

In the World of Human Trafficking, Vietnam Remains a 'Supply Country'

News Analysis, Andrew Lam,
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Editor's Note: Human trafficking in Vietnam shows no signs of abating. PNS editor Andrew Lam is author of "Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora," forthcoming this fall from Heyday Books.

SAN FRANCISCO--While visiting Ho Chi Minh City (more known as Saigon) last December I asked a group of well-educated young women for their thoughts on Vietnamese women being sold abroad. Their answers were surprisingly tempered.

"Not everyone is going to end up as a prostitute or badly treated by her husband," said Tuyen Nguyen, a 19-year-old who is attending college and planning to be a doctor. "I know this one girl who came back wealthy. It's true, she's one of the lucky ones, but still, it's a better chance than staying home."

According to sources from UNICEF and Vietnam's Ministry of Justice as well as other groups, as many as 400,000 Vietnamese women and children have been trafficked overseas, most since the end of the Cold War. That's around 10 percent of trafficked women and children worldwide. They are smuggled to Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Czech Republic -- and, to a lesser extent, the United States -- for commercial sexual exploitation.



*Vietnamese sex workers in Cambodia.
Courtesy of Women's eNews.Org and
Mikel Flamm.*

"Still, if your parents and siblings are starving, you've got to do something," observed Thuy Le, a young woman in her mid-20s. "It's the right thing to do."

"It's the girl in the countryside who would do this kind of thing," said another woman, a publicist for a cosmetic company. "No one in the city would go. I mean, it's hard work in the rice field. Besides, who is to say their Vietnamese husbands won't beat them just like their Korean or Taiwanese one?" Her friends murmured in agreement.

Unfortunately, not all trafficked women end up in real marriages, even if their paperwork says so. According to Huy Phan, who is part of a group of Vietnamese Americans trying to help victims of trafficking, "the scheme is, the brothel or mafia finances a man to go to Vietnam to buy a wife. But the marriage is a ruse, and the girl ends up as a prostitute or indentured servant when she gets to Taiwan. It's a way to legalize trafficking."

In June, the U.S. State Department released the "Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000: Trafficking in Persons Report." Vietnam was classified as a "tier two" country, meaning that the government of Vietnam, according to the report, makes some effort to eliminate the problem but "does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking."

In March 2004, a Taiwanese tried to sell three young Vietnamese women on E-bay. The starting bid was \$5,400. Vietnamese living abroad protested, and E-Bay quickly pulled the auction page. But the language used on that page, along with the images of the three young, hapless women smiling to the camera, bespoke of modern-day slavery: "Products will be delivered only to Taiwan," the page said.

A typical trafficking scenario in Saigon goes something like this: A group of men come in from a foreign country, Taiwan or Korea, perhaps, and are chauffeured to a designated bar where young women and teenage girls await. The girls are lined up. The men pick and choose their brides, and pay around \$5,000 to \$10,000 dollars depending on the "quality" of the bride, which depends largely on whether she is a virgin. Soon these so-called brides are taken to unknown destinies. Their families back in the rural areas receive around \$500 dollars for the sale. The rest goes to middlemen and to grease the legal machine.

Girls and women may also be promised jobs in Cambodia, Laos or China, only to end up as sex slaves once they cross the border. Recent raids in Cambodian brothels came up with Vietnamese girls as young as 5 years old. Young boys, too, are bought, and are highly prized in China, especially for families that have no children and want to adopt.

Many problems help perpetuate this form of exploitation. First are rising population pressures. There are now 82 million people in Vietnam. Two out of three Vietnamese are under 35, and there are an estimated 1.5 million abortions each year. The rural-urban gap is widening. Peasants trying to survive become easy prey.

Second is corruption. Government officials can be bribed to look the other way or, worse, actively assist the sale of these women by stamping their exit visas.

Third, and most important, Vietnamese people themselves have developed a lackadaisical attitude about the plight of trafficked women. After all, when there are approximately half a million prostitutes in Vietnam trying to make ends meet, who cares if a few hundred thousand more are plying their trade abroad?

Thien-Tam Tran, another Vietnamese American activist, remembers a scene in the airport in Taipei, Taiwan. Three Vietnamese girls were waiting to be taken away by gangsters. "I asked them if they wanted help but they wouldn't talk. They were very afraid. When the gangsters showed up the girls finally realized what would happen to them and started to weep. One girl, about 17, held onto me. But it was too late."

In Vietnam, self-sacrifice is still perceived as the highest Confucian virtue, but few seem to notice that to sell or induce one's own offspring into slavery is an absolute evil -- and highly un-Confucian. "Some women and girls are raped by their captors, husband, and/or male members of the family," Tran notes sadly.

Unless human rights become a real dialogue in Vietnam and the urban rural gap is seriously addressed, the nation seems fated to play a role that many activists working against human trafficking refer to as "a supply country."

Courtesy Andrew Lam, Editor Pacific News Service (PNS)

[BACK](#)