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Human Trafficking and Psychosocial Well-being:

A Mixed-Methods Study of Returned Survivors of Trafficking in Vietnam

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Public Health

by

PhuongThao Dinh Le

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Human Trafficking and Psychosocial Well-being:
A Mixed-Methods Study of Returned Survivors of Trafficking in Vietnam

by

PhuongThao Dinh Le

Doctor of Philosophy in Public Health

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, Chair

This study employs qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the psychosocial issues among women survivors of trafficking who have returned to Vietnam.

The quantitative study examines the relationship between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms among a pilot sample of trafficked women who accessed a post-trafficking project at the Vietnam-China border. The results are consistent with the existing literature suggesting that greater trafficking-related abuse is associated with worse mental health. The study also reveals that trafficking experiences and mental health symptoms may be varied between women trafficked for different types of exploitation – in particular, between sex work, marriage, domestic servitude, and other trafficking types.

The qualitative study illustrates the experiences and coping responses among survivors of trafficking interviewed at both the Vietnam-China and the Vietnam-Cambodia borders. Themes of *being uprooted*, *understanding “new realities,”* and *facing the “new normal”* emerged to characterize the pre-, peri-, and post-trafficking stages, respectively. Throughout the stages, these women also exhibited a process of *navigating to a renewed sense of self* by employing coping strategies such as regulating emotional expression and thought, creating opportunities within constraints, and relating to cultural schemas.

The synthesis study triangulates the qualitative and quantitative findings, and presents the development of an Ecological-Transitional Framework of human trafficking and health. The public health Framework posits that both human trafficking and health are influenced by multiple, interconnected *ecological system levels* and that there are *transitional processes* that affect the timing and trajectories of events and conditions as well as their significance within developmental and socio-cultural pathways. These principles are applied in the triangulation of findings from both methodological approaches in order to contextually analyze the multitude of psychosocial issues among a group of survivors of trafficking, and to identify the knowledge gaps as well as the potential solutions to address the needs of these women. The proposed Framework is the first to holistically assess the social-cultural forces that interact to contribute to the vulnerabilities and impact of human trafficking on individuals as well as their surroundings.

This study contributes unique findings of the psychosocial issues associated with a group of survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. The findings, as well as the methodological and conceptual contributions, suggest some future directions for more targeted and effective public health efforts to address the causes and consequences of human trafficking in Vietnam, and potentially in other populations who face similar issues.

The dissertation of PhuongThao Dinh Le is approved.

Steven P. Wallace

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2014

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the extraordinary women who shared their stories with me. I am grateful for your open hearts and mind. Thank you for allowing me into your lives, to try to understand and portray your experiences. I sincerely hope that your voices are heard and that your stories will inspire others as they have inspired me.

Như là một lời cảm ơn, Phương Thảo mến gửi những trang, chữ này đến tất cả chị em đã giúp cho Phương Thảo cơ hội hiểu biết về những hoàn cảnh, kinh nghiệm và ước mơ của các chị em. Phương Thảo hy vọng tiếng nói của các chị em sẽ là nguồn động viên cho những người cùng hoàn cảnh.

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I simply could not be where I am without my family and friends. As a Vietnamese proverb instructs, “*Uống nước nhớ nguồn*” (“Remember your roots.”), From the bottom of my heart, I thank my family and friends for the amazing love and encouragement. I thank my parents, who have sacrificed so much so that we daughters could have better opportunities in life.

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[I] INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* within the *Convention on Transnational Crime*, the Palermo Protocol, which defines trafficking in persons (TIP) as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person or having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (United Nations, 2000).

Human trafficking is a serious human rights violation and the real extent of the problem remains unknown. However, the International Labor Organization (2012) conservatively estimates that 20.9 million people are victims of trafficking globally, which is the equivalence of three victims out of 1,000 persons worldwide. Women and girls represent 55% of the total (men and boys, 45%) and forced labor exploitation account for 68% of the total (forced sexual exploitation 22%, state-imposed forms of labor 10%). The Asia-Pacific region contains the largest estimated number of victims, 11.7 million people (56%), but human trafficking affects every region and virtually every country in the world.¹

Human trafficking has many health consequences. The emerging literature reveals that trafficked persons face health problems such as physical health (e.g., headaches, fatigue, bodily pains), sexual and reproductive health (e.g., HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B, other gynecological infections), and mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) (Oram, Stöckl, Busza, Howard, & Zimmerman, 2012). Despite recent progress in the field, existing

¹ The distribution for other regions are as follows: Africa (3.7 million, 18%); Latin America and the Caribbean (1.8 million, 9%); Developed Economies and European Union (1.5 million, 7%); Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe (non-European Union) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (1.6 million, 7%); and the Middle East (0.6 million, 3%).

health data and knowledge about TIP is still limited due to the underground nature of the activities, the difficult access to survivors of trafficking, and the lack of studies that capture the variety and complexity of experiences and implications associated with human trafficking.

This study examines the psychosocial issues among returned women survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. The study took place in the Vietnam-China border as well as the Vietnam-Cambodia border regions (**Appendix A**).

The quantitative study was implemented in two border provinces in the Northeast region as part of the Returnee Initial Support Essentials (RISE) project, a post-trafficking program that provide care packages to survivors of trafficking.² This study uses RISE's pilot data collected between October 2012 and April 2013. The qualitative study took place at various reintegration projects located at the Vietnam-China and Vietnam-Cambodia border regions, as well as Ho Chi Minh City. The in-depth interviews were conducted between October 2012 and August 2013.

Quantitative Study. The quantitative study examines the relationship between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms, and the experiences between different types of exploitation. Previous studies have found moderate to high levels of mental health problems among women survivors of trafficking (Cwikel, Chudakov, Paikin, Agmon, & Belmaker, 2004; Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010; Tsutsumi, Izutsu, Poudyal, Kato, & Marui, 2008). However, these studies have measured mental health using instruments that have been validated but mainly among Western cultures.

² Care packages consist of items such as clothing, slippers, and toiletries (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, etc.). Care packages are not intended exclusively for females; however, RISE has only identified female returned survivors. As the RISE project is located in provinces at the Vietnam-China border, returned survivors of trafficking were almost exclusively trafficked to China. This study only uses initial data from RISE, but the project continues to be implemented (as of June 2014).

One study has examined the relationship of trafficking trauma to mental disorders and has found that trafficking-related abuse/violence is associated with worse mental health outcomes (Hossain et al., 2010). However, this study – and prior research on other health outcomes – have looked at singular or disjointed aspects of trafficking-related trauma. That is, studies have either included one type of abuse (usually, sexual violence) or have added another type of abuse (namely, physical violence) to analyze their (separate) consequences. Although an understanding of specific effects are important, this approach ignores important theoretical specifications regarding the potentially different psychological sequela of multiple traumas as compared to individual traumas (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2001; Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Green et al., 2000). Furthermore, studies have also included mostly women who have been trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. This design precludes the detection of potential differences between groups trafficked into different exploitative environments.

To address these limitations in prior research, the quantitative study uses the Self-Reporting Questionnaire-20 items, an instrument that has been validated in many cultural settings (World Health Organization, 1994) and examines the focal independent variable, trafficking abuse, as a composite score on 5 items that have been reduced based on exploratory factor analysis of 18 items. This study also examines the experiences of different types of exploitation by disaggregating data among these groups.

Qualitative Study. The qualitative study provides a thematic analysis of the experiences and coping responses among a group of survivors of trafficking. Although numerous reports from media outlets and non-governmental organizations have portrayed the experiences of some victims of trafficking, no study has inductively analyzed their experiences nor has elucidated the

coping strategies among survivors of trafficking who have returned to their country of origin. An understanding of the trafficking experience from the perspectives of the survivors, formulated via qualitative analysis principles and techniques (Bernard, 2007; Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mostyn, 1985), is beneficial not only for the efforts that aim to assist survivors reintegrate, but also for those that seek to address factors that contribute to the vulnerabilities of being (re)trafficked. Additionally, the contextual approach of the qualitative study provides a more accurate depiction of the women's lives, as well as, a more comprehensive understanding of how the meanings of their experiences are constructed and embedded in socio-cultural contexts (Kasper, 1994).

Synthesis Study. The synthesis study integrates the qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial issues among a group of returned survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. The triangulation process minimizes biases and weaknesses of single methodologies and provides a mechanism to obtain findings that have been corroborated from different methodological approaches (Denzin, 1970; Greene & McClintock, 1985). As a result, the triangulated findings may lead to more effective anti-trafficking efforts than evidence obtained otherwise (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003).

The analysis of findings from the mixed-methods study also led to the development of the Ecological-Transitional Framework. As both TIP and health are influenced by multi-faceted and multi-dimensional issues, the analysis of their intersections requires a contextual and dynamic approach. The proposed Framework is an example of such approaches, as it recognizes the impact of multiple layers of the ecological system levels and transitional processes in TIP and health. The Framework could be utilized to design and implement responses that could prove more effective in serving the needs of those affected by human trafficking.

OVERVIEW OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN VIETNAM

Vietnam is a significant source country of men, women, and children trafficked into forced labor, commercial sex, and foreign marriages (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Many Vietnamese men and women migrate to construction, fishing, or manufacturing sectors throughout Asia as well as Western Europe and the Middle East, with many labor migrants subsequently facing exploitation or debt bondage (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Vietnamese women and girls are often trafficked via fraudulent employment opportunities into brothels in China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia or sold into forced/fake marriages in Taiwan, South Korea, and China (Archavanitkul, 1998; Dang, 2006; Vu, 2006).

Data on human trafficking in Vietnam exist but they only capture disjointed fragments of the magnitude of the issue. Between 2005 and 2009, the Vietnamese Government recognized more than 4,000 victims of trafficking (VOTs), of whom 60% were trafficked to China, 11% to Cambodia, and the remaining (29%) to other countries; the Government also noted that 22,000 missing women and children were suspected as trafficked (Steering Committee 130/CP, 2009). The Trafficking in Persons Reports, published by the U.S. Department of State (2011, 2012, 2013) indicated that Vietnamese authorities recognized 750 victims in 2010, 800 in 2011, and 883 in 2012. However, these statistics reflect mostly cases of sexual and cross-border trafficking, as these have been the officially recognized categories until a change in the Vietnamese human trafficking law was adopted in 2010 (U.N. Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2010). Thus, TIP in Vietnam is likely more widespread than these official figures would suggest.

Additionally, as irregular and unsafe migration patterns increase, the vulnerability and incidences of human trafficking in Vietnam may also rise. Vietnam is an emerging economy, with rapid increases in rural-to-urban as well as international labor and marriage migration (V.N.

General Statistics Office & U.N. Population Fund, 2004). Increased migration patterns alone are not negative externalities of emerging economies. However, rapid migration, coupled with the absence of social support services for migrants and the increased deception in the illegal migration routes, is likely to contribute to the potential exploitation and trafficking of migrants (Vu, 2006).

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Trafficking in Persons (TIP), Human Trafficking

Trafficking in persons and *human trafficking* are used interchangeably in this study. As defined in the Palermo Protocol, TIP includes the trade in human organs. However, this study refers to TIP/human trafficking as an issue of trafficking in human beings.

Trafficked Person, Victim of Trafficking (VOT), Survivor of Trafficking (SOT), Returnee

The terms *trafficked person*, *victim of trafficking*, *survivor of trafficking*, and *returnee* all refer to the individual who has been trafficked. *Trafficked persons* is a general term indicating the population of individuals who have been trafficked. *Victim of trafficking* (or *victim*) is used in circumstances where the individual is still in the trafficking situation or to connote the official legal status. *Survivor of trafficking* is used to indicate that the individual has exited the trafficking situation. *Returnee* refers to survivors of trafficking who have returned to their community/country of origin. The terms are not intended to connote the individual's agency or other characteristics.

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World Health Organization. (1994). A user's guide to the Self Reporting Questionnaire. Geneva: World Health Organization.

[II] QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Trafficking Abuse and Psychological Symptoms among Returned Survivors of Trafficking: Preliminary Findings from the RISE Project in Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms among trafficked females returning to Vietnam. A cross-sectional, convenience sample of returned survivors of trafficking who received assistance from the Returnee Initial Support Essentials (RISE) project is included in this pilot study ($n=73$). Participants reported high levels of abuse experienced while trafficked: 60% reported sexual abuse, 42% physical abuse, 40% emotional abuse, 40% labor abuse, and 32% forced alcohol use. The Trafficking Abuse Score, computed as a sum using factor loadings from the principal component analysis of the 5 abuse items, averaged at 1.58 (SD 1.46, range 0–3.71). Among the sample, psychological symptoms, assessed via the 20-item self-reporting questionnaire (SRQ-20), averaged at 8.3 symptoms (SD 4.2, range 0–20); 64% of the sample met the criteria for mental disorder (SRQ Score > 7).

Linear regression results of the focal relationship showed that Trafficking Abuse Score was positively associated with SRQ Score (unadjusted b , 1.213; 95% CI 0.60 to 1.82) and the association remained after adjusting for duration of trafficking (adjusted b , 1.051; 95% CI 0.37 to 1.73). Stratified analyses showed that the focal relationship may be different among groups trafficked for different types of exploitation (i.e., marriage, sex work, domestic servitude, and other/undeclared). These findings suggest that future studies should assess a range of psychological symptoms and trafficking abuse, as well as, the potentially different experiences between groups of survivors of trafficking.

INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is the threatened, forced, coerced, or fraud recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation, where exploitation includes activities pertaining to “the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (United Nations, 2000). Although the real extent of human trafficking remains unknown, the International Labor Organization (2012) estimates that globally, 20.9 million people are trafficked into forced labor, which includes exploitation in economic activities such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work or manufacturing; forced sexual exploitation; and state-imposed forms of forced labor such as in prisons, state military, or rebel armed forces.¹ Trafficking in persons is one of the largest sources of profits for organized crime and is tied with the illegal arms trade as the second largest criminal industry in the world (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

Victims of trafficking face a myriad of physical, sexual, and mental health consequences (Zimmerman et al., 2003). The most common physical health problems reported were headaches, fatigue, dizziness, back pains, stomach pains, pelvic pains, memory problems, and dental problems, with many people reporting multiple symptoms (Cwikel, Chudakov, Paikin, Agmon, & Belmaker, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Because the majority of trafficking cases involve sexual exploitation, studies have focused on the increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS (Beyrer & Stachowiak, 2003). A study of brothel-based sex workers in Eastern India found that trafficked sex workers experienced more abuse than non-trafficked sex workers, and that the abuse was associated with increased risk of HIV (Sarkar et al., 2008).

¹ The International Labor Organization figures do not include forced marriages/adoptions unless they lead to forced labor or service, nor do these figures include trafficking for the removal of organs.

Another study, conducted among trafficked women as they received post-trafficking support in Nepal, found that the odds of HIV infection was significantly higher for those initially trafficked at age 14 or younger compared to those trafficked at 18 or older, and among those who had been forced into prostitution for a greater number of months (Silverman et al., 2007).

Recent research has expanded the investigation of TIP's consequences to include mental health issues as well. In a study conducted in Nepal among those who were forced to work as sex workers or in non-sex work settings (e.g., domestic and circus work), the authors found that both groups exhibited high proportions of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that those in the sex work group had higher proportions than the non-sex work group of all three mental health problems (Tsutsumi, Izutsu, Poudyal, Kato, & Marui, 2008). Another study, conducted among trafficked women in Moldova, found that 54% met the criteria for DSM-IV mental disorder, with 36% diagnosed with PTSD (alone or co-morbid), 13% had depression without PTSD, and 5% had another anxiety disorder (Abas et al., 2013). In the same study, childhood sexual abuse, post-trafficking unmet needs, and post-trafficking support were risk factors predictive of mental disorders and duration of trafficking was weakly predictive.

Despite the recent increase of studies that assess mental health issues among trafficked and sexually exploited women, the literature remains scant. Moreover, research has not examined how these mental health problems are associated with the trafficking experience *per se*. Only one study directly assessed mental health problems in relation to trafficking-related trauma; the study found that sexual violence was associated with higher levels of PTSD and that physical violence, threats, and restricted freedom of movement were associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety (Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010).

Investigations that focus on specific disorders or diagnoses such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression draws from recognizable mental health phenomena with established professional standards of response and treatment. Thus, these types of findings can be informative for providers of post-trafficking services and can also be expedient in political and research advocacy efforts. However, the strategy of dichotomizing those with and without “disorders” might result in a reductionistic understanding of the complex, multi-dimensional psychological processes in general (Thorton, 2000), and of human trafficking consequences in particular.

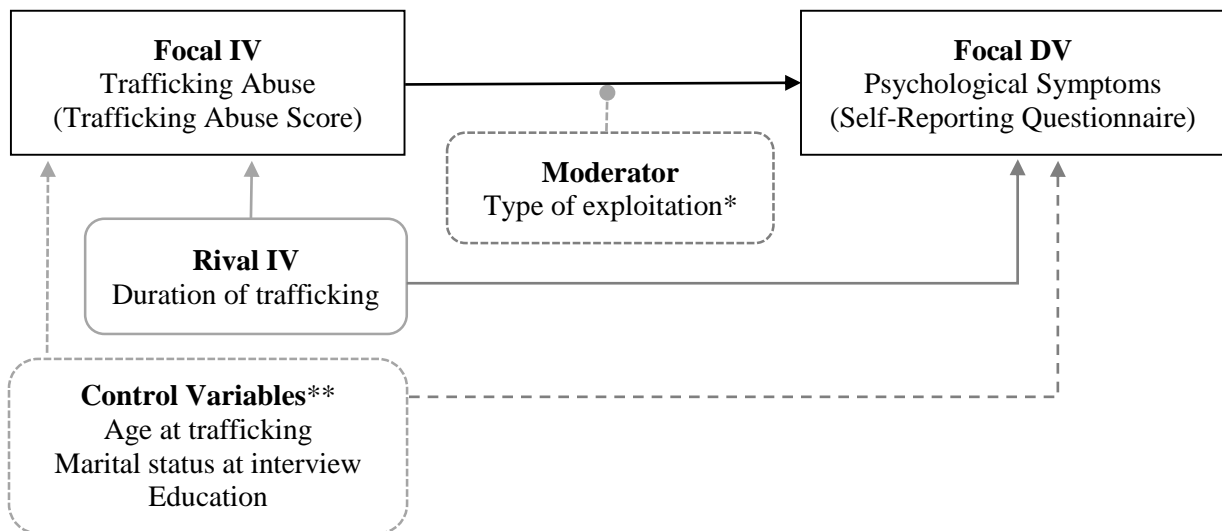
Previous studies have used mental health questionnaires that have been validated but primarily among Western cultures. Psychological responses to traumatic events vary between cultures (Waitzkin & Magana, 1997) and they may also be specific to certain characteristics of the type of traumatic events (Norris, 1992). Human trafficking occurs mostly from low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) to higher-income countries, and the majority of victims originate from LMIC countries in the Asia Pacific region (International Labor Organization, 2012). These patterns suggest a need to use psychological assessment instruments that are more appropriate to the cultural and environmental contexts of the majority of trafficked individuals.

Furthermore, highlighting individual aspects of trafficking-related abuse and violence, as previous studies have done, may produce inaccurate or incomplete understandings of the relationship between trafficking experiences and mental health problems. Specifically, victims of trafficking may experience multiple traumas, which may interact to have different mental health effects than the purely additive properties of single traumas (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). No study has assessed the mental health effects with a composite measure of trafficking-related trauma, nor has any study compared such properties between groups trafficked for different exploitative purposes.

This study aims to address the aforementioned gaps in the literature through the examination of the focal relationship between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms. The study also examines trafficking experiences and mental health problems across different types of exploitation. **Figure II-1** illustrates the analytical model of the focal relationship.

The study assesses mental health via a self-reporting questionnaire of 20 items (SRQ-20), which has been developed by the World Health Organization (1994) to screen for psychological dysfunction in low-income countries and has been validated in many settings, including Vietnam (Tran, Harpham, & Nguyen, 2004). Trafficking abuse, operationalized as the Trafficking Abuse Score (TAS) in this study, is computed from factor loadings of the principal component analysis of 5 abuse items: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, labor abuse, and forced alcohol use.

Figure II-1. Analytical model of the association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms



Note: IV: Independent variable; DV: Dependent variable

* Type of exploitation is hypothesized as a rival independent variable and a potential moderator. However, this variable is not included in regression models due to the small sample sizes. Regression analyses stratified by type of exploitation are conducted instead.

** The control variables (age at trafficking, marital status at interview, and education) are not included in the regression analyses due to the small sample size. Moreover, tests of bivariate associations determined that these variables were not associated with the dependent variable.

Duration of trafficking is posited as a rival independent variable and that it captures some aspects of the adversity that trafficked individuals experience. Studies have found trafficking duration to be associated with health problems (Abas et al., 2013; Silverman et al., 2007), as well as exposure to violence, exploitation, and restricted freedom among victims of trafficking (Hossain et al., 2010). The adjusted linear regression analysis includes trafficking duration.

Type of exploitation refers to the purpose for which an individual is trafficked. Most trafficking research distinguishes only between labor and sexual exploitations, with the majority of sexual exploitation cases referring to those trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. Among the sample in this study, there are three known types of exploitation (sex work, marriage, and domestic servitude) and one undetermined category (other/undeclared). Type of exploitation is hypothesized as a rival independent variable and a potential moderator. However, this variable is not included in regression models due to the small sample sizes. Regression analyses stratified by type of exploitation are conducted instead.

Increased levels of trafficking abuse is hypothesized to be associated with increased levels of psychological symptoms. This focal relationship is also hypothesized to be linear, but it is probably linear only when trafficking duration is terminated within a certain time. Individuals trafficked for longer durations may be affected by different psychological processes; however, there is insufficient evidence in the literature for further theoretical extrapolations in this regard. Thus, the nature of the focal relationship posited in the analytical model applies only within the time period set for this study, which is 36 months.

This study uses pilot data collected from RISE, a post-trafficking project for returned survivors of trafficking in Vietnam, described below.

METHODS

Sampling and Recruitment

A pilot sample of surveys from the Returnee Initial Support Essentials (RISE) project is used in this study. RISE provides survivors of trafficking – upon their return to Vietnam – care packages that consist of items such as basic clothing, hygiene products, and referrals to local support services. It is coordinated by a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, Pacific Links Foundation (PALS), and is administered in partnership with the Vietnamese Border Guards, Women’s Union, and Social Protection Centers in two provinces at the Vietnam-China border (Lao Cai and Ha Giang).²

Women and girls, who had been rescued or escaped from their trafficking environment (in China) and were repatriated to Vietnam via border stations or other governmental centers participating in RISE, were eligible to receive free, no-obligation care packages. Returnees who received the care packages were recruited to voluntarily participate in a health survey, which was administered verbally by trained personnel.³ Each participant and interviewer was compensated with 50,000 VND (2.50 USD),⁴ regardless of the participant’s willingness and/or ability to complete the survey in its entirety.

² The RISE project is called “Chương trình Hỗ Trợ Thiết Yếu cho Người Trở Về,” which has been literally translated into English, with the addition of the word “Initial” in the English version. There are several other border stations in the region; however, RISE is implemented in two provinces that are among the top trafficking hotspots in Vietnam. This study only uses the initial data from RISE, but the project continues to be implemented in the two aforementioned provinces (as of June 2014) and will expand to other provinces in the region.

³ The training curriculum was co-developed by PALS staff and the author, and were conducted by PALS’ Program Manager. Training sessions covered the voluntary informed consent process, questionnaire administration procedures as outlined in the Training Manual (available upon request), and included practices. Each session lasted approximately three hours.

⁴ VND: Vietnamese Đồng. USD: U.S. Dollar. The average monthly wage for Vietnamese agricultural workers in 2012 is 3.78 million VND (178 USD), which is the equivalent to the daily earning of 6 USD (Thanh Nien News, 2012).

Between October 2012 and April 2013, a total of 92 returnees received RISE care packages, of whom eight (8.7%) declined participation in the health questionnaire. Of the remaining 84 respondents, 11 were excluded due to missing data on the outcome or exposure variables (psychological symptoms, trafficking abuse, and trafficking duration). Consequently, the analytic sample consisted of 73 respondents collected from a convenience, cross-sectional sampling design. **Appendix B** shows the characteristics between included and refused/excluded participants; these two groups did not statistically differ (at the 0.05 level of significance).

Measures

Psychological symptoms (Self-Reporting Questionnaire-20) were measured by a validated Vietnamese version of the 20-item Self-Reporting Questionnaire (Tran et al., 2004). The SRQ-20 was developed by the World Health Organization (1994) as a screening instrument to detect “psychological disturbance,” or cases of mental health disorders, among the general population in different cultural contexts, especially in low-income countries. SRQ questions included “Do you often have headaches?,” “Do you have trouble thinking clearly?,” “Do you find it difficult to enjoy your daily activities?,” “Do you feel that you are a worthless person?,” “Has the thought of ending your life been on your mind?,” etc. Respondents were asked to indicate (yes/no) if the items applied to them within the past 30 days. Although the SRQ was designed to consist of only yes/no responses, RISE survey administrators were allowed to record “don’t know/refused.” We modified the procedure to account for the possibility that the question item(s) might cause returnees discomfort. We computed the SRQ Scores for psychological symptoms by averaging “yes” responses over answered items, then multiplying by 20 to normalize the score. The main dependent variable in this study is SRQ Score; however, data on potential cases of mental disorders (SRQ Score > 7) are also provided for descriptive purposes.

Trafficking abuse (Trafficking Abuse Score) was assessed by the question “While you were (trafficked) abroad, were you controlled/abused by the following methods?” Originally, there were 18 (yes/no) items.⁵ However, based on exploratory factor analysis, we derived a reduced set that consisted of 5 items: physical abuse, emotional abuse, labor abuse, sexual abuse, and forced alcohol use. (The women had, however, reported instances of all 18 forms of abuse.) Then, we computed a summed Trafficking Abuse Score using the items’ factor loadings in the principal component analysis of the reduced 5-item set. **Appendix C** presents the frequency distributions and exploratory factor analysis of the original 18 items, as well as, the results of the principal component analysis to compute the Trafficking Abuse Score.

Duration of trafficking was measured by the number of months returnees were in the destination country, from the date they left Vietnam to when they returned. Some individuals were trafficked directly to their intended destination and purpose; others were trafficked indirectly through brokers or were trafficked multiple times. This study refers to trafficking duration as the total time an individual was trafficked, regardless of the number and specific duration of each particular trafficking transaction. Two respondents who reported trafficking durations of more than 36 months were excluded from the study due to the *a priori* specification of the hypothesized nature of the relationship.

Type of exploitation was assessed by the question “Were you trafficked into the following purpose(s): sex work, marriage, domestic servant, factory work, and/or other?” We created a single “type of exploitation” variable. No one in the sample reported being trafficked

⁵ The original 18 items consisted of: threats to self, threats to family, threats via legal means, tricked, restricted movement, forced to use drugs, forced to use alcohol, no healthcare access, no food/water, withheld wage, withheld personal identification documents, withheld travel documents, debt bondage, overworked, physical abuse, emotional abuse, labor abuse, and sexual abuse. These items were adapted from a screening interview form devised by the International Organization for Migration (2008) to identify the experiences of those considered as victims of trafficking.

into factories; this category was eliminated from further analysis. Although respondents could indicate if they had been trafficked into multiple types of exploitation, only one respondent in the analytic sample indicated as such (forced marriage and domestic servitude). An “other/undeclared” category combined the “undeclared”⁶ (31%) and “other” (9%) cases as well as the single case of multiple types of exploitation.

Statistical analysis

We used univariate analyses to report the frequency and distribution of variables among the sample and among trafficked subgroups. Bivariate tests of associations used Fisher’s Exact tests for categorical variables and Kruskal-Wallis tests for continuous variables (UCLA Statistical Consulting Group). The distribution of the dependent variable, SRQ score, was approximately normally distributed; thus, we conducted ordinary least squares regression analyses to examine the focal relationship between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms. We considered *a priori* two-sided *p*-values of 0.05 statistically significant.

Although some demographic and trafficking-related variables (education, age at trafficking, marital status at interview) were considered, only duration of trafficking was included in regression analyses on the basis of parsimony and because the other variables were not associated with the dependent variable, thereby not satisfying a requirement for the inclusion as a third type of variable in the analytical model (Aneshensel, 2012).

All analyses were conducted using Stata 11/SE (StataCorp, 2009).

⁶ “Undeclared” cases may include individuals who had been sold to a broker across the border but were able to escape or were rescued before they were further trafficked to their final destination. This category may also include cases where individuals did not want to declare their trafficking type.

RESULTS

Table II-1 shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Returnees' mean age at interview was 21.8 years (SD 5.38, range 14–45); the majority (76%) was below age 26.

Among the sample, the average education was 5.2 completed grades (SD 4.0, range 0–12); 25% had no formal education. The sample was predominantly (67%) of ethnic minority background and 16% belonged to the Kinh ethnic majority group. Most (69%) of the sample were single at interview; 12% were married; and 12% were widowed/separated (see note in table).

Table II-1. Demographic characteristics of the RISE sample

Characteristic	<i>Mean ± SD or frequency, %</i>	
Age at interview (years)	21.8 ± 5.5	
14–17	16	22%
18–20	23	32%
21–25	16	22%
26–30	14	19%
31–45	4	6%
Education (grade completed)	5.2 ± 4.0	
None	18	25%
Grade 1–5	15	21%
Grade 6–8	18	25%
Grade 9–12	12	16%
Unknown	10	14%
Ethnicity^I		
Kinh (majority)	12	16%
Dao	16	22%
H'mong	14	19%
Other (minority)	19	26%
Unknown	12	16%
Marital status at interview^{II}		
Single	50	69%
Widowed/Separated	9	12%
Married	9	12%
Unknown	5	7%

All females ($N=73$). RISE: Returnee Initial Support Essentials (October 2012 – April 2013). *SD*: standard deviation. ^I Kinh is the ethnic majority group in Vietnam. ^{II} Marital status is assessed at interview, but may reflect the individual's pre-trafficking marital status since cases of forced foreign marriages would not be recognized by the State.

Table II-2 shows the trafficking characteristics, including trafficking abuse, and psychological symptoms of the total sample and among types of exploitation. Among known trafficking type, forced sex work was the most frequent ($n=19$; 26%), followed by forced marriage ($n=13$; 18%), and domestic servitude was the least frequent ($n=11$; 16%); 40% of the sample belonged to the “other/undeclared” category. Approximately equal proportions of the participants knew their trafficker (relative/friend, 53%) and did not know their trafficker (stranger/other/no data, 47%). The majority (70%) of returnees were rescued by police. The average duration of trafficking was 6.5 months (SD 9.7, range 0–36) and the average age at trafficking was 21.0 years (SD 5.3, range 14–45).

Participants reported high levels of abuse while trafficked: sexual abuse, 60%; physical abuse, 43%; emotional abuse, 40%; labor abuse, 40%; and forced alcohol use, 32%. The average Trafficking Abuse Scores (TAS) between the groups varied significantly (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2=11.112$, $p=0.011$). Those trafficked into domestic servitude reported the highest average TAS (mean 2.90, SD 0.98), followed by those in sex work (mean 1.55, SD 1.34), and those in marriages reported the least (mean 1.38, SD 1.51) among groups of known exploitation type.

Participants reported an average SRQ score of 8.3 (SD 4.2, range 0–20). The average SRQ Scores between the groups varied significantly (Kruskal-Wallis $\chi^2=11.014$, $p=0.012$). The higher average SRQ Scores were reported by those trafficked into domestic servitude (mean 10.8, SD 4.7, range 6–19) and those in marriages (mean 10.3, SD 4.7, range 4–20), as compared to those in sex work (mean 7.8, SD 3.3, range 1–15). A high proportion (64%) of the sample met the criterion for mental disorder (SRQ Score > 7). The rate of mental disorder was highest among those trafficked into domestic servitude (91%), followed by those in marriages (77%),

and those in sex work had the lowest rate (63%) among groups of known exploitation type.

However, these differences were not statistically significant (Fisher's Exact test, $p=0.071$).

Table II-2. Human trafficking characteristics and psychological symptoms of the RISE sample

	TOTAL SAMPLE (<i>N</i> =73)	TYPES OF EXPLOITATION [†]				<i>p</i> ^{††}
		Sex Work (<i>n</i> =19)	Marriage (<i>n</i> =13)	Domestic Servitude (<i>n</i> =11)	Other/ Undeclared (<i>n</i> =30)	
TRAFFICKING CHARACTERISTICS						
Relationship to trafficker, <i>n</i> (%)						0.001
Relative/Friend	39 53%	11 58%	7 54%	7 63%	14 47%	
Stranger/Other/Unknown	34 47%	8 42%	6 46%	4 36%	16 53%	
Mode of exit, <i>n</i> (%)						0.043
Police rescue	51 70%	14 74%	9 69%	7 58%	21 72%	
Self/Family/Other rescue	15 21%	4 21%	4 31%	5 42%	2 7%	
Other/Unknown	7 10%	1 5%	0 0%	0 0%	6 21%	
Age at trafficking (years), <i>mean</i> ± <i>SD</i>	21.0 ± 5.3	20.5 ± 3.8	25.2 ± 8.6	20.1 ± 4.1	19.9 ± 3.9	0.222
Duration of trafficking^I (months), <i>mean</i> ± <i>SD</i>	6.5 ± 9.7	4.3 ± 4.7	10.8 ± 13.8	7.4 ± 12.7	5.8 ± 8.6	0.763
Trafficking Abuse Items, <i>n</i> (%)						
Sexual abuse	44 60%	16 84%	5 38%	10 91%	13 43%	0.014
Physical abuse	31 43%	9 47%	4 31%	8 73%	10 33%	0.223
Emotional abuse	29 40%	6 32%	6 46%	8 73%	9 30%	0.178
Labor abuse	29 40%	5 26%	6 46%	9 82%	9 30%	0.051
Forced alcohol use	23 32%	4 21%	3 23%	8 73%	8 27%	0.085
Trafficking Abuse Score,^{II} <i>mean</i> ± <i>SD</i>	1.58 ± 1.46	1.55 ± 1.34	1.38 ± 1.51	2.90 ± 0.98	1.21 ± 1.55	0.011
PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS (SELF-REPORTING QUESTIONNAIRE, SRQ-20)^{III}						
SRQ Score, <i>mean</i> ± <i>SD</i>	8.3 ± 4.2	7.8 ± 3.3	10.3 ± 4.7	10.8 ± 4.7	6.8 ± 3.6	0.012
SRQ Score > 7, <i>n</i> (%)	47 64%	12 63%	10 77%	10 91%	15 50%	0.074

All females ($N=73$). RISE: Returnee Initial Support Essentials (October 2012 – April 2013).

SD: standard deviation. [†] The “Other/Undeclared” group includes one respondent who was trafficked into marriage and domestic servitude. ^{††} Fisher's Exact test was used for categorical variables; Kruskal-Wallis test was used for continuous variables. ^I Two participants with trafficking duration of more than 36 months were excluded from the study. ^{II} Trafficking Abuse Score was computed using factor loadings from principal components analysis of the 5 abuse items. ^{III} Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ) score was averaged over items and normalized to 20. Based on the validation study in a Vietnamese sample, SRQ scores above 7 indicate cases of mental disorders (Tran et al., 2004).

Table II-3 shows the results of ordinary least squares regression analyses of the focal relationship between trafficking abuse (Trafficking Abuse Score) and psychological symptoms (SRQ Score), unadjusted and adjusted for duration of trafficking. Based on the simple regression analysis (unadjusted model: $F=15.73$, $df=(1, 71)$, $p \leq 0.001$), we reject the null hypothesis of no association and conclude that trafficking abuse probably has a moderate ($R^2=0.181$) positive association with psychological symptoms. The association among the total sample remained after adjusting for trafficking duration (adjusted model: $F=8.45$, $df=(2, 70)$ $p \leq 0.001$) and the addition of trafficking duration increased the explained variance in psychological symptoms marginally, by 7% (R^2 increased from 0.181 in the unadjusted model to 0.194 in the adjusted model).

Table II-3. Results of ordinary least squares regression analyses of the association between Trafficking Abuse Score and Self-Reporting Questionnaire Score of the RISE sample

	Self-Reporting Questionnaire Score (SRQ-20)				
	TOTAL SAMPLE ($N=73$)	TYPES OF EXPLOITATION [†]			
		Sex Work ($n=19$)	Marriage ($n=13$)	Domestic Servitude ($n=11$)	Other/ Undeclared ($n=30$)
Model with Trafficking Abuse Score (unadjusted)					
<i>b</i>	1.213 ***	2.311 ***	1.660	0.586	0.485
95% CI	[0.60, 1.82]	[1.43, 3.20]	[-0.07, 3.39]	[-3.01, 4.19]	[-0.40, 1.37]
F (<i>df</i>)	15.73 (1, 71)	30.41 (1, 17)	4.44 (1, 11)	0.14 (1, 9)	1.27 (1, 28)
R ²	0.181	0.641	0.288	0.015	0.043
Model with Trafficking Abuse Score, adjusted for duration of trafficking					
<i>b</i>	1.051 **	2.304 ***	2.239	0.479	0.821
95% CI	[0.37, 1.73]	[1.46, 3.14]	[-1.10, 5.57]	[-1.99, 2.95]	[-0.28, 1.92]
F (<i>df</i>)	8.45 (1, 71)	18.61 (1, 17)	2.17 (1, 11)	6.08 (1, 9)	1.20 (1, 28)
R ²	0.194	0.699	0.303	0.603	0.081

All females ($N=73$). RISE: Returnee Initial Support Essentials (October 2012 – April 2013).

b=coefficient; *CI*=confidence interval; *df*=degrees of freedom; * $p \leq 0.05$. ** $p \leq 0.01$. *** $p \leq 0.001$.

[†] The “Other/undeclared” category includes one respondent who was trafficked into marriage and domestic servitude.

The hypothesized relationship was also statistically significant in the sex work-trafficked group (unadjusted model: $F=30.41$, $df=(1, 17)$, $p\leq 0.001$). After adjusting for duration of trafficking, the focal relationship among those in sex work remained similar to that of the unadjusted model (unadjusted $b= 2.311$, $p\leq 0.001$; adjusted $b=2.304$, $p\leq 0.001$) and explained a high proportion (69.9%) of the observed variance in psychological symptoms among the group. Regression results in the other groups (marriage, domestic servitude, other/undeclared) showed that we cannot reject the hypothesis of no association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms in these types of exploitation. However, small sample sizes may have limited the power to detect the associations, if such exist (see discussion below).

DISCUSSION

The study found that a majority of the RISE participants belonged to an ethnic minority group (67%), were single (69%), had some education (62%), were trafficked before age 26 (84%), and exited the trafficking situation via police rescue (70%). The average duration of trafficking was 6.5 months.⁷

A high proportion (64%) of the returnees met the criteria for mental health disorder (SRQ Score > 7), with the highest rate reported among those trafficked into domestic servitude (91%), followed by those in marriages (77%), and those in sex work reported the least rate (63%) among groups with known type of exploitation. We cannot compare these rates to similar, non-trafficked populations in Vietnam (or Southeast Asia), as no such data exists. However, these rates of mental disorders are similar to studies in other countries – that screened for, but did not diagnose, the trafficked women – although previous research reported considerable variations,

⁷ Among the sample, 37% experienced less than one month of being trafficked abroad and 15% returned after being trafficked for more than one year (data available upon request).

depending on the population and the instrument used (Oram, Stöckl, Busza, Howard, & Zimmerman, 2012). A study that used DSM-IV diagnostic criteria found that 54% of women survivors who accessed post-trafficking services in Moldova had mental disorders (Abas et al., 2013).

Although study participants appeared to have high rates of mental distress, these results should be interpreted in the context of three important issues. First, although the study used the 7/8 cut-off point as suggested by a validation study among a Vietnamese population, this criterion was developed from a community-based sample of the general population (Tran et al., 2004). The questionnaire may have different psychometric properties among the trafficked Vietnamese population. Second, this study used a different method of computing SRQ scores, to account for respondents' ability to skip items if they felt uncomfortable answering the questions. This option has not been employed in prior research; the findings are likely to contain biases associated with "disguised missing data" (Pearson, 2006) and therefore should be interpreted cautiously. Third, there may be an initial "survivor effect" that likely produced biased estimates since these returnees were probably experiencing more positive than negative psychological symptoms when they were surveyed, as they had just exited the trafficking situation and were able to return to their home country. The trauma from the trafficking experience may have a delayed effect that has not yet been captured. The study's cross-sectional design, however, precludes definitive conclusions on the longer-term psychological effects of human trafficking among this sample. Future studies should follow the women over time to observe the potential changes in the returnees' mental health statuses.

Study participants reported high proportions of adverse experiences via sexual abuse (60%), physical abuse (42%), emotional abuse (40%), labor abuse (40%), and forced alcohol use

(32%). These findings are consistent with the literature on human trafficking (Abas et al., 2013; Tsutsumi et al., 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2003). This study also showed that there appear to be variations in the trafficking experiences as well as post-trafficking mental health symptoms depending on whether an individual was trafficked into sex work, marriages, domestic servitude, or other/undeclared. Previous research either focused on a group of women trafficked for sexual exploitation or compared trafficked and non-trafficked sex workers. This practice, as suggested by study's findings, may mask differences among groups and thus, may limit the understanding of the abuse and psychological symptoms of different trafficking types.

In the total sample and among the sex work-trafficked group, trafficking abuse is associated with psychological symptoms at the point of re-entry among Vietnamese females trafficked to China. Furthermore, the net associations remained statistically significant after adjusting for trafficking duration. These findings suggest that there is a need to address the negative mental health consequences of trauma among these survivors of trafficking, and especially those who experienced multiple types of abuses.

Analyses in this study assumed a linear focal relationship based on the distribution of the entire sample and in the specified time frame. However, the focal relationship may be curvilinear among groups or with other time frames. If there is in fact a nonlinear association between the focal variables of interest, the linear regression estimates of the coefficients in the models are incorrect and the models would have to be adjusted according to the observed nature of the relationship. Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of this study and the currently small sample size limit these more sophisticated analyses, which are reserved for future studies with larger samples.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

This is the first study to provide data on a sample of female survivors of trafficking returning to their Asian country of origin. Vietnam is a significant source country from which many women and girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation to China, Taiwan, Cambodia, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Macau (Archavanitkul, 1998; Dang, 2006; Nguyen & Hugo, 2005; Vu, 2006), with increasing numbers of women and girls trafficked to China (V.N. Ministry of Labor Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010). The study contributes new evidence and analytical techniques to improve the understanding of human trafficking and health, especially in the Asia Pacific region where human trafficking seems to be on the rise (Derks, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Nguyen & Hugo, 2005; V.N. General Statistics Office & U.N. Population Fund, 2004).

This is one of the first studies to examine the relationship between psychological symptoms and trafficking abuse, and is the first to do so with a composite measure of trafficking abuse. By using exploratory factor analysis and principal component analysis to derive a composite Trafficking Adversity Score, the study adds to the understanding of the potential simultaneous effects of multiple abuses on mental health among trafficked returnees. Additionally, the study uses a cross-culturally validated psychological assessment instrument, which increases confidence in the validity of the data interpretations among this population. These approaches are important in order to clarify the mechanisms associated with human trafficking, especially in the beginning stages of this new area of study, so that future efforts can develop more accurate conceptual models and instruments to investigate the mental health issues among trafficked individuals.

Limitations

A major limitation of the study is the small sample size, which might limit the power to detect an existing effect. The small sample size also precluded full analyses as specified in the analytical model, such as controlling for a range of potential confounders and examining the potential moderated effects by type of exploitation. Therefore, the study's analyses could not detect more complex patterns of associations.

The study's convenience, cross-sectional design limits the generalizability of findings and causal inferences, in addition to the limitations associated with the potential initial "survivor effect" discussed above. We can only interpret the study results in a descriptive manner and to this particular sample. That is, the study describes the characteristics and associations found among Vietnamese women and girls who received RISE packages (between October 2012 and April 2013) as they returned to Vietnam after exiting their trafficking situation in China. Moreover, the association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms found among the sample should be interpreted as a correlational, not causal, relationship, and that the observed association is an illustration of the constructs as they were operationalized in the study (Rothman & Greenland, 2005). Studies that utilize longitudinal designs and/or other instruments will likely obtain different results.

The study is limited in its ability to conduct inferential statistics due to the convenience sampling strategy (Treiman, 2008). The study also uses self-reported data, which is subjected to measurement biases such as non-response bias, recall bias, and social desirability bias (Aschengrau & Seage, 2003). It is unlikely that studies that would satisfy conditions for unbiased (or rather, the least biased) estimates, such as randomized control trials, could be conducted among trafficked populations. However, alternative study designs, such as measuring changes

over time or comparing different cohorts, could provide a more accurate understanding of the factors and the underlying processes (Diez-Roux, 2000) and should be explored in future studies.

CONCLUSION

This study presents quantitative data of the mental health symptoms and characteristics of the trafficking experience among a group of returned survivors of trafficking. The psychological symptoms among participants in the RISE project appear to be associated with trafficking abuse and net of duration of trafficking. However, this relationship may not be present in other groups other than those in sex work.

The study also finds that the experiences of trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms seem to vary by type of exploitation. Consequently, entities involved in the repatriation of survivors of trafficking would be advised to attend to these potentially variant experiences among different trafficked groups. Further research is needed in order to determine if these patterns are first, present in larger sample sizes that may have more power to detect the true differences and effects, and then in other populations to test their generalizability.

This study has contributed new data and analytical techniques to improve the theoretical and methodological understandings of the mental health consequences of human trafficking. The use of a composite measure of trafficking abuse accounts for the likely interactive effects of multiple trauma experienced while trafficked. The assessment of a range of mental health symptoms, and via a cross-culturally validated instrument, increases the appropriateness of the understanding of mental health issues among these types of populations. The disaggregation of data on trafficking characteristics and psychological symptoms across types of exploitation contributes a unique perspective to the understanding of the potentially different experiences between trafficking types and their mental health manifestations.

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[III] QUALITATIVE STUDY

Navigating a Renewed Sense of Self: Experiences of Vietnamese Female Survivors of Trafficking

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from an inductive, qualitative study that investigates the experiences and coping responses of female survivors of trafficking who have returned to their country of origin, Vietnam. Emergent themes identified three key transitions that informed the trafficking experience for these women: Pre-, Peri-, and Post-trafficking stages. Each stage included, respectively: being uprooted, understanding “new realities,” and facing the “new normal.” When women were uprooted from their normal livelihoods, they experienced a loss of their sense of belonging and trust in others. They then encountered not only life-threatening and exploitative conditions, but also unlikely alliances at the trafficked destination. Upon return to their home country and community, they struggled with different facets of the “new normal,” which included subthemes of residual fears, strained relationships, and living with a “social evil.”

Throughout the stages of trafficking, their coping responses are best characterized as an iterative process of navigating a renewed sense of self as the result of experiencing changes in the contextual and environmental parameters. It is a process in which the women reflected on their evolving understanding of their social identities by employing strategies such as regulating emotional expression and thought, creating opportunities within constraints, and relating to cultural schemas.

INTRODUCTION

Trafficked persons often experience extreme physical, sexual, and psychological abuses that have deleterious health and social consequences (Zimmerman et al., 2003). For some individuals who are able to escape the situation, they must cope with the conditions and events that they were subjected to as victims, as well as their new sensibilities as survivors. Numerous reports have documented some of the experiences of female survivors of trafficking (Caliber, 2007; Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009; Derks, 2002; Kelly, 2002; U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2013a). Most of these reports, however, have captured the experiences of survivors while they were in the destination country, either awaiting deportation or being assisted by support organizations to integrate into the destination country.

The perspectives of survivors in their destination and integration phases are important; so are those of survivors who return to their country of origin (hereafter, “returnees”). During reintegration, returnees not only have to cope with the emotional and social consequences of trafficking-related trauma, but also with some of the vulnerability factors that have contributed to their being trafficked in the first place (Zimmerman, Hossain, & Watts, 2011).

This inductive, qualitative study provides a contextualized analysis of the experiences of female survivors of trafficking who have returned to Vietnam. The current understanding of the vulnerabilities and consequences of TIP, particularly from the perspectives of the survivors themselves, has been limited by the difficult access to the population, as well as the lack of in-depth research to capture the complexity of the issues and perceptions throughout the trafficking experience. The study reveals the themes associated with the pre-, peri-, and post-trafficking stages to broaden our understanding of how the trafficked individuals interpret and react to issues throughout each of these transitions. The study also identifies the strategies chosen by the

individuals to find meaning in the trafficking experience and to manage the associated emotional and social issues.

Overview of Study Context

Vietnam is a significant source country of men, women, and children trafficked into forced labor, commercial sex, and foreign marriages (U.S. Department of State, 2013b). However, similar to global estimates, women and girls comprise the overwhelming majority of the identified victims of trafficking (VOTs) in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese women are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriages, and to a lesser extent, domestic servitude (U.N. Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2007).¹ Major destination countries include Cambodia, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Vietnam is a primarily agrarian country and 69% of the population live in rural areas (World Health Organization, 2012). This study takes place in several provinces in the Northeast and in the Mekong Delta in South, as well as Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's "financial center." There are notable topographic and socio-cultural differences between the regions. For example, the Northeast provinces consist mostly of mountainous areas and sparsely populated villages, with underdeveloped economic structures. On the other hand, the Mekong Delta provinces consist of low-level plains and a patchwork of canals and rivers by which many people populate so that they can capitalize on these resource-rich environments. Additionally, while the Northeast

¹ There is also a potentially high degree of internal (within-border) trafficking in Vietnam, but cases of internal trafficking have not been monitored by the Vietnamese Government. Most of the officially identified cases involved transnational trafficking in women and girls. Additionally, the State has historically defined TIP as the transnational trafficking in women and girls; the expanded definition, which includes internal trafficking as well as trafficking in men and boys, was revised in 2010 (U.N. Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2010).

is home to many ethnic minority hill tribes,² much of the population in the Mekong Delta belong to the Kinh ethnic majority group (Embassy of Vietnam, 2014).

These regional differences contribute to some of the variant trafficking patterns in Vietnam. Women from the northern provinces are often trafficked to China (and further inland), and those from the southern provinces are usually trafficked to Cambodia (or en route to Thailand and other countries in the region). The majority of those trafficked via Cambodia are for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. Those trafficked to China are sold into sex brothels or into households as wives or domestic servants. Due to the presence of many ethnic minority groups in the Northeast, ethnic minority women probably comprise a large proportion of those trafficked by land in this region.³

Regardless of their regional origin, many Vietnamese women are also trafficked via other routes, usually with the lure of labor contracts but are then coerced into the commercial sex sector once they arrive in the destination countries. However, since this study is conducted primarily at the border regions, it reflects the experiences of those trafficked to, and returned from, Cambodia and China by land.

Since 2005, the Vietnamese Government identified more than 7,000 women and children returned victims of trafficking (V.N. Department of Social Evil Protection, 2011).⁴ The majority of returned VOTs receive minimal support. Returnees who are identified via official government

² Ethnic groups have their own language. However, the majority of the younger generations can speak both their ethnic language as well as the official Vietnamese language.

³ The TIP statistics made available by the Vietnamese Government do not provide the ethnic data of the identified victims of trafficking. However, many ethnic minority groups in the Northeast provinces reside in areas that are in close proximity to the border. Furthermore, many of the study participants from the northern region were of ethnic minority background.

⁴ In the same report, the Government also contends that there are more than 22,000 women and children who were suspected to have been trafficked. This figure, however, does not include those who have migrated via official channels (such as labor contracts) but became trafficked later, nor does it include those who end up being trafficked in fake foreign marriages.

channels may receive a maximum stay of two weeks at a Social Protection Center, if necessary, and a maximum \$50 in cash assistance (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009). There are a handful of shelters, operated by international governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Central Women's Union, that provide more intermediate support for trafficked women, such as educational and vocational training opportunities, assistance with healthcare access, and case management (U.S. Department of State, 2012). However, the impact of these shelter-based reintegration models have not been clearly articulated nor conclusively demonstrated.

METHODS

This study draws from 15 individual interviews with female survivors of trafficking who returned to Vietnam.⁵ The interviews were conducted between October 2012 and August 2013. All interviews were conducted by the bilingual, bicultural Vietnamese author, who designed the study, recruited the participants, and analyzed the data.

Recruitment

The author approached various governmental offices and NGOs that provide post-trafficking services, described the study objectives, and asked them to announce invitations for study participants. Governmental offices included temporary assistance centers that provided returnees with initial repatriation services such as filing legal documents, family reunification, and referrals to vocational training programs, if such are available. NGOs included shelter- and community-based reintegration services offering access to some combination of services such as vocational training, continuing educational opportunities, and life skills training.

⁵ In the larger qualitative study, participant observations and focus groups at the study sites as well as three interviews with service providers of reintegration projects were also conducted. However, this paper focuses on the individual in-depth interviews with returnees as its main source of data and uses other aforementioned sources as background and contextual information.

Although the author made efforts to purposively sample from a variety of post-trafficking projects and a wider range of experiences, access to this population was limited by the dearth of such projects, as well as, the understandable restrictions imposed to protect the confidentiality and privacy of victims of trafficking. Consequently, participants were primarily recruited from three sources: one vocational training program in Ho Chi Minh City and two shelters (one near the Vietnam-Cambodia border, one near the Vietnam-China border, see **Appendix A**).

Returnees aged 18 and above who expressed willingness to participate in the study were contacted to set the date, time, and private setting for the interview. At the beginning of each meeting, detailed information about the purpose, format, and confidentiality of the interview was explained verbally and provided in written form to the potential participants. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions or decline participation and/or permission of audio recording before providing oral consent and continuing with the interview.

Participants

Table III-1 provides the study participants' characteristics. Participants, all female, were between 18 and 27 years of age. Of the 15 women, seven (47%) were from the northern provinces and were all trafficked to China; eight (53%) women were from the southern region (Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh City), of whom seven women were trafficked to Cambodia and one woman to Malaysia. Six (40%) participants were trafficked by friends/acquaintances; five (33%) by family members or relatives; and four (27%) by strangers or other relationship types. On average, the participants were trafficked at age 15 (range 13–18). Two (13%) participants had married since returning and the remaining 13 (87%) were single at the time of the interview. All participants were trafficked when they were single.

Table III-1. Characteristics of participants in the qualitative study

	STUDY PARTICIPANTS		
	Northern Provinces	Southern Provinces	Total Sample
	(n=7) <i>No.</i>	(n=8) <i>No.</i>	(N=15) <i>No.</i>
Marital status at interview[†]			
Single	7	6	13
Married	0	2	2
Destination			
China	7	0	7
Cambodia	0	7	7
Malaysia	0	1	1
Type of trafficking			
Sex work	3	8	11
Marriage	3	0	3
Sex work & Marriage	1	0	1
Relationship with trafficker			
Friend/Acquaintance	3	3	6
Family/Relative	2	3	5
Strangers/Other	2	2	4
Age at interview (years), <i>Mean [Range]</i>	19.7 [18–23]	22.8 [18–27]	21.3 [18–27]
Age at trafficking (years) ^{††} <i>Mean [Range]</i>	16.0 [13–18]	14.2 [13–17]	15.0 [13–18]

[†] All participants were single at the time of trafficking.

^{††} Some participants' age at trafficking could not be determined because they did not want to discuss the specific details of the trafficking experience.

Data collection

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, in Vietnamese, and with a minimal set of open-ended question topics (**Appendix D**). The author used the respondents' answers as cues for successive questions or probes but maintained an open-minded and conversational modality throughout the interviews, in order to facilitate the participants' expressions of their experiences as uninterrupted as possible (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005).⁶

⁶ Due to the conversational modality, some topics were not discussed with certain participants. Therefore, quantification of issues cannot be provided. The objective of the study is to highlight the prominent issues, as they were discussed. Thus, the presentation of findings shall adopt generalized terms of quantity such as "some," "several," and "few" without accompanying them with statistics.

Nine interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim by a native speaker. The author checked the transcriptions for accuracy and noted any relevant situational dynamics from the audio recordings as well as previous post-interview notes. During non-audiotaped interviews, the author took written notes and expanded on them immediately after these interviews. Notes of non-audiotaped interviews served as unofficial transcripts and were analyzed in conjunction with the fully transcribed interviews.

Data analysis

Data analysis was inductive and adhered to the principles of openness and reflexivity as much as possible. The author treated the informants' own voices of their experiences in an open-minded and unprejudiced manner – and with a self-reflective attitude – in order to facilitate the discovery of new understandings of the women's experiences and knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

First, whole transcripts and interview notes were read to grasp a naïve understanding of the experiences and to capture a sense of the whole (Burnard, 1991). Recorded audio files of some interviews were played back with the readings to re-assess non-textual cues and to achieve an enhanced understanding of the tone and context of the transcripts. Memos and notes were recorded to flag *in vivo* (participants') terms, issues, or explanations (Creswell, 2009).

After achieving an overall understanding from the majority of the texts, each transcript was then analyzed in the context of the study's focus on the trafficking experiences and coping responses by by annotating the main topics and questions that arose. Texts were divided into "meaning units," each signifying an idea, issue, or set of perceptions (Burnard, 1994). Meaning units were condensed and assigned codes to extract their essential structure and significance.

Codes were analyzed – through an iterative process of comparing and contrasting against one another – to identify topics and patterns (Dey, 1993). Topics were categorized into themes, and themes into the four domains that emerged from the analysis. Three domains reflected the Pre-, Peri-, and Post-trafficking Stages, and one domain reflected the Coping Responses. Thus, a coding scheme and a tree diagram were created to illustrate the hierarchical relationships between domains, themes, and properties that characterized the lived experiences of the participants (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007).

Interview transcripts were then re-read, with meaning units juxtaposed against the coding scheme and tree diagram to ascertain its current “goodness of fit” with the data, as well as, to enhance the understanding of the themes and how they were interconnected (Dey, 1993). This step re-asserted some contextual variations of human behaviors and experiences that may have been missed or reduced in the previous inductive analytical steps.

Ethical considerations

Survivors of trafficking are considered an especially vulnerable population, as most have endured exploitative conditions and may remain traumatized by their experiences. Thus, the study adhered to research ethics as outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki, as well as, additional ethical considerations. Strict confidentiality and protection of participants’ identities were maintained by referring to their pseudonyms at all times; participants’ real names were never recorded. Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could discontinue the interview or withdraw entirely or partially from the study at any time.

Interviews were conducted in accordance with the World Health Organization ethical and safety recommendations on interviewing trafficked women (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003).

Participants were encouraged to share their experiences, as doing so in a confidential and

nonjudgmental manner might have a positive, therapeutic effect on their well-being and help elucidate the understanding of the experiences of others in similar situations. Nevertheless, referral to a professional, native-speaking counselor was included as one of the safeguard measures to protect the participants in case they were harmed by retelling their experiences. The UCLA Institutional Review Board approved the study design and procedures (No. 12-001260).

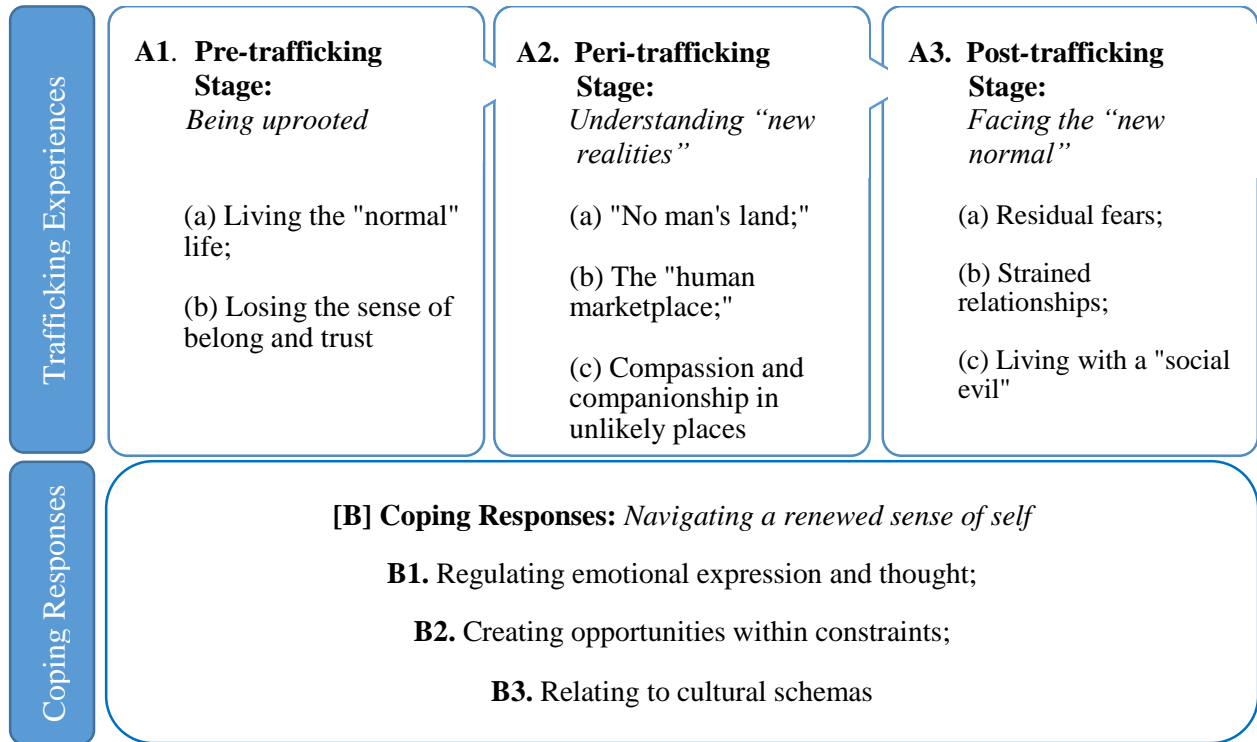
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Figure III-1 illustrates the emergent themes and properties associated with the respective stages of the trafficking process, as well as the overarching coping responses across each of the stages.

In the Pre-trafficking Stage, individuals were uprooted, often by friends and family members, from their “normal” livelihoods in their place of origin, which led to a loss of their sense of belonging and trust in others. In the Peri-trafficking Stage where they had been trafficked to a destination country, they attempted to understand the “new realities” of being in “no man’s land,” of being a commodity in the “human marketplace,” and of finding companionship and compassion in unlikely places. Upon return in the Post-trafficking Stage, they faced the “new normal,” which encompassed residual fears, strained relationships, and living with a “social evil.”

Linking these stages and characteristics is the coping process of navigating to a renewed sense of self, whereby returnees negotiate and demonstrate their evolving understanding and development of themselves within the environmental and contextual parameters. This process is comprised of strategies such as regulating expression of emotion and thought, creating opportunities within constraints, and relating to cultural schemas.

Figure III-1. Experiences and responses of Vietnamese trafficked returnees: Domains, themes, and properties



The following section is divided into two main parts. Part A presents the themes associated with each of the three domains representing the trafficking stages. Part B discusses the domain associated with the coping responses, which were exhibited across the stages. The returnees’ identities are represented by their pseudonyms, followed by “N” or “S” to indicate their northern or southern region of origin, respectively.

[A] Trafficking Experiences

A1. Pre-trafficking: Being uprooted

A1.a. Living the “normal” life

All of the trafficked women in the study originated from poor, rural areas. They and their families usually subsisted on growing rice, maize, or regional agricultural products on family- or

community-based farms. They often struggled to secure enough food and other basic needs. A woman described the typical way of life for many of the women in the study:

Before when I was at home, I didn't attend school. I worked in the field all day and was not allowed to go to school. I wasn't able to eat much [nutritious things], so I was very skinny, very small, and not tall at all...

Normally, I only ate rice and steamed vegetables, and chili. That was it. We only had meat when it was a holiday. Normally, we ate only vegetables for weeks, or even months. That was all.

(Trang-N, aged 18)

These women also grew up in remote, border communities – communities that belonged to border provinces and were geographically, economically, and culturally isolated from provincial and regional activities. Thus, the exchange of goods, ideas, and people between these and other communities was slow and minimal. Most returnees probably would have spent their entire lives within the same village where they were born and raised had they not been trafficked or married to a person from a different village. Many of these rural villages/communes, especially those in the mountainous areas of the northern border provinces, still retained their long-standing traditions and communal structures wherein members were closely connected with each other. For instance, a returnee described that in her village, there were no home addresses so mail letters only included the name of the addressee and that they were received and distributed by the village leader, who knew all of the community residents.⁷

Furthermore, as in more traditional societies and particularly in low-resource settings, women were expected to adhere to gendered cultural customs and social obligations that typically relegate women to inferior social and economic status. A common example is the gender disparities in education. Due to limited family and community resources, daughters were usually allowed to complete only a few years of education – only as many as could be afforded

⁷ Most of these villages/communes consisted of about 50 to 100 people each.

without compromising the education of sons (or older daughters) or depleting the family income.

As a woman explained, many girls in these communities were forced to drop out of school prematurely in order to help the family or to be married and start their own families:

I finished the 9th grade, then I stopped going to school. I had thought that I would continue with school after one year [of being absent], but I was tricked and sold before I could come back...

My parents didn't want me to attend school [anymore]. They forced me to stay at home. My parents were not educated. They said that I should stay home to help out, then they pushed me to get married.

(Ngoc-N, aged 19)

Marriage is considered a significant life event for many girls and young women⁸ in these communities. It signifies changes in the family structure that may alleviate some of the household economic burden, as it is customary that married women would move in with the husband's family and thus the original family would have one less member consuming resources (although young female members are expected to – and most do – contribute to the resource-generating activities in whichever household they belong to). Women in these communities typically marry before they reach age 18, if not younger.

In some ethnic minority populations in the northern provinces, “wife kidnapping” remains frequently practiced. Although the custom varies between different ethnic groups, it usually involves the husband-to-be, after identifying the girl he desires, leading some friends or male relatives to take the woman from her home and bring her to his home as a claimed wife. A woman, who belonged to the H'mong ethnic group, recalled a (failed) wife kidnapping incident she experienced:

I was about 13 or 14 years old. My aunts and uncles came over for a family gathering. My parents even drank. When it was over, I was cleaning, sweeping the kitchen floor...

Then this guy came in out of nowhere and pulled me away. There were three of them. At that time, I cried so much and called out to my mom but I didn't know where she

⁸ In this paper, “young women” refers to those aged between 16-22 years.

was...[The guys] dragged me away and away, down the hill, then up the hill. They even dragged me through the stable where the buffalos were. One of my slippers was lost among the dung. (laughs)...

I continued to yell out to my mom, so the other two guys were afraid to continue dragging me. I cursed at them so they became afraid. The guy who wanted to take me continued to drag me away, though. But I kept on screaming. Then my uncle heard me and called my parents...My mom was able to catch up to the guys and told them that they couldn't take me away because I was too young. My mom started yelling and cursing at them while I ran away. I ran home at once.

(Trang-N, aged 18)

It is important to note that “wife kidnapping” is culturally accepted and is commonly practiced among some ethnic groups. It is a means and a ritual associated with the process of proposing marriage unions in these communities. Some families are aware – sometimes, in advance – of these “kidnappings,” and most are informed of the daughters’ whereabouts and statuses shortly after these events. However, these traditions and practices can limit women’s choices and can be exploited by people to push women and girls into more restrictive circumstances. Young women in remote, ethnic communities may end up being married – usually not to a person of their choosing – regardless of their emotional readiness. Additionally, traffickers may be able to kidnap young women and be undetected for days because family members usually first assume that the missing women have been claimed as wives.

The economic conditions and socio-cultural norms and practices in these communities may be perceived by others as “austere,” but the women have developed an understanding of their social identities based on these livelihoods, which are perceived as “normal,” although not necessarily desirable, by the women. They generally understood their social roles and responsibilities, as daughters and as members of their communities. At times, the women were able to navigate, or even circumvent, these community values and beliefs. The above woman, for instance, was able to escape the wife kidnapping attempt by loudly protesting and resisting the captors (who may or may not have been traffickers). Contrary to these norms and values,

however, the trafficking incident disrupted the women's previously held expectations and livelihoods. Their known environments as well as their self-understandings about their roles and personhood within the communities were being questioned.

A2.b. Losing a sense of belonging and trust

In the communities where the women originated, family members and friends were all vital sources of household economic productivity and of interpersonal relationships. Yet, many of these women were driven into precarious and exploitative conditions – overtly, covertly, or otherwise – by their own kin and trusted others. These acts and circumstances created conflicted understandings about kinships and friendships, thus contributing to their sense of upheaval, loss of belonging, and trust in others.

Some women knew their trafficker as a friend or trusted acquaintance from school, via an internet chat room, or as a person in a nearby village. Traffickers usually deceived and sold the women under the auspices of friendship and kindness. For instance, like many other young women from remote villages, a woman was deceived by a male friend she had met from an internet chat room:

[I had met him] from the internet. I went on the internet [at an internet café] from time to time if I had money. He asked for my number to talk... We agreed to meet up so that he could take me to visit my dad. I had told him about my situation, how my father was sick, so he offered to take me [to visit my father in the hospital] because we were friends...

After visiting my father, we went to eat. After we finished eating, he said that his father and his mother were sick. I said that I couldn't go. He said that it was fine that I couldn't go, but he wanted to pick up his friends since it was on the way home. So we went ahead. After we passed a gas station, he went on an unpaved road so I was scared. I said, "I'm not going anymore." But then these two guys came, also with a girl. He threatened, "Go! Otherwise, you're going to be killed." He had taken out a knife. I was so scared.

(Ney-N, aged 21)⁹

⁹ Despite being rural areas, many Vietnamese can readily access internet communications technology, mainly via small internet cafes and mobile phones. According to one source, as much as 145 mobile phones are available for every 100 people in Vietnam (Do, 2012).

The villages in the northern provinces that shared borders with China are usually comprised of ethnic minority populations. Most of the women in these villages never had the opportunity to leave their hometown. Thus, it required compelling reasons to leave the village for a trip, especially with a person whom they had not met in-person. Traffickers usually courted multiple women simultaneously and led each one to feel as if the friendship was developing authentically. After having “demonstrated” their interest and involvement in the relationship – often by arranging a trip to the town/city with friends or by providing a personal favor – they appealed to the women’s sense of goodwill and sympathy. The traffickers’ use of tragic and vulnerable stories of their family members’ illnesses injected guilt into the decision-making process and compelled women to feel obligated to “help a friend in need” despite having reservations about the potential dangers involved.

The persuasion methods, however, were not as invested or elaborated for the women whose hometowns were not as remote. In border areas with high volumes of transnational trading activities, traffickers deceived women by offering references for jobs and labor contracts, as a woman shared:

I was very young [at age 14]... The guy who tricked me was actually very nice to [my friend and me], like we were his younger sisters. But as it turned out, he was only using us. He treated me like a sister to make me believe he was very nice to me. He said that he would recommend some work for me in a restaurant, like a café. So that’s why I went with him.

(Hien-S, aged 21)

When it came to family members, usually less deception was involved. Whereas some were led into exploitative conditions by relatives via indirect means, others were sold by kin first-hand: A relative may offer a reference for a low-skilled employment opportunity with alluring pay; A mother may follow a friend’s advice to search for more promising jobs in another

country, and may bring her daughters along. A woman described the experience of being sold by her uncle across the border to China along with her mother and three sisters:

My uncle said that we were taking a trip. I only knew that my uncle said that he was taking my mom and us [sisters]... We went to Lao Cai... We've never been to Lao Cai [City], you know? So we went through some hills, and then we reached a small boat. He took us across to the other side where two Chinese men were waiting for us...

My uncle said that these men were driving us, and my uncle went too. We went further in. I saw signs with Chinese words but I didn't know that it was China. We just thought it was Lao Cai...

We arrived at night time so we all went to sleep. When we woke up the next morning, my uncle was gone. The two men said that my uncle had sold us to them. We wanted to escape right away, but the men had a knife and a gun. My mom wanted us to run away immediately but she saw [the weapons] and was so scared. The men took us to a village and sold the four of us.

(Trang-N, aged 18)

Upon realizing that a family member was directly or indirectly involved in trafficking them, the women struggled to reconcile the discrepancies between the expectation that kinship relations were loyal and protective, to the reality that these connections betrayed them.

Ironically, a woman may have been pushed further along the trafficking route due to the family ties with her traffickers. As she pointed out, she had feared that since she knew the people who tricked her across the border, community members may interpret her departure as voluntary – i.e., people would think that she probably had asked to be smuggled and was not deceived because the alleged smugglers were her kin:

My friend and I were tricked and brought over [the border]. I was afraid that people would gossip, saying that we wanted to go over there, that we went voluntarily. I was afraid that people would spread those kind of information...

At that time, we were already over there so we couldn't have said anything [to dispel] the information. At that moment I did think to myself, "there is probably plenty of gossip already," so I kind of... thought about staying over there longer.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Since women were trafficked across national borders, the sense of betrayal and the loss of sense of belonging extended beyond the family and the community. Women also felt that fellow

Vietnamese betrayed them. They often protested loudly when they found out that they were no longer on Vietnamese soil. For example, the above woman expressed her outrage when she realized, en route, that she and her friend were sold by her male cousin and his friends: “I yelled at them, ‘You [animals]! You sold me to China just because of money? Why do you treat human lives like they are goods, selling [Vietnamese] people like this?’”

A2. *Peri-trafficking: Understanding “new realities”*

A2.a. *“No man’s land”*

Uprooted from their family, community, and homeland, women then faced a foreign environment where they were held captive and suffered abuse, violence, and trauma, including life-threatening conditions. Women who were taken from the northern provinces to China were often held at knife-point and feared that they would be killed in remote areas and that their bodies would be discarded and never found.

As the following excerpt illustrates, these women were usually trafficked via hidden routes, through forests and across unguarded water channels, to evade capture:

When they took me, we [had to] swim across a river. Then we reached a road where there were two Chinese men waiting for us...

The guy said that the men were his cousins and that we were traveling with them. We arrived at an apartment building, ate, and went to sleep...

When I woke up the next morning, the other guy wasn’t there anymore. The men said that the guy had to help his aunt on some sugarcane fields. In the afternoon, they told me to go with this lady...So they ended up taking me further in.

(Ngoc-N, aged 19)

Additionally, a woman who was trafficked to China revealed the severity of the danger and disregard for human life and legal consequences in these trafficking destinations:

We arrived somewhere, and they crammed us into a room. There was a man who had many tattoos of some type of animals. He then used his knife/sword and slashed a girl 8

times. I was so scared, I shrieked, “My god,¹⁰ how can this be?” She was also sold. She refused to obey him so he killed her. He said, “See? You saw that. If you don’t listen to us you will be just like her.” He slashed her from foot to head...

Afterwards, he left the corpse in the room. Nobody dared to sleep that night. Blood spilt all over. They didn’t let us eat. We starved for 2 days. Then a lady came at around 9 o’clock and bought the two of us to become prostitutes.

(Ney-N, aged 21)

Traffickers’ use of circuitous paths and violence exacerbated the women’s sense of abandonment and fear. Women were removed from their hometown and were among dangerous criminals. They were physically and psychologically disoriented with their surroundings and the apparent lawlessness and disregard for humanity of these environments. Nevertheless, women reported trying their best to escape from this “no man’s land” since it was still relatively close to the border. For example, a woman who was trafficked as a wife and later re-trafficked into the sex industry described her various efforts to escape as well as the coercive tactics employed by the traffickers:

I wanted to escape but I couldn’t. I tried to run away many times, but they were always watching me, so I couldn’t escape. After I tried to run away a couple of times, they became furious at me. This lady warned me, “If you continue to misbehave, the man will call two people to come and kill you.” Then, one day after I had just finished eating breakfast, they actually called those people, who came and took me to a hill behind the house... They had told me that they were taking me to Lao Cai but I didn’t believe them. Still, they forced me to come with them. When we arrived at the top [of the hill], they beat me. They also threatened [to kill] me.

(Ngoc-N, aged 19)

If successful in escaping from their captors, however, their journey home was arduous. Women often had to travel on foot for days – and almost always food-deprived – to the nearest village or local police station where they could receive help to return to Vietnam. A woman described that after running away from her traffickers, she walked through forests for two days –

¹⁰ The actual Vietnamese words were, “*Trời ơi!*,” which is more closely translated as “my heavens!” It is translated as “god” to connote a general expression and not as a reference to any religious/spiritual beliefs.

with blisters on her feet and only ate some cherries she had picked along the way – until reaching the nearest village, where she fortunately met a family who was also of the H'mong ethnicity so she was able to communicate with them. The family fed her, hid her from the sight of the traffickers who were looking for her, and helped her to the nearest police station. Another returnee was not as fortunate; she was re-trafficked:

We were able to escape and get to the police...The police did ask us some questions, but not many. After we begged them to let us go back [to Vietnam], they let us go...

They took us to the bus station and put us on a bus. They bought the tickets for us. But on the way home, we were sold again...We actually needed to take two buses to reach the border, but the policeman bought the ticket for the first bus and told the driver to buy the second set of tickets for us when we got to the next bus station...

But there was this other lady on the [first] bus. Maybe she knew the driver, so they were talking to each other. And then they asked us if we wanted to go to some place, to eat [fried] tofu. We said no. So they forced us to get off the bus...The next day we met two women who said that they could take us back to Vietnam...We went with them, but they ended up selling us to a brothel owner.

(Ngoc-N, aged 19)

A2.b. *The “human marketplace”*

The women interviewed in this study were either sold into sex brothels or into marriages (or both if they were trafficked multiple times). Before ending up as prostitutes or as wives, they were being offered as commodities in the “human marketplace,” which was an experience that contributed to a loss of the sense of integrity as a human being. A woman described the economy in which Vietnamese women and girls were being bought and sold in a border village in China:

There were these houses/families that also had wives, husbands, children, and they bought [Vietnamese women/girls] like they bought buffalos. You know, you'd buy a buffalo home, tie it up, etc...

The guys in the village would come to see if they liked any of the girls. The families would then sell [the girls/women] to the guys, mostly to be wives. It wasn't like they had one large house to hold the women. Each family bought [their own] Vietnamese girls/women. Like this family bought me and this other girl and another family would buy two other girls...

And [the other people] would just call. The people in the village knew these families because [these families] were always trading women. And people who were from further

away, they'd call ahead [to check on the availability] before they came to take a look [at the women].

(Thai-N, aged 18)

As the account above reveals, some of the women who were trafficked to China were first “traded” by a broker before they were “acquired” by their final buyer. The initial trade in the trafficking process usually took place in border towns, where these “human marketplaces” were developed. Some women may be bought by families and brothel owners to serve their respective roles near border areas. Others may be trafficked further away from the border. The market-like environment that many women were subjected to – as commodities – eroded their sense of human integrity and trust in others. A returnee stated that she tried to refuse being “an object that was examined and bought,” but was eventually sold to be the wife of the broker’s cousin. Another woman who was trafficked by a local “businesswoman” recalled the state of shock when she found out that she was sold into a sex brothel:

I really don't understand it. Even until now, I cannot understand how a human being can actually sell another human being. She was a successful businesswoman, we [the villagers] thought. She wore a lot of gold jewelry and all. But to make money from selling people – I don't know how a person could do that.

(Mong-S, aged 19)

Women who were sold into the commercial sex and sex tourism industries –whether it was in Cambodia, China, or Malaysia – were treated as commodified properties of the owners. They were considered as “services” in the sex marketplace and experienced exploitative treatments at their trafficked destination. These women also reported being controlled on their physical appearance, possessions, and mobility. For example, their hair were cut short and dyed to make them unrecognizable and to cater to certain clientele’s preferences. Many women were physically confined within these environments, and those who disobeyed were beaten. A

returnee who was trafficked into a sex brothel in Malaysia described the abuse she and others experienced:

[The traffickers] locked us in a room. They'd come to take us to go "serve the clients." If we disobeyed, they'd let us starve, wouldn't feed us. A couple of women tried to escape but were re-captured. [The traffickers] took an electric cord and beat the women with it, and hung the women upside-down by their ankles and poured fish sauce into their noses.

(Jessica-S, aged 27)

Women who were bought to be wives in individual families also experienced a loss of sense of integrity and trust, but of a different nature. These women sometimes described a sense of isolation and distrust by the "new family," especially in the beginning stages of being "included" into the family structures and dynamics. As a woman who was trafficked along with her mother and sisters explained, recently "acquired" family members were often hidden from neighbors and were heavily monitored to prevent the women from escaping:

The man [who bought us] didn't have daughters. He had two sons, though. But his [previous] wife had left him...At first the family didn't allow us to be downstairs. We were only allowed to stay upstairs, just the upstairs. We cried so much. We cried everyday...After about a month, they allowed us to go outside. We worked on the family farm with them.

(Trang-N, aged 18)

Because destination families often viewed that they had already "paid for" these women, they usually continued to treat the women as acquired property and with a sense of entitlement and contempt. Women in these situations would probably remain perpetually entrapped, physically and psychologically. A woman recollected meeting a woman who faced severe maltreatment and abuse by the family that bought her:

There was this woman who was forced to be the wife of the guy in the family [that was trading me]. The guy didn't know anything, and was always yelling at her. The family made that Vietnamese woman do everything: cook, wash the clothes, everything. She was verbally abused all the time. She really suffered a lot.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

A2.c. Companionship and compassion in unlikely places

Amidst the trauma in the trafficking experience, some women developed friendships with co-trafficked others or developed empathetic attitudes toward the families who bought them. During the initial transit and destination phase, when the Vietnamese counterparts in the trafficking networks forcibly smuggled the women the border and delivered them to the initial destination, the women often came with or met at least one other woman who was also trafficked. Their co-trafficked status, forged under extreme circumstances, became a source of solace and camaraderie. For example, a woman assumed the role of an older sister with a younger woman who was trafficked by the same group and bought by the same brothel owner. When she was rescued, she then asked the police to rescue the other co-trafficked woman:

I was with a client [at a motel] when I heard some sounds and voices. It was the police. When I came to the door, the police asked if I was Vietnamese and showed a picture of me. I was overjoyed! I even hugged the policeman. The client didn't know what to say. He was taken to the police station as well...

I was so happy, I called my friend. At first she didn't pick up. I thought the owner had taken her somewhere, so I cried. A little later she texted me and asked where I was. I asked her where she was – she was at a motel...I asked the police to take me to find her... We came back [to Vietnam] together.

(Ney-N, aged 21)

The emotional connectedness formed with other co-trafficked women may result in the rescue of one another. Additionally, in some instances, these bonds also gave women mutual hopes and opportunities of joint escapes. Another woman described this dynamic that was typically found among those trafficked into the commercial sex industry:

My friend and I [escaped by] climbing down a wall, from a window. There was a big window and it was locked, but we were able to break the lock and tie some curtains and jeans together, lowered them, then climbed down the very tall wall...My friend and I came together so we would die together.

(Jessica-S, aged 27)

Relatedly, some women who were trafficked into individual households may develop an unexpected relationship if their destination family treated them well. Some destination families wanted to include the “acquired wives” as productive members of the household; thus, these women were fed, clothed, and not abused. These women may be confronted with conflicted attitudes and behaviors toward their destination families. A woman expressed the discomfort at the “opportunity” to regain a sense of belonging in such a contradictory environment:

At that time [with the family], I thought, “I would not stay there.” So I still acted like I was content and close to them so that they wouldn’t suspect that I’d run away...But back then I didn’t know how to escape. When I was there they basically treated me like I was one of their children. I wasn’t beaten or anything...But it was not my home.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Although some women who were not maltreated may never accept their destination family, others may eventually adjust to their new environments, especially if they were acquired by families whose circumstances resembled those of their native families in Vietnam. Some trafficked women may develop empathetic attitudes toward the destination families’ – and many other (Chinese) families’ – decision to purchase Vietnamese women as wives, as the above woman also revealed:

Generally speaking, [Chinese] wives have to think about a lot of things. They would [want to] choose husbands who have a lot of money, and a house. So basically, it costs a lot to have a wife over there, which means that [Vietnamese women] who are taken over there [to China] usually end up being sold as wives.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Compared to those trafficked into individual households, those who were trafficked into the commercial sex industry may be less socially isolated because they were physically placed among other women, which facilitated emotional bonds and a sense of support. Despite being exploited in the commercial sex environments, these women had opportunities to interact with

other women who shared similar experiences and circumstances. For instance, a woman turned to the other women in the red light district when she needed condoms to protect herself:

There were many prostitutes [in the village]. Some arrived voluntarily. Some were sold and later became voluntary. There were about 300 girls there, all of them very young....

In that village, all the houses were 2-stories tall...At night, the red lights were turned on, which were so scary to look at...

We had to [serve clients] all day...The owner made us wear short clothes and lipstick. We didn't want to, but she forced us...She gave us some condoms in the beginning, but when we ran out and asked her for more condoms, she said, "Screw you. If you die, so be it." So we went to ask the women nearby. When the owner wasn't around, we gave each other condoms.

(Ney-N, aged 21)

As the above excerpt alluded to, a few of the women were able to elicit instrumental resources from other women who had been in the sex industry longer and perhaps had become more "accustomed" to it. The trafficked women often voiced disdain and resentment for the sexual acts they were forced to perform. However, they seemed to project more tolerance and empathy toward the other women they met, regardless of whether these other women had entered the commercial sex industry on their own or had become "voluntary" participants later on although they had been trafficked initially. A woman clarified: "It's because of their difficult circumstances," and provided examples of such women she had met:

Like this one older woman: she came here and did this kind of work to escape the debt she had accumulated from her husband's death in a motorcycle accident [in Vietnam]...

Or this very pretty girl, the most popular one around here: she was bought at first and they beat her so much in the beginning because she didn't know anything and cried all the time. Later on, she was having 35-40 clients a day. Sometimes, she was not finished putting on her shirt and there was already another client. The brothel owners were treating her very well then.

(Xin-N, aged 20)

Thus, women who had been trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation may develop sympathetic attitudes toward other women – and perhaps, eventually, toward themselves – who reportedly entered the commercial sex industry voluntarily. These

relationships arose from their shared circumstances. In the “red-light district” environments where the “voluntary” and the “trafficked” co-existed in close vicinity, the distinction between the two categories seemed to reflect the individuals’ “current” understanding of their sense of self with respect to their shared circumstances, and the challenges to survive, rather than the original reasons that led them there.

A3. Post-trafficking: Facing the “new normal”

A3.a. Residual fears

A major concern that many women expressed upon return was the lack of a sense of safety and security. They often feared reprisals from traffickers. In cases where the trafficked women were identified via government channels, authorities made concerted efforts to minimize the women’s risks of being harmed, especially in the initial stages of return. These returnees were usually placed in a temporary assistance center while authorities determined if the women satisfied the legal criteria as a “victim of trafficking” and tried to capture or build criminal evidence against the alleged traffickers. Nevertheless, the women were afraid that the traffickers would be able to find out where they were and harm them. A returnee’s description exemplifies this fear:

I was afraid of the traffickers. I stayed [at the assistance center] for two weeks. [The government officials told me that] I could go home if the situation became safer...I was afraid that [the traffickers] would find out that I had come back, and would hire someone, somehow, to find and kill me. I still had that fear, you know, so I continued to stay [at the assistance center] longer...

I had thought that I would stay at the center for about a week and then come home afterwards. But I was still afraid, so I stayed at the center for more than two weeks. Then I visited home for three days. Afterwards, [as I’ve decided], I came back to start staying at the [longer-term] shelter.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Another returnee also described similar fears even as she was living in a shelter:

I was living at the shelter and went to school every day but I was very afraid. When I was walking, I was afraid that someone was walking behind me...I imagined a knife behind

me. After school, I didn't dare go outside and just stayed inside [the shelter]. I was even afraid when I was inside the house. I was also afraid at night, when I [tried to] sleep. I had heard that some people who had come back – those who were able to escape – were later killed.

(Cao-N, aged 19)

If the traffickers were captured, some of the women's fears subsided and the women had a better sense of safety. Nevertheless, the fears did not dissipate completely, as a woman shared:

Nowadays, I am kind of okay. But still, when I think about it, when I talk about it, then I would have nightmares that night. I wasn't beaten so I'm not as afraid as [this other woman]. She was beaten when she was trafficked. She even lost two teeth and her arm was broken. If she talks about it, she would have really scary dreams that night. In my dreams, I dreamed that my dad killed me, and that my uncle killed me...I dream those dreams a lot.

(Trang-N, aged 18)

The women also faced the emotional toll associated with the prosecution trials of their traffickers, whether the women testified or not. For instance, the returnee who had been trafficked (along with her mother and siblings) by her uncle only realized that her uncle had also trafficked many other women when she saw nearby villagers show up at the trial to condemn him. "I didn't really know," she said, "When I first returned, I didn't know. But at the trial, I saw so many people. They came to say that my uncle had sold [their family members]."

In addition to the emotional and psychological fears, the returnees also faced fears related to their economic conditions, which remained dismal. Although some women felt grateful to be alive and back in their home country, they still had to struggle once again with the lack of resources in their communities. As part of some reintegration support, several women were enrolled in vocational training programs and received certifications as seamstresses, hairstylists, or manicurists. However, all of the women – even those with vocational certifications – continued to struggle. A woman who had been married (after returning) and had a child described the economic reality that many trafficked returnees faced after their return:

My husband works. He makes about 100,000 VND (5 USD) a day, but we have to pay for a lot of things so the money is gone quickly. “Work a day, eat a day.” There’s nothing left over at the end of the day.

(Jessica-S, aged 27)

A3.b. Strained relationships

When they returned, the women faced many challenging relationships with friends, family, and community members. Some witnessed their family members being prosecuted for trafficking crimes, and some felt obligated to care for convicted and imprisoned family members. Others were not accepted back by their family members who blamed the women for falling prey to traffickers. In some instances, the women had estranged or antagonistic relationships with and between family members as the result of their involvement in the commercial sex industry. A returnee shared that, upon returning to Vietnam, she found out that government authorities had arranged for her to live with her aunt and forbid her to live with her parents because the parents were suspected of having been involved with her entrance into the commercial sex sector:

When I was in Cambodia, I wanted to go back [to Vietnam] – when I was 14/15 years old. But I had to wait for over a year for the paperwork to finish. It’s so complicated...and full of headaches, you know?...

But it was so strange, [the government officials] didn’t allow me to live with my parents. I had to live with my aunt. I was afraid. My aunt yelled at me all the time. I wanted some freedom, but I wasn’t allowed to go outside of my aunt’s house.

(Diep-S, aged 21)

Another woman described the tense family dynamics in the relationships with her parents, who had been separated after she returned:

My life is stable now. But if you don’t have parents...well, I took my mom and dad for granted. When I came back [to Vietnam], they both had separate families already, so I had to take care of myself...

Going back [to the community]...I always worried about things all the time. I worried about this and that. About life, and random things. And my parents weren’t together anymore, so I was very sad...

My dad visits sometimes. But my mom cannot come home...because my brother doesn't allow her to step foot inside the house. My brother is quite strict. But if my brother wasn't home, then my mom would come visit me. But if my brother was home, she wouldn't come.

(Hien-S, aged 21)

Returnees also struggled with trusting others. They preferred social relationships to remain cordial and kept at a distance, as they did not think that other people would understand their struggles and they feared of being judged:

For me, relationships are mostly about small talk. Other people – we don't easily let them know. If we share our stories with them, maybe they'll understand us and be sympathetic. But if they don't understand, they would judge us...It's very rare to meet good people so we cannot trust easily. So why talk about it? Only close family should know...

I know that maybe the more we talk to others the more we can understand each other. We have so much to share [but] we don't know how [to start]...People do need others who understand and care for them. If people share [stories] with us, and we share ours with them, we'd probably feel lighter.

(Tho-S, aged 23)

A3.c. *Living with a “social evil”*

Upon return, most of the trafficked women faced stigma as the result of their noted absence from the community. Many women felt that people in the community were probably talking *about* their situation with others, but not *with* them. An interview exchange about the women's interactions with community members upon return typically proceeded as follows:

Interviewer: When you went back home, how did you feel, when you went back to your community?

Returnee: At first, I was afraid that people would talk...

Interviewer: Talk about what?

Returnee: They gossip about things, you know?...

Interviewer: Do you think that they don't talk about things in front of you?

Returnee: I think that they probably talk behind my back. But they wouldn't say it in front of me.

(Ngoc-N, aged 19)

Some women feared that the community members perceived them to be “bad people” and that they had brought the experience onto themselves. The returnees were often treated

differently by their neighbors and former friends due to the association between trafficking and the “tarred” image of a “good woman.” In Vietnam, human trafficking is designated as a “social evil,” along with “dirty” social phenomena such as prostitution, pornography, premarital and extramarital sex, drug and alcohol addiction, gambling, theft, etc. The trafficked women were often assumed to have been sexually exploited and thus may have contracted “undesirable diseases.” Some women – and sometimes, their families as well – were socially and emotionally isolated by the perceptions and behaviors of the community members. Women often reported staying indoors, as they were afraid to face inquiries from the community members. For example, a returnee described the typical initial period of social isolation, usually self-imposed, when trafficked women returned to their community:

For a few months when I first came back, I was very scared. I didn't step foot outside of the house. When my mom asked me if I wanted to go to the market, I said no. When she asked if I wanted to go out to hang out with others, I said no. I just laid in bed at home. My mom said, “Don't worry. Ignore what they say”...

When I first came back, many villagers came by. We didn't even know some of them but they still came by. They came, asked questions, and then went away.

(Loan-N, aged 23)

Although some community members may have tried to show their support – perhaps while satisfying their curiosity, their actions were interpreted as interrogating and did not provide a sense of safety and belonging for the women. Most returnees, however, did not want to confront their families or community members regarding these unspoken assumptions, probing behaviors, and stigma. They avoided bringing up the topic and limited their sharing with others about the trafficking experience. Close family members often encouraged the women to ignore what other people said and to “move on,” as the above account illustrated.

Oftentimes, the returnees and their families perceived that the most expedient way to “move on” was for the women to be married so that they become a member of another family

and start their own, as other “normal,” non-trafficked women in the community would. Both of the women in the study who became married post-trafficking described their current lives as “stable” and “normal,” characteristics that were also expressed by the single women when they were asked what “reintegration” meant for them.

However, the stigma against women who had been trafficked may not end even after they were married. The women who had married after returning to Vietnam still struggled to gain the acceptance of their new extended family. A returnee and her husband were forced to move out of the village if they wanted to be together because the husband’s mother refused to let her son marry a person who was “rumored” to have been involved in the sex industry:

I met [my husband] at a friend’s house. We talked and got to know each other. We liked each other...But my mother-in-law did not approve. Their family said that...in Cambodia...I was forced to do some things there...His family wouldn’t allow [the marriage], so I was very sad and left [town]...

My husband followed me. He loves me. We lived together [in the city] for some time. And [after a couple of months], his mom told us to come back. We have lived here since...Her son made his decision – what was she to say. If she didn’t accept, her son would leave.

(Jessica-S, aged 27)

[B] Coping Responses

Throughout the trafficking experience, the women were forced to make sense out of their relationships and environment, as well as, to respond in ways that would reduce their conflicted understandings and emotions regarding the dissonance between expectancies and realities. In particular, the women were compelled to navigate through their evolving understanding of their sense of self in relation to the contextual realities in the trafficking experience. They seemed to use three main coping strategies: (B1) regulating emotional expression and thought; (B2) creating opportunities within constraints; and (B3) relating to cultural schemas. Each woman

may undergo multiple iterations to construct a renewed sense of self and employ multiple strategies in any given iteration.

B1. Regulating emotional expression and thought

The returnees often recalled numerous instances of crying throughout the trafficking process: when they found out they had been trafficked; when they perceived their captivity as inescapable; when they were beaten in public for disobeying orders; when they were rescued; etc. However, due to the threats and penalizing conditions imposed onto them by the traffickers, some women inhibited their emotional expression, thoughts, and memories with the hope of reducing physical and psychological abuse and discomfort.

As the result of failed escape efforts, many were reprimanded with threats of murder or disembodiment. Therefore, women may have repressed their resistant attitude to avoid being punished and may have suppressed their emotional expressions. For instance, a returnee declared – to herself – that she had to hold back her tears in order to get through the experience:

[When I found out that I had been tricked], I told [the traffickers] that I refused to go with them. I said, “I’d rather die right here.” Then, they snatched my arm and said, “You going or what?” They took out a knife and said “If you obey me, I will allow you to have a peaceful life. And if you disobey, I will kill you. It’ll be too late then.”

At that time I thought, “Okay, I’ve already crossed the border. I have to accept the situation.” I wiped away my tears. I was so devastated, but I wiped my tears away and pretended to laugh with them. I said, “Fine, let’s go. I am not afraid of you...I’d have to listen to you. Otherwise, I’d be dead, right?”

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Sometimes, the suppression of emotional expression was counteracted when the women felt that they were “cleared” of immediate dangers. An emotional release would probably occur, usually at the moment when they were rescued by police authorities or when they physically “stepped foot” into their country of origin again. The above returnee contended that she could not hold back tears when she was finally in the custody of Vietnamese Border Guard officials:

When I arrived at the [Vietnamese] border station, I felt...all I can say is, “simply happy.” I had told myself, “I cannot cry...I am able to return so I should not cry.” But the tears just poured out. Because I was so happy. Because I was able to come home. I was very happy.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Even among those who reported self-initiated entrance into the sex industry and were “accustomed” to that environment, they seemed surprised at their inability to control their emotional expression once they were “taken” out of the sex work circumstances:

[The police] just came, raided, and captured us... We were working there and we also lived and ate there. But out of nowhere, one day, I don’t know if it was a coincidence or not. I don’t know, I think maybe [we were] unlucky. At 4pm, suddenly they came and raided us...

I didn’t know anything. I was sleeping. They called us down and then, I started crying. I didn’t really understand what was happening.

(Tho-S, aged 23)

Women also reported inhibiting their thoughts and memories. As the following exchange illustrates, they often refused to remember or reveal the “sad memories” of their trafficking experience:

Interviewer: So do your friends know about your situation?

Returnee: No. If they know the situation they will look at us differently. Only some people know. That is my private story. I don’t tell anyone.

Interviewer: But don’t the people around you think about your situation in a certain way?

Returnee: They only know that I have been [abroad]. I don’t want them to understand. I want to forget, to keep only the happy memories. Nobody wants to keep sad memories.

(Diep-S, aged 21)

The “sad memories” were sometimes “temporarily forgotten” with the passage of time and as the women got accustomed to day-to-day activities of their “new” lives. “Sometimes I forget,” a returnee shared, and was surprised at her apparent ability to “move on” from the experience. At other times, the memories and thoughts were actively inhibited. As a woman

described, some returnees continued to suffer with the negative affect as well as physiological effects of the memories of the trafficking experience:

[We] used to cry so much that no more tears would come out. When we were taken, we cried a lot, especially when we were sold. We cried so much that whenever I cry now, I would have headaches/migraines. Probably because I used to cry too much, right?

(Trang-N, aged 18)

Memory/thought regulation was also a response to the distressed emotional state or the fear of adverse consequences of recalling traumatic events. Some women stated that during the repatriation process, foreign law enforcement authorities often treated them as individuals who had broken rules (i.e., as criminals) and not as those who were victims of trafficking. These experiences exacerbated their sense of insecurity and distrust. A woman described the disorientation and fear she felt when she was being questioned by authorities:

[The foreign authorities] placed me in a temporary place. Then they started asking me questions like where I went, where my hometown was, and things like that. But I didn't know if...I was afraid that they would throw me into jail. [My thoughts were] all over the place. I gave them wrong information.¹¹

(Hien-S, aged 21)

Some returnees may reject memory recall efforts in attempts to prevent an emotional breakdown, as a woman's explanation alluded to:

What I remember most about that experience is...argh, I think "emotional nightmare." I don't need that. I don't need to remember!

(Jessica-S, aged 27)

Many of the returnees who stayed in shelters felt that they were able to discuss their experiences and emotions with other shelter residents because of the shared trafficked

¹¹ It is unclear whether the woman had intended to give inaccurate personal identity information or if she could not recall the information. Whatever the case, she described a state of disorientation and distrust toward the people who were questioning her.

backgrounds. When asked about what they liked most about being at the shelter-based projects, many mentioned the friendships with the other women. A woman shared a typical response:

I remember/like everything [about the shelter]. I remember the meals. When I was home [during holidays], I remember the friends at the shelter...At the shelter, we all ate together. We can eat if we are happy. At home, there are not many people so I couldn't eat. Here, there are people that I can talk to, the more the merrier. At home, it's lonely and quiet. Here, so lively.

(Xin-N, aged 20)

B2. Creating opportunities within constraints

In the beginning stages of the trafficking process, women reported numerous attempts to risk their lives to escape, as previously illustrated. In another example, a woman who had been taken across the border by two young men (one of whom held a knife to her throat to keep her quiet) took the chance to assert her resistance when she was being transferred to the next node in the trafficking network: She used her teeth to bite the trafficker's arm, hoping that they would let go of her so she could run away. Individuals who were able to escape the trafficking situation usually assessed the circumstances and reacted in manners that maximized their chances of survival and created opportunities of escape.

Although trafficking cases were usually detected by “rescue missions” conducted by police authorities, some women in the study created the escape opportunities themselves. For example, a returnee realized that in the confines of the destination environment, she needed a method to communicate with her family members in Vietnam. Thus, she displayed obedient behaviors toward the brothel owners while she set aside some money – from the forced sex work – and convinced neighboring women to obtain a phone for her. She was able to call her family to let them know that she was still alive. After about three months, her father was able to insist and assist the Chinese police to locate and rescue her.

In yet another case, a H'mong woman supposedly “gave in” to her traffickers’ demands and agreed to be the wife of a (Chinese) H'mong man when the “choices” were offered to her:

[The husband] was born in the '90s. He was pretty normal and still young. I didn't want to be married to him. But I was forced to. I had to accept it. Otherwise, what if they sell me into a brothel, or sell me off to a guy who's 40, 50 years old in Beijing? So I thought I had to accept [the marriage] and I would find a way to escape later...

However, once in the destination family, she devised means to delay the husband's and parents-in-law's expectations to consummate the marriage:

When you become a wife, they expect you to...well, “it” is expected. But, because their family name was Zhan, I told [the husband] that my last name was also Zhan. I lied to him. I said that I was also a Zhan, so that meant that we were basically brother and sister. He told his parents. When they asked why I had told them that I was a Ven before, I said that I was born a Zhan but I was raised by the Vens so I took the name Ven...And then I also said that according to traditions in Vietnam, a couple cannot sleep together until they have a wedding ceremony. The mother questioned why there was such a tradition. I gave her an example. I said, “You don't believe me? My aunt was [sleeping] with my uncle before they had a ceremony, so she gave birth to a son who is disabled...”

She also described how she was able to successfully run away from her husband after postponing two previous escape attempts:

On the day before I planned [the third] escape, I started being nice to [the husband]. At the market, I told him, “If you love me, you will buy me these things.” I was able to buy a bag and some food. For food, I was able to buy some baked goods, four mangos, grapes and two bottles of water. I didn't ask him to buy me [other] things, just food for the road. So that I wouldn't starve to death, so I wouldn't be hungry. After we bought those things I ran away.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

Thus, some women demonstrated acts of resistance although they had rendered the perception that they had accepted their trafficked status. Despite the restraints of the trafficking circumstances, stories from the women in the study revealed that some women were sometimes extremely resourceful. Some even capitalized on the similarities or differences in cultural beliefs and values in order to reduce, delay, or escape the constraints of their trafficking situation, as the above returnee and other women have demonstrated. Not all who were hopeful and planned their

escapes were successful. However, it should be recognized that under conditions where death and/or debilitating consequences were highly likely, some trafficked individuals may adopt a ruse of acceptance of the situation while assessing the means to remain alive and to manage their physical and psychological pain and suffering.

B3. Relating to cultural schemas

The returnees – and their families – often attributed some aspects of the trafficking experience to fate and karma as well as filial piety, concepts that remain ubiquitous in many communities in Vietnam, and especially in the rural areas from which the women in the study were born and raised. *Fate* is the belief that the course of events is destined by a supernatural power beyond a person's control. *Karma*, derived from Buddhism, connotes the philosophy that a person's current and previous actions – and that of their ancestors – accumulate to determine their fate in the future. *Filial piety* is a virtue based on Confucian philosophy that epitomizes respect for one's parents and ancestors and is considered an essential principle of a good society.

Returnees often conveyed that the circumstances that led to their being trafficked were usually “beyond their control,” but some women also asserted that they themselves were responsible for their actions. For instance, a woman contended that her family's economic situation compelled her to enter the commercial sex industry, but she insisted that she was the person responsible for her decisions:

I have accepted the situation. I willingly went and I do not blame anyone. At that time, the situation was dire. The family was in a lot of debt. I made the decision [to go to Cambodia] on my own and I don't regret it. I have to live with the decision that I made...

She also expressed a desire to demonstrate to others that she was capable of changing, and that she could become a “better” person if she worked diligently:

I am working hard. I want to prove to others that I can change. I want my friends to be proud of me. “I can be better,” not worse. I don’t want my friends to be disappointed. I have a [vocational] certificate. I’ve shown that I am passionate about my career.

(Diep-S, aged 21)

Therefore, although some women viewed that they had endured painful circumstances because of “fate,” they also saw their escape from the trafficking situation as an opportunity to offset the bad karma by doing good deeds. Another returnee, who subscribed to the proverb of “*học tài thi phận*,” which connotes the belief that (mis)fortune can trump talent, illustrated how the belief in karma propelled her to engage in good behaviors (in this case, learning and acquiring knowledge) instead of bad behaviors (such as corruption, greed):

When it comes to learning, we learn for ourselves. That knowledge is in our mind, and we have to remember that. As for other things, like using money to bribe others so that we can have higher status or work that pays more...[even] if we have those things but if we have no knowledge, *we* would be doomed. Others would not suffer. For me, I just want to learn/study, I don’t want to be involved with things that use money in [those] ways.

(Thai-N, aged 18)

The concept of filial piety also permeated many parts of the discussions with the returnees. Most women repeatedly expressed their sense of obligation to contribute to the family’s economic welfare and to take care of ailing parents, usually their mothers. Illness in the family was a major factor in the women’s or their family members’ decisions to pursue precarious job offers. As a woman explained, the costs of health care treatments – most of which consisted of prolonged herbal remedies prescribed by local health healers – could have a debilitating effect on the family’s income and savings:

I was very young when I had to start working [menial jobs]. My mom was sick often. My uncle was living in Cambodia with his wife at that time. He told my mom that she should come over there, to see if she could get treated [for her health conditions], and to see if she could find a job, so that we could improve our lives...

So [my mom and I] went to Cambodia. After some time, she was able to find a stable job there...

And then, she became ill again [with bronchitis]. She went to many healers but she didn't get better. We tried all kinds of healers but none of them helped. So I thought, you know, my family's circumstances were desperate. What else was there to do, but for me to find work?

(Tho-S, aged 23)

Some women were especially filial to their mothers, perhaps because they had witnessed their mothers being abused and because sometimes the women themselves had been beaten by their fathers. Spousal abuse, usually accompanied by alcoholism, persists in many Vietnamese families. One woman described her family's case as follows:

Dad beat Mom all the time. Everyday. He drank a lot. My grandma said that maybe the house had spirits, making my dad like that. He drank all the time and was drunk every day, then he would beat my mom. He refused to stop drinking. But then he started to vomit blood. [Eventually], he was hospitalized [for liver cirrhosis]. That's why I was visiting him [and was tricked and sold].

(Ney-N, aged 21)

As another woman's account shows, abuse had also been a part of some women's childhoods:

My dad is a hired laborer. My mom was collecting/recycling plastic bottles, but now she works at a coffee shop. They are in Cambodia, near the Thai border. My dad is working to pay off the debt. He [incurred] so much debt from his past drinking [habits]. Whenever he was drunk, he would beat my mom and me. He beat me a lot. It was very painful...

When I heard that my dad had stopped drinking, I was so happy. I was very afraid of being beaten...

I don't know when he first started to beat me. I think as early as my first memory. My mom said that there was a time, when I was very small, my dad literally kicked me from our house to the front of the neighbor's house.

(Diep-S, aged 21)

Although the above excerpts probably represent the more severe and rare cases, they suggest the reality that many women likely experienced abuse and violence as they were growing up in environments where male-domineering practices and norms perpetuated women's inferior social status. Perhaps because of such dynamics that women in the study remained filial, particularly toward their mothers, although their own kin may have contributed to their being trafficked. From the women's perspectives, theirs and their family members' actions resulted

from some circumstances that were not of their choosing. The above returnee, who was also not allowed to live with her parents upon returning, attempted to describe this point-of-view:

The family [members] hate Mom and Dad. But I still love them, especially my mom... A lot of people wouldn't understand, but I cannot really explain much. People just wouldn't understand my situation.

(Diep-S, aged 21)

According to most of the women in the study, their mothers as well as other family members remained essential to their sense of social identity. Upon returning to their community, women continued to be influenced by cultural beliefs and values – namely, fate, karma, and filial piety – that favor compliance. Therefore, questioning parental and ancestral authorities may be perceived as an irreparable act of betrayal.

DISCUSSION

Emergent themes showed that the trafficked women's experiences consisted of being uprooted from their expected and understood livelihoods, displaced in foreign environments where their sense of belonging and integrity were traumatically injured, and then returned to their families and communities, faced with still-dismal economic and social conditions as well as with the stigmatization of being a victim of trafficking. As the result of severe changes in relationships and environments throughout the stages of trafficking that threatened their previous perceptions and understandings, women had to navigate to their renewed sense of self, exhibiting coping strategies that dealt with regulating emotional expression and thought, creating opportunities within constraints, and relating to cultural schemas. The mental health implications of the emergent coping strategies are discussed below.¹²

¹² The objective of the overall study is to examine the psychosocial issues associated with human trafficking from the public health perspective. Therefore, the discussion of the findings is limited to those of the emergent coping strategies and their implications to mental health research and practices.

A person's psychological well-being depends on her construct of the self, which is derived from the system of values, beliefs, and norms that inform her worldview of the reality (Kagawa-Singer & Chung, 2002). Prior to being trafficked, the women's livelihoods were informed by their understanding of themselves as daughters and as members of the communities in their hometowns. These women, like any other human being, needed a sense of belonging, safety and security, and integrity and meaning in and for life (Kagawa-Singer, 1988). When these basic psychological needs are compromised as the result of the trafficking experience, the women reacted – cognitively and behaviorally – to (re)situate their self-understandings in relation to the context of the evolving environments.

One type of response that the women displayed is the regulation of emotional expression and thought, which are commonly observed psychological reactions (Gross, 1998; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). In particular, the women in the study seemed to down-regulate – via suppression, repression, avoidance, and/or denial-like mechanisms – with regard to the expression of emotions and thoughts/memories in order to manage the unpredictable and adverse circumstances.¹³ Human beings' motivation to avoid negative affect is a widely acknowledged phenomenon (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Thus, the trafficked returnees' exhibition of these down-regulation patterns are not particularly surprising. Implications for mental health depend on the specific type of response strategy as well as the cultural context.

For example, suppression, whether it is the inhibition of emotion-expressive behavior (expressive suppression) or thought (thought suppression), is generally considered a maladaptive response to stress; expressive suppression and thought suppression have been documented in

¹³ The precise underlying psychological processes remain unclear and cannot be conclusively determined based on this study's design and collected data. Moreover, different women may respond with different combinations of these coping strategies.

(Western societies) to be counterproductive in emotional management (Gross, 1998; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Denial, on the other hand, may have psychological and social costs but can also yield beneficial results (Lazarus, 2013). Positive uses of denial-like strategies have been observed in studies among people who have suffered serious emotional injuries to their sense of self, such as those living with cancer (Kagawa-Singer, 1993) and HIV/AIDS (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998). However, further research is needed to examine the effects of the specific emotional and thought regulation strategies in this and other populations, and cultural contexts.

Despite the reality that people who are trafficked have very limited options but to be subjected to physical and psychological abuse, some women in the study did attempt to manage unpredictable and constrained situations in the forms of actions that demonstrated their resourcefulness and problem-solving ability. These revealed acts of resistance and strength align with some recent findings (Gozdziak & Bump, 2008), which suggest that the discourse of only victimization and vulnerability in the trafficking literature may be presumptuous and may mask important variations in the experiences and response strategies among trafficked persons (Saghera, 2005).

To be sure, human trafficking often involves extreme abuse, violence, and trauma (Zimmerman et al., 2003). Current trafficking-related efforts, however, are primarily focused on assessing and addressing these physically and emotionally detrimental characteristics associated with human trafficking (Gozdziak & Bump, 2008). Practitioners and researchers working with trafficked populations should try to understand not only on the negative aspects trafficking-related trauma, but also the potential positive adaptive strategies. The inclusion of protective factors may be more productive in the efforts to assist survivors of trafficking to achieve the

supposed goal for (re)integration: to become “an active member of the economic, cultural, civil and political life of a country and perceives that he or she has oriented and is accepted” (Zimmerman et al., 2011, p. 330).

Future efforts should broaden the emphasis on *resources* and *resiliency* in coping mechanisms. In stigmatized populations, resource-focused strategies may lead to better mental health outcomes than deficit-focused strategies (Hobfoll, 1989; Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003; Shih, 2004). Additionally, the construct of resilience, which refers to “that human potential to emerge from a shattering experience scarred yet strengthened” (Walsh, 1996), may also provide useful insights for the study of trafficking and mental health. Resilience is distinct from the concepts of risk and protection. Whereas risk and protection focus on outcomes, resilience recognizes individual variation in people’s responses, even to the same occurrences (Rutter, 2006). Therefore, the application of the resilience construct may elucidate the mechanisms by which differences in responses to challenges or risks associated with trafficking may promote resistance to later stress among individuals, families, and even communities.

A prevailing type of coping mechanism that emerged was the women’s use of cultural schemas to situate their renewed sense of self in light of their trafficking experience. Amidst the conflicted understandings that arose from the discrepancies between the expected and the reality of relationships and environments, the trafficked women coped by utilizing the system of beliefs and values that have constructed their worldview and their sense of self. In particular, some of the Vietnamese trafficked returnees in the study expressed how they (re)appraised their trafficking experiences through the lens of cultural concepts such as fate, karma, and filial piety in order to maintain a positive sense of self.

The returnees' efforts to reduce discomfort from the conflicted emotional and cognitive states by accessing certain elements of their self-understandings can be approached from the perspective of cognitive dissonance theory (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978). Particularly, in the Self-Standards Model of dissonance (Stone & Cooper, 2001),¹⁴ the posited generalized self-attributes and standards that are accessed in the context of a discrepancy could be substituted with the culturally-informed self-standards such as fate, karma, and filial piety as had been cognitively retrieved by the women in the study. If conceptually and practically true as strongly indicated in the literature on coping and mental health, research and practice must critically consider the representations and analyses of these cultural issues, in order to prevent gross inaccuracies and inappropriations with regard to the generalization of the mental health status of cultural groups (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005). This issue is discussed further below.

From a cultural coping perspective (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006), the women's use of cultural concepts as coping strategies validates the centrality of culturally-informed concepts of the self that has been advocated in mental health research (Kagawa-Singer & Chung, 2002), as well as, the importance of examining the bias of assuming individualistic, rational Western values among groups that may instead adhere to Eastern collectivist values (Chang, 1988; O'Connor & Shimizu, 2002).

Some women in the study related to cultural schemas in making sense of the trafficking experience and maintain a positive sense of self. This suggests that, for example, a critical aspect

¹⁴ In other models of cognitive dissonance, different aspects of the self (e.g., self-consistency, self-affirmation, self-resource) have been articulated as playing the prominent role in the dissonance process. The Self-Standards Model posits an integrative understanding of self-attributes and self-standards as a set of "generally shared, normative considerations of what is good or bad, foolish or sensible, moral or immoral or it may be based on personal, idiographically held considerations of what is bad, foolish, or immoral" that are "made accessible in the context of a discrepant behavior" (Stone & Cooper, 2001, p. 231).

of the recovery process for these returnees is the ability to navigate to a renewed positive sense of self that is harmonious with the socially and culturally constituted patterns of behaviors and attitudes. Consequently, many of the existing reintegration models should be re-assessed, as their focus on individual empowerment outcomes may be incompatible in these communities.

Current reintegration efforts generally adopt individual-focused models of recovery that are based on Western ideals of individual aggrandizement, such as achieving financial independence and being an “empowered” survivor (Surtees, 2010). For example, a typical narrative of a “successful” survivor of trafficking is someone who has overcome her ordeal and has established her own business or NGO to help the plight of other women (Kristof & WuDunn, 2010). While these types of stories are laudable, not all survivors desire such outcomes.

Reintegration projects that assume a *vertical* orientation (i.e., success comes from an individual’s upward mobility) are incompatible in groups whose sense of self and livelihoods are *horizontally* structured (i.e., success is embedded across the family and community contexts). In the study of human psychology, behavioral scientists have repeatedly misgeneralized findings from studies that include only Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) people (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Most trafficked individuals are from low- and middle-income countries and cultures with Eastern values. Therefore, projects should not assume that all trafficked individuals share the values and experiences of WEIRD people. In many Eastern cultures, a person’s sense of self and well-being results from a complex compromise between personal and physical needs and abilities with their social roles and functionalities (Kagawa-Singer, 1993). Consequently, individual-focused empowerment objectives that are acontextual may create further dissonance with respect to the community-oriented and collectivist values by which most of the trafficked women still subscribe after their return.

A horizontal reintegration approach is a contextual, communitarian orientation. It recognizes that trafficked individuals are not lone actors in their recovery, and that reintegration is contingent on the individuals' perceptions of their social identities in their communities. This approach does not discount the importance of self-discovery and empowerment. On the contrary, by acknowledging the contextual parameters, a horizontal reintegration approach would strengthen these personal dimensions. Given the foregoing revelations about the significance of cultural contexts in shaping individuals' experiences along the trafficking stages, reintegration efforts should at least incorporate the potential advantages as well as the limitations of the socio-cultural settings to which the trafficked women are expected to return.

CONCLUSION

The overarching theme that emerged from the experiences of Vietnamese female survivors of trafficking is a process of navigating to a renewed sense of self as the women encountered extreme challenges throughout the trafficking stages. Trafficked individuals had to contend with the physical, social, and emotional realities as they were uprooted from their livelihoods, endured exploitative and conflicted circumstances, and then struggled to reintegrate in their communities. As a consequence of their evolving contextual constraints, the women adjusted their self-understandings, and displayed behavioral and cognitive responses to maintain a sense of self that is harmonious to the environmental parameters and their relationships with others.

The study's in-depth analyses, as informed by the women themselves, revealed that there are many complexities in the circumstances, emotions, and reactions in the trafficking process as well as the reintegration process. The inductive, qualitative findings provide more contextualized illustrations of the multiple issues that trafficked individuals face and thus potentially better inform efforts that strive to alleviate the vulnerabilities and impact of human trafficking.

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[IV] SYNTHESIS STUDY

Toward an Ecological-Transitional Framework of Human Trafficking and Health

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the synthesis of the findings from a mixed-methods study on the psychosocial issues associated with human trafficking in Vietnam. Utilizing the quantitative and qualitative findings discussed in the previous chapters, this chapter presents a proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework of human trafficking and health. As complex causes and consequences influence both human trafficking and health, the study of their intersections necessitates a more contextual and dynamic approach. Informed by public health principles from Ecological Theory, Stages of Trafficking Model, and Life Course perspective, the proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework advances the understanding of health issues associated with human trafficking by recognizing the impact of multiple layers of the ecological system and trafficking cycle, as well as, the developmental and sociocultural pathways involved in the transitions between ecologic levels and trafficking stages.

This Framework aims to promote multi-dimensional research and responses that recognize the dynamic interplay of factors among and across levels and stages through a public health lens, to position anti-trafficking programs and policies to address the health issues more holistically. The analysis of the mixed-methods study in Vietnam illustrates how the Framework could be applied to integrate the available evidence in order to develop more effective public health efforts to meet the needs of this population, and potentially similar populations who are affected by human trafficking. This paper concludes with a discussion of the proposed Framework's benefits, limitations, and suggestions for future research and interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is a global concern, and captivates the interest of many individuals, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and inter-governmental entities worldwide. The topic is studied in many academic disciplines, including anthropology (Long, 2004), economics (Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010; Wheaton, Schauer, & Galli, 2010), law and human rights (D'Cunha, 2002; Gallagher, 2001; Hathaway, 2008), and health (Dovydaitis, 2011; Gushulak & MacPherson, 2000). Regardless of one's perspective, TIP is widely recognized to impact not only the well-being of individuals who are trafficked, but also their families and the larger society (Beyrer, 2004).

The social and health consequences among those affected by human trafficking are serious, and to date, understudied (Oram, Stöckl, Busza, Howard, & Zimmerman, 2012). The health and well-being of trafficked persons are not only affected by the trauma they experienced while trafficked, but also on multiple factors before and after the trafficking incident (Zimmerman et al., 2003). During the trafficking process, these individuals face abuse, violence, and exploitation that result in physical, mental, as well as sexual and reproductive health problems (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Their families and communities also struggle with conditions that contribute to their shared vulnerability, as well as, their limited capability to alleviate the consequences (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012). Many scholars and practitioners advocate for the importance of understanding and addressing structural factors in TIP – and by extension, its subsequent health impact – such as gender norms and practices (D'Cunha, 2002), migration and development policies (The PLoS Medicine Editors, 2011), healthcare infrastructure (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009), and criminal justice systems (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008, 2009, 2012).

As the scale, scope, and impact of human trafficking continue to be examined, analysts and advocates alike are particularly interested in the ability to organize the understanding of the multi-faceted and complex aspects of human trafficking, in order to prevent the problem and improve the lives of those affected by TIP. An integrative, systems based perspective is needed to integrate multi-level, multi-dimensional factors involved human trafficking and health. As yet, no such encompassing framework exists.

The premise of this paper is that a public health perspective offers valuable analytical and programmatic tools for anti-trafficking projects, since public health efforts are designed to use evidence- and practice-based policies and interventions to alleviate harmful consequences as well as to prevent harms by promoting health and well-being (Awofeso, 2010). Drawing from public principles, this paper proposes an Ecological-Transitional Framework, which incorporates multiple layers of the ecological system and trafficking cycle, as well as, the developmental and sociocultural pathways involved in the transitions between ecologic levels and along the trafficking stages.

The Framework emerged from the process of analyzing the findings of a mixed-methods study on the psychosocial issues that affect a group of returned survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. As the triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings below shows, the Framework captures a dynamic, contextualized understanding of the factors that impact the relationship between TIP and mental health, by considering the economic, social, cultural, political, and historical settings that may contribute to, and are shaped by, differences in trafficking and health experiences. The Framework's posited tenets have implications for future research and interventions in the field of human trafficking and health. A discussion of these issues concludes the paper.

AN ECOLOGICAL-TRANSITIONAL FRAMEWORK OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND HEALTH

This section first briefly describes the three conceptual orientations that informed the proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework: Ecological Theory, Stages of Trafficking Model, and Life Course perspective. Then, based on the triangulation of findings from the mixed-methods study in Vietnam, principles from these perspectives are integrated to illustrate the Framework.

Conceptual Orientations

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) Ecological Theory posits that an individual's developmental process is influenced by nested and interrelated environmental systems: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems.²⁴ Microsystems refer to the immediate environments in which a person operates, including the family and school or work settings. Mesosystems are interactions between microsystems or connections between contexts, such as those between the family and peers or between the church and the family. Elements of the exosystems are external to the person's immediate environment in which the person may not have an active role but nonetheless affects the person, such as the community or law enforcement. Macrosystems are social and cultural beliefs and values, including religious/spiritual, economic, and political contexts.

This conceptualization of embedded environmental systems offers foundational principles for a more complete understanding of how factors associated with human trafficking concurrently affects multiple levels of functioning, from the individual and societal level. The inclusion of ecologic levels enables the analyses of the relative contribution of factors at each

²⁴ Bronfenbrenner also added the chronosystem, when he realized that the Life Course perspective was an important environmental system.

level, information that cannot be attained by focusing on only one level of analysis (Morgenstern, 1995). An ecological perspective is a necessary approach to study human trafficking. The public health principles from the Ecological Theory are particularly appropriate for anti-trafficking efforts that aim to address the health of communities as well as individuals.

Stages of Trafficking Model

Drawing from the stage-based approach in migration research, Zimmerman and colleagues (2011) proposed the Stages of Trafficking Model to highlight various issues associated with the chronological steps in the trafficking process, which includes: (1) pre-departure; (2) travel and transit; (3) destination; (4) detention/deportation and criminal evidence; and (5) integration or reintegration. The pre-departure stage is the period before individuals are trafficked. The travel and transit stage involves the recruitment of the individuals and includes all points of travel until individuals reach the destination. The destination stage refers to the location and time in which trafficked persons are exploited. In the detention/deportation and criminal evidence stage, trafficked persons are under the custody of law enforcement officials for questioning and investigations in order to determine the legal courses of action. The integration or reintegration stage refers to the period in which individuals attempt to become a member of the society in their destination or home country, respectively. Some individuals may be forced to repeat certain stages of the cycle when they are re-trafficked.

In the Stages of Trafficking Model, each step specifies different health-related needs and as a result, offers various opportunities and challenges for targeted health interventions. For example, anti-trafficking efforts in the travel and transit stage could address issues such as violence, abuse and threats imposed by traffickers, and efforts in destination areas could focus on issues such as physical injuries, lack of access to healthcare services, etc. The discrete and

interdependent stages are useful in understanding the diversity as well as the potential overlaps of health issues that affect individuals throughout the trafficking cycle.

Life Course Perspective

The Life Course (LC) perspective emerged as a response to the “contextual challenge” during the twentieth century in social sciences; it is “grounded in a contextualist perspective and emphasizes the implications of social pathways in historical time and place for human development and aging” (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003, p. 4). The LC perspective postulates that the concepts of transitions (changes in state) and trajectory (sequence of life events and transitions) recognize the age and timing of life events, while the principles (life-span development, agency, time and place, timing, linked lives) situate the phenomena of interest at the nexus of developmental trajectories, socio-cultural pathways, and historical change (Elder et al., 2003).

In tandem with Ecological Theory and Stages of Trafficking Model, the LC perspective offers helpful conceptual tools to understand the intersections of TIP and health. The LC perspective’s focus on timing as well as historical time and place and serves as a crucial and extended link between micro- and macro-level environments. As a result, the LC perspective is a process-oriented approach, which highlights the dynamics of an individual’s life cycle (including the trafficking cycle) as the micro-level forces and pathways unfold and transition within the larger contexts and circumstances. For instance, the principle of agency posits that individuals are agents who engage in actions that shape their life trajectory. This suggests that it is important to examine the ways in which trafficked persons navigate the structural opportunities and limitations throughout the TIP stages, and how previous actions subsequently influence their individual functioning as well as the structural factors.

A Proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework of Human Trafficking and Health

The proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework, illustrated below (**Figure IV-1**), integrates the Ecological Theory, Stages of Trafficking Model, and the Life Course perspective discussed above, and posits two tenets with regard to human trafficking and health. First, both human trafficking and health are influenced by factors at multiple *ecological system levels*. Second, the trafficking cycle is located at the nexus of *transitional processes* – i.e., the significance of trafficking events and conditions are contingent on their timing, transitions, and trajectories, as well as how they are situated in developmental pathways and socio-cultural contexts.

Ecological System Levels

Corresponding to Bronfenbrenner’s environmental systems, the Framework specifies four levels in the ecological system associated with human trafficking and health: individual; family/social; community; and societal/global.

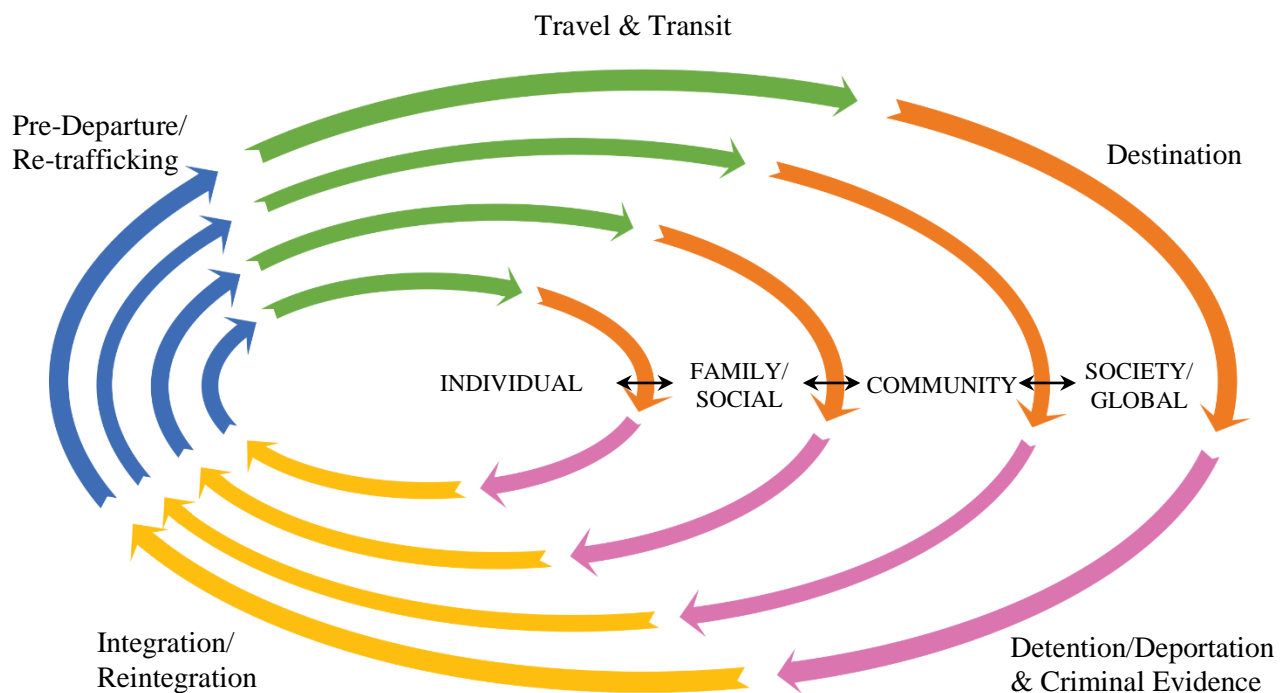
Individual-level factors refer to personal, developmental characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and exposure to adverse events. Family and social factors are those associated with the microsystems and mesosystems, such as family structures and social support. Issues at the community level refer to those in the exosystems, such as community perceptions and stigma. Societal/global level factors are associated with the macrosystems, such as cultural beliefs and geopolitical contexts. The levels are interrelated; therefore, factors at any level are simultaneously impacted by those at other levels, and vice versa.

Transitional Processes

The five stages of trafficking previously described – pre-departure; travel and transit; destination; detention/deportation and criminal evidence; and integration/reintegration – remain important

demarcations of time and space.²⁵ Each stage constitutes different experiences that present different needs and challenges that also influence the trajectory of health and trafficking outcomes for the individuals and their surroundings. For example, an individual’s exposure to trafficking abuse in one stage would affect how she experiences and responds to abuse – and other life events – in the later stages. Similarly, single women of “marriageable age” might be more likely to be sold into forced marriages than into other environments, which would reduce these women’s opportunities of experiencing the age-appropriate socially and culturally significant life events in the post-trafficking phase (e.g., marriage, first childrearing). Therefore, the meaning and significance of trafficking-related events becomes more apparent if they are situated within the developmental trajectories and socio-cultural pathways.

Figure IV-1. An Ecological-Transitional Framework of Human Trafficking and Health



²⁵ In Zimmerman et al.’s (2011) conceptualization of the trafficking stages, the travel and transit stage includes recruitment mechanisms and all points of travel until individuals reach the trafficking situation, this study includes recruitment mechanisms in the pre-departure phase.

When the two concepts of ecological system levels and transitional processes are integrated, they further delineate these dimensions of TIP. Thus, factors can be categorized according to their ecologic level as well as their location within the TIP cycle, and vice versa. For example, two characteristics related to the TIP experience, exploitation and stigma, would usually be classified in the destination and reintegration stages, respectively. However, there is an implicit assumption that these factors operate at the individual level only. The Ecological-Transitional Framework questions this assumption, and suggests that exploitation and stigma should be examined at other ecologic levels as well (e.g., family exposure to exploitation, community stigma). As a result, the Framework increases the scope of understanding of the issues associated with human trafficking and health.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK: FINDINGS FROM A MIXED-METHODS STUDY IN VIETNAM

To advance the framework's applicability in the conceptualization, design, and implementation, and analysis of future research and responses, this section presents the integration of findings from a mixed-methods study of human trafficking in Vietnam. The study is not considered an example of how the proposed guided its design and implementation. In fact, the opposite occurred. Principles from the Ecological Theory and Stages of Trafficking Model initially informed the conceptualization of the mixed-methods study, but the Ecological-Transitional Framework emerged from the triangulation phase of the mixed-methods data analysis in order to guide the comprehension of the multitude of factors that were uncovered, described below.

The author partnered with an anti-trafficking project²⁶ to study the psychosocial issues associated with TIP among a group of trafficked returnees – i.e., returned survivors of trafficking (SOTs). In the deductive quantitative study, female returnees were surveyed as they came through a post-trafficking project (RISE) at the Vietnam-Cambodia border. The survey asked about the returnees’ profile characteristics, trafficking experiences, and (mental) health status (**Chapter II**).²⁷ In the inductive qualitative study, the author conducted in-depth interviews with returnees in various reintegration projects at both the Vietnam-China and the Vietnam-Cambodia borders (**Chapter III**).

Table IV-1 lists the prominent factors that emerged during the analysis of psychosocial issues among the participants of the mixed-methods study. For the purpose of simplicity, the ecological system levels are condensed into three levels: (A) Individual; (B) Family/Social and Community; and (C) Societal/global. Similarly, the stages of trafficking are grouped into three phases: (1) Pre-; (2) Peri-, and (3) Post-trafficking.²⁸ Factors discussed at each level-stage are examples and are not intended to be exhaustive. Issues may be relevant in more than one level-stage but they are featured in the sphere of influence where they have the most prominent effect for the majority of the study participants.

At the individual level, pre-trafficking factors include the *sociodemographic characteristics* – e.g., gender, age, education, marital status, socioeconomic status (SES) – that are widely known to affect health outcomes, as well as important TIP characteristics such as

²⁶ The anti-trafficking project is ADAPT, which is operated by Pacific Links Foundation, an NGO founded and based in the United States (www.pacificlinks.org).

²⁷ RISE surveys assessed other health issues (e.g. physical symptoms and injuries, reproductive health). However, only mental health outcomes were included in the quantitative study.

²⁸ The peri-trafficking phase encompasses the travel and transit as well as the destination stages. The post-trafficking phase includes the detention/deportation and criminal evidence stage as well as the (re)integration stage.

country of origin, ethnic group, and interpersonal violence. Duration of trafficking, type of exploitation, and abuse/violence capture the individual's peri-trafficking experience. *Mode of exit and method of return* are important factors in the post-trafficking phase.

Issues associated with the family level include *family structures* in the pre-trafficking phase (e.g., family size, family SES, parents' education) and *family dynamics* in the post-trafficking phase (e.g., changes in family structures, family members' behaviors and perceptions). Social factors include *social networks, social isolation, and social support* in the pre-, peri-, and post-trafficking phases, respectively.

Pre-trafficking *community structures* (e.g., community cohesion, ethnic composition) and post-trafficking *community dynamics* (e.g., community awareness and stigma) provide instrumental information regarding the influences in the exosystems, which may not directly affect individuals but certainly shape the context of their experience.

Societal/global factors, which operate in macrosystems, include socio-cultural issues and the legal frameworks regarding TIP. In the pre-trafficking phase, *socio-cultural values and norms* are prominent factors. In the peri-trafficking phase, *cross-cultural issues* may arise. Factors associated with the legal frameworks, *repatriation and criminal evidence and prosecution* in the pre- and post-trafficking phase, respectively, shape the vulnerability, experiences, and outcomes of associated with human trafficking and its health consequences.

While the following discussion primarily refers to the findings of the mixed-methods study, it also draws from and situates the study results within the existing literature on human trafficking and health. In prior research, quantitative studies generally focused on individual-level characteristics and qualitative studies highlighted factors located at the family, community, and societal/global levels. As a consequence, there is more empirical data about individual-level

factors. However, this is not necessarily representative of the relative influence of such type of factors among the ecologic levels in the context of human trafficking and health. Moreover, although the discussion focuses on psychosocial factors among women survivors of trafficking who have returned to Vietnam, there are theoretical and methodological parallels to other health issues and similar populations; these issues are briefly discussed in the Implications section.

Table IV-1. Selected factors associated with human trafficking and health

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM LEVELS	PHASES OF TRAFFICKING		
	(1) Pre-trafficking	(2) Peri-trafficking	(3) Post-trafficking
(A) Individual Level	A1.a Gender A1.b Age A1.c Marital status A1.d Socioeconomic status [‡] A1.e Country of origin A1.f Ethnic group ^{‡‡} A1.g Interpersonal violence	A2.a Type of exploitation A2.b Duration of trafficking A2.c Abuse/violence	A3.a Mode of exit A3.b Method of return
(B) Family/Social Relationships and Community Level	B1.a Family structures B1.b Social relationships B1.c Community structures	B2.a Social isolation	B3.a Family dynamics B3.b Social support B3.c Community stigma
(C) Societal/ Global Level	C1.a Socio-cultural values and norms	C2.a Cross-cultural issues C2.b Repatriation	C3.a Criminal evidence and prosecution

‡ Education is included as an aspect of socioeconomic status.

‡‡ Ethnic group refers to individuals' identification with the subpopulation that shares a set of similar language, lifestyle, and cultural practices and values.

A1. Pre-trafficking Individual Factors

A1.a. Gender

TIP involves men and boys as well as women and girls.²⁹ However, trafficking in women and girls (TIWG) comprise the majority of the identified cases of human trafficking in Vietnam and worldwide (International Labor Organization, 2012; U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).³⁰

All of the participants in the mixed-methods study were females. Consequently, the following discussions and subsequent interpretations of the findings are intended to reflect some of the circumstances of TIWG only, and have limited generalizability of the overall TIP situation in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the study's findings reveal important gender issues.

Within seven months (October 2012 – April 2013) of data collection for RISE, which is implemented in two of thirteen³¹ official land border crossings, at least 100 female victims of trafficking (VOTs) were officially identified out of the unknown number of people who had been trafficked or returned via other means. This absolute number of VOTs raises concerns regarding the TIP pattern in this region. A government report has noted a recent increase in the proportion of Vietnamese women trafficked to China; between 2005–2009, 60% of the identified VOTs were trafficked to China (V.N. Ministry of Labor Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010).

Findings from the qualitative study suggest two societal-level reasons for this pattern.³² One explanation is that the “female deficit,” a consequence of the one-child policy imposed in

²⁹ The literature on trafficking in men and boys, albeit scarce, suggests that males are mostly trafficked into exploitative labor contracts and conditions or state-imposed activities such as forced labor in prisons and armed conflicts (International Labor Organization, 2012). Trafficking in men, however, requires more extensive efforts to identify potentially variant patterns and effects.

³⁰ The Government of Vietnam historically defined TIP as an issue of (transnational) trafficking in women and children. In 2010, a revised law expanded the TIP definition to include domestic trafficking and trafficking in men (U.N. Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2010).

³¹ This figure comes from a Wikipedia (2014) article.

³² The potential explanations refer to factors operating at the societal/global level. However, they are discussed at the individual level because most of the women experience them on a personal level.

China, has propelled the increased volume of forced marriages of Vietnamese women to Chinese men. The other possibility is that the commercial sex activities in China, especially in border areas, has proliferated. These factors are not mutually exclusive. In fact, some evidence exists for the co-occurrence of both phenomena (Le, Béanger, & Khuat, 2007). However, the extent to which these socio-cultural – and political – processes in China directly contribute to the trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls remains unclear and should be investigated further.

Al.b. Age

Global estimates by the International Labor Organization (2012) suggest that adults (age 18 and above) comprise 74% of trafficked persons and that children (aged 17 and below) represent 26% of the total. However, the age range among trafficked persons varies with regional TIP patterns and type of exploitation (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Age can reveal some of the transitional processes associated with human trafficking and health pathways. Therefore, age should be assessed at various stages in the trafficking cycle.

Age at trafficking can reveal TIP recruitment patterns, and this information can help prevention efforts to focus on the age groups that are more vulnerable to trafficking. RISE data indicated that the majority (75%) of Vietnamese women surveyed belonged to the 14-25 age group. This statistic is in alignment with the findings from the qualitative study, which showed that these women were trafficked between the ages of 13 and 18, when they were of “marriageable age.” Thus, age and gender are intrinsically connected and should be examined together. When data about age at trafficking and knowledge about gender issues are combined, they enrich the understanding of the characteristics of groups who may be more vulnerable to TIP than others.

Similarly, individuals' ages after they exit the trafficking environment have implications for the trajectories of their recovery and (re)integration. For instance, trafficked women who return at age 17 have vocational and social opportunities that are different from those who return at age 24, even though both may have been trafficked at the same age. When age is examined with respect to the developmental pathways and in the particular context, as opposed to simply a measure of time, researchers and practitioners are able to connect this individual-level factor to the underlying social and cultural pathways and achieve a better comprehension of the multiple processes in TIP and their differential effects on health.

A1.c. Marital Status

Marriage is a significant life event in many cultures and it is a particularly important milestone for many women. Additionally, as previously mentioned, single – and usually, younger – women who are trafficked into forced marriages must contend with the potential ramifications of being deprived of a socially and culturally sanctioned marriage upon their return, and thus may subsequently experience negative psychosocial outcomes.

Marital status, however, is not a static characteristic; it is imbued with societal values, norms, and practices and should be interpreted in its cultural context. There is no global data on marital status among trafficked persons. The migration health literature suggests that single women are more likely than married women to undertake migratory risks (Pedraza, 1991). Thus, single women are probably highly vulnerable to trafficking.³³ This study's data from Vietnam support this hypothesis. In the qualitative study, all 15 of the women were single at trafficking (and two women married after returning to Vietnam). In the quantitative study, 69% of the

³³ Married and unmarried (widowed/separated) women are also be vulnerable to TIP. For instance, they may be compelled to undertake precarious employment opportunities for financial (e.g., to provide for their household) or non-financial (e.g., to escape domestic abuse/violence) reasons.

returnees reported “single” status at the time of the survey, which was conducted at the initial point of their return.³⁴ In-depth interviews with women who were trafficked into forced marriages suggested that they would not consider themselves as “married.” It is unclear if those surveyed in the quantitative study would hold similar views. (However, there is reason to believe that women in the quantitative study who were single prior to departure would not consider themselves as “married” although they were trafficked as wives, as these forced marriages would not be recognized by the State.) This shortsightedness in operationalizing this variable in the quantitative study serves as a valuable lesson of the nuanced meanings of marital status in TIP research and that this factor should be clarified as much as possible in future efforts.

A notable finding from the quantitative study is that women who were trafficked into marriages exhibited worse mental health than those trafficked into sex work (**Table II-2**, p. 23). This finding was unexpected at first because the literature on trafficking has emphasized the deleterious consequences of trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. However, given the qualitative study’s revelation of how marriage is imbued with societal values, norms, and practices in many of the communities, in Vietnam and elsewhere, the statistical finding becomes a more fitting illustration of the significance of marital status in the study of TIP and health.

A1.d. Socioeconomic Status (SES)

SES-Education: Studies that examine TIP and health have only included education as a measure of SES. The average educational level among RISE returnees was 5.2 years (median 5, SD 4.0, range 0–12). This suggests that TIP affects those with limited levels of formal education

³⁴ Marital status was assessed at interview. The distribution for marital status among RISE participants are as follows: 50 single, 9 married, 9 widowed/separated, 5 unknown (see **Table II-1**, p.16).

as well as those with higher educational levels. This finding corroborates the available data on TIP in other countries (Raymond et al., 2002). However, no global study or report has provided information on the educational level of trafficked persons. Education should be more systematically collected in TIP-related projects, in order to understand the potential significance of this aspect of SES.

In Vietnam, primary education is compulsory and supposedly tuition-free; however, the educational attainment differential between boys and girls, albeit small, are more pronounced in some regions, especially those in the mountainous areas in the northern and central provinces (Kelly, 2000). The qualitative study showed that many Vietnamese families, especially those in the rural areas, usually allow daughters to attend school only up to a certain point, as long as the daughters do not diminish the limited resources that are reserved for sons or older siblings. This finding is consistent with other studies on educational practices in Vietnam (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001; Behrman & Knowles, 1999; Bélanger & Liu, 2004; Truong, Knodel, Lam, & Friedman, 1998). Therefore, education should also be evaluated in the context of the educational system as well as the socio-cultural norms and values in the communities of origin, as the prevailing discrepancies between the established educational standards and the actual practices have important influences on the interpretations of educational status.

SES-Other: Besides education, studies have not included other SES measures, although (low) economic status (e.g., poverty) has been a central premise of many discussions and interventions aimed at alleviating the vulnerabilities and consequences of TIP. There are challenging theoretical and practical issues associated with the inclusion of SES measures. A foremost obstacle is the lack of a standard measure of SES, which is partly due to the recognition that the effect of SES on health is relative (Braveman et al., 2005). That is, the meaning and

significance of SES is dependent on a variety of factors associated with the context in which it is measured (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000).

Moreover, given the impoverished and unstable economic conditions of many of the individuals and communities who are affected by TIP, income and other commonly used SES indicators may not even be measurable, let alone be accurate and reliable. Some proposed alternative indicators and methods of measuring SES in health research exist. Examples include the Scale of Subjective Status that uses a 10-step ladder visualization (Adler et al., 2000; Operario, Adler, & Williams, 2004; Ostrove, Adler, Kuppermann, & Washington, 2000) and composite SES measures that evaluate multiple household assets (Shavers, 2007; Vyas & Kumaranayake, 2006). These alternative SES measures should be explored to ascertain their applicability to the study of human trafficking and health.

In RISE questionnaires, returnees were asked about their vocation/occupation prior to their departure. The lack of diversity of responses (74% reported no occupation or “worked on a farm”) reflects the ubiquitous resource-strapped environments in which many individuals resided. Unfortunately, this response distribution presents methodological challenges because quantitative data analysis techniques often require measurements to contain as much variability and granularity as possible (Treiman, 2008). In addition, RISE questionnaires could not include objective SES measures (such as a composite index of household assets) due to the study being implemented at the reception centers and not at the returnees’ homes. Future studies should anticipate – and address – similar measurement challenges, as victims are most likely found away from their places of origin.

AI.e. Country of Origin (COO)

Although internal (within-country) trafficking occurs, much of the literature has focused on transnational (cross-border) cases of TIP. Employing country of origin as the locus of discussions about TIP patterns can be useful because they enable comparisons across countries and highlight issues that should be addressed by nation-states, most of whom are Signatories to the benchmark international agreement on TIP, the Palermo Protocol (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).³⁵

One of the ways in which COO is emphasized is the method of ranking the nation-states based on the volume of TIP activities, as well as, the respective States' efforts and progress in combatting TIP and providing support for victims of trafficking. This emphasis is prominently practiced by the U.S. Department of State's (2001-2013) annual publication of the Trafficking in Persons Report, and to a lesser extent, by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime's (2009, 2012) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. There is a policy – and political³⁶ – imperative to focus on country of origin, especially by the anti-trafficking efforts in destination countries, because it has implications with regard to the (inter)national security issues, including immigration policies and repatriation mechanisms. COO is usually indirectly assessed in anti-trafficking efforts, as most projects (including this study) focus on either a single country of origin or country of destination.

³⁵ The Palermo Protocol is the “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime,” which defined Trafficking in Persons and outlined its associated international elements and agreements.

³⁶ The U.S.' TIP Reports have been criticized by many as presenting a biased, American-centric view, and that the Reports are primarily used as a political and diplomatic tool. A thorough discussion of these debates, including the ranking system employed by the TIP Reports, is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purpose of understanding transnational human trafficking trends, the country narratives included in TIP Reports provide useful background information.

A1.f. Ethnic Group

In some parts of the world, ethnic minority groups experience increased vulnerabilities to TIP. For instance, there are disproportionately high volumes of trafficked ethnic minorities and stateless Shan Burmese in Thailand (Kwah Dao, 2014; U.N. Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2014), and some ethnic or religious minorities from Pakistan are notably vulnerable to trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2013b). Ethnic minority status usually denotes an additional degree of marginalization within the individuals' socio-political realities (Mah, 2011). Therefore, an individual's ethnic group affiliation is a characteristic that should be considered, as it may help explain some of the TIP patterns and to anticipate issues that are particularly relevant to some groups but may be unknown due to the groups' diminished standings in society.

The data obtained from RISE offers the first set of statistics on the ethnic composition of a sample of Vietnamese returnees. Notably, the study found that 67% of the participants belonged to ethnic minority groups (**Table II-1**, p. 21). When this data is combined with the qualitative study's finding regarding the TIP vulnerabilities of some ethnic minority populations that reside in remote border communities, it is clear that ethnic identity should come to the foreground in future TIP-related projects in Vietnam and especially those conducted in the northern border provinces.

A1.g. Interpersonal Violence (IPV)

IPV may be a significant pre-departure stressor among trafficked individuals (Raymond et al., 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2006). In a study conducted among trafficked women who returned to Moldova, a high proportion (30%) of the sample reported childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and that

CSA (as well as duration of trafficking and post-trafficking stressors) predicted mental disorder at an average of 6 months post-return (Abas et al., 2013).³⁷

In the qualitative study, the anecdotes of domestic and spousal abuse, as well as the reported alcoholism among fathers, offer some support for the hypothesized relationship between pre-trafficking IPV and post-trafficking mental health. Additionally, several returnees suggested in the interviews that they had met some women who had been tricked and trafficked as they were trying to escape from their abusive domestic partnerships in Vietnam.

Among RISE participants, 11% (7 of 66)³⁸ reported having experienced domestic violence prior to departure. Although this rate appears low compared to the study conducted among returnees in Moldova, it should be interpreted in the Vietnamese context, where the concept of domestic violence is not in the common consciousness nor vocabulary, and thus is likely underreported.

Despite some recent efforts in documenting pre-trafficking IPV, the extent and processes by which IPV and other pre-departure stressors contribute to TIP vulnerabilities and health problems post-trafficking remains poorly understood. The general literature on abuse suggests that the link between childhood and adult sexual abuse/violence is strong (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2001; Finkelhor, 1987; Lindert et al., 2014). This provides additional reasons for further critical analysis of the interrelationships between childhood/pre-departure IPV, trafficking-related abuse, and post-trafficking health consequences.

³⁷ Due to the potential initial “survivor effect,” the variable “time since return” may contain bias. “At an average of 6 months post-return” means that among the study sample, their average time since return was 6 months. The range of “time since return” among the sample in the referenced study was 2-12 months.

³⁸ Among 66 RISE participants with data on this factor, seven reportedly experienced domestic violence prior to departure.

A2. Peri-trafficking Individual Factors

In the TIP health literature, researchers have included some combination of type of exploitation, duration of trafficking, and exposure to abuse/violence. These measures have probably been included in order to capture different, overlapping aspects of the adversity of the peri-trafficking phase. The current practices and implications of each factor, as well as how they are interrelated, are elaborated below.

A2.a Type of Exploitation

Sex trafficking, which usually connotes trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), has received the substantial share of the attention in the literature. Recently, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have focused on other forms of exploitation as well – e.g., labor exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced marriages.

“Type of exploitation” depends, to a large extent, on the perspective – and consequently, the classification system – of the reporting entity. For instance, an international NGO, Walk Free Foundation (2013), suggests that globally there are 29.8 million people being exploited in “modern slavery,” which includes of human trafficking.³⁹ The International Labor Organization (2012), on the other hand, provides estimates of 20.9 trafficked persons, who are categorized according to two main types of “forced labor” – state or private, with the latter inclusive of CSE and domestic servitude. However, this definition of “forced labor” does not include forced marriages unless they lead to a situation of forced labor or service. Given the potentially different

³⁹ As defined by Walk Free Foundation, “[m]odern slavery includes slavery, slavery-like practices (such as debt bondage, forced marriage and sale or exploitation of children), human trafficking for forced labor, and other practices described in key international treaties, voluntarily ratified by nearly every country in the world.” The treaties referred to include: 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery; the 1957 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery; the ILO Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labor; and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

interests of the entities involved, it is important to first understand how type of exploitation is conceptualized and defined in order to derive meaningful interpretations of the data.

In RISE surveys, type of exploitation is operationalized as a series of binary (yes/no) variables indicating if individuals were exploited in each of the following environments: commercial sex, forced marriage, domestic servitude, and/or other. Among those surveyed by RISE, CSE remains the most frequent (26%) identified form of exploitation, followed by forced marriage (18%) and domestic servitude (15%). In the qualitative study, which included women from the southern as well as northern border provinces, 80% of all women (all of those from the South, 57% of those from the North) were trafficked for sex work, and the remaining 20% of all women (none of those from the South, 53% of those from the north) were trafficked into forced marriages. In both studies, a few women were trafficked into multiple types of exploitation.

Type of exploitation is associated with the patterns of criminal, economic, social, and political networks that are specific to the geographical and cultural settings. For instance, most women in the southern provinces of Vietnam were usually trafficked to Cambodia and those in the northern provinces to China. Another example is the increased TIWG patterns (into the commercial sex industry) in Eastern European countries, which is believed to be a consequence of the de-stabilization of socio-economic and political structures following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union (International Organization for Migration, 2005).

A2.b. Duration of Trafficking

Duration of trafficking is an important characteristic of the trafficking experience. Studies have found trafficking duration to be associated with mental health outcomes among SOTs, with those who were trafficked for longer durations reporting more mental health problems (Abas et al., 2013; Tsutsumi, Izutsu, Poudyal, Kato, & Marui, 2008).

While some studies capture trafficking duration as the entire time the individual was abroad, others may measure only the time the individual was held captive in the final destination and do not include the transits and transfers. These differences in measuring trafficking duration reflect the variant TIP patterns in places where the studies are conducted. For example, a person may start out as a voluntary migrant (who may have asked to be smuggled) but she may later be exploited in the destination stage. In this scenario, it is preferable to include only the destination period, as it is important to distinguish between “voluntary” and “involuntary” experiences. Studies should provide clear specifications of how duration of trafficking is measured, as well as its relationship to the trafficking patterns of the context, so that the interpretations and comparisons are appropriate.

Interviews with Vietnamese returnees revealed that the women were tricked from the beginning and may have been trafficked multiple times and/or transferred through intermediaries before arriving at their ultimate destination(s) in the commercial sex industry or in individual families. Thus, RISE operationalized trafficking duration as the entire period of being abroad. Among RISE participants, the average duration of trafficking was 6.5 months (SD 9.7, range 0–36). Trafficking duration was significantly correlated with mental health symptoms ($r=0.291$, $p<0.05$) as well as trafficking abuse ($r=0.444$, $p<0.05$).

Although the qualitative interview data cannot confirm nor reject the hypothesized association between trafficking duration and mental health, its findings support the possibility – as qualified in the quantitative study – that the nature of the association may be nonlinear. That is, trafficked persons may, as the result of their evolved understanding of themselves within the trafficking circumstances, adjust their expectations and behaviors, thereby changing the underlying processes that affect the relationship between trafficking duration and mental health.

For example, trafficked women may adopt a psychological stance that enables them to justify their continued existence in extreme and coercive conditions, such as identifying with the perpetrators.⁴⁰ This will likely decrease their chances of exiting the trafficking situation, and will probably lead to more negative emotional consequences if they are disassociated from the environment to which they had emotionally adapted.

Type of exploitation and duration of trafficking are probably correlated. However, although stratified statistics of RISE data revealed that those trafficked into individual households (forced marriages, domestic servitude) were trafficked for longer average durations than those trafficked into sex work, the bivariate test of association between type of exploitation and duration of trafficking was not statistically significant. However, the returnees' narratives in the qualitative study revealed that quantitative estimates may be skewed, due to barriers of exiting the trafficking situation for some women who are trafficked into the domestic spheres. Those trafficked into marriages and domestic servitude were probably more likely to be trafficked further away from the borders, making their escape and/or rescue opportunities less likely than those in CSE. This hypothesized association between type of exploitation and duration of trafficking needs to be tested with further empirical evidence and in other settings.

A2.c. Abuse/Violence

Many extensive descriptions of trafficking-related abuse, violence, and trauma exist.⁴¹ Health studies on TIP, however, have only included limited aspects of TIP-related trauma – namely, exposure to sexual abuse/violence and physical abuse/violence.

⁴⁰ The example illustrates a potential psychological mechanism that trafficked women may adopt, which is informed by prior research on Stockholm syndrome, “the positive bond some kidnap victims develop with their captor,” (Namnyak et al., 2008, p. 4). However, there is no clear evidence to demonstrate the existence of such phenomenon among the trafficked women in this study. Therefore, this example should be interpreted in the context of its exploratory nature.

⁴¹ For an overview, see (Zimmerman et al., 2003).

As the quantitative study showed, VOTs are subjected to multiple and concurrent forms of abuse and violence (see **Table II-2**, p. 22, and **Appendix C**, p. 153). Returnees' narratives in the qualitative study confirm the severity of the trauma that trafficked persons are subjected to, and they also suggest that current quantitative instruments may not be adequate nor culturally appropriate, as they do not capture the severity and frequency of abuses nor the potentially different culturally-specific coping responses among some trafficked individuals.

In particular, the practice of obtaining binary (yes/no) responses to a pre-determined list of abuses may not be sufficient to capture the degree, duration, and repetition of trauma exposures. This has important implications for data interpretations and health consequences. For instance, SOTs may experience complex trauma such as complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may result in severe mental illness or may have unknown impact for some cultural groups, such as “disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified” (DESNOS). The existence of DESNOS is indicative of the failure to characterize some psychological mechanisms in mental health research, which is partly due to the Western bias in the field (Agbayani-Siewert, Takeuchi, & Pangan, 1999; Steel, Silove, Phan, & Bauman, 2002).⁴²

Findings from the qualitative study also suggest that other, previously unexamined forms of abuses may have important psychological effects on trafficked persons. For instance, the manipulation of the physical appearance of those trafficked into the sex industry (such as the cutting and dyeing of women's hair or the “revealing” clothes that some women are forced to wear) may negatively affect the individuals' sense of identity and damage their psychological status. Thus, the immediate and longer-term effects of, and responses to, such coercive tactics is an important line of inquiry for future anti-trafficking efforts.

⁴² DESNOS includes PTSD symptoms as well as depression, anxiety, dissociation, substance abuse, self-destructive and risk-taking behaviors, etc.

A3. Post-trafficking Individual Factors

A3.a. Mode of Exit

The physically and psychologically isolated environment built by traffickers can be quite effective in preventing trafficked individuals from escaping or being found. As a result, VOTs are often identified by law enforcement authorities via “rescue operations,” which are usually conducted among sex brothels.⁴³ Among RISE returnees, 70% exited the trafficking situation by police rescue and the remaining (30%) via other means, including self-escape and other types of rescue (see **Table II-2**, p. 22).

Mode of exit can disclose important characteristics of the trafficking experience and subsequent health consequences. For example, as the stories from returnees in the qualitative study suggest, a successful escape depends on the restrictiveness of the trafficking environment and the trafficked persons’ escape attempts, although the relationship may depend on the form of exploitation. However, while information on mode of escape contributes to the understanding of the trafficking process and subsequent health consequences, it should be interpreted in the context of the law enforcement environments, as well as, the bilateral and multilateral legal frameworks (see the **C2.b Repatriation** and **C3.a Prosecution** sections below).

⁴³ There are no published global statistics on the mode of exit/escape of identified victims of trafficking. However, many reports have suggested that law enforcement authorities are usually involved in the detection of trafficking cases (see examples in the Trafficking in Persons Reports). It is also important to note that scholars have criticized the “raid-and-rehabilitation” approach by law enforcement entities, which have resulted from – and further fuel – the “moral crusade” that have contributed to the disproportionate emphasis on commercial sexual exploitation in the trafficking discourse as well as the involuntary removal of women who may be exercising their “choice” to earn their income in the commercial sex sector (Soderlund, 2005; Weitzer, 2007).

A3.b. Method of Return

Once individuals are able to escape the immediate trafficking situation, they usually undergo a period of detention/deportation and criminal evidence that create consequences for their post-TIP experience.

In the qualitative study, some women reported experiencing fear and disorientation, in addition to the physical dangers, during their attempts to return to Vietnam. A returnee's story revealed that some women might be re-trafficked as the result of not receiving help for their journey back to their home country. Therefore, method of return – which refers to characteristics such as mode of travel (e.g., on foot, by bus, by air travel), duration of return travel, and whether trafficked persons undergo official repatriation procedures – should be examined. Factors related to the method of return have not been included in any study or report on TIP.

B1. Pre-trafficking Family/Social and Community Factors

B1.a. Family Structure

The findings from the qualitative study offer strong support for the proposition that families play an important role in a many individuals' vulnerabilities to TIP. In particular, family relationships may be abused, thereby increasing some individuals' propensity to undertake migration decisions that could put them at risk of being trafficked. Other narratives have also highlighted the significance of families – and to a lesser extent, social relationships – in the trafficking cycle; however, no such statistics currently exist (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012).

Family structure factors such as family composition (e.g., number of people in households, numbers of female and male siblings), illness in the family, parents' education, and family SES should be measured and evaluated on their effects in the context of TIP. For instance, migration studies have detected that parental education and involvement – in particular, maternal

education and support – affect children’s health and social well-being (Hagan, MacMillan, & Wheaton, 1996). This relationship is likely to apply in TIP as well. This would suggest that children in families where parents have higher levels of education are probably less vulnerable to trafficking than children whose parents have lower levels of education. If this relationship is empirically demonstrated, then efforts should focus on helping families with low parental education. Similarly, if studies find that families with higher daughter-to-son ratios are more likely to have trafficked daughters, then more resources should be dedicated to those families, in order to reduce the TIP vulnerabilities in many of these communities.

B1.b. Social Networks

Human trafficking recruitment mechanisms often rely on social relationships. Much of the criminal activities in TIP are believed to be highly correlated with drug trafficking, since the illicit and illusive mechanisms that have been established in trafficking narcotics could probably be adapted relatively easily in trafficking humans (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Therefore, the conventional wisdom is that human trafficking is mostly operated by major organized crime networks and that those who are not apparently associated with these criminal elements would be safe from trafficking.

However, recent data reveal that trafficked individuals are tricked by people whom they know as well as by strangers. For example, a study of sex trafficking in Mumbai found that 57% knew the assailant (as a friend or acquaintance, intimate partner, or relative) and 43% did not (Silverman et al., 2007). This study in Vietnam also found that most people were trafficked by someone they knew: 53% of RISE participants and 73% of the women in the qualitative study knew their trafficker. These results suggest that potential traffickers are quite embedded in the social networks surrounding vulnerable individuals. Thus, factors such as relationship to

trafficker and main recruitment strategies (e.g., job offer, “romantic” relationships initiated via internet chat rooms) would be useful in the efforts to determine likely cases and patterns of TIP, and to formulate campaigns to raise awareness about the common trafficking recruitment modes in certain settings.

B1.c. Community Structures

As with family and social relationships, no study has quantified the effects of community-level factors in TIP. The preclusion of community issues may be due to the difficulty in measuring social and environmental factors, a challenge that health researchers continue to face (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

Perhaps a promising start is to provide descriptions of the community-level issues, such as common practices in the community and level of community cohesion, and to include quantifiable characteristics such as the geographical proximity to borders and the ethnic composition of the village/community. An understanding of such factors may help elucidate and predict certain TIP patterns and effects. The qualitative study, for example, found that communities that are geographically, socially, and culturally isolated from other areas may be more vulnerable to TIP because of the limited exchange of information and the lack of awareness of TIP among the community members. Community factors, however, should be considered in conjunction with the individual and family factors, in order to provide the appropriate context to the understanding of the microsystem-level characteristics and circumstances.

B2. Peri-trafficking Family/Social and Community Factors

B2.a. Social Isolation

In addition to examining how social relationships contribute to TIP vulnerabilities, studies should also explore the effects of the relationships on trafficked persons’ sense of social

isolation. In the peri-trafficking phase, trafficked individuals are often subjected to extremely restricted physical environments. However, VOTs may experience variant degrees of social isolation that subsequently affect their different patterns of psychosocial functioning.

In a groundbreaking report, Human Rights Watch (2001) detailed the extreme isolation that many women who were trafficked into U.S. households as domestic servants experienced. These women were physically and psychologically entrapped. The “owners” often withheld the women’s personal identification documents (e.g., passports, work visas), forbid them to make contact with anyone, and threatened the women that if they had tried to run away, they would be criminalized and deported since they could not prove their legal presence in the country without the proper documentation. In many labor trafficking cases, especially those in factories, although the trafficked individuals are faced with physically austere conditions, they may not be as isolated from others as compared to those in other types of trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2005, 2009, 2013a). Regardless of the potentially divergent social isolation patterns, information and appropriate measures about the social and emotional connectedness of the destination environment should be captured.

As noted earlier, the quantitative study showed that, on average, those trafficked into marriages or domestic servitude exhibited worse mental health than those trafficked into sex work. The qualitative data provided a potential explanation for the quantitative results. The interviews revealed that those trafficked into sex work may be allowed to socially interact with others and thus may not feel as socially isolated as compared to those trafficked into households (as wives).⁴⁴ This finding corroborates the aforementioned reports in other contexts. The socially

⁴⁴ In the qualitative study, no returnee was trafficked into domestic servitude. Therefore, we can only compare between the types of trafficking that these study participants experienced – i.e., those trafficked into sex work and forced marriages.

isolated household environments are often in sharp contrast to the relatively dense social environment of most commercial sex venues. However, as described previously, some trafficked women in the qualitative study may have experienced discomfort as the result of having developed sympathetic attitudes toward their captors. Therefore, research and intervention procedures should take into account the SOTs' potential sense of guilt and retraumatization in recalling these conditions and experiences.

B3. Post-trafficking Family/Social and Community Factors

B3.a. Family Dynamics

Family dynamics, particularly those in the post-return phase, also require analytical attention. The RISE project did not include family-level variables in the analyses of trafficked returnees' health. The qualitative findings, however, provided compelling reasons to no longer exclude such factors in future projects, especially in efforts that provide services to children and young adults. The family remains the core microenvironment for many trafficked returnees in the study. These women were raised with family-oriented and collectivist values; relationships with community members, especially those with kin, are essential to their sense of self and consequently, their post-trafficking psychosocial outcomes.

Despite some challenges in capturing the family circumstances and scenarios that accompany an individual's environment, characteristics such as changes in the family structure (e.g., parents' divorce, separation, or remarriage; new family members), family exposure to stigma, and family members' attitudes and perceptions can inform efforts to reintegrate survivors of trafficking. For example, in a multi-level study examining factors related to the reintegration of formerly conscripted children in Nepal, Kohrt et al. (2010) found that while child-level variables (e.g., age, gender, education, marital status, age at recruitment, time since return, and

conflict-related trauma) explained 16% of reintegration supports, family variables (e.g., nuclear vs. joint family, number of family members in the household, religion, family caste, wealth) explained 26% of the reintegration supports.⁴⁵ Similar family dynamic factors could be incorporated in future designs and analyses of TIP-related efforts.

B3.b. Social Support

After a traumatic event, social support is critical in the recovery process (Kaniasty, 2005). In particular, social support has implications for the recovery of a trafficked individual, as trafficked individuals who attempt to (re)integrate in a community must do so in the context of their social interactions with others (Derks, 1998). Furthermore, since individual functioning may then shape the familial, communal, and societal exposures and responses to TIP, social support can result in dynamic effects. For example, families or communities that support trafficked returnees to become productive members of the community/society may positively influence the returnees' efforts to reduce other community members' vulnerability to being trafficked, which would create opportunities to improve the community capacity to respond to human trafficking.

The returnees in the qualitative study experienced many struggles with respect to navigating the emotional and instrumental barriers and resources of family, friends, and community members. Upon returning to their community, some women found that their friends were no longer allowed to associate with them, or that there were limited (or nonexistent) outlets to express their thoughts and emotions. The women who received reintegration services in shelters expressed gratitude for these supports, especially the emotional support from other

⁴⁵ "Reintegration supports" included factors such as "helped take me home," "welcomed me home," "allowed me to share my feelings," etc.

women survivors in the shelters. To date, however, there are no critical evaluations of the specific and long-term impact and effectiveness of most reintegration support programs (Surtees, 2010). A better empirical understanding of how families and relationships with others contribute to risk as well as protective factors in TIP is needed in future analyses, as such understandings could lead to more targeted and effective policies and interventions.

B3.c. Community Stigma

Related to social support, community awareness of TIP issues and community members' attitudes and behaviors toward returned trafficked persons have important health implications. For instance, the community-level acceptance of trafficked persons may influence the returnees' decisions to either re-establish their livelihoods in their native community or in a different setting altogether.

The qualitative study showed that the conflation between TIP and the commercial sex sector exacerbates the negative perceptions of TIP and thus, the stigma imposed on returnees. Furthermore, the study on former Nepalese child soldiers also showed that community-level variables (conflict mortality, female literacy, high caste proportion) contributed 10% of the explanatory power for mental health outcomes among the study participants (Kohrt et al., 2010). These community-level factors should be assessed, in order to identify important characteristics that encapsulate many returnees' social and cultural environments.

C1. Pre-trafficking Societal/Global Factors

C1.a. Socio-cultural values and norms

Socio-cultural issues are important structural factors that contribute to human trafficking vulnerabilities (Raymond et al., 2002). In particular, gender inequities such as women's limited educational and economic opportunities, as well as gender-based violence, perpetuate women's

inferior status in the social and power structures in many societies, and propel the trafficking in women and girls worldwide (Dunlop, 2008). As the qualitative study showed, some gendered socio-cultural norms have a prominent effect on TIP patterns. For instance, the practice of “wife kidnapping” in some ethnic minority groups and the ramifications of the “female deficit” in China are forces that intertwine to increase the TIP vulnerabilities of many Vietnamese women and girls.

The reality that many women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking highlights the significance of gender issues and thus the need for gender-sensitive approaches to human trafficking. A gender-based approach to TIP acknowledges the gender inequities and women’s marginalized social locations. However, it is also grounded in the perspective that women should not be further deprived of their agency and empowerment (D’Cunha, 2002).

Anti-trafficking efforts often adopt the perspective that women and girls who are trafficked originate from positions of extreme vulnerability. This narrow approach further marginalizes women’s social, cultural, political, and economic locations and may inadvertently reinforce the status quo, rendering such approaches counterproductive to their stated goals of women’s empowerment and human rights (Desyllas, 2007; Musto, 2009).

Moreover, a careful treatment of gender should be employed, to avoid erroneously conceptualizing gender as a homogeneous and static characteristic – i.e., as sex. Gender-sensitive approaches should situate gender within power dynamics that shape women’s – and men’s – personal and social opportunities and constraints, as well as, how gender may in turn reconstitute power and social dynamics (Hammarstrom & Ripper, 1999). That is, studies and projects should examine how some people, despite having been trafficked as the result of gendered elements, may end up reshaping those very gendered dynamics.

An example of a gender-sensitive approach is the application of feminist research principles that recognize the multitude of women's voices as legitimate sources of knowledge and experiences (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). The qualitative study applied this approach, in order to provide a forum for the voices of these women survivors to be considered in TIP research and analyses, especially because their experiences and truths are underrepresented and understudied. The qualitative study showed that such gender-sensitive approaches enhance the knowledge of TIP issues because they enforce a more contextual understanding of the women's lived experiences.

C2. Peri-trafficking Societal/Global Factors

C2.a. Cross-cultural issues

Due to the physical displacement of trafficked persons and the potentially pronounced differences between places of origin and destination, cross-cultural issues may arise. From the qualitative interviews revealed that transnational ethnic ties – i.e., the concordance or discordance of ethnic affiliation between the (Vietnamese) trafficked individuals and other actors in the destination environments (in China) – may affect the TIP conditions and relationships. For example, a woman was helped by a Chinese family because they shared the same ethnic group affiliation. In another case, a Vietnamese H'mong woman, when offered the “choices,” reasoned that she would be better off if she were sold into a Chinese H'mong family than another family who may not share her ethnicity.

Qualitative research methods may be better equipped to explore these structural factors because they can investigate the layers of complexities that are not easily captured by standardized instruments (Bernard, 2007). However, there are quantitative analysis techniques that can identify the existence of cross-cultural issues. Some quantitative studies have included

countries of origin and destination, but mostly in the descriptive statistics. Even though most of these studies lacked sufficient sample size to conduct more sophisticated statistical procedures such as hierarchical linear regression, researchers should control for country of origin or conduct stratified analyses, in order to reveal the potential differences or commonalities of TIP conditions due to cross-cultural issues. If cross-cultural patterns emerge from quantitative analyses, they can then be triangulated with findings from the in-depth qualitative methods, or vice versa. These statistical techniques and the use of different methodological approaches could help formulate a more complete and better substantiated understanding of the issues operating at the societal level (Bernard, 2007).

C2.b. Repatriation

Policies and procedures associated with the repatriation process are important factors, as they dictate the terms of return for many VOTs (Shchloenhardt & Loong, 2011). The repatriation factors are extensions of those associated with mode of exit, but refer to characteristics at the national and international levels.

It might be difficult to determine variables that would capture the repatriation experience, but viable indicators are the number and types of policy in bilateral or multilateral agreements. However, issues such as the local authorities' willingness and resources to execute the established proceedings are varied and can be difficult to assess. Despite these challenges, there are methods to qualify and quantify repatriation issues. One technique is to conduct analyses stratified by the VOTs' port of departure and/or return. A related method is to analyze data using geographical information systems (GIS). For instance, sentinel surveillance systems can be established and analyzed using GIS software in order to portray policy and law enforcement gaps by visually illustrating discrepant patterns of departure and return routes.

C3. Post-trafficking Societal/Global Factors

C3.a. Criminal Evidence and Prosecution

Legal structures and proceedings regarding the criminal evidence and prosecution process are critical factors in the post-trafficking stage because they affect survivors' ability to cope (Zimmerman et al., 2003). Several women in the qualitative study indicated that the investigation and trials involved in the prosecution of traffickers inhibited their well-being because the process was accompanied by fears of reprisal and a heightened sense of insecurity in the homeland.

The extent to which these criminal and legal aspects of TIP affect trafficked individuals, however, have not been adequately addressed in practice. Many individuals and organizations have advocated for victim-centered approaches among law enforcement authorities; however, the implementation of such legal procedures have been lackluster at best or incompetent at worst (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2008). Any examination of the recovery process among SOTs should incorporate an understanding of the individuals' surrounding legal and criminal frameworks. For instance, the rate of prosecution and convictions of TIP crimes, as well as the adoption of victim protection assistance mechanisms, can provide information about the legal context that shape survivors' recovery process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND INTERVENTIONS

As the previous section illustrates, the Ecological-Transitional Framework provides a schematic to help conceptualize and organize the existing evidence and to identify the knowledge gaps, to inform the design and implementation of efforts to serve the needs of survivors of trafficking. Ultimately, the framework specifies that (1) individuals are embedded in nested, interrelated ecological system levels, and that (2) there are issues and processes associated with the transitions between the ecologic levels and trafficking stages as well as the developmental and

socio-cultural pathways. These properties highlight several themes and provide some directions for future research and interventions to better understand human trafficking and health issues.

First, an ecological perspective enhances the understanding of the multitude of factors contextually and increases the validity of data interpretations. This ecological approach is especially useful in examining the intersection of complex phenomena such as human trafficking and health. In the TIP literature, quantitative studies have primarily focused on the effects of individual-level factors such as age, gender, education, and exposure to abuse/trauma. Despite revelations from qualitative assessments suggesting the importance of supra-individual factors, no strong empirical evidence exists regarding the role of families and communities, nor the potential effects of societal-level issues in magnifying or dampening the health effects of TIP. Future studies should address this knowledge gap.

An ecological approach can guide researchers and practitioners in identifying the relative or combined contributions of factors at different levels of influence (Morgenstern, 1995). Efforts that do not include multiple levels (such as the analyses in the quantitative study) are limited in their explanatory power because they preclude the potentially consequential effects of the forces and processes operating dynamically in multiple dimensions. Some health studies have shown that interventions that address factors at multiple levels can yield the efficacy that cannot be achieved by single-level interventions (Bond et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 2007). Therefore, future anti-TIP projects should incorporate factors at multiple levels, in order to maximize their potential understandings and effectiveness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ A methodological issue commonly associated with multi-level analyses is ecological bias (i.e., ecological fallacy), which refers to the inappropriate justification of an association observed at the aggregate level to an association at the individual level (Idrovo, 2011; Morgenstern, 1995). That is, in studies that observe a correlation between two variables using a group of individuals as a unit of analysis, but if individual-level factors are not included, no conclusions can be made about the association at the individual level.

Second, a process-oriented examination of issues is warranted as well. In particular, while snapshots of TIP and health issues (e.g., using cross-sectional surveys) are useful, studies that measure changes over time or compare different waves of individuals (i.e., cohorts) would provide a more accurate understanding of the factors and the underlying processes (Diez-Roux, 2000). Cohort studies can highlight the dynamics of the life cycle and situate the lives of a group of trafficked individuals in their specific historical circumstances. For instance, returnees could be followed over the years to reveal cohort effects – e.g., differences between those who returned before and after changes in legal provisions of victim assistance protection mechanisms.

However, careful considerations of the specific cultural context are needed when some TIP factors that have been detected as important in some settings are applied to other settings. For example, although gender issues such as gender-based violence may contribute considerably to the trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation in many countries, the caste system in India appears to be a more influential structural factor in some situations (Kara, 2008; Kristof & WuDunn, 2010). These variations in cultural contexts have several methodological implications, including the questionable validity and reliability of some (quantitative) questionnaires, as well as, the need for approaches that provide better assessments of the contexts, such as those offered by qualitative and ethnographic methods. These issues have been and continue to be extensively discussed in the public health literature (Bhui, Warfa, Edonya, Mckenzie, & Bhugra, 2007; Kagawa-Singer & Chung, 2002; Sasao & Sue, 1993) and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, such issues should be addressed in the study of TIP and health.

Limitations of the Framework

The proposed Framework presents several challenges. First, a major methodological obstacle is the lack of data available to fully investigate the complexities of TIP and health that the

Framework emphasizes. Data on TIP is woefully inadequate and access to trafficked individuals is limited (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2006). Moreover, researchers and practitioners who have worked with SOTs and similar vulnerable populations highlight the difficulties in obtaining accurate and detailed information from the survivors, as most of them have experienced psychological processes that negatively affected their memory and (lack of) trust and willingness to share personal information to others (Zimmerman et al., 2003). However, it is critical to develop and implement approaches that facilitate informative disclosure without compromising the recovery process for SOTs. Researchers associated with the World Health Organization have developed a set of guidelines for interviewing trafficked persons; these guidelines are based on the understanding that trafficked persons are a vulnerable population, and at the same time, they should be treated as people who are agents of their lives (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003). Such principles should be adopted and refined to the particular contexts.

Second, although randomized (exposure) designs are optimal in order to best understand processes and to establish causal inferences (Aschengrau & Seage, 2003), they are difficult to implement in the study of intricate phenomena such as human trafficking. However, alternative options include time-series designs or quasi-experimental studies that use matching techniques to achieve comparability (Aschengrau & Seage, 2003). The Framework's multi-dimensional approach also advocates for the understanding and application of multiple methodological techniques, which will likely be time-intensive and cost-prohibitive.

Third, the emphasis on the circumstantial dynamics of human trafficking and health may limit the ability of analysts and advocates to generalize and apply evidence from a particular context to another. This makes it difficult to extract specific factors that can be universally addressed. The impetus for standardization, however, must be restrained. In public health issues,

knowledge that is acontextual can be misaligned and ineffective (Link & Phelan, 1995).

Contextual issues and processes that affect certain groups of individuals or settings should be described and then compared and contrasted to those in other groups or contexts so that patterns can be identified from the diversity and specificity of the evidence.

CONCLUSION

Studies on human trafficking and health usually focused on either quantitative analyses of individual characteristics or qualitative descriptions of structural factors. If advancements are to be made in the research and responses regarding the health consequences of TIP, anti-trafficking efforts must consider the reality that trafficked individuals are affected by an intricate web of issues and processes, and that neither TIP nor health has causes and consequences that are contained solely at the individual level nor in a specific time period.

Public health principles from Ecological Theory, Stages of Trafficking Model, and Life Course perspective were integrated to propose an Ecological-Transitional Framework from which to view human trafficking and health. The proposed Framework promotes a more holistic and dynamic approach to investigate and address the multiple layers and processes associated with the health of those affected by human trafficking.

The Framework could also serve as a template for delineating the risk and protective factors operating in the interrelated ecological system levels and transitional processes. The analysis of the findings from the mixed-methods study in Vietnam applied this template, and demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the evidence as well as the knowledge gaps of the psychosocial issues among this population. Although the triangulation of findings illustrated the Framework's potential utility as a schematic to better understand the factors and processes associated with human trafficking and health, it was the study's use of multiple methodologies –

a quantitative, deductive approach combined with a qualitative, inductive approach – that enabled the formulation of the Framework.

Despite its origins from a small study in Vietnam, the Framework’s two central tenets toward the intersectional analysis of human trafficking and health – *ecological system levels* and *transitional processes* – are applicable to other health issues as well as cultural contexts. This Framework could be tested in other population groups and health dimensions, in order to improve its utility and to generate a more comprehensive and global understanding of human trafficking and health issues.

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[V] CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

This study examined the psychosocial issues among a group of survivors of trafficking who returned to their country of origin, Vietnam.

In the quantitative study, we analyzed the association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms among a group of returnees. The participants were recruited as they accessed RISE, a post-trafficking project implemented at the Vietnam-China border. The result from a pilot sample ($n=73$) indicated that the RISE participants reported high levels of trafficking abuse, high levels of post-trafficking psychological symptoms, and that the post-trafficking psychological symptoms appear to be associated with the experience of abuse while trafficked. These findings consistent with prior research (Beyrer & Stachowiak, 2003; Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009; Cwikel, Chudakov, Paikin, Agmon, & Belmaker, 2004; Sarkar et al., 2008; Zimmerman, Hossain, & Watts, 2011).

The quantitative study also revealed that the experiences of trafficking abuse and mental health problems at return may differ between women trafficked for different purposes. Specifically, women who were trafficked into households, as wives or domestic servants, may have exhibited worse mental health than those trafficked into sex work. However, the study's small sample size limits its statistical power to detect the true relationship, if such existed. Therefore, these finding should be interpreted cautiously, and should be tested in larger samples and other settings.

In the qualitative study, we interviewed returnees ($n=15$) in various reintegration projects at the Vietnam-Cambodia and the Vietnam-China borders in order to understand their trafficking experiences and coping responses. The emergent themes revealed that as the women experienced

conflicting emotions and circumstances throughout the stages of trafficking, they employed multiple strategies to navigate to a renewed sense of self. These strategies included: regulating emotional expression and thought; creating opportunities within constraints; and relating to cultural schemas. Findings from the qualitative study showed that issues associated with the environments and relationships – such as family and social relationships, community structures and practices, and societal values and norms – can exert potentially powerful influences on the individuals’ trafficking experiences as well as coping responses. As a result, it is important to examine the contextual parameters that contribute to the vulnerabilities and impact in human trafficking.

In the synthesis study, we triangulated the quantitative and qualitative findings with the goal of providing a comprehensive survey of the current understanding, as well as the knowledge gaps, of the psychosocial issues that affect some survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. This analytical process also resulted in the formulation of the Ecological-Transitional Framework, which integrated public health concepts to derive two tenets with respect to the understanding of human trafficking and health: *ecological system levels* and *transitional processes*. As the triangulation of the study findings illustrated, the application of the Framework generated a more holistic and contextual understanding of the (mental) health issues associated with human trafficking.

LIMITATIONS, STRENGTHS, AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations

The study findings should be interpreted with limitations. First, all of the participants surveyed and interviewed in this study were females. Consequently, the study’s results are intended to

reflect some of the circumstances of trafficking in women and girls only and have limited generalizability of the overall TIP situation in Vietnam or the issues related to trafficking in men and boys.

Second, both the qualitative and quantitative studies consisted of specific and small samples, which also limit the generalizability of the findings. Since the quantitative study was implemented at (two) official reception centers located at the Vietnam-China border, the results only represent some of the issues experienced by women who had been trafficked to China and identified via the study sites. The patterns and effects may be different among women trafficked to other destinations and those who returned at other locations. Although the qualitative study also included women who were trafficked to Cambodia (and one woman who was trafficked to Malaysia), its findings also have limited generalizability because we only interviewed returnees at reintegration projects. Issues among women who did not receive post-trafficking support services are not represented in either study.

Third, the study's cross-sectional, convenience sampling design restricts its interpretations to only correlational, not causal, relationships. For instance, the statistically significant, positive association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms found in the quantitative study does not imply that increased trafficking abuse causes more mental health problems among the study sample. Many other factors must be evaluated before the hypothesized relationship can be demonstrated as causal (Rothman & Greenland, 2005).

The quantitative study's convenience sampling strategy limits its ability to utilize statistical inference in order to generalize the findings to the population from which the study participants might represent (Treiman, 2008). Similarly, the convenience sample of participants

in the qualitative study limited the range of experiences captured to only those who accessed reintegration services at the study sites.

Fourth, since this observational study uses self-reported data, the results may contain several measurement biases. In the qualitative study, the author was the research instrument. Although the author made every attempt to conduct the study in a reflexive manner – by recognizing, acknowledging, and delimiting some of the assumptions and biases, data collection and analyses remain influenced by many unrecognized biases and assumptions (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In the quantitative study, the obtained self-reported data are also subjected to biases, including non-response bias, recall bias, and social desirability bias (Aschengrau & Seage, 2003). In addition, the quantitative findings may contain biases associated with the initial “survivor effect” because the respondents were surveyed when they first returned to their home country and thus at a time when they probably experienced more positive than negative psychological states.

Strengths and Implications

The high levels of abuse and psychological symptoms, as well as the confirmed association between trafficking abuse and psychological symptoms among the RISE sample, suggest that there is a need to develop and provide mental health services to serve the needs of this population and similar groups, especially those who have experienced high levels of abuse and violence while trafficked. The disaggregated data and the differences found between groups based on types of exploitation suggest that future studies and interventions should incorporate the potentially different needs and conditions between those trafficked into different exploitative environments.

The quantitative study also addresses some important limitations in prior research by using a cross-culturally validated psychological assessment instrument and by operationalizing trafficking abuse as a composite measure. These methods increase the validity of data interpretations and account for the likely interactive effects of multiple traumas on mental health, respectively.

Both studies found high levels of abuse/violence that the trafficked persons experienced. Scholars and practitioners should continue to document these experiences, in order to build on the understanding of the scope of impact of TIP. However, as the qualitative findings showed, efforts should also investigate how trafficked individuals interpret these experiences, and how such interpretations could impact their subsequent health and well-being.

The qualitative findings also affirmed the perspective positing the centrality of cultural contexts in shaping individuals' styles of managing adversity, while trafficked as well as when they return to their native country and community. As a result, a contextual, cultural systems approach (Kagawa-Singer & Chung, 2002) is recommended to improve the understanding of the vulnerabilities and impact of human trafficking. In particular, there needs to be a better understanding of the risk as well as protective factors associated with the familial, social, and communal relationships in the study of human trafficking and health.

The dissertation study has illustrated that by utilizing multiple methodological approaches, it contributes to the understanding of the scope as well as the depth of the conditions and dynamics that affect a group of survivors of trafficking in Vietnam. The triangulation of the findings generated the proposed Ecological-Transitional Framework. This Framework offers scholars, practitioners, and policy makers a means to engage in more holistic investigations of the issues, and in the development of potentially more effective anti-trafficking efforts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Trafficking of persons, particularly women and children, for forced and exploitative labor, including sexual exploitation, is one of the most egregious violations of human rights...It is rooted in social and economic conditions in the countries from which the victims come, facilitated by practices that discriminate against women and driven by cruel indifference to human suffering on the part of those who exploit the services that the victims are forced to provide. The fate of these vulnerable people in our world is an affront to human dignity and a challenge to every State, every people and every community.

(Kofi A. Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations)

Human trafficking has potentially far-reaching causes and consequences. From local grassroots organizations to global inter-governmental initiatives, efforts have strived to understand, mitigate, and prevent the social, economic, and health impact of human trafficking. Despite the increase of such initiatives in recent years, little is known about the trafficking experiences and their associated health effects. Moreover, Vietnam is a significant source country for trafficking and the Asia Pacific region comprises the largest proportion of victims of trafficking (International Labor Organization, 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2013). However, the experiences of these populations have not been captured nor represented in the literature.

This dissertation contributes much-needed empirical evidence and analytical techniques in the examination of the experiences of Vietnamese women who have been trafficked and returned to their country of origin. The women in this study represent only a small group of those who have been trafficked. The stories of those still in their trafficked destinations or those who do not receive reintegration supports remain, as yet, untold. The study focuses on psychosocial issues and on the TIP patterns in Vietnam. However, the findings, as well as the illustrated conceptual and methodological approaches, provide some future directions for more multi-faceted and multi-dimensional public health efforts to address the causes and consequences of human trafficking in similar populations globally.

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APPENDICES

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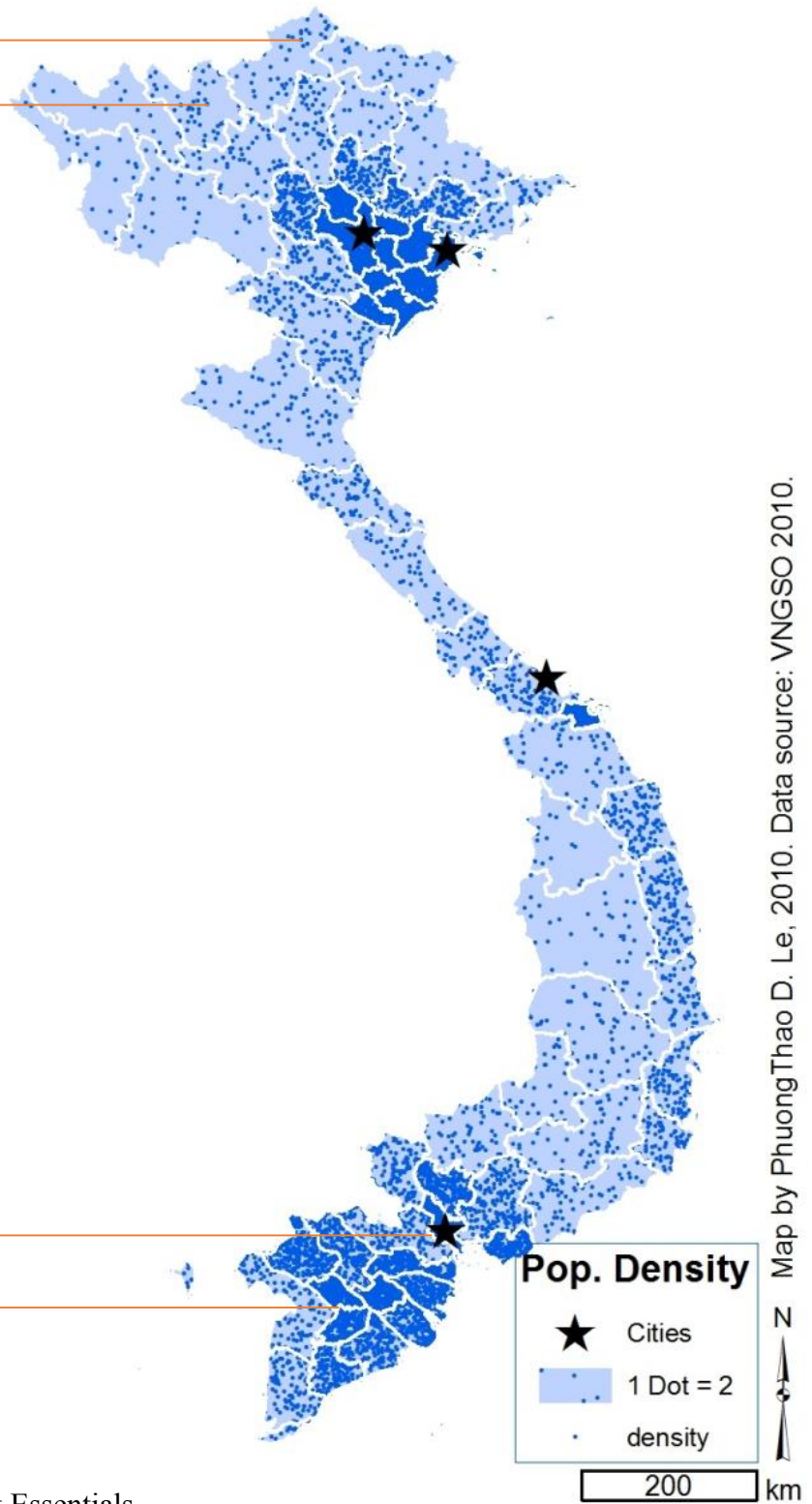
APPENDIX A. LOCATIONS OF STUDY SITES

RISE

RISE, Interviews-S

Interviews-C

Interviews-S



Note:

RISE: Returnee Initial Support Essentials.

Interviews-C/S: Interviews conducted at community- or shelter-based reintegration projects.

**APPENDIX B. CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED AND REFUSED/EXCLUDED
RISE PARTICIPANTS**

	All RISE Participants (n=92)				<i>p</i> -value ¹
	Included in Study (n=73)		Refused/ Excluded (n=19)		
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	
Demographic Characteristics					
Age at interview (years), <i>mean ± SE</i>	21.8 ± 1.50		21.5 ± 0.64		0.601
Education (grade completed), <i>mean ± SE</i>	5.2 ± 0.50		6.3 ± 0.91		0.192
Ethnicity					0.112
Kinh (majority)	12	(16)	4	(21)	
Dao	16	(22)	0	(0)	
H'mong	14	(19)	4	(21)	
Other (minority)	19	(26)	4	(21)	
Unknown	12	(16)	5	(26)	
Marital status at interview					0.456
Single	50	(68)	15	(79)	
Widowed/Separated	9	(12)	3	(16)	
Married	9	(12)	0	(0)	
Unknown	5	(7)	1	(5)	
Trafficking Characteristics					
Age at trafficking (years), <i>mean ± SE</i>	21.0 ± 0.62		20.7 ± 1.33		0.581
Duration of trafficking (months), <i>mean ± SE</i>	6.5 ± 1.13		10.7 ± 4.1		0.379
Mode of exit					1.000
Police rescue	51	(70)	13	(68)	
Self/Family/Other rescue	15	(21)	4	(21)	
Other/Unknown	7	(10)	2	(11)	
Type of exploitation ^{II}					0.077
Sex work	19	(26)	7	(37)	
Marriage	13	(18)	6	(32)	
Domestic servitude	11	(15)	2	(11)	
Other/Undeclared	30	(41)	4	(21)	

All females (*N*=92). RISE: Returnee Initial Support Essentials (October 2012 – April 2013).
SE: standard error. ¹ The Mann-Whitney test was used for continuous variables and Fisher's Exact test for categorical variables.

APPENDIX C. ANALYSES OF TRAFFICKING ABUSE ITEMS AND SCORE

Distribution of the Original 18 Abuse/Violence Items

	Sex Work n=19	Marriage n=13	D. Serv. n=11	Other/Und. n=30	Total Sample N=73	
%	12 63.16	8 61.54	8 72.73	19 63.33	47 64.38	threats to self
%	3 15.79	1 7.69	3 27.27	0 0.00	7 9.59	threats to family
%	4 21.05	0 0.00	1 9.09	2 6.67	7 9.59	threats via legal means
%	9 47.37	12 92.31	6 54.55	12 40.00	39 53.42	tricked
%	12 63.16	8 61.54	4 36.36	4 13.33	28 38.36	restricted movement
%	7 36.84	1 7.69	7 63.64	1 3.33	16 21.92	forced drug use
%	6 31.58	5 38.46	4 36.36	9 30.00	24 32.88	no healthcare access
%	2 10.53	2 15.38	1 9.09	6 20.00	11 15.07	no food/water
%	8 42.11	1 7.69	7 63.64	2 6.67	18 24.66	withheld wage
%	7 36.84	2 15.38	4 36.36	3 10.00	16 21.92	withheld ID documents
%	6 31.58	1 7.69	5 45.45	6 20.00	18 24.66	withheld travel documents
%	3 15.79	0 0.00	2 18.18	1 3.33	6 8.22	debt bondage
%	4 21.05	1 7.69	2 18.18	5 16.67	12 16.44	overworked
%	4 21.05	3 23.08	8 72.73	8 26.67	23 31.51	forced alcohol use
%	9 47.37	4 30.77	8 72.73	10 33.33	31 42.47	physical abuse
%	6 31.58	6 46.15	8 72.73	9 30.00	29 39.73	emotional abuse
%	5 26.32	6 46.15	9 81.82	9 30.00	29 39.73	labor abuse
%	16 84.21	5 38.46	10 90.91	13 43.33	44 60.27	sexual abuse

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR RETURNEES

Archival #	Date	Start	End	Pseudonym
IR-____-____	201__/__/____	__:__	__:__	

Giới Thiệu

Trước khi bắt đầu, cho tôi xin phép xác nhận:

1. Bạn có hiểu mục đích của nghiên cứu này?
2. Bạn có được nghe tôi đã giải thích tiến trình phỏng vấn?
3. Bạn có hiểu bạn có nguy cơ bị khó chịu và buồn bã khi bạn tham gia phỏng vấn?
4. Tôi có trả lời tất cả các câu hỏi của bạn?
5. Bạn có đồng ý tham gia cuộc phỏng vấn?
6. Bạn có đồng ý cho thu âm?

Introduction

Before I begin, please allow me to confirm:

1. Do you understand the purpose of the study?
2. Have I explained to you how the interview works?
3. Do you understand the potential risks of discomfort and distress by participating?
4. Have I answered all your questions?
5. Do you consent for the interview?
6. Do you consent for the sound recording?

Câu Hỏi | Questions

1. Xin bạn cho biết kinh nghiệm của bạn từ khi trở về VN.
Please tell me your experience since you have returned to VN.

Probes

- Living situation*
- Health*
- Emotions*

2. Cuộc sống của bạn như thế nào trước khi bạn rời VN?
How was your life before you left Vietnam?

- Family*
- Education, job*

3. Thời gian ở nước ngoài bạn sống như thế nào?
Can you tell me how it was when you were abroad?

- Conditions*
- Trauma*
- Exploitation*

4. Xin bạn cho biết quá trình trở về của bạn như thế nào?
Can you describe the process of returning to Vietnam?

- Authorities*
- Services*
- Support, coping*

5. Theo suy nghĩ của bạn, khi nào thì tình trạng của mình mới là “tốt”?
How do you know that your situation is “good”?

- Outcomes*
- Services*

Kết Thúc

Cám ơn bạn đã tham gia nghiên cứu.

Nhớ là bạn có thể liên lạc tôi hoặc những người đã được nêu trên danh thiếp nếu bạn có thắc mắc về nghiên cứu này.

Conclusion

Thank you for participating in the study.

Remember that you can contact me or any of the people listed on the business card if you have questions about the study.