and operationalised.

This study selects for analysis the *Tài liệu tập huấn giáo dục giới tính toàn diện* – the Ministry of Education and Training’s Comprehensive Sexuality Education Training Manual (2022) because of its institutional authority, recency, and potential policy impact. As one of the most recent nationally endorsed training documents, it represents a significant effort to formalise and standardise sexuality education practices in Vietnam. The manual was developed under Project VNM10P04, a USD 1.9 million initiative funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA Vietnam, 2022). Its relevance lies not only in its official status at national and international levels but also in its potential influence on future curriculum design.

By focusing on this document, the study is able to examine not only the official discourse promoted at the policy level but also the tensions that arise when globalised models of consent-based education are translated into a high-context cultural setting. Analysing this manual thus provides critical insight into the assumptions, limitations, and contradictions embedded in Vietnam’s emerging sex-education framework, particularly in relation to its capacity to reduce sexual harms while enhancing girls’ agency.

### **The Use of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

The paper employs a critical discourse-analytic method, which conceptualises language as a form of social action and examines how institutional texts build significance, enact identities, and reinforce normative cultural models. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is particularly suited to this study because it “combines linguistic analysis and ideological critique,” enabling inquiry that moves from the micro level of textual features to broader historical, philosophical, and social contexts (Yazdannik et al., 2017, p. 3). This approach allows researchers to analyse educational texts to address questions such as the following. “What kinds of knowledge do we construct about women and minority groups in school texts? Do the texts we use in class promote stereotypical views that reinforce racist, sexist, and patriarchal attitudes?” (McLaren, 2014). CDA has been widely applied

in health-related research (Yazdannik et al., 2017), gender studies (Lazar, 2007), and analysis of gender and sexuality ideologies in educational settings (Remlinger, 2005).

Building on this tradition, this study adopts a feminist CDA framework as articulated by Lazar (2007), which focuses on “how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated and contested” in representations of social practices, interpersonal relations, and identity constructions in text and talk (p. 150). Feminist CDA is particularly useful for examining processes of “doing gender” and “gender performativity”, while remaining attentive to the discursive mechanisms through which inequality is normalised (Lazar, 2007, p. 150). Its analytical scope is flexible, encompassing linguistic choices at multiple levels, including “lexis, clauses/sentences/utterances, conversational turns, structures of argument and genre” (p. 151).

### **Analytical Focus and Procedure**

The analysis encompasses the entire training manual. However, the discussion focuses specifically on sections and language that address consent and desire, examining how these concepts are framed, normalised, or suppressed within the text. Sections related to physical development, terminology, and general pedagogical procedures fall outside the primary analytical scope and are therefore not foregrounded.

The focus on the discourse of consent is particularly critical. From a feminist perspective, especially within radical traditions such as MacKinnon’s (1990), sexuality is understood not as a neutral domain of individual expression but as “the dynamic of control by which male dominance” is enacted (p. 137). From this perspective, consent is neither neutral nor purely communicative, but deeply political. It is embedded within broader structures of gender inequality that shape how consent is given, interpreted, and respected. MacKinnon (1991) further argues that “legal sex equality theory has not been designed to address the substance of most lived sex inequality” (1991, p. 1296) and the fact that “condescending, demeaning, hostile, humiliating, and indifferent judicial treatment of female victims of sexual assault is not uncommon” (p. 1306). Within such conditions, consent alone offers limited protection, as it presumes a level of autonomy and recognition that is not equally available to all. Analysing the discourse of consent in this educational manual therefore makes visible the underlying assumptions embedded in policy and pedagogy, as well as the disjuncture between formal definitions of consent and the lived realities of girls navigating unequal social conditions.

At the same time, the decision to analyse not only the discourse of consent but also the discourse of desire is informed by Fine and McClelland’s (2006) seminal work, which demonstrates that the erasure of girls’ sexual desire in North American sex education has profound consequences for their development and safety. As they contend, when curricula omit desire, they deny young women opportunities to “imagine themselves as sexual beings”, “access information and health care”, protect themselves against “structural and interpersonal violence”, and “rely on a public safety net” (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 300). Their framework underscores that examining desire is not ancillary but central to understanding how educational materials position young women’s agency and vulnerability.

## FINDINGS

Across the manual, clear discursive patterns emerge. The discourse of consent is heavily foregrounded and systematically elaborated. At points, the presentation of consent appears to move beyond the limitations of simplified models such as ‘yes means yes’ or ‘no means no,’ incorporating elements that gesture towards cultural nuance and contextual interpretation. However, the discourse of desire, while present, remains constrained, fragmented, and ultimately subordinated. This imbalance reflects a deeper ideological ordering of sexuality, in which regulation, risk management, and communicative procedure overshadow questions of subjectivity, agency, and lived experience. From a feminist perspective, this asymmetry is significant because it suggests that consent, when treated as the primary framework, may obscure the power relations that shape whose desires are recognised, whose voices are heard, and whose boundaries are enforceable.

To demonstrate this imbalance, the analysis therefore traces key lexical items related to sexual consent and sexuality, including “consent” (*đồng thuận*), “agreement” (*đồng ý*) or “voluntary” (*tự nguyện*) and “desire” (*ham muốn*), “pleasure” (*khoái cảm*) and “orgasm” (*cực khoái*). These terms are traced across the entire manual to examine how they are defined, contextualised, and operationalised within specific scenarios of reproductive health guidance.

Particular attention is given to when these terms appear in the manual’s scenarios, since such conversational scenarios are where “discursive critique of the prevailing restrictive structures” is most visible (Lazar, 2007, p. 153). Close analysis of how these terms are played out helps identify how certain forms of knowledge, agency, and sexual subjectivity are foregrounded while others are marginalised or silenced. This approach thus illuminates not only how the guidelines define and regulate sexuality, but also what forms of gendered and cultural assumptions remain unarticulated and may contribute to the reproduction of inequality.

### The Discourse of Consent in the Training Manual

The Ministry of Education and Training’s manual provides one of the clearest formal definitions of sexual consent currently available in Vietnamese educational policy. The section on “Seeking Consent” (*Tìm kiếm sự đồng thuận*) occupies one full chapter (Section 9 of 18), underscoring its pedagogical importance. Consent is defined as “a voluntary agreement to do something” (*sự đồng ý mang tính tự nguyện làm việc gì đó*) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, pp. 118 and 128). In line with international standards, the guideline also specifies circumstances in which consent cannot be given, including sleep, intoxication, coercion, or being under age 16, and emphasises that consent requires “choice, freedom, and ability to give consent” (*sự lựa chọn, tự do và khả năng đưa ra đồng thuận hay không*) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, pp. 121 and 129). These provisions suggest that the manual’s authors have engaged, at least in part, with feminist critiques of simplified consent models by incorporating a more nuanced understanding of voluntariness and capacity. In this respect, the framework aligns closely with Reiss’s (2022) discussion of “voluntary consent” (p. 688), which stresses the conditions necessary for consent to be meaningful rather than procedural.

Lessons emphasise that consent must be explicit, verbal, and enthusiastic. Students are also instructed that “If the person does not say ‘no,’ that does not mean they say ‘yes’” (*Nếu người được*

hỏi không nói ‘không’, điều đó không có nghĩa là họ nói ‘có’), and, importantly, any uncertainty requires the initiator to stop immediately (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, p. 127). This discourse of consent, which disciplines young people’s sexuality through rules of communication and responsibility, mirrors approaches widely implemented but increasingly critiqued by MacKinnon and other prominent feminist scholars. As Gilbert (2018) argues, “the concept of consent brings with it, into education, a procedural logic that misrecognises sexuality as a transparent, communicative, and rational experience and mistakes compliance for learning” (p. 265). The manual’s instructions appear progressive and culturally appropriate, particularly because they anticipate the limitations of both affirmative (“yes means yes”) and negative (“no means no”) consent models criticised in Western contexts (Wright, 2024) and in their emphasis on caution in situations of uncertainty. However, such an approach still rests on the contested assumption that sexuality is transparent and readily communicable.

The manual further illustrates how both affirmative and negative consent can be conveyed through not only verbal but also nonverbal cues (p. 127) (see Figure 1). This pedagogical move aligns well with Vietnamese high-context communication, where indirect expression, silence, and gesture often carry significant meaning. However, the manual’s suggestion that “looking directly into the other person’s eyes” signals affirmative consent, and avoiding eye contact signals negative consent, is culturally incongruent. Direct eye contact is a Western norm, whereas Vietnamese communicative practices often value discretion and modesty (Nguyen, T., 2020).

**Figure 1.** *Verbal and Nonverbal Indicators of Affirmative vs Negative Consent* (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, p. 127)

| <b>Dấu hiệu bằng lời nói thể hiện khả năng đồng thuận</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Dấu hiệu bằng lời nói thể hiện khả năng không đồng thuận</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Có</li> <li>• Tôi chắc chắn</li> <li>• Tôi rất hứng thú!</li> <li>• Tôi muốn ...</li> <li>• Tôi muốn làm việc đó</li> <li>• Tôi cảm thấy hài lòng về việc đó</li> <li>• Tôi sẵn sàng</li> <li>• Đây là điều đúng đắn đối với tôi</li> </ul>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Không</li> <li>• Tôi không chắc chắn</li> <li>• Ngược lại</li> <li>• Tôi không muốn làm việc đó!</li> <li>• Bạn có thể không làm điều đó được không?</li> <li>• Tôi đã nghĩ là tôi muốn, nhưng ...</li> <li>• Tôi không muốn làm điều đó vào lúc này</li> <li>• Tôi chưa sẵn sàng hoặc không chắc chắn là tôi đã sẵn sàng</li> <li>• Tôi không còn muốn làm việc đó nữa</li> <li>• Đây là điều sai trái đối với tôi</li> </ul> |
| <b>Dấu hiệu phi ngôn ngữ thể hiện khả năng đồng thuận</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Dấu hiệu bằng lời nói thể hiện khả năng không đồng thuận</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nhìn thẳng vào mắt</li> <li>• Gật đầu</li> <li>• Trông thoải mái và thư giãn</li> <li>• Cười thành tiếng và/hoặc mỉm cười</li> <li>• Ngôn ngữ cơ thể “mở”, VD: tay chân để thoải mái, mở, thư giãn; nét mặt thư giãn; nghiêng người về phía người hỏi</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tránh nhìn vào mắt</li> <li>• Đẩy ra xa</li> <li>• Tránh động chạm cơ thể</li> <li>• Lắc đầu</li> <li>• Trông không thoải mái, căng thẳng, buồn bã hoặc lo sợ</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chủ động tham gia</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ngôn ngữ cơ thể “đóng”, VD: tay chân cứng lại, khoanh tay, căng thẳng; quay lưng về phía người hỏi</li> <li>• Không chủ động tham gia</li> </ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Below is the English version translated by the author:

| <b>Verbal Indicators of Agreement</b>                                                                                                                             | <b>Dấu hiệu bằng lời nói thể hiện khả năng không đồng thuận</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yes;<br>I am certain;<br>I am very interested;<br>I want to...;<br>I want to do that;<br>I feel satisfied with that;<br>I am ready;<br>This is right for me       | No;<br>I am not sure;<br>On the contrary;<br>I do not want to do that;<br>Could you not do that?;<br>I thought I wanted to, but...;<br>I do not want to do that right now;<br>I am not ready or not sure if I am ready;<br>I no longer want to do that;<br>This is wrong for me |
| <b>Nonverbal Indicators of Agreement</b>                                                                                                                          | <b>Nonverbal Indicators of Non-Agreement</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Eye contact;<br>Nodding;<br>Relaxed posture;<br>Smiling or laughing;<br>Open body language (e.g., relaxed limbs, leaning toward speaker);<br>Active participation | Avoiding eye contact;<br>Pulling away;<br>Avoiding physical contact;<br>Shaking head;<br>Tense or uncomfortable posture;<br>Closed body language (e.g., crossed arms, turning away);<br>Lack of participation                                                                   |

The curriculum also introduces structured steps for seeking consent, articulated as “Ask – Listen – Respect” (“*Hỏi – Lắng nghe – Tôn trọng*”) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, pp. 121, 122 and 129), which reflects broader ethics of care, respect, and mutuality (Hand, 2022). While mutuality remains difficult to operationalise and measure (Reiss, 2022), the manual attempts to teach it through scenario-based activities (see Figure 2). Yet the first scenario is controversial because it portrays a girl expressing sexual desire only to be refused by her boyfriend. Although intended to model girls’ agency, the example may be culturally discordant with traditional expectations of femininity and may provoke resistance among educators and communities. In the scenario between Tài (the male partner) and Trang (the female partner), Trang asserts her desire for more sexual intimacy and even threatens to seek it elsewhere if Tài cannot satisfy her. Moreover, Trang is depicted as three years older than Tài, but this age dynamic runs counter to conventional expectations often upheld by older generations in Vietnam. Trainers and teachers who choose to teach this scenario may therefore face backlash due to its perceived radicalism.

Moreover, while the scenario introduces the possibility of girls articulating sexual desire, it simultaneously frames this expression within refusal, raising questions about its capacity to genuinely empower. It may resonate with already outspoken girls, but risks discouraging those who

are more hesitant or constrained by norms of modesty. Read through MacKinnon's framework, the scenario remains at the level of language, leaving the underlying structures of inequality intact. It further individualises sexual negotiation while deferring responsibility to sex education educators, offering little guidance on practical implementation or the cultural adaptation required for the scenario to be meaningful.

**Figure 2.** *Role-Play Scenario* (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, p. 129)

| Tình huống đóng vai                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Tình huống 1: Tài và Trang</b></p> <p>Tài 19 tuổi và Trang 22 tuổi. Họ đã hẹn hò với nhau được 6 tháng và có quan hệ tình dục với nhau được khoảng 1 tháng. Tài thường thấy thỏa mãn khi quan hệ tình dục, nhưng đôi lúc cảm thấy không muốn quan hệ. Vào những lúc này, Trang thường nói những điều như “Nếu anh thật sự yêu em, anh sẽ muốn làm điều đó” hay “Nếu anh không muốn quan hệ tình dục với em, có thể em sẽ tìm một người khác để làm điều đó”. Tài không muốn để mất Trang, do đó thường bỏ cuộc và chấp nhận quan hệ tình dục. Tài có thể đưa ra sự đồng thuận không? Vì sao?</p> <p><b>Tình huống 2: Huy và Lan</b></p> <p>Lan và Huy đều 18 tuổi và quyết định có quan hệ tình dục. Lan nói rằng cô sợ có bầu, nhưng Huy trấn an cô là sẽ không thể có bầu lần đầu tiên quan hệ tình dục. Lan có thể đưa ra sự đồng thuận hay không? Vì sao?</p> |

Below is the English version translated by the author:

| Role-play Scenario                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Scenario 1: Tài and Trang</b></p> <p>Scenario 1: Tài (19) and Trang (22) have been dating for six months and have been sexually active for about one month. Tài usually feels satisfied with their sexual relationship, but sometimes Tài does not feel like having sex. In those moments, Trang often says things like: “If you really love me, you will do this for me.” Or “If you don’t want to have sex with me, I’ll find someone else who will.” Tài does not want to lose Trang, so he agrees to have sex even when he does not want to. Does this count as consent? Why or why not?</p> <p><b>Scenario 2: Huy and Lan</b></p> <p>Lan and Huy are both 18 years old and decide to have sex. Lan says she is worried about getting pregnant, but Huy reassures her that she cannot become pregnant the first time she has intercourse. Did Lan give consent? Why or why not?</p> |

In conclusion, the discourse of consent is poised to become a central feature of sex education in Vietnam if this manual ultimately shapes future curriculum, which is a possible outcome given its joint production by UNFPA and the Ministry of Education and Training. The prominence of consent is unmistakable. Across 344 pages, “consent” (*đồng thuận*) appears about 150 times, “agreement” (*đồng ý*) 68 times, and “voluntary” (*tự nguyện*) 10 times. This density signals a deliberate effort to foreground consent as a pedagogical anchor, reflecting either a genuine commitment to rights-based, autonomy-oriented frameworks or a strategic discursive adaptation aimed at making such concepts more culturally palatable. However, the presence of these terms in policy does not ensure their effective translation into classroom practice. Nor is it clear that such instruction will enhance girls’ agency or reduce harms and violence in a context where high-context communication norms,

Confucian gender expectations, and entrenched power hierarchies continue to shape everyday interactions.

### The Discourse of Desire in the Training Manual

As discussed above, scholars argue that “consent” alone is insufficient for meaningful sex education, and that the missing link is a discourse of “desire” (Beres, 2018; Fine & McClelland, 2006). In the sex education manual, “desire” (*ham muốn*), “pleasure” (*khoái cảm*) and “orgasm” (*cực khoái*) appear 19, 24, and 33 times, respectively. At first glance, this suggests an unusually progressive and arguably radical approach within the context of Vietnam’s highly gendered sexual norms. Yet a closer discourse analysis reveals that although the lexicon of desire appears throughout the manual, its meanings, functions, and pedagogical implications remain constrained.

Across the text, desire is consistently positioned within a framework of biological function and risk management rather than relational agency or subjective experience. “Pleasure” (*khoái cảm*) and “orgasm” (*cực khoái*) are typically presented as physiological processes, detached from emotional, interpersonal, or ethical dimensions of sexuality. For example, in Section II, “Sex throughout a person’s life,” orgasm is mentioned in relation to statements such as “it is possible to masturbate to achieve orgasm” (*có thể thủ dâm để đạt cực khoái*), “physically capable of reaching orgasm” (*có thể đạt cực khoái*) (see Figure 3). In this formulation, desire becomes legible only when it serves scientific explanation, not when it might support young people’s lived experience, meaning-making, or articulation of sexual subjectivity. Thus, desire is acknowledged but not empowered.

**Figure 3.** Representation of Orgasm (highlighted) in Section II, “Sex Throughout a Person’s Life” (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, p. 20)

| Tâm lý và xã hội                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Sinh học và thể chất                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Có thể thủ dâm để đạt cực khoái</li> <li>• Có mơ tưởng tình dục</li> <li>• Có thể bắt đầu quan hệ tình dục</li> <li>• Có thể thử nghiệm các hành vi tình dục khác nhau</li> <li>• Có nhiều bạn bè khác giới hơn</li> <li>• Có bạn bè thân nhất cùng giới tính</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến nhất bắt đầu biết hẹn hò - người dị tính</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến bắt đầu biết hẹn hò - người đồng tính</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến nhất “công khai xu hướng tính dục” - người dị tính</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến “công khai xu hướng tính dục” - người đồng tính</li> <li>• Tự cảm nhận về ngoại hình cơ thể một cách thực tế hơn</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến để kết hôn</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Âm đạo tiết dịch và âm vật cương cứng</li> <li>• Hình dáng cơ thể trẻ em gái thay đổi, vòng hông phát triển</li> <li>• Hình dáng cơ thể trẻ em trai thay đổi, phát triển cơ bắp</li> <li>• Xuất hiện mụn trứng cá</li> <li>• Mọc lông mu</li> <li>• Vỡ giọng</li> <li>• Ngực bắt đầu phát triển</li> <li>• Mãn kinh/mãn dục</li> <li>• Tắt kinh</li> <li>• Có thể đạt cực khoái</li> <li>• Có thể mắc phải các bệnh lây truyền qua đường tình dục, trong đó có HIV</li> <li>• Phản ứng tình dục chậm hơn</li> </ul> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến để bắt đầu có con</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến có con cái ra ở riêng</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến để trở thành ông bà</li> <li>• Độ tuổi phổ biến có vợ/chồng chết</li> </ul> |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

Below is the English version translated by the author:

| <b>Psychological and Social</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Biological and Physical</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May engage in masturbation to achieve orgasm</li> <li>• May experience sexual fantasies</li> <li>• May initiate sexual intercourse</li> <li>• May experiment with a variety of sexual behaviors</li> <li>• Increased number of friends of a different sex</li> <li>• Close friendships with same-sex peers</li> <li>• Typical age for beginning to date (heterosexual individuals)</li> <li>• Typical age for beginning to date (same-sex individuals)</li> <li>• Typical age for “coming out” (heterosexual individuals)</li> <li>• Typical age for “coming out” (same-sex individuals)</li> <li>• More realistic self-perception of body image</li> <li>• Typical age for marriage</li> <li>• Typical age for having children</li> <li>• Typical age when children leave home</li> <li>• Typical age for becoming a grandparent</li> <li>• Typical age of spousal loss (widowhood)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vaginal lubrication and clitoral erection occur</li> <li>• Changes in body shape among girls; hip development</li> <li>• Changes in body shape among boys; muscular development</li> <li>• Appearance of acne</li> <li>• Growth of pubic hair</li> <li>• Voice deepening</li> <li>• Breast development begins</li> <li>• Menopause/andropause</li> <li>• Cessation of menstruation</li> <li>• Ability to achieve orgasm</li> <li>• Risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV</li> <li>• Slower sexual response</li> </ul> |

Notably, the manual also includes unexpectedly progressive references to queer relationships. Trainers are encouraged to facilitate discussion using five case studies of happily married queer couples (Ministry of Education and Training, 2022, p. 189). While this gesture reflects an openness rarely seen in Vietnamese educational discourse, it produces a paradox. Fine and McClelland (2006) critique the heteronormative pressure towards marriage in sex education; in this manual, that pressure extends not to heterosexuality specifically but to marriage as an idealised endpoint for all relationships, even though same-sex marriage remains illegal in Vietnam. The romanticisation of queer “happy endings,” while well-intentioned, risks fostering aspirations that the current legal and cultural environment cannot yet support, with potentially painful consequences for queer youth.

In practice, queer relationships in Vietnam continue to be shaped by stigma and limited legal recognition. Although same-sex marriage is no longer criminalised, it is not legally recognised under Vietnamese law, meaning couples cannot access the rights and protections afforded to heterosexual

unions (e.g., inheritance, spousal benefits) (Cao, 2014), and discrimination persists within families, schools, and broader communities (Nguyen, T., 2020). Beyond cultural incongruence, these legal constraints also raise practical questions about how such lessons can be meaningfully enacted by educators within the current institutional context. As such, the pedagogical value of these materials remains uneven, as their aspirational framing may outpace the realities of classroom applicability and institutional readiness.

The manual also refrains from linking desire to sexual agency, boundary-setting, or communicative competency, nor does it acknowledge that Vietnamese girls face powerful cultural expectations to suppress desire, avoid appearing sexually knowledgeable, and prioritise modesty. Desire is rarely framed as something that can be expressed, negotiated, or used to evaluate whether a sexual experience is wanted, safe, or autonomous. Only one scenario includes a girl voicing her sexual desire yet is rejected (see Figure 2). However, feminist theory suggests that this absence is not trivial. Srinivasan (2021) argues that desire is often reduced to a neural indicator of wanted versus unwanted sex; in reality, desires themselves are shaped by social hierarchies and cultural norms, influencing how individuals exercise agency and navigate power dynamics, including the political formation of who is considered desirable. In this light, the manual's silence on desire undermines its ability to foster the true understanding of desire and reflective self-agency necessary for meaningful sexual decision-making. As Fine & McClelland (2006) similarly argue, such representational absences "lodge sexuality education in fear and shame, firmly burying discussions of desire and pleasure" (p. 306).

The manual's discourse of desire operates within a broader logic of risk aversion and regulatory control, despite its seemingly progressive language. The two sets of discourse remain parallel but unintegrated domains, with desire explaining the body while consent explaining the rules. The manual as a whole still reflects the reluctance to legitimise desire as a normal and valuable part of adolescent development. As Fine and McClelland (2006) argue, when curricula fail to teach young people, especially girls, to recognise and articulate their desires, they leave them vulnerable not only to coercion but also to the internalisation of silence as a normative sexual position. The danger scenario is a sex-education framework that recognises the body's capacity for pleasure while maintaining that girls who express desire are "bad/morally wrong" (*hư hỏng*) (Do et al., 2017).

Thus, a more transformative approach to sex education in Vietnam would begin by supporting girls in advocating for themselves and their rights in culturally appropriate ways. Sex education should not operate in isolation but be embedded within broader democratic and social transformations, including the recognition of women's voices, queer rights, and social visibility. The sex education manual itself must move beyond the separation of desire and consent by integrating them within a relational, culturally grounded, and rights-based pedagogy. To this end, sustained consultation with scholars in sexual health, psychology, Vietnamese studies, and legal theory is essential. Scenarios in the manual should scaffold diverse case studies and dialogic encounters that move beyond deficit-based or rigidly binary (positive/negative) framings. In doing so, sex education guidelines can more effectively affirm young people's sexual agency without reproducing imbalances between consent and desire or reinforcing unequal distributions of power and responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

If sex education in Vietnam continues to follow the trajectory reflected in the Ministry of Education and Training's manual, it risks producing a generation of girls who find themselves caught between irreconcilable demands. The manual largely omits discussion of desire, sexual agency, and communicative competency, while failing to account for the powerful cultural expectations that girls remain modest, suppress sexual knowledge, and prioritise others' judgments. As shown in the scenarios analysed, girls are seldom positioned to express, negotiate, or reflect on their desires, and the few instances where desire is voiced result in rejection or shame. Their intellectual and emotional development is likely to unfold amid tensions between traditional expectations and an increasingly globalised economy, between Western-influenced curricular reforms and the reluctance of parents and teachers to address sexuality openly. Although the current sex-education landscape is insufficient, the emerging model with multimillion-dollar international investments may not necessarily serve Vietnamese girls well. Progressive language introduced without cultural grounding, legal alignment, or meaningful attention to gendered realities risks reproducing, rather than challenging, existing inequalities.

I conclude this paper by returning to my own memory of the awkward and performative sex education I experienced nearly thirty years ago in my middle school's hall. In many parts of Vietnam today, students still gather in a school hall to watch a tiny, blurry projection of the harmful effects of abortion (Bich Thanh & Tue Nguyen, 2024). The main difference now is that both boys and girls sit together in the room, sharing the same feelings of anxiety, awkwardness, and shame. As recent reporting shows, sex education continues to focus primarily on preventing unintended pregnancy and abortion, placing responsibility on teachers who may feel unprepared or unwilling to address these topics (Bich Thanh & Tue Nguyen, 2024). Despite decades of economic and social change, the core messages, and the cultural discomfort surrounding them, remain largely unchanged.

I suggest that sex education in Vietnam should begin with supporting girls to advocate for themselves and their rights in culturally appropriate ways, while also creating pedagogical spaces where silence is no longer the default mode of safety or virtue. For sex education in Vietnam to be meaningful, far greater attention and care must be paid to ensuring that its content is culturally appropriate, gender-responsive, and attuned to Vietnamese communicative norms. Equally important, the progressiveness of the curriculum must be matched by progress in the legal and policy environment, particularly regarding sexual rights, gender equality, and protections against violence. Without such alignment, sex education may create more harm than good, leaving young people navigating contradictions that neither families, schools, nor the law are prepared to resolve.

This study contributes to scholarship on sex education in Vietnam by examining how consent-based curricula may intersect with cultural norms, gendered expectations, and the politics of desire. Through an analysis of the Ministry of Education and Training's training manual, it identifies key gaps, particularly the marginalisation of desire within constructions of sexual agency and the limited development of culturally grounded pedagogical approaches. At the same time, I acknowledge that the scope of this study is limited to a single key document and that the analysis is primarily interpretive in nature. As such, its claims are exploratory rather than comprehensive, and further work is needed to translate critique into concrete curriculum models and intervention strategies. Future research should therefore examine how integrating desire alongside consent within culturally

responsive and high-context communicative frameworks might strengthen sex education and better support girls' sexual agency.

Although this study does not expand the corpus of analysed documents to substantiate broader claims about sex education in Vietnam, it is grounded in a sense of critical hope and pedagogical praxis. In the current restrictive climate, one can only hope that, in the future, Vietnamese girls will be able to live fully in their own “glory,” and that the silence implied in ‘Brocade Silhouette in the Dark’ (*Áo gấm đi đêm*) will finally become a relic of the past. As noted in the introduction, my mother taught me to pursue my dreams quietly, with modesty and discretion. I am grateful for her wise strategy of survival, but I hope I will never have to teach my daughters the language of silence. Instead, by writing this paper and bringing attention to the gaps and constraints between current sex-education directions and cultural and legal realities, I engage in a different praxis, reflecting my modest effort to imagine and contribute to a future in which generations of Vietnamese girls can fully enact their agency, in a world where desire, consent, and self-expression are recognised, valued, and supported.

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