



Perceptions of Governmental and Nongovernmental Actors of Human Trafficking Victims: The Case of Vietnam

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Abstract

This article explores how governmental and nongovernmental actors perceive victims of human trafficking in Vietnam. This research utilises a qualitative design, drawing on data from 30 in-depth interviews with police officials from eight study sites and two nongovernmental organisations. Findings identify that some victims of human trafficking do not fit the traditional victim images of this crime, including trafficked men for sex tourism, forced labour, organ removal, sex workers, migrants in search of seasonal employment and girls with high education levels. Implications for policies and practice are suggested from these findings.

Keywords

Victims; human trafficking; police; nongovernmental organisations; Vietnam.

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Introduction

In the Nation Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons from 2016 to 2020, the Government of Vietnam identifies victim-centred approaches as essential in addressing human trafficking (Nguyen, Le and Luong 2020). Accordingly, stakeholders have increased their understanding of this crime to better identify, assist and protect victims. However, such understandings are lacking in the existing literature in Vietnam. Studies have frequently targeted victim services, such as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the Vietnamese Women's Union or social agencies to examine how victims of human trafficking are treated (Gan et al. 2014; Surtees 2013; Vijayarasa 2013). Very few studies emphasise the influence of the pivotal role of police in responding to human trafficking in this country (Le 2017). Additionally, the current studies largely explore the anti-trafficking laws, causes of human trafficking, the psychology of victims and assistance to victims (Kneebone and Debeljak 2012). Particularly, there has been no empirical research on victims of human trafficking; therefore, misconceptions and inconsistencies regarding the notion of victims of this crime remain (Vijayarasa 2015).

This study contributes to knowledge of human trafficking by investigating police and NGOs' perceptions of victims of this crime. Particularly, this article highlights the unfamiliar characteristics of victims of human trafficking in Vietnam. This study argues that victims of human trafficking are different from the stereotypical indicators of what constitutes a victim of trafficking in theory and the public/political discourse. The qualitative study conducted 30 in-depth interviews with police officials and NGOs to examine their insights into victims of this crime. This article consists of five sections. First, information is presented about Vietnamese anti-trafficking laws and the conceptualisation of human trafficking victims. Second, the methodology is described to show how the data were collected and analysed, followed by the findings section. Finally, the article discusses how the findings are similar or different from the existing literature before concluding and offering further recommendations.

Literature Review

The Vietnamese Legal Framework on Victims of Human Trafficking

Until 2009, trafficking in persons had been a familiar and comprehensive crime in Vietnam. In the past, anti-trafficking regulations were criticised for containing a narrow and inconsistent definition of trafficking, only focusing on women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation, while ignoring trafficked males and labour trafficking (Kneebone and Debeljak 2012; Vijayarasa 2014). Drawing on the Trafficking Protocol's definition of human trafficking, Article 150 in the *Penal Code 2015* states that human trafficking occurs when:

Those who force, coerce, deceive, or use other means to a) transfer or receive a person in order to give, receive money, benefit or other material benefits; b) transfer or receive a person in order to exploit sex, force labor, remove organs of victims, or do other inhuman purposes; c) recruit, transport, harbor another person to commit the acts as stated in a and b.

It is not clear enough for law enforcers to implement this definition in practice. Specifically, it does not mention exploiting the victims' vulnerabilities, such as poverty, which is common in the Greater Mekong Subregion and Vietnam (Nguyen and Nguyen 2018). Indeed, there have not been any official guidelines on interpreting and implementing this penal code until now. Therefore, the police still draw on an old *inter-ministerial circular* to interpret the meaning of trafficking and trafficking-related offences. This *circular* explains that trafficking in persons is to be understood as the act of one person (or a group of people), transferring one person to another (or another group of people) to earn money, property or other material profits. This includes selling persons to another regardless of the buyer's purpose, buying persons to resell to others, using persons as exchange or payment and buying persons for exploitation, forced labour or other inhuman purposes (Nguyen 2019). However, this *circular* considers the use of benefit to be a compulsory factor in the definition of human trafficking. This is not reasonable because benefiting is one

of the purposes of trafficking, and it challenges police to seek evidence related to the so-called benefit (Nguyen and Nguyen 2018).

Until now, Vietnam's laws have lacked a consistent and standard definition of victims of human trafficking. Interestingly, the concept of victims of human trafficking, which is not defined in any version of Vietnam's penal code, comes from the *Law on Prevention and Suppression against Human Trafficking (Anti-Trafficking Law 2011)* (Nguyen and Nguyen 2018). According to the *Anti-Trafficking Law 2011*, victims of human trafficking are defined through prohibited acts, including:

1. the trafficking in persons as ruled in Article 119 and Article 120 of the penal code;
2. the transfer or receipt of a person for purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labour, removal of organs or other inhuman purposes, and;
3. the recruitment, transportation and harbouring of a person for organ removal or other inhuman purposes, or for the commission of the acts as stipulated in paragraphs one and two of this article.

However, the prohibited acts in the *Anti-Trafficking Law 2011* do not accord with the means of trafficking described in the *Trafficking Protocol* (Kneebone and Debeljak 2012). Additionally, the grey area is whether law enforcement agencies can apply this law or the criminal code provisions to respond to human trafficking matters (Nguyen 2019). Therefore, a full concept of victims of trafficking is needed to strengthen responses by authorities to this crime.

Notably, neither the versions of the penal code nor *Anti-Trafficking Law 2011* has historically included the principle of non-punishment for trafficked people who commit unlawful acts during their trafficking, even though Vietnam signs and ratifies some bilateral agreements with other governments. Consequently, many women trafficked for prostitution can be treated as sex workers and/or criminals since they may either use fraudulent personal documents or have undertaken illegal exit from and/or entry into Vietnam (Hoang 2015).

Conceptualisation of Victims of Trafficking

Many researchers discuss a victim's stereotypical profile in human trafficking cases (Daigle 2013; Hoyle, Bosworth and Dempsey 2011; Marmo and Chazal 2010). Christie (1986, p. 19) published a groundbreaking article in 1986, introducing the term 'ideal victim' to depict the main factors of a person affected by crime, who seemingly deserves sympathy and support. According to Christie (1986), an ideal victim is weak, carries out a respectable project, is in a situation they could not possibly be blamed for and does not know the perpetrator. As Matthews (2015, p. 91) explains, these characteristics are likely to increase the chances of certain individuals and groups attracting sympathy and being considered victims of crime. For example, orphaned young girls who are kidnapped to be sold into the sex business are more likely to receive sympathy and be labelled victims of trafficking than sex workers who consent to sell sex in foreign countries and 'find themselves trapped in unacceptable conditions or in debts bondage' (Hoyle, Bosworth and Dempsey 2011, p. 315).

Public awareness campaigns can perpetuate images of ideal victims—who are trafficked for sexual exploitation and young, innocent and blameless (O'Brien 2013). However, this depiction might make police less likely to identify the diversity of victims of trafficking; for example, people voluntarily agree to be smuggled for different reasons (Jones 2012). To some extent, the images and language of slavery in these campaigns generates ideal victims of trafficking with the oversimplification of factors concerning the causes and experiences of trafficking (Hoyle, Bosworth and Dempsey 2011).

Goodey (2005, p. 124) claims that those who appear vulnerable are likely to be observed as victims of crime who deserve sympathy. Meanwhile, 'those whose character, past conduct, or actions can be considered as undesired, or as somehow contributing to their victimization' are not deserving. In human trafficking, Srikantiah (2007, p. 158) argues the concept of deserving victims of trafficking refers to 'iconic victims' who are completely controlled by traffickers from recruitment to exploitation for various

purposes. Turning to the US, Srikantiah (2007) presents iconic victims of trafficking as females who are trafficked for sexual exploitation, are good witnesses, cooperate effectively with law enforcement agencies and are rescued by law enforcement. However, this concept overlooks that males are also trafficked for sex, and some females are trafficked for labour or other purposes (Yea 2015). Victims could also choose to move abroad and refuse to cooperate with law enforcement agencies. Further, victims can escape alone or with the assistance of other people rather than police rescue exclusively (Nichols and Heil 2015).

Many trafficked people do not absolutely fit the ideal image as a deserving victim. For example, numerous studies found that trafficked women sell sex in destination places, trafficked people violate the immigration laws of destination countries and trafficked people can also have a close relationship with traffickers (Matthews 2015). Indeed, traffickers target the vulnerabilities of potential victims to recruit them (Greenbaum 2014). To illustrate, in Vietnam, traffickers prey on vulnerable people, who are ethnic minorities, young, poor or uneducated (Vijayarasa 2013). Therefore, it is unfair for those who agree to participate in sex work because their vulnerabilities are not classified as trafficking victims (Hoyle, Bosworth and Dempsey 2011).

Methodology

Research Design

The data collection of this research had two phases. In the first period, the data were collected as part of the research, focusing on the role of police in identifying and assisting sex trafficking victims. This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate police responses to the identification and assistance of victims of sex trafficking in Vietnam. Data were collected from May to June 2016. In the second phase, the research also utilised a qualitative design to explore the insight of police and NGOs regarding victims of human trafficking. It happened from August 2019 to February 2020.

Phase 1

This research selected task forces of the Department of Criminal Police of the Ministry of Public Security and five anti-trafficking units of the Department of Criminal Investigation of five provincial police departments, consisting of Ha Noi, Hai Duong, Lang Son, Lao Cai and Ho Chi Minh. These provinces/cities experience the prevalence of human trafficking in Vietnam. The police officials in these sites have much experience and understanding to respond to this crime. The researchers attended one Monday meeting, where all officials must be present to summarise their accomplishments last week and plan what to do next. The researchers provided information about this research to them, including purposes, benefits, contents, methodology and personal contact. Those who were interested in this research contacted the researcher via mobile phone or email.

Concerning the criteria for interviewees, this research only selected participants who work for anti-trafficking units at various levels, including ministerial, provincial and district level with at least five years of experience in combating human trafficking. Further, police from junior to senior leaders were recruited. Finally, 25 police officials were selected to participate in this research as interviewees.

Phase 2

The research selected the anti-trafficking units of three provincial police departments: Ha Giang, Nghe An and Ha Noi. Beyond these sites, this study selected two NGOs, including Blue Dragon Children's Foundation¹ and World Vision.² These NGOs have much experience providing care to children and assisting (potential) victims of human trafficking in their communities. Regarding human trafficking, these NGOs pay special attention to supporting the victims' reintegration to end this crime in Vietnam. Officials who work in these organisations respond to victims of human trafficking, such as identifying, investigating, preventing and supporting victims. The researchers are often invited to train anti-trafficking stakeholders to increase their capacity in responding to human trafficking. These workshops include police officials and social service providers and are hosted by Blue Dragon Children's Foundation and World Vision. In the last day of each training course, the researchers introduced the purpose, value, content and methods of this

research. If they were interested in this study, they would contact the researchers via phone or email posted on the presentation's final slide.

This research selected either officials with five years of experience working with human trafficking or leaders of these agencies. This phase recruited five interviewees, including one police official, three officials working for Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, and one working for World Vision.

Data Collection

All interviewees signed the consent form before sending it back to the researchers. Before starting each interview, the participants consented again with verbal agreements. All in-depth interviews occurred in coffee shops as the interviewees suggested. All respondents were asked their understanding and experience in responding to victims of human trafficking in their jurisdiction.

Data Analysis

This research employed the NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software package for coding and preliminary analysis. Themes were created from the interviews, the literature review, and research questions based on this coding. Following this, the themes were analysed within and across study sites, classifying various levels of police interviewees and NGOs' to identify differences in their perceptions of human trafficking victims. The deductive approach was used to form this research's main themes, including gender, age, employment, family and education. The findings presented below are organised according to these themes.

Findings

Male Victims of Human Trafficking

The data from this research revealed that men are also victims of trafficking for various purposes in the flows of trading people. Several police interviewees described boys as trafficked victims in sex tourism. Some criminal groups collect boys who are runaways, homeless, panhandlers or wanderers to exploit their labour by selling newspaper or chewing gums, polishing shoes and even selling sex to foreigners. Bodyguards from the gangs follow whatever these boys do. One official illustrated that the link between trafficked boys and domestic child sex tourism is growing in Vietnam:

Today, Vietnam attracts millions of foreign tourists, as well as tens of millions of domestic tourists yearly. The more widespread and lucrative the tourism industry becomes, the more danger children enlarge when it [the tourism industry] diversifies the forms of tourism services, including sex tourism which attracts more and more foreigners to travel to Vietnam to enjoy paid sex from children. In some big cities/provinces, traffickers kidnap children to sell to this tourism. Boys are also kidnapped for this purpose. It's extremely aggressive and reckless. Due to the increasing demand for sex with children from foreigners, they [traffickers] ignore their own conscience and conduct abductions for money. [Interviewee 13]

Indeed, sex tourism still seems to be an unfamiliar problem for Vietnamese police. Other interviewees reported that many police do not recognise boys as sexually abused by acquaintances, neighbours or stepfathers, who may bring them to cafe shops, massage parlours or hotels to bargain with foreign tourists. These activities are hidden in communities. Therefore, it is difficult to identify this problem unless functional agencies have enough knowledge, experience, skills and techniques to identify. Another senior official described the current challenges to find trafficked boys in sex tourism, stating:

I [police] fear an explosion of sex tourism in our country in coming times... I have found many indicators of child sex trafficking, including male victims... Many boys on the streets have been forced to provide sexual entertainment for tourists, but we haven't known how to address these issues. [Interviewee 11]

Meanwhile, several interviewees from NGOs lamented that it is alarming for governmental agencies to address the increasingly serious problem of boys forced to participate in sex tourism. These participants added that boys either are paid money for sex through pimps and traffickers or cheated with the help of social applications, such as Zalo or Facebook, before being forced to participate in sex services. This has not created a tendency but exists in some famous tourism-developed places in Vietnam, such as Ho Chi Minh, Da Nang, Vung Tau, Lang Son and Lao Cai. Meanwhile, the legal system is biased towards protecting female victims rather than caring for male victims in trafficking. Further, preventing children from being sexually harmed in schools, families and communities has not been effective (Kneebone and Debeljak 2012). Therefore, boys are trafficked into this industry, helping stakeholders to identify another type of human trafficking victim to end this crime.

Beyond sex trafficking, the interviewees showed evidence concerning the relationship between men and labour trafficking. These respondents reported that men are forced to work in factories, farms, gold mines, constructions and fishing boats. These people are either cheated or lured to work in these places with high incomes. However, they are paid with the cheapest salary or nothing apart from food. Some recognise this deception when going to destination places, but they do not have any options beyond working until they pay enough money to the exploiters. Rescuing a man from a fishing boat is illustrative in this regard:

The father of a 20-year-old man called my agency [police] for help to rescue him from a fishing boat in Kien Giang. That victim reported his father that he was forced to work in this boat after being promised to make good money. After two-month working there, he hadn't paid anything. He wanted to come back home, but the owner of the boat refused and asked him to pay money if the victim wanted to get out of the boat. We cooperated with maritime police to remove that man from the exploited condition on the sea. [Interviewee 10]

Meanwhile, several participants provided information about trafficked men working hard in factories, although these victims are young. Traffickers take advantage of poverty, education and unemployment to deceive victims into working far from home. To exemplify this problem, an official from Blue Dragon Children's Foundation stated:

This case happened some years ago. Traffickers were members of a family, including the mother and her two sons. They came to Tuan Giao district in Dien Bien to recruit men who were young but unemployed to work at their clothing factory. The parents of these victims agreed with a three-million salary per month. However, when working in this factory, they were forced to work from 12–14 hours per day, and their salary was one million each month. Additionally, they only lived in a tiny room with the supervision of two sons of the owners. They couldn't contact their parents. Luckily, a citizen called us [Blue Dragon] to report this case before we contacted the police station to crack down this factory. We rescued 23 men, and some of them were asthenia. [Interviewee 4]

Several participants agreed that men are also victims of organ trafficking, which has happened in some big hospitals in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh. Traffickers target those facing poverty or other difficulties to persuade them. Interestingly, some of the traffickers were victims of organ trafficking in the past. Offenders often focus on central hospitals to find and get acquainted with those who need kidneys replacements. Following this, they organise a transaction between sellers and buyers to gain benefits. More temerarious, these criminals create some groups of selling and buying kidneys on Facebook or Zalo accounts to gather those who want to sell kidneys and control them in inns before taking their kidneys to the customers. An investigator from Ha Noi told the latest case of organ trafficking to depict this problem:

S [name of victim changed] is a victim of trafficking in kidneys. He sold one kidney of his to a customer to get VND 250 million (about AUD\$12,500) because he needed money for his daughter who got blood cancer. He wanted to get much money for treating her as soon as

possible. Through his Facebook, he contacted Luong [a broker] to sell his kidney. We [police] prosecuted three traffickers in this case. [Interviewee 1]

These results provide important insights into the profile of victims of human trafficking. Data from this research reported that men are victims of sex trafficking, labour trafficking and organ trafficking in Vietnam.

Seasonal Employment

The findings identify that a portion of police working in some of the mountainous provinces of Vietnam reported that some ethnic minorities become victims of sex trafficking since they are deceived when migrating to China searching for seasonal jobs. As officials explained, after harvesting rice, people in these provinces have no more work. They have about two or three months of free time. Some interviewees considered this migration a habit or a custom of local citizens, especially ethnic minorities, to earn more money. They normally migrate in small groups and have prior contact with owners/managers in China. However, traffickers have recognised this habit as a favourable situation to go to the villages to recruit labourers with promises of high salaries to deceive victims. As one interviewee from the Lao Cai Police Department, a mountainous province, reported:

Many people often find jobs in China after finishing harvest. Because they only work one season per year, they have much free time. Every year, they move to China in a small group to work for some months and return to their home before starting a new harvest. But recently, bad guys [traffickers] have entered the village to deceive women with offers of lucrative jobs in China... They [traffickers] presented the prospect of a promised land in which there was light work, high income and a full material life. [Interviewee 2]

Although job offers are traditional techniques used by traffickers, it is more convincing for women since they are used at the exact time when victims typically have no work. One police official argued that Vietnamese labourers never let themselves have free time; they want to find work when there is no employment after the main harvest. If someone offers them work, they will willingly take it to earn money. This motivation encourages them to work abroad, as the traffickers promise. As one female official from the Lang Son Police Department, a border province, explained:

The nature of women here is hardworking, nice and honest. When having free time after the main harvest (*thang ba ngay tam*), they may go to China or other domestic cities to find jobs. Of course, they only work for a short time until the new season starts. That's why we [police] sometimes find the sudden disappearance of these women in their communities. However, among them, many are deceived and sold into brothels in Chinese neighbouring provinces. [Interviewee 25]

Another interviewee lamented how the number of women missing without reason in the mountainous communities has increased. The authorities cannot manage this situation, as people migrated to work in neighbouring places, either domestic or cross-border. Many of the missing women were also engaged in trafficking for sexual exploitation due to the influence of labour migration. As this official stated:

The life of citizens here is hard. One year, they can make around 11 million Dong [about AUD\$650] after harvesting and selling their products. However, they must cover living costs with that amount of money. So they must search for seasonal jobs to improve their income... I think most of them agree to do this in the short term, as promised by traffickers. However, only after landing in brothels, they find they have been cheated. [Interviewee 19]

Only a small number of respondents indicated that this problem also happens in the mountainous districts of Nghe An, which shares the border with Laos. Taking advantage of searching seasonal jobs in these areas, many traffickers cheat women and girls into taking part-time jobs in restaurants in LuangPhrabang before

selling them to brothels. Some of these victims have already been to Laos several times to work in farms but wanted to earn a higher salary—which is the point in recruiting victims. The following statements illustrate a desire to get more money from seasonal work, although they experience a weak point for traffickers to commit this crime:

Last year, we [police] cooperated with Laos’s police to rescue nine women from brothels. At the beginning of this journey, these victims discussed with four Vietnamese men to work in restaurants in three months. These women migrated to work in Laos many times, but they got a low income. Therefore, they believed in the Vietnamese guys’ promises to work another job with good money; however, these men sold them for pimps to get money. [Interviewee 3]

Sex Workers

Police participants found that traffickers tried to persuade sex workers to move to another country for many reasons, mainly safe working conditions and higher incomes, which were likely convincing. Accordingly, traffickers convince sex workers that it is legal for them to sell sex in other countries. In contrast, Vietnam prohibits prostitution and police conduct crackdowns on brothels. One participant illustrated the legitimacy of sex workers in the sex trade as a motivation to follow traffickers abroad:

I [police] heard from some victims that their safety was ensured when working as sex workers in destination countries. In Vietnam, they [sex workers] felt worried about police who can raid brothels and arrest them anytime because sex services are illegal. Nevertheless, they can feel free to sell sex in Thailand or Malaysia, where they believed that governments permit it to happen. Safety in those places is excellent for them to sell sex abroad rather than doing it in Vietnam. [Interviewee 15]

Another story describes the police force fears of sex workers when selling sex in Vietnam. Despite earning considerable money, these sex workers felt insecure and unsafe when participating in paid sex activities in Vietnam. To them, sooner or later, the police were going to arrest them for selling sex illegally. Therefore, a good strategy was to change working places, meaning going to destinations with legal prostitution. However, many sex workers become victims of sex trafficking without identification because of this. As one interviewee stated:

There are also victims of sex trafficking who are sex workers. When interviewing them after rescuing, one young girl told me that she had been afraid of police who could arrest her if she sold sex in Vietnam. She trusted in the traffickers who recommended that she works in Thailand where the sex industry is legal and developed. She departed for this country because she didn’t want the police to arrest her someday. [Interviewee 21]

A small number of those interviewed suggested that sex workers believe in hiding their fate in their homeland. In other words, they feel safe and confident in their minds to come back home since no one knows about their jobs in other countries. One senior official spoke of this psychology in some cases:

One sex worker—a victim—told me that she agreed to sell sex, but this happened in other countries. It never happened in Vietnam. I [police] asked her why she did this. She replied anxiously that no individual in her village knew that she sold sex abroad. If she did this in Vietnam, she could meet her acquaintances suddenly. After selling sex abroad, she wanted to marry. [Interviewee 5]

Some young women do not initially agree to participate in paid sex services in foreign countries. Instead, they make good money from selling sex in domestic hotels. Then, traffickers note that selling sex abroad makes them more money and ensures their hidden identity as sex workers. One female police official told of her conversation with a young sex worker who decided to sell sex in China:

When I [police] questioned the reason why she [victim] left home to sell sex in China, she said for money and the secrecy of her destiny... However, behind the high income, she believed that she could hide her destiny as a sex worker if she worked abroad. No one could know what she did in China. [Interviewee 22]

Among the reasons for sex workers' entry into the sex industry abroad, many police participants believed that the promise of high income was a prevalent trick of traffickers. An experienced official outlined:

One of the victims already told me that she would sell sex for one-two years in China until she had made enough money to cover her future life because the trafficker told her that she could earn hundreds of dollars per day by selling sex in a Chinese brothel. It was a big dream for her to decide to move and sell sex in China. [Interviewee 24]

An official from the Ho Chi Minh Police Department, a large city, in contrast to poor areas, detailed one's reasons for choosing sex work, also pertaining to higher wages:

To attract sex workers, traffickers always tell lies about income. They [traffickers] exaggerate the amount of money they [sex workers] can make per night. It can be 2,000 or 3,000 Yuan [about AUD\$550]. Some sex workers heard from their friends that they could make a large amount of money in China, Thailand or Malaysia in exchange for prostitution. [Interviewee 16]

Some interviewees from NGOs stated that many sex workers are victims of sex trafficking because the owners of brothels want to earn more money by selling old and unsightly sex workers to other places before these women have no value price. In these cases, sex workers only understand that they would sell sex in another brothel of new bosses rather than thinking of themselves as victims of sex trafficking. As one experienced official of World Vision declared:

We also support victims who were sex workers in the past. These victims were sold by the owners of brothels who wanted to make some money after they were old. But they didn't understand that they were victims, instead of they sold sex in another brothel because they were outmoded. [Interviewee 27]

Overall, these results indicated that sex workers are also identified as victims of trafficking since traffickers deceive them by various means, such as the safety of selling sex, the confidentiality of their past, high incomes and swapping working places.

High Level of Education

The participants defined a high level of education as those who continued studying after completing high school, such as at colleges or universities. Several interviewees indicated that some female students studying at local colleges or universities were still sold into brothels. As one participant from the Lao Cai Police Department stated:

In terms of the educational characteristics of victims, I think that most of them were poorly educated. Some finished primary or secondary education. But in some special cases, victims were students of a university, college, or vocational centre. [Interviewee 29]

People with low education are often viewed as vulnerable to trafficking, but students of a university or college can also be sold into the sex industry. These cases occur when the victims find they lack life skills in challenging instances. This official offered his thoughts on the matter:

Most of the victims have no knowledge regarding campaigns about trafficking and other problems surrounding this crime. But some of them told me that they knew and understood human trafficking because they participated in anti-trafficking education classes at their

college. I [police] still remember one victim—a student of a local college. I asked her ‘why didn’t you protect yourself from being trafficked?’. She told me that she wanted to try being trafficked. [Interviewee 28]

This statement was supported by a story about one victim of sex trafficking involving a murder. Despite being a university student, the victim lacked the necessary life skills to avoid the traps of trafficking and its consequences. As one female official from the Lang Son Police Department stated:

The level of education regarding victims of sex trafficking differs. For example, I [police] am in charge of an investigation where three girls who were students at M University followed the traffickers’ sweet words to work in China as tour guides. They believed it to be a good chance for them to have a part-time job during their study. But, unfortunately, they were raped many times by traffickers on the way to China. Then they were sold to brothels in China. Over nearly a year, these girls were forced to sell sex many times a day. Being heavily exploited regarding sex, they couldn’t stand their sexual slavery in brothels under the pressure of the owners, and they killed the owner of the brothel and came back to Vietnam. Bitterly, they are both victims of trafficking and offenders of homicide. [Interviewee 21]

Another participant from Blue Dragon Children’s Foundation revealed that some students of universities in the northwest highland seek part-time jobs to support their families. These students post some status on their Facebook account, hoping that someone can introduce them to a job. Many traffickers use fake Facebook profiles to ‘hunt’ potential victims on the Internet. They actively contact those whose status is searching for a (temporary) job to make friends before providing information about counterfeit jobs. This helps them deceive many students to sell them to Chinese brothels. As this official declared:

Some of the victims of human trafficking are students of some universities in the provinces sharing the north border with China. They find jobs via their Facebook where ‘hunters’ are always online to find preys. These students often believed the lies of traffickers about promising jobs without any doubt. That’s why some of them were trafficked to many brothels in China. [Interviewee 26]

Another interviewee described the complicated tricks of traffickers to deceive university students. These offenders also get acquainted with the students via Facebook and start online dating for a couple of weeks before organising a party to introduce each other. They often cover all the costs for this party, including the restaurant, karaoke shops and accommodation for all attending members. This illustration helps traffickers to get belief from online students. Therefore, they can easily control these students since the second meeting. The story about K [name of victim changed] is illustrative in this respect:

K [name of victim] is a victim like that. We [Blue Dragon] found her to be trafficked to a Chinese brothel when being a third-year student. She lived far from home since the first year of studying. She started participating in bars or pubs often. She also made friends with strange Facebookers without checking. After some off-lines, she easily fell in love with her online lover, who sold her later. [Interviewee 30]

Together these results provide important insights into the reasons for the victimisation of some university students. The data provided evidence that traffickers take advantage of lifestyles, life skills, habits and living experience to trap victims, despite some studying at universities.

Discussion

The current study findings are consistent with the literature review on human trafficking victims, such as the prevalence of females, the young, the unemployed and the lowly educated (Christie 1986; O’Brien

2013). However, this section mainly discusses the difference between stereotypes and realities regarding victims of human trafficking in Vietnam.

This research assesses the perception of governmental and nongovernmental actors regarding victims of human trafficking. Police officials in this observation differ partly from the image of stereotypical trafficking victims in the existing literature. In Vietnam, these findings are all unexpected, given the narrow and inconsistent definition of human trafficking in the legal system, which only records women and children as victims of sex trafficking (Kneebone and Debeljak 2012) and lacks the principles of non-punishment for victims of trafficking (Hoang 2015).

Specifically, the current study provides some evidence for the trafficking of males for sex, labour, and organs, which has not appeared in empirical studies on human trafficking in Vietnam. The importance of this result is threefold. First, this study points to a significant cohort of male victims involved in sex trafficking, while previous studies on trafficking in Vietnam have discussed the trafficking of males for labour (Vijayarasa 2014, 2015). Additionally, this finding opposes the notion of ideal victims of trafficking, referring to females, as discussed in the existing research (O'Brien 2013; Srikantiah 2007). This study importantly provides some first evidence on organ trafficking in Vietnam to the current literature. This is a good start for further research in this area.

Unlike the findings in Farrell, McDevitt and Fahy's (2010) study, a portion of police officials and NGOs in Vietnam treat illegal migrants as victims of trafficking when these victims are deceived, lured and attracted by the promises of traffickers searching seasonal jobs, although they voluntarily consent to migrate. This result might be explained by the migration habits of some ethnic minority populations in the mountainous provinces coinciding with them searching for short-term jobs in China (Dang 2006a, 2006b). However, this finding is only specific to some mountainous provinces that share borders with China and Laos. Thus, police officials in these places are unlikely to criminalise migration regulations since it happens in other countries (Chacón 2009; Longazel, Berman and Fleury–Steiner 2016; van der Woude and van Berlo 2015).

Additionally, this research contributes to expanding the concept of victims of sex trafficking since some police officials perceive sex workers as victims of this crime. This is positive evidence, shedding light on the current theories about blameworthy victims regarding human trafficking (Marmo and Chazal 2010). The findings show that some sex workers consent to sell sex in other countries only because traffickers deceive them with promises of safe working conditions and high income, and they have limited understanding. It also contests the concept of ideal victims of trafficking; victims of sex trafficking are not always weak, young and innocent, as Christie (1986) argues. More importantly, this finding helps explain how victims of human trafficking may voluntarily enter the exploitation (Vijayarasa 2015). This could have important implications for developing protocols and policies related to identifying victims of sex trafficking.

Furthermore, this research expanded the existing literature related to the profile of victims of trafficking by indicating that well-educated people can also become victims of this crime. This finding adds to Vijayarasa's (2015) findings on Ukrainian trafficking, concluding the relationship between a high level of education and a high risk of trafficking. This study's data suggest that an accurate perception of victims of trafficking is beyond the current laws and understandings of trafficking. Some police interviewees explained that several victims lack life skills despite being students of colleges or universities. This finding raises the possibility that the current campaigns on human trafficking in Vietnamese educational institutions might be ineffective since they may rely on the wrong methods, weak contentions and incorrect subjects; there is weak cooperation among stakeholders. For example, school-based educational activities regarding human trafficking are not occurring in all schools or do not educate students on how to prevent this crime (Le 2017).

Conclusion

Evidence from this present research expands the existing body of knowledge examining the notion of victimhood in human trafficking cases. This study provides the images of victims of human trafficking different from the stereotypical indicators of what constitutes a victim of trafficking. This study has shown that victims of human trafficking include men, sex workers, migrants for work and well-educated students. These findings imply that lawmakers must adjust the current definition of human trafficking and victims of this crime in the Vietnamese anti-trafficking laws since the narrow and inconsistent definition does not reflect the nature of this crime. Otherwise, a protocol implementing the anti-trafficking regulations in the current laws should be issued at this time. If not, education and training for the police and anti-trafficking actors about a new profile of trafficking victims are needed to improve the quality of responses to the human trafficking incidents.

Notably, this research also shows sex tourism happens in some big cities/provinces in Vietnam, helping the authorities of these places plan to end this problem. Parallel to this, the legal adjustment is necessary to guide law enforcers and other agencies in a consistent application. Using mass media to prevent this problem should be considered the first action before policies appear.

Furthermore, this research suggests that socioeconomic factors greatly contribute to human trafficking victimisation in Vietnam, such as unemployment, seasonal migration, sex tourism and life skills. These findings suggest changing policies to prevent this crime from happening in the future. Anti-trafficking stakeholders should focus on addressing the lack of work for citizens, filling the gaps in sex tourism and improving campaigns' effectiveness against human trafficking. The solutions for preventing traffickers from using Facebook to commit this crime should be studied further. Similarly, the non-criminalisation of police migration regulations in a national scope is needed to develop anti-trafficking stakeholders' protocols to respond to trafficking cases in such settings. These recommendations can help governmental and nongovernmental actors improve their practices in identifying, rescuing and supporting victims of human trafficking.

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¹ See more at <https://www.bluedragon.org/who-we-are/>

² See more at <https://www.wvi.org/about-us>

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