

The link between animal-directed violence and human well-being: Worker experiences in Vietnam's dog and cat meat trade

Friday, 5 April, 2024

The article contains details of the cat and dog meat trade that some may find distressing.

Researcher Network member, Tani Khara, shares the findings from a recent collaborative study with Soi Dog, a global animal welfare charity, and Vietnam National University

Introduction

Annually, the dog and cat meat trade (DCMT) is responsible for the death of approximately five million dogs and one million cats in Vietnam (Four Paws, 2020).

Notorious for its violence, this trade employs harsh methods throughout the process of capturing, transporting, housing and slaughtering animals, frequently involving the theft of animals from their rightful owners.

Conducted in partnership with Soi Dog, a global animal welfare charity, and Vietnam National University, this research delved into the link between animal-directed violence and its psychosocial impact on human well-being, in the context of the DCMT in Vietnam (Khara, 2023).

Preliminary conversations before this research indicated that the DCMT is especially widespread in Vietnam, more so than in other Southeast Asian countries, creating a major concern for animal welfare. Furthermore, the practice of consuming dog meat, more often observed in the northern regions of Vietnam (Four Paws, 2020), represents a deep-rooted cultural tradition (Avieli, 2012).

The animal trade – whether it involves chickens, pigs, cows, or dogs and cats – tends to be violent and inhumane. Our study focused on the dog and cat meat trade. This focus aligns with the ongoing efforts of Soi Dog, initially founded to enhance the welfare of stray animals in Asia – predominantly cats and dogs living on the streets, frequently in poor health or injured. The charity's successful endeavours in improving the lives of these strays have organically expanded to include combating the cruelty faced by these animals within Asia's DCMT. This work is an extension of the charity's original mission to safeguard the well-being of cats and dogs.

This study explored the first-hand experiences of several DCMT workers in Hanoi, Vietnam. Through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with child and adult workers, the study aimed to understand how witnessing violence against animals affects the mental and social well-being of those involved in this trade.

In addition to sharing some of the findings, this article also draws comparisons between these workers in the DCMT in Vietnam and findings from previous research on abattoir workers in other cultures, with the results showing some disturbing similarities.

Key findings

The findings from this research revealed that both child and adult workers in Vietnam tend to get into the DCMT driven by dire personal and familial circumstances. They often view their involvement as a duty or responsibility to support their families. Previous studies have similarly shown that abattoir workers in other countries, often hailing from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, enter the trade primarily for self-support. Frequently, they also have limited options but to sustain themselves through this line of work. This sense of obligation was starkly evident in this Vietnamese study as well:

- *“That is my family's livelihood, so I join to support my parents” (Child worker #1).*
- *“At that time, my husband and I were newly married, we had a struggling life. We just tried to get by every day ... That's why I thought about selling dog meat to make money and to make a saving” (Adult worker #1).*

Many Vietnamese workers emphasised the greater earning potential in this industry when compared to various other professions. Some also viewed the DCMT as similar to other meat trades in that if dog and cat slaughter were banned in Vietnam, all animal killing might follow suit. This appeared to reflect a normalisation of this activity from their perspective:

- *“If dog and cat slaughter will be banned, all kinds of animal killing will be banned, too. If there are people who like eating dog meat, there are people who will slaughter dogs” (Adult worker #2).*

Workers, both children and adults, reported extensive working hours that started as early as 5am and continued until 10pm daily. Although there were some acknowledged benefits of such work, many mentioned that the job was not only physically strenuous but also emotionally and psychologically distressing:

- *“This job is quite barbaric, scary, I really don't want to do this job. But because of the economy, I also want to help my family” (Minor worker #4).*
- *“I am sick, I feel very tired and want to quit my job ... sometimes it makes me very tired and depressed, but I still have to do it” (Adult worker #4).*

Workers were often directly involved in the killing process, described as “bloody” and “horrible”. They mentioned being disturbed by constant reminders of their work, such as the “fishy smell of blood” and sounds of petrified and distressed dogs and cats. Some also reported suffering from sleep disturbances, indicating a profound psychological impact that extended beyond their working hours:

- *“I wake up in the middle of the night ... I also had scary dreams, I used to dream that I was the dog (which) I had killed” (Child worker #5).*

Prior research among abattoir workers in other countries has similarly revealed notably high instances of anxiety and psychotic tendencies among these individuals (Khara, 2020; Muller, 2018; Victor & Barnard, 2016). Common symptoms among abattoir workers may encompass violent dreams, leading some to seek treatments akin to those provided to war veterans (Dillard, 2007; Lebowhl, 2016; Slade & Alleyne, 2021). Additionally, the strenuous nature of abattoir work often results in many physical health problems (Eisnitz, 2007; Smith, 2002). Similar observations were made in this Vietnamese study, where workers reported experiencing issues like dizziness, fatigue and injuries resulting from dog bites or accidents involving work tools:

- *“One day, while preparing to slaughter the dog ... the dog escaped and rushed to bite me causing me to bleed quite a lot ... After that, I had to get stitches and had difficulty walking. It took about a week to get better” (Child worker #5).*

- *“Recently, during the slaughtering process, the knife unfortunately slipped from my father’s hand and cut into my leg, causing me to lose blood ... that haunted me for a while” (Child worker #11).*
- *“...doing this job is tiring and sometimes risky” (Adult worker #6).*

Some workers also discussed battling social stigma and ridicule due to their involvement in the trade, leading to feelings of isolation and shame:

- *“...my classmates make fun of me about my family’s job” (Child worker #1).*
- *“...slaughtering dog meat is dirty work” (Worker #3).*

Studies on abattoir workers in various countries have indicated that their levels of aggression can be heightened to the extent that they are akin to those observed in prison populations (Slade & Alleyne, 2021). Similarly in the Vietnamese study, the cumulative effect of this work appeared to create a general sense of dissatisfaction as many workers expressed anger at work and in their personal lives:

- *“I get angry easily when at home” (Child worker #3).*
- *“I am feeling depressed, tired, not wanting to do anything ... doing this job makes me feel more angry, easily angry ... this job is stressful” (Worker #5).*

Nearly all child workers expressed a wish to exit the trade and pursue different job opportunities. They often encouraged their families to also look for different sources of income. A significant number of adult workers also reported being reluctant to involve their children in the DCMT. The experiences of these workers and those in the farm animal trade share significant similarities, encompassing many psychological and physical challenges. Given the impacts are consistently negative, it is worth noting that the dog and cat meat trade is not uniquely morally reprehensible or practically challenging compared to other animal farming sectors.

Viewpoints from local authorities regarding the DCMT in Vietnam

As part of this study, several Vietnamese officials were engaged in face-to-face conversations about the DCMT, focusing on its influence and effects on workers.

The dialogue involved members from the Vietnam Youth Union, the Department of Child Protection, the Communist Party of Vietnam and local community leaders. The discussions revealed a consensus that the prevalence of DCMT in Vietnam is gradually diminishing. This decline was attributed to increased local awareness, education and changing cultural habits, particularly among the younger generation.

However, despite this, it was noted that there are currently no explicit measures in place to halt the DCMT industry entirely within Vietnam.

One of the primary reasons cited for the persistence of DCMT was its status as a cultural practice, especially prevalent in rural areas. An official from the Vietnam Youth Union commented, *"Most people think it's normal ... dogs are slaughtered on important occasions like funerals."*

Additionally, economic factors continue to play a significant role in the continuation of this trade. As stated by a Communist Party official, *"Selling dog and cat meat is a source of livelihood for many ... Vietnam has dog farms for meat like cattle farms."*

Echoing this sentiment, a Department of Child Protection official added, *"It generates income for some families."*

The officials' views on the DCMT varied, but most saw this as a fairly normal cultural and economic activity.

As for the impact of the DCMT on child workers in particular, and the steps towards ending it, officials emphasised the critical role of awareness and education in altering mindsets. They suggested that while legal reforms are essential, they should be accompanied by programmes aimed at raising public awareness.

This feedback appears to underscore the complexity of addressing the DCMT issue in Vietnam, balancing cultural practices, economic realities and the need for progressive change.

Conclusion

The study's findings revealed the profound and far-reaching consequences of human involvement in the DCMT in Vietnam. It is evident that exposure to animal-directed violence leads to significant emotional and mental health challenges. These effects were noted in both children and adults engaged in this trade. Additionally, the physical toll is substantial.

Furthermore, the parallels between DCMT workers and those working in abattoirs are striking, with both groups exhibiting similar psychological turmoil and diminished well-being. Therefore, it's crucial to question the meat trade involving all non-human animals, not solely focusing on species traditionally viewed as pets in certain regions. To this point, it might also be important for countries in the Global North to spearhead the shift from animal farming to plant-based agriculture.

A recent development: following on from this recent research in Vietnam and ongoing advocacy efforts by the European Coalition Link and various animal rights NGOs, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has enhanced its child and animal welfare guidelines (European Coalition Link, 2023). The Committee's General Comment 26 now stresses the importance of protecting children from different types of violence, including exposure to animal

abuse. This development aligns with the research findings, fostering a societal value system that emphasises compassion and respect for both humans and animals, recognising their interconnected well-being. This effort remains ongoing.

The views expressed by our Research News contributors are not necessarily the views of The Vegan Society.

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