Paying the costs of connection

Human Rights in the Digital Age

Policy Brief for Vietnam

DHRP
Digital Health & Rights Project

The Digital Health and Rights Project (DHRP) consortium brings together international social scientists, human rights lawyers, health advocates, and networks of people living with HIV, to conduct research and advocate for rights-based digital governance in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, Vietnam, and globally. Website: https://digitalhealthandrights.com/

The Vietnamese Network of People Living with HIV (VNP+) is a consortium member of the DHRP and the implementing partner for the Future of Human Rights in the Digital Age Study. Email: vnpplus2008@gmail.com - Telephone: +84974243366.

Country Context

As of January 2025, Vietnam had approximately 79.8 million internet users, representing 78.8% of its population. Meanwhile, 76.2 million people used social media, or 75.2% of the population[1]. This rapid digital adoption highlights the country's growing reliance on online platforms. However, it also raises concerns about digital rights. In the area of digital health technologies, the expansion of telemedicine, electronic health records (EHRs), and health apps introduces both opportunities and challenges. The handling of sensitive health data requires stringent protections against unauthorized access and misuse, particularly in light of the government's extensive surveillance practices, including legal mandates and advanced technologies to monitor and control internet activities[2]. Social media offer powerful opportunities for HIV activists to engage young adults with accurate sexual health information—such as in *Phong's Story* on Facebook, YouTube and Tiktok—helping break stigma and encourage informed choices. However, the same platforms also pose risks, as misinformation can spread rapidly and undermine public health efforts.

This brief explores digital health and rights issues, reviews the current policy landscape, identifies gaps, and offers recommendations to internet users—especially young adults living with HIV or from marginalized communities (who are even more vulnerable than they already are, due to the fear of data leak, exposure, stigma, digital divides, and absence of in-person support), as well as government authorities, NGOs, and donors. These recommendations, informed by the study *Paying the costs of connection: Human rights of young adults in the digital age in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam[3]",* conducted by the Digital Health and Rights Project (DHRP)[4] and funded by Fondation Botnar, aim to ensure young adults can engage safely, responsibly, and meaningfully in the digital space.
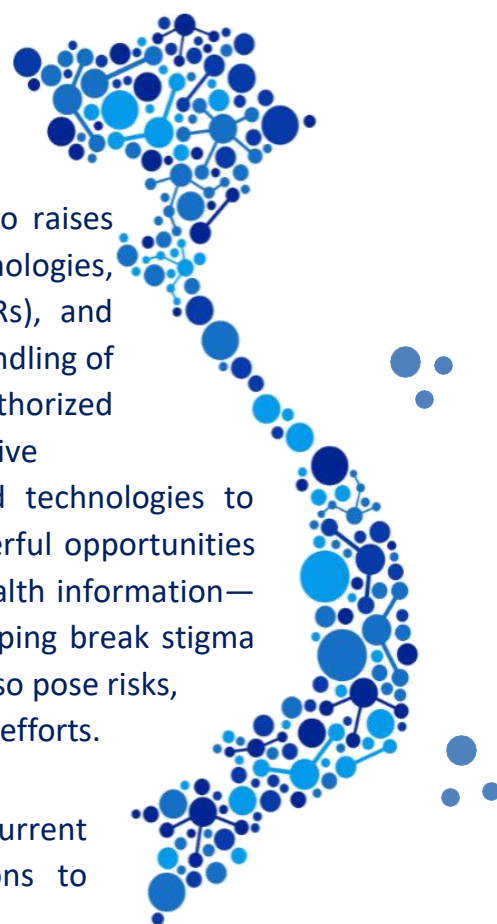
Vietnam's National Policy Landscape in Digital Health

Vietnam has been making significant strides in digital transformation, particularly in the healthcare sector. Nine out of ten Vietnamese people have a mobile broadband subscription, and most are smartphone users, though the internet infrastructure still faces challenges due to frequent disruptions in its undersea cables[5]. However, the policy framework still faces challenges in terms of transparency and coordinated governance. Below is an overview of the key policies and initiatives, including relevant laws and regulations.

1. Digital Health Policies and Initiatives

- National Digital Transformation Program for 2020-2030 (Decision No. 749/QD-TTg dated April 3, 2020). This program aims to accelerate digital transformation across all sectors, including healthcare. Key objectives include enhancing digital infrastructure, improving e-government services, and increasing digital health apps to promote efficiency in healthcare service delivery.
- Digital Health Transformation Program to 2025 and orientation to 2030 (Decision 5316/QD-BYT dated December 22, 2020). This decision outlines a comprehensive digital transformation program for the healthcare sector, with specific goals to be achieved by 2025 and a longer-term orientation toward 2030.
- Telemedicine Regulation (Circular No. 46/2018/TT-BYT dated December 28, 2018). This regulation formalizes the practice of telemedicine and establishes minimum standards for its operation, including data privacy.

2. Data Privacy and Digital Rights

- Law on Cybersecurity 2018 (Law No. 86/2015/QH13). This law regulates the management of digital information, establishing cybersecurity standards and granting the government extensive powers to monitor and access data. It also applies to digital health services.
- Personal Data Protection Decree 2023 (Decree No. 13/2023/ND-CP dated April 17, 2023). This decree mandates comprehensive guidelines on personal data protection, including user consent and restrictions on cross-border data transfer, applicable to digital health platforms managing sensitive data.
- Law on Data Protection 2024 (Law No. 60/2024/QH15 effective July 2025). This law establishes a comprehensive framework for the management and protection of digital data

in the country. It covers both personal and non-personal data, outlining ownership rights, data classification, and regulations for cross-border data transfers.

Vietnam lacks comprehensive mechanisms to address digital health misinformation and cyberbullying. Publications from private sector companies and privacy-focused NGOs often address the limitations and challenges in digital rights protection in Vietnam[6]. Although the *Personal Data Protection Decree* and the new *Law on Data Protection* aim to strengthen safeguards for personal data, challenges remain in enforcing these regulations[7]. The second issue is significant digital divides, particularly between urban and rural populations[8]. This digital gap exacerbates healthcare disparities, as people in rural regions may experience both limited access to quality healthcare and fewer opportunities to benefit from digital health solutions[9]. In addition to infrastructure, barriers to digital health adoption also include preference for in-person consultations, low trust in digital platforms, stigma, and digital literacy. Finally, concerns about government surveillance of health data are prevalent in Vietnam, especially as laws allow government access to personal data for national security and public health purposes[10].

DHRPResearch Findings

In 2025, DHRP published a report titled 'Paying the costs of connection: Human rights of young adults in the digital age in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam'. This study was unique in using a participatory action research approach, with members of the study population and community-led networks participating in design, data-gathering, analysis and validation of the findings, and using them for action, as well as sitting on our global steering committee.

In Vietnam, the study involved a dynamic Vietnam Community Advisory Team (V-CAT – right photo) with 12 members from diverse communities (people living with HIV, men who have sex with men, trans women, and trans men), including former study participants and civil society leaders working on HIV and health of diverse populations. These team members actively engaged in the research process, working to empower themselves through enhancing their skills and capacities. They played critical roles throughout all phases of the study, from design and review to dissemination, and elected a representative to the study's global governance committee.

Another key aspect of their involvement was providing timely legal information and support, particularly in cases of cyber fraud and abuse.

The cross-country research findings are grouped into the following themes:

- *Digital Divides and the Right to Health*: digital divides, created by economic, geographic, and social inequalities, block young adults' access to health information and digital participation, especially among marginalized communities;
- *Technology-Facilitated Abuse (TFA)*: a wide range of online abuses (cyberbullying, fraud, hacking, stalking, blackmail, falsified images) seriously harmed young adults' safety, health, and trust, with little available remedy;
- *Privacy:* Participants reported pervasive threats to privacy through corporate data gathering, government surveillance, and community-level monitoring, which created fear and limited online engagement;

- *Resilience and Digital Empowerment:* despite challenges, young adults demonstrated strong resilience, mobilizing through peer support, digital literacy efforts, and envisioning more equitable and rights-based digital futures.

Below are the findings specific to Vietnam:

1. Concerns about Digital Rights and AI

The most pressing concern among participants was poor data protection. Concerns varied by gender. While women prioritized digital health literacy, men

> *"They hacked my Facebook and Zalo accounts and then altered my pictures into sensitive images, …and blackmailed me."* (Male, Hanoi).

(including men who have sex with men) were most concerned with data privacy, and transgender women highlighted technology-facilitated abuse, including experiences of cyberbullying, hacking, doxxing and blackmail.

2. Future of Digital Rights and AI

While 75% of participants expressed optimism about AI's potential to improve healthcare, governance, information access, and digital inclusion, others raised concerns about AI weakening critical thinking,

> *"…a chat between my friend and me was monitored … not meant to offend anyone. But the police fined us 7 million VND (US$300). Personal*

increasing online deception and misinformation, greater surveillance, and potential loss of data privacy.

3. Digital Divides and Barriers to Empowerment

Key barriers to digital access in Vietnam included: (1) conflicting and/or overwhelming information, in many cases inaccurate and confusing information on health and other

> *"… apps for LGBT people often ask whether you are "bot" or "top"... I don't like to fill in such information."* (Male, Hanoi).

topics, lack of transparency, and limited gender identity options; and (2) stigma - due to the fear of being outed - which leads to limited access to online healthcare services, perceived more in urban areas, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals.

4. Surveillance and Privacy Risks

Participants feared surveillance from both government and private companies, particularly due to weak data protection measures. Key concerns included:

> *"In the digital age like today, my wish is to be able to find trustworthy and verified information online in a convenient way." (Female, Hanoi).*

- Lack of transparency in biometric data collection under the Law on Cybersecurity (2018), leading to fears of government overreach.
- Weak enforcement of cybercrime laws, leaving transgender and men having sex with men (MSM) communities exposed to technology-facilitated abuse.
- Lack of a clear reporting mechanism left victims vulnerable, with limited response from authorities.

5. Community Participation and Digital Governance

Community networks help counter misinformation and connect individuals to digital healthcare services. However, digital literacy remains uneven across different regions and demographics. The government was urged to play a stronger role in improving digital infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, and strengthening cybersecurity.

The study underscores the importance of empowering marginalized communities with digital rights education, narrowing digital health literacy gaps, and improving infrastructure to bridge digital divides. It also highlights the need for stronger data protection, clearer laws regarding cybersecurity, and more robust reporting mechanisms to safeguard individuals against abuse and exploitation online. This participatory approach, involving affected communities in all stages of the research, helped ensure that the findings were grounded in real-world experiences and needs, making the advocacy for better digital governance even more relevant and actionable. A good example of this was how the V-CAT was mobilized in response to cyberbullying and misinformation online.

Recommendations

With the research findings centered around individuals, with focus on people living with HIV and vulnerable populations, the government and the civil society/local communities, the following recommendations are proposed to target/advocate with individual digital users, different government ministries, and potential NGOs and donors working in promoting digital health and rights.

1. Individual Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is key for young adults, especially young people living with HIV or from vulnerable communities, e.g., LGBTQI+ individuals, to safely navigate the online world. It means knowing how to protect your privacy, spot misinformation (especially about HIV and health), and recognize online stigma or harmful content. Being digitally literate also means knowing when and how to seek support, whether from trusted friends, online communities, or professionals. By engaging respectfully, standing up to stigma, and building critical thinking skills, young people can create safer, more inclusive digital spaces for themselves and others.

DHRP is developing training programs and tools aiming at this goal, including some programs led by VNP+ and GNP+ (the Global Network of People Living with HIV). Meanwhile, the *Digital Empowerment Hub*[11] is a resource people can use to educate themselves about their digital rights.

2. Government Actions

The Ministry of Information and Communications is positioned to play a central role in advancing digital protections, improving digital literacy, and expanding digital infrastructure. To strengthen the enforcement of the Personal Data Protection Decree (2023), the Ministry may create a dedicated oversight body, coordinate with the Ministry of Justice to define penalties for data misuse, and lead public campaigns on digital rights, misinformation, and cyberbullying.

Raising digital literacy will require collaboration with the Ministry of Education

and Training, Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, local authorities, and NGOs, to develop tailored curricula on cybersecurity and privacy, targeting different key groups such as students, young adults, seniors, rural populations, and marginalized communities.

Protections for vulnerable populations must also be expanded, including rapid response channels and support units—working with the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of Health—to address online threats and sensitive health data breaches.

Improving digital access in rural areas is another priority. The Ministry can work with the Ministry of Finance to offer tax breaks for companies expanding broadband, encourage public-private partnerships, and explore satellite internet solutions. In the longer term, the Ministry should collaborate with the Ministry of Justice to develop a comprehensive Law on Digital Rights that ensures strong privacy protections, data transparency, and cybersecurity accountability.

3. Role of NGOs, U.N. Agencies and Donors

While the Ministry of Information and Communications will take the lead in designing curricula and leading national awareness campaigns on digital rights, NGOs have a crucial role in ensuring these efforts are inclusive and locally relevant. By working with local authorities, NGOs can tailor training programs for the communities they serve—such as rural populations, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people living with HIV. Leveraging existing community outreach efforts, NGOs can integrate digital literacy into ongoing programs to better reach marginalized groups. Within these communities, NGOs and donors should invest in strengthening community-led networks and grassroots organizations. These groups are well-placed to counter misinformation, prevent online abuse, and promote safe digital practices. Establishing peer-support platforms where vulnerable individuals can access resources, share experiences, and receive guidance on digital safety will help create a more supportive and informed digital environment.

In the longer term, NGOs will play a vital role in shaping the future Law on Digital Rights by providing policy input and advocating for inclusive protections.
However, their work must begin now by assisting the government in developing fast-tracking systems for reporting online harms, ensuring swift action and protection for victims. NGOs can also offer valuable training, expertise, and support to government agencies responsible for enforcing cybersecurity regulations and responding to digital threats in at-risk communities. U.N. agencies, with their expertise and experience in working with national

governments on digital governance, can provide support on both short-term goals (addressing TFAs and collecting online data on online abuse trends) and longer-term goals (digital rights issues, and engaging the civil society and youth in digital health strategies).

Amid uncertainty around U.S. foreign assistance and widespread USAID program shutdowns, NGOs must act quickly to diversify their funding sources, strengthen local partnerships - particularly with host government authorities and the private sector, and build more sustainable, community-led models for both advocacy and interventions.

Conclusion

Vietnam's digital transformation brings both significant opportunities and challenges. AI and digital technologies present new avenues for inclusion, enabling marginalized groups to access resources and participate in digital spaces. AI, in particular, has the potential to enhance efficiency, improve decision-making, and create personalized experiences, driving innovation across various sectors. However, critical concerns around data protection, surveillance, and the spread of misinformation persist, particularly for vulnerable populations. These issues pose risks to privacy, security, and the ability of individuals to navigate digital platforms freely.

A rights-based approach to digital governance is essential to address these concerns. By prioritizing privacy, the right to quality healthcare, and equitable access to technology, Vietnam can create an environment where young adults—especially those from marginalized communities—can engage safely, responsibly, and meaningfully in the digital space. This approach will help build trust in digital platforms, empower individuals to protect their rights, and ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age.

REFERENCES

[1] Kemp, S. (2025). *Digital 2025: Vietnam*. Webpage: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-vietnam

[2] Freedom House (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024 - Vietnam*. Webpage: https://freedomhouse.org/country/vietnam/freedom-net/2024

[3] Digital Health and Rights Project Consortium. (2025). *Paying the costs for connection: Human rights of young adults in the digital age in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya and Vietnam*. Final project report.

[4] This project has been funded by Fondation Botnar www.fondationbotnar.org

[5] Luu, Q. (2024). *Mobile internet subscriptions in Vietnam surpass 90% of population for first time*. Webpage: https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/mobile-internet-subscriptions-in-vietnam-surpass-90-of-population-for-first-time-4775342.html;

Vietnam News Agency (2024). *Internet slows in Việt Nam as 3 out of 5 undersea cables encounter failure.* Webpage: https://vietnamnews.vn/society/1657555/internet-slows-in-viet-nam-as-3-out-of-5-undersea-cables-encounter-failure.html

[6] Le, N., Le, L., Tran, N., Truong, C. (2024). *Personal Data in the Digital Age: An Overview Study in Vietnam*. Webpage: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379066045_PERSONAL_DATA_IN_THE_DIGITAL_AGE_AN_OVERVIEW_STUDY_IN_VIETNAM

Nguyen, H. (2024). *The Challenges of Data Protection Law in Vietnam*. Webpage: https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/vjls-2024-0008

Bach, N. (2023). *Addressing the Challenges of Data Privacy Protection Law in Vietnam*. Webpage: https://js.vnu.edu.vn/LS/article/view/4413

[7] Vu, H. (2024). *Vietnam National Assembly Approves Law on Data*. Webpage: https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/vietnam-national-assembly-approves-law-on-data.html/#:~:text=On%20November%2030%2C%202024%2C%20the,in%20Vietnam's%20evolving%20digital%20landscape

[8] UNDP (2024). *E-governance performance in 2023 and the need to close the digital divide.* Webpage: https://www.undp.org/vietnam/blog/e-governance-performance-2023-and-need-close-digital-divide?utm.com

[9] KPMG (2020). *Digital Health in Vietnam*. Webpage: https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/vn/pdf/publication/2021/digital-health-vietnam-2020-twopage.pdf

[10] Secure Privacy (2024). *Vietnam's Personal Data Protection Decree: Key Insights on Data Law*. Webpage: https://secureprivacy.ai/blog/vietnam-personal-data-protection-law

[11] https://digitalhealthandrights.com/digital-empowerment-hub/