

Between Shame and Lack of Responsibility: The Articulation of Emotions among Female Returnees of Human Trafficking in Northern Vietnam

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative research conducted with some female residents of a shelter for victims of trafficking located in Lào Cai, an urban centre on the Northern Vietnamese border with China, the intention, in this article, is to explore some of their expressed feelings and emotions. These seem to oscillate between a sense of shame and guilt, and a sense of self-pity and victimization. Such oscillation finds significant correspondence at two broader levels, that of Vietnamese society and of the international ideological discourse of human trafficking, which both present a stigmatizing, yet compassionate, approach to the returnees of trafficking. In this way, the aim is to show how emotions are embedded within socio-political power relations and gender inequalities.

Keywords: Human trafficking, female returnees, shame, victimization, shelters, Northern Vietnam

Introduction¹

This article is intended as a reflection on the feelings and emotions that are expressed by a group of women who live in a shelter for female victims of human trafficking in Northern Vietnam². Such feelings, which seem to

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1 I would like to sincerely thank all the residents of the Compassion House shelter for their warm welcome and affection and the local authorities of Lào Cai who made my research possible. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the editors for comments on previous drafts of this article and their precious work. All cited proper names are pseudonyms.

2 I find it necessary to specify the use of three terms in the article. First, it is only for ease of reading that I don't put the word "victim" between inverted commas, while I am aware of the debate around the use of the term in human trafficking and migration studies (for instance, Doezema, 2002; Agustín 2003; O'Connell Davidson 2006; Andrijasevic 2007; Gallagher and Pearson 2010; Ditmore 2012; Kempadoo 2012). Nonetheless, even without using it unproblematically, the focus of the article lays elsewhere. Second, I will alternatively use the terms "women" and "girls" as synonyms and with the intent to indicate the gender of my informants and not their age, since it varies considerably. Third, I cannot enter the debate surrounding the differences between emotion, affect and sentiment, which mostly pertains to

oscillate between a sense of shame, guilt and self-pity are not only grounded in the social milieu of Vietnamese society, but are also the product of a humanitarian discourse. By exploring the nuances of such emotional articulations, I attempt to show how emotions are embedded within socio-political power relations and gender inequalities (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Clark 1997).

Specifically, I draw from qualitative research conducted with the female residents of a shelter for victims of trafficking located in Lào Cai, an urban centre on the Northern border with China.³ Not only is the establishment of shelters one of the most tangible outcomes of anti-trafficking policies, but it is also a good humanitarian business: they are relatively easy to set up and relatively easy to find sponsors and funds for. The shelters are the undeniable proof, in face of the international community, that the Vietnamese State, including provincial and local institutions and authorities, are indeed active in the fight against trafficking in persons. Furthermore and in particular, shelters are here considered as a good viewpoint to explore the intersection of emotions, social stigma and the humanitarian machine: the intimate, the social and the global.

Feelings of shame and lack of responsibility

The girls and women who lived in *Nhà Nhân Ái* (The Compassion House)⁴ were identified and defined as victims of human trafficking.

When I visited *Nhà Nhân Ái* there were 11 residents. Their age varied considerably: the youngest girl was 14 while the oldest woman was between the age of 30 and 35; they came from several different rural communes of Lào

the psychological, psychoanalytical, psycho-biological sciences and the neuroscience. Along with Levy (1984), we can be satisfied by considering emotion as a sort of “sub-category of feeling”, in the sense that there are, in a culture, some “emotional feelings” which result in an “emotional response” due to a particular event (Levy 1984, p. 218). This is why I use both “emotion” and “feeling”, depending on whether I am referring to the existence of a sense of shame, for example in our case, or to the emotional reaction of shame. For an interesting critique of the concept of “affect” and the so called “turn to affect” in the human sciences I refer, for example, to Leys (2011). Some pivotal anthropological references regarding the study of emotions are for example: Mead 2002; Kluckhohn 1962; Rosaldo 1984; Lutz 1998; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990.

3 I conducted intensive research between the two cities and provinces of Lào Cai and Hà Nội from June to December 2011. In this article I will focus on the Lào Cai shelter house. I carried out further research in the area from April to July 2013. See below for a presentation of the Lào Cai shelter house and province.

4 *Nhà* means “house”, and *nhân ái* is translated to “compassion”, where *nhân* indicates “human people” and *ái* corresponds to “heart/love”. I will later critically contextualize this name in opposition to *Cục phòng, chống tệ nạn xã hội*, the Department of Social Evils Prevention.

Cai province, belonged to different ethnic minorities (Hmông, Dao, Tày) and spoke different dialects, in addition to basic Vietnamese. They were farmers' daughters and had a low level of education: some of the younger girls were still attending secondary school; some others were enrolled in vocational and professional training courses; a few were working at a tailor shop and at a hair and make-up salon. I was told by the director of *Nhà Nhân Ái*, Mdm Quy, that five girls had found a steady job and had either left or were about to leave the house, while another had continued her studies to become a lawyer (a reason for exceptional pride, in the words of the director) and one was about to get married.⁵

These girls and women all shared the same experience of having been deceived in order to be sold in China and become the wives of Chinese men. Their stays abroad varied considerably, and among the six women I conducted in depth interviews with, they had been rather brief, ranging from a minimum of one week to a maximum of six months. This means that they did not establish a life in China but managed to run away or were rescued before being placed with the final "customer".⁶ Furthermore, the time between their return from the other side of the border and their entry in *Nhà Nhân Ái* varied from a period of one week to two years.

Because Hoa, my interpreter, was born and raised in Lào Cai city and had some good acquaintances at the provincial *Cục phòng, chống tệ nạn xã hội* (Department of Social Evils Prevention – DSEP), I was granted exceptional permission for access to *Nhà Nhân Ái*. At the beginning, Mdm Quy, the director of the house, along with Ms Mai, the civil servant of DSEP, gave us some limitations regarding the time of the visits and the duration of the interviews, but after a few days Hoa and I could essentially come and go as we wanted, eat with the residents, set up the interviews directly with the women, take part in some of the activities they did around the house, such as cooking, watching TV and creating some simple bijoux, and even meet them outside the house.

One particular morning, Hoa and I went to visit the tailor shop where some of the girls were receiving some training. The shop was located close to the shelter and could easily be reached by bike: it was small and simple, and consisted mainly of one room with fabrics hanging from the walls and a

5 Unrecorded conversation, 27/10/11, Lào Cai.

6 Most women who, on the contrary, do settle in China, rarely return home. Some become accustomed to a better life-style in terms of marital life and work (they say they are treated well by their husbands and, for example, don't have to work in the rice field), while some others fear they would not be accepted by their families back in Vietnam (see also Grillot 2010). Among the women at the shelter, one seemed to have lived in China for five years, where she had married a Chinese man and had a son, while another was rumoured to have been a prostitute in China where she had experienced violence.

smaller space for storage in the back. The girls were working together around small sewing machines under the neon light of the main room. The space was crowded with drawings, scissors, pencils and needles. The owner of the shop, a man of about 40 years of age, welcomed us rather politely, while the overall atmosphere was quite silent and restrained.

I had instructed my interpreter to introduce us without mentioning human trafficking, the victims, China and so forth. As we entered she exchanged a few words with the owner and his assistant and we were given permission to have a chat with the girls who were working at the shop. Not all of the girls were residents of the shelter; some I recognized, while some others I had not met before.

As I began talking to ĐỀ, one of the girls stood up and ran to the back room. ĐỀ immediately followed her, and so did Hoa, my interpreter. I could not understand what was going on and decided to follow them as well. As I entered the small room in the back, I saw Hoa and ĐỀ talking to the girl, Thu, who was in tears. Thu looked desperate, so I waited until she calmed down, then asked Hoa what had happened. My interpreter was mortified and explained that she had mistakenly mentioned the fact that we were there to visit the girls who were part of the reintegration programme for victims of human trafficking at *Nhà Nhân Ái*.

Emotional reactions such as the one shown by Thu were not new to me; I had witnessed a similar reaction in the course of interviews or at the shelter house. There, however, all the residents of the structure shared the same position of “victim of human trafficking” (*nạn nhân buôn người*). Keeping such position secret from the outside protects these women from feeling ashamed. At the tailor shop, in front of an audience that was deliberately inattentive, Thu felt her identity had been exposed and this triggered a sentiment of shame.

What is interesting about this episode is what Thu thinks of her own status as a “victim of human trafficking” and what she makes of her feelings of shame. These are aspects of her life and personal feelings that she views in a negative way and would like to keep private; they are behind a state of frustration and suffering and must be hidden. As Hoa, the interpreter, unintentionally revealed her status of “victim of human trafficking”, Thu ran away to cry somewhere nobody would see her.

At a more complex level of analysis, however, the feeling of shame is more ambiguous than Thu’s reaction would suggest. In fact, like Thu, none of the girls I interviewed and talked to in *Nhà Nhân Ái* explicitly stated that they felt responsible, guilty or ashamed for what had happened to them.⁷ On the contrary, and in general, they said they had been “unlucky” (*không may*) and

7 This can also be inferred about the residents of the shelter in Hà Nội City.

had no regrets because they could not have known what was going to happen to them. Others said that what had happened was in the past and there was nothing they could do about that. Some were afraid they would become involved with trafficking again, or suffer from retaliation. All of them considered themselves as *nạn nhân*, a word that literally means “person of unfortunate accident” and suggests that the so-called “victims of human trafficking” take little or no responsibility for their recent or past experiences. Moreover, some of the victims said that at the beginning of the process of returning, as they interacted with the Chinese police and the Vietnamese Border Guard Command, they were feeling guilty, but that they have since learned that they were “victims” (*nạn nhân*) and now feel less guilty.

At the shelter, the women I talked to seem to have embodied the role of the victim who deserves compassion, pity and help. During our conversations, for example, something captured my attention and it had to do with the way they spoke. On the one hand, the women gave brief and concise answers to questions about their life, family, childhood, village and their plans for the future; while, on the other hand, they spoke relentlessly and in great detail about their experience as victims of human trafficking. Furthermore, they evoked violent episodes of their lives, including some brutal events of deception, subjugation, and deprivation; they recalled the nightmares that haunted them at night and the anxieties and paranoia that inhabited their daily lives as they watched violent scenes on television or walked outside alone without a mobile phone. They even felt compelled to leave school in fear of being given “weird” looks by some of their schoolmates.

I suggest that the ability and the excessive meticulousness in narrating these events, in particular the details of the trafficking experience, could be in part the product of the victims’ close contact and interaction with the police and the authorities. Their body language (the constant movement of a foot, their escapist gaze, the low tone of their voice) also seemed to suggest, other than shyness, insecurity and embarrassment, a very humble self-presentation, almost as if they were begging for compassion and protection. The most significant episode, in this sense, happened during an interview with another young girl, Thám, who suddenly broke into tears as I asked, as I usually do: “Do you have any questions for me?” Thám hesitated and then said “What can you do to help us? (*Các chi có thể giúp gì cho bọn em không?*)”, and right after she started crying relentlessly, manifesting her pain and fragility, and her need for comprehension and compassion.⁸

In the following paragraphs I connect such emotional ambivalence to the ways it is constructed and reiterated in the field of humanitarian aid and in the social perception and representation of female returnees.

8 Recorded interview, 30/10/11, Lào Cai.

Compassionate stigma: the discourses of the humanitarian and of Vietnamese society

“Because in the culture/customs of Vietnamese people everybody who is trafficked to China is considered guilty [...]”.⁹ This was one of the clearest formulations I received from a returnee, Mui, a resident in the Hanoi shelter, which reminded me of the power and diffusion of social stigma against victims of trafficking. In Vietnam, human trafficking is stigmatized because it is linked to sex work and to the sale and loss of virginity (Lainez 2011; Molland 2011); it is also associated with arranged and forced marriages. HIV, a consequence of sex work, also contributes to the definition and representation of human trafficking as a “social evil” (*tệ nạn xã hội*) (Vijayarasa 2013, p. 7). Such ideas must be set against a background that sees the persistence of a patriarchal ideology where a woman’s virginity at marriage constitutes a virtue and a reason for social respect (Samarasinghe 2008; Walters 2013).

Vietnam ratified the so-called Palermo Protocol¹⁰ with one restriction¹¹ in June 2012, a few months after the Law on Prevention and Suppression against Human Trafficking, approved in 2011, became effective. The ratification and the new legislation were accompanied by a new NPA (National Plan of Action) over the course of four years (2011-2015) with a \$13.5 million dollar investment (Brown 2011). The new law made significant improvements by considering both domestic and international trafficking of women, children and men for “sexual exploitation, forced labour, the

9 Recorded interview, 20/10/11, Hà Nội. I cannot provide the Vietnamese original version of this statement because of the low quality of the recorded file.

10 The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, opened for signature on 12th December 2000 and entered into force 25 December 2003. It is commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol.

11 The reservation to the Protocol is the following: “The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam does not consider itself bound by paragraph 2 of Article 15 of this Protocol”. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18&lang=en#EndDec. (Accessed: 10/9/2014). Paragraph 2 of Article 15 states: “Any dispute between two or more States Parties concerning the interpretation or application of this Protocol that cannot be settled through negotiation within a reasonable time shall, at the request of one of those States Parties, be submitted to arbitration. If, six months after the date of the request for arbitration, those States Parties are unable to agree on the organization of the arbitration, any one of those States Parties may refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice by request in accordance with the Statute of the Court. <<http://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>> (Accessed: 2/4/2013).

removal of organs, or for other purpose” (art. 3.2). This means it significantly attempted to overcome the biunivocal association between human trafficking and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, or sex work *tout court*. The new law also states that “discrimination or differentiation shall not be made against victims” (Article 4.2).¹² However, it continues to rank trafficking in persons with other “crimes, social evils, [that] shall be combined with other socio-economic development programs” (Article 5.1), thereby moving little from a language of stigmatization (Vijayarasa 2013, pp. 3-4) and an ideology of development (Molland 2012b, pp. 58-59).

Along with the other five northern provinces¹³, Lào Cai city, which is the main urban agglomerate of the province of the same name, is a good perspective from which to study the ambiguous implementation of anti-trafficking policies. It was turned into the *Hekou – Lào Cai Economic Cooperation District* in 2010, after the most recent reopening of the frontier in 1989 (Grillot 2010, p. 77-88). Along the 2,363 km. border with China, Lào Cai has been identified and “constructed” (Zhang 2012) as a hotspot with a high incidence of human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriage (Marshall 2006; Uniap 2011). This is due to the fact that its international border is easy to cross both “on” the new Red River Bridge and “under” it clandestinely, and also because of the severe levels of poverty, rural marginality, low levels of education and presence of ethnic minorities attested in the area (Vijayarasa 2013; Zhang 2012).

Lào Cai shelter house opened in April 2010 thanks to a collaboration between Lào Cai Province DSEP and PALS – Pacific Links Foundation, a Vietnamese and American NGO which received the support of two other investors, Limited Brands and Caridad Partners¹⁴. *Nhà Nhân Ái*, officially translated as the “Compassion House” shelter for survivors of

12 See also article 3.9 where differentiation or discrimination against victims is ranked amongst the prohibited acts. A translated version of the Law can be found at <http://www.molisa.gov.vn/en/Pages/Detail-document.aspx?vID=502>. It is also important to recall that in 2007 the “Promulgation of the Regulation on receipt and support to community reintegration of the trafficked women and children returned home overseas” n° 17/2007/QĐ-TT, art.3.2, declared that victims must be respected and not discriminated. The document is available at IOM website at <http://www.iom.int.vn/ccompton/pdf/Decision17VN.pdf> (both sites last accessed: 4/11/14). For a good synthetic overview of Vietnamese anti-trafficking legislation prior to the new law see Nguyen Anh 2004, pp.164-170.

13 Lai Châu, Hà Giang, Cao-Bằng, Lạng Sơn and Quảng Ninh. This last one is the most active cross-border commercial area for it shares with China both a land and sea frontier and it is well connected with Hà Nội capital city and the international port of Hải Phòng (Grillot 2010, p.66).

14 It is worth noticing that thanks to the recent support of the British Embassy in Vietnam *Nhà Nhân Ái Lào Cai* officially moved into a new bigger and better building on 3rd June, 2013.

human trafficking, is part of a bigger project: ADAPT - *An Giang/Đồng Tháp Alliance for the Prevention of Trafficking*, launched in 2005 by PALS to combat human trafficking in the Mekong Delta, with special focus on protection and reintegration services for returnees of trafficking. The first shelter that opened in 2008 within the ADAPT project was in An Giang province, near the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Given the success of this first structure and “the ever-growing need for reintegration services” (PALS 2012, p. 6), PALS opened the Compassion House in Lào Cai Province in 2010 which has since assisted 28 “survivors, all of whom are from ethnic minority tribes” (ibidem)¹⁵. More generally, ADAPT declares being active in areas which are the most vulnerable to human trafficking, because “extreme poverty, high unemployment, and the porous nature of these borders [with Cambodia and China] render girls vulnerable to sexual and labour exploitation at the hands human traffickers” (PALS 2012, p. 2).

The very name of Lào Cai shelter, Compassion House, clearly matches its anti-stigmatization drive, calling for an attitude of pity towards the “survivors” of trafficking. As the above PALS’ declarations well testify, the stereotypical “quintessential” figure of the vulnerable victim of human trafficking as poor, uneducated, from an ethnic minority and a remote area, so widespread and functional to the humanitarian discourse, is at work here (Doezema 1999; Frederick 2012; Vijayarasa 2013). However, Compassion House, being managed by *Cục phòng, chống tệ nạn xã hội* (Department of Social Evils Prevention – DSEP) of Lào Cai, seems to simultaneously reinforce the very social stigma of the State institutions since, as mentioned above, the “language of ‘social evils’” (Vijayarasa 2010) seems to associate human trafficking to social vices and crimes against public morality and not to a violation of the human rights of the individual.

An ambivalence at work: the words and silences of Mdm Quy at the Compassion House

Mdm Quy is only the second manager of Lào Cai Compassion House after Mdm Minh, who ran the shelter since its opening in April 2010 until August 2011. When I met Mdm Quy she seemed rather joyful and willing to talk about the residents’ daily activities as well as being available to discuss my research with the girls over the course of the subsequent weeks. She said

15 According to PALS report (2013), the number of survivors assisted in 2012 in the whole country is of 144, of which 30 new survivors were assisted with shelter-based reintegration services (PALS 2013, p.10). In the most recent report available, which includes the figures for 2013, we read that more than 400 “trafficking survivors have been assisted in their physical and emotional recovery for successful reintegration” (PALS 2014, p. 10), with 150 in 2013 only.

that she was carrying out her role with “enthusiasm” (*nhiệt tình*), but that she was encountering some difficulties, since she had no previous training as a social worker.¹⁶

After a few days, Hoa, my interpreter, suggested she found Mdm Quy’s behaviour quite two-faced because she was too kind with the girls while we were there. This piqued my curiosity and led me to set up an interview with her. During this interview¹⁷, Mdm Quy, mother of a daughter and a son, who worked occasionally in the rice-field and in the market of her district, explained that she found the job through word of mouth, and more precisely through a neighbour who was a relative of the DSEP official who was appointed to that position but ultimately fell pregnant. For these reasons, she not only considered the job a temporary occupation, but she also described it as a sort of “charity (*tú thiên*) [...] where you need internal love (*luong tâm*).¹⁸” She added that the job was not simple, and compared it to managing a family, and also declared: “It is stressful because I cannot shout but I always have to calm down”.

When we started talking about the girls and the daily life at the shelter she gave me a family-like picture stressing, for example, the existence of little fights over domestic chores and cleaning turns, or the fact that some girls were not tidy and had, at the beginning of their stay, a messy lifestyle. She even talked about the limited budget and the difficulties in administering the three meals per day and the extra-activities like picnics and day trips. When I wanted to investigate a little bit more about the psychological disturbances Mdm Quy had hinted at here and there, she pointed to a widespread occurrence of headaches and, although admitting that she could not understand the reason behind such headaches, she imagined that it was due to the severe physical violence the girls had endured in their lives. I then asked about the specific cases of the residents of the shelter and if there were, for example, only cases of women trafficked for marriage, or also for prostitution and the director started to talk a lot with no interruption, and lowering the tone of her voice, specifically when she referred to “the girl in the kitchen” who had been treated very badly and probably, but just probably (“I guess, just guessing” she repeated twice), forced into prostitution.

In the end, thinking again about Hoa’s gaffe at the tailor’s shop a few days before, I asked if the general policy at the shelter was to keep secret - at school, work, or in the neighbourhood - the fact that the *Nhà Nhân Ái*

16 Unrecorded conversation, 27/10/11, Lào Cai.

17 Recorded conversation, 30/10/11, Lào Cai.

18 Interestingly enough, *luong tâm* refers to a sort of good moral disposition from the heart that any medical doctor should have as one proverb recites: *luong tâm bác sĩ*.

residents had experienced displacement to China. The answer was affirmative. Mdm Quy added that people are led to believe that the women at the shelter are from the Social Protection Centre and come from poor families. She, herself, said she preferred to present herself as an adviser and a cook rather than a manager for returnees of human trafficking. When I asked about the reason behind the choice to conceal the women's identity, Mdm Quy said that she was unsure of the reasons but thought it was to avoid stigma and gossip around the community and therefore to protect the girls.

The simplified idea of the girls and of the girls' life experiences that emerges from the words of Mdm Quy, as well as her silences about the women she claims to help at the shelter, show very well how the compassionate stigma of the humanitarian machine and of the social milieu both permeates and is translated at the micro levels of the social and moral interactions (Yang et al. 2007) between social workers and shelter residents. It also raises questions about the efficacy of such structures on multiple levels, which are however not the object of the present article.

Concluding remarks

This article has taken as its starting point the ambivalence in the articulation of emotions among a group of female returnees of human trafficking who live in a shelter in Lào Cai. These women express a sentiment of shame when confronted in public about their experiences as victims of human traffic. At the same time they seem to detach their present life from their past experiences. They know they are not responsible for their own suffering, that they have been "unlucky" and have after all learned how to articulate explicitly their need for compassionate help.

I have shown how such ambiguity is grounded in the social relations that characterize Vietnamese society and in the political and economic interests that foster the humanitarian machine, with their intrinsic power and gender imbalances. Whether through laws, international programs or through the words of a mere "advisor" of a shelter such as Mdm Quy, it emerges that an ambiguous attempt to stay clear of any stigmatization results in new forms of stigmatization and these, in turn, permeate the words (and tears) of girls like Thu and Thám.

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