

# The Vietnamese women who refuse to stay silent

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## **As International Women’s Day nears, female activists in Vietnam are appealing for global attention to the persecution they often face**

Just before midnight on October 6, 2020, police raided the boarding house of [Pham Doan Trang](#), a prominent Vietnamese author, journalist, and human-rights activist. They arrested her under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code for “making, storing, disseminating or propagating information, documents, and articles against the State and Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” She faces up to 20 years in prison.

Ironically, Pham Doan Trang was arrested just hours after the United States and Vietnam completed their 24<sup>th</sup> annual Human Rights Dialogue. Trang has been held incommunicado in pretrial detention since her arrest. No one has seen her or heard from her since that day, not even her lawyer.

Unfortunately, Trang’s case is not unique. Despite their internationally acclaimed achievements and important contributions to the human rights, free press, and pro-democracy movement in Vietnam, Trang and other female activists in the country are frequently subjected to harassment, arrest, and long prison sentences.

On June 24, 2020, police broke into [Can Thi Theu](#)’s house and arrested her without a warrant. Theu is a land-grab victim and a land-rights activist. She was harassed multiple times before she was arrested that day, her third arrest. She is being held incommunicado. Her sons, [Trinh Ba Tu](#) and [Trinh Ba Phuong](#), have also been arrested, leaving Theu’s husband, [Trinh Ba Khiem](#), as the only one not currently imprisoned.

Early the same day, land petitioner and human-rights defender [Nguyen Thi Tam](#) was kidnapped by security forces while going to the local market.

These four were charged under Article 117.

According to [The 88 Project’s records](#), as of March 2, 2021, there are 83 female activists currently at risk, including 28 in detention for speaking up for human rights and democracy issues. There were nine women arrested in 2020 and four in 2019. In 2020, the number of arrests more than doubled, and most of the women were charged for expressing their opinions on social media.

Vietnam suppresses dissent broadly, often denying political prisoners the right to communicate with their families or lawyers, the right to a fair trial, and adequate health care behind bars.

The targeting of female activists also raises serious concerns about the effects of this treatment on women and their families, especially young children. The arrest and harassment of female activists with young children, has a significant mental impact on both the mothers and the children, as former political prisoner [Tran Thi Nga](#) shared in an [interview](#) with The 88 Project after her release.

According to Clause 1(b) of Article 67 of the Vietnam's [2015 Criminal Code](#), "[a] convict who is a pregnant woman or having a child under 36 months of age may have the sentence deferred until the child reaches the age of 36 months." However, the Vietnamese government often doesn't follow its own rules.

[Doan Thi Hong](#) was arrested on September 2, 2018, without any charges or arrest warrant, and her family didn't know her whereabouts for a long time. Hong is a single mother, and her daughter was only 30 months old at the time of her arrest. She was held incommunicado for one year. During that time her family was not allowed to see her, including her young daughter.

[Huynh Thi To Nga](#), a lab technician, also a single mother, has two children, and one of them was under 30 months old at the time Nga was abducted by plainclothes police. She was taken away from the hospital where she worked on January 29, 2019, and her family didn't know her whereabouts for several weeks.

After Nga's arrest, the family decided to stay very quiet and were unwilling to advocate for her because of intimidation by the authorities.

[Dinh Thi Thu Thuy](#) is the most recent arrest of a single mother. Thuy was arrested on April 18, 2020, under Article 117 for "making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and articles to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam."

According to the indictment, Thuy had allegedly created a number of Facebook accounts to disseminate numerous articles distorting the Communist regime's policies and defaming its leadership. She was also accused of criticizing the Communist Party's measures in dealing with Covid-19.

Thuy is a human-rights and an environmental-rights activist, and she is also a single mother of a nine-year-old child. Thuy was held in incommunicado pretrial detention and did not get to see her son until December 2020. She was sentenced to seven years in prison on January 20, 2021, and has been severely ill while imprisoned.

The Vietnamese government often uses children as bait to force their mothers to sign a confession. The authorities accuse the women of not fulfilling their responsibilities as mothers.

These women are often transferred to prisons located far away from their home towns, even thousands of kilometers away. By detaining them in places that are far from home, they make it extremely difficult for the young children to visit. The family is only allowed to visit once a month and for less than 30 minutes each visit. Sometimes the families will travel a long distance to the prison camps only to find out that they are not allowed to visit.

The human-rights situation in Vietnam has worsened in the past five years. The government often uses draconian laws to threaten freedom of expression, and it has sentenced dissidents to longer prison terms.

The authorities continue to abuse the basic rights of citizens. They engage in arbitrary arrests and detention, handing down lengthy prison terms, and placing restrictions on freedom of expression, the Internet, the right of peaceful assembly, and freedom of movement, such as by imposing travel bans.

[The torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners](#) is also particularly worrisome. And it's even more difficult for female prisoners detained in such conditions. Former female prisoners have shared their experiences in prison, explaining how they had to fight for sanitary napkins or how the guards would

watch them while they were changing their clothes.

The 88 Project [interviewed](#) Pham Doan Trang before she was arrested. She shared the struggles and challenges of female activists in Vietnam.

“In general, Vietnamese women are not respected,” she said. “Not only in democracy activism, female activists disadvantaged because they get attacked no less than male activists. They are beaten and assaulted.

“The work they do is no less than their male counterparts. But what they often get from other people is pity. I think it is not respect....

“In a dictatorship nobody has freedom, but especially not women; their lack of freedom is multiplied many times compared [with] men. Because women are not only victims of the regime in terms of politics, but they are also victims of gender inequality and self-constraint.”

International Women’s Day is celebrated on March 8 each year. The 88 Project is dedicating the whole month of March to honor all Vietnamese female activists, and especially the 28 who are currently in prison.

Please join us in speaking up for Vietnam’s female activists in honor of International Women’s Day. We encourage foreign governments and organizations to press the Vietnamese government to provide better conditions for female prisoners, such as ensuring visiting hours and following its own laws in respect to the arrests of women with young children, and to release all female political prisoners unconditionally.

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