

Transnational Migration, Marriage and Trafficking at the China-Vietnam border

Le Bach Duong, Institute for Social Development Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam
Danièle Bélanger, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada
Khuat Thu Hong, Institute for Social Development Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam

Paper abstract

Demographic evidence documents an increasing female deficit in China over the past decades. Partly resulting from rising discrimination against females, this sex imbalance has important and long-term implications. This paper examines the consequences of the shortage of females in China for transnational migration and trafficking of Vietnamese women across the China-Vietnam border.

Within China, two provinces sharing a border with Vietnam – Guang Xi and Yunnan – are among those with the highest gender imbalances. This female deficit is creating a market for foreign wives and foreign female workers. Other factors such the high cost of marriage (bride price) for Chinese men and the need for agricultural labor also create a demand for foreign wives and daughters-in-law. Pervasive inequalities in gender and intergenerational relations make foreign wives attractive because of their vulnerable and captive position.

For the Vietnamese, the opening of the border has translated into increasing opportunities to migrate to China for social and economic reasons. Women, in particular, have crossed the China-Vietnam border in search of a spouse or a job. Single women considered too old to marry in Vietnam, see in migration an opportunity to find a spouse and have children. The dynamic Chinese economy and booming border region make migration to China particularly attractive for Vietnamese women facing poverty and unemployment.

This paper will examine data on 213 women who have migrated or have been trafficked to China and have returned to Vietnam. Questionnaire and interview data collected in 2005 provide information on the circumstances of these women's migration and return. The paper documents women's perspectives on the process of leaving their village, living in China and returning to Vietnam. In addition, the study describes traffickers' strategies to recruit, transport and sell Vietnamese women as wives or sex workers in China. We conclude that social, economic and gender inequalities at the macro and micro levels together contribute to the flourishing trafficking market of Vietnamese women. By studying women's trajectories, the paper also discusses how migration and trafficking are intertwined and difficult to disentangle conceptually.

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Le Bach Duong¹, Danièle Bélanger² and Khuat Thu Hong³

Introduction

The end of the Cold war has marked a radical change in the history of international migration processes (Castles 2000). After several decades of controlled and limited international mobility, citizens of the former or reformed communist States began to have new opportunities to cross borders for tourism, visits, temporary or permanent migration for work and other socio-economic needs. At the same time, the opening of borders of these nation-states has led to important in-flows of nationals from other countries. The increase in internal and international migrations within and between China and Vietnam are part of this important migration transition. Changing migration patterns in these two reformed economies (from planned to market) are generally linked to the far-reaching economic changes of the past two decades, accompanied by necessary 'more' open-border policies that facilitate the circulation of goods, capital, and people (Dang Nguyen and Le Bach Duong 2001; Dang Nguyen 2003).

Simultaneously to this trend, the Asian region began to experience more intra-regional political and economic activities. The case of migration flows speaks to this important change. While in the 1970s and 1980s, the vast majority of Asian migrant workers migrated to the rich-oil countries of the Middle-East, this trend now has changed in favor of intra-Asia migration (International Organization for Migration 2005). Citizens of many developing countries of Asia now consider migration, for the most part temporary work migration, in the realm of possibilities to better their lives (Hugo 2004). Most male migrants work in manufacturing and fisheries, and most female migrants labour as nannies, domestic workers or in the entertainment/sex industry (Piper 2004). Due to the disengagement of sending governments in the recruitment and training process of workers, a private and semi-private migration industry that recruits, trains and transports workers across borders and waters has rapidly developed. Not all recruitment is legal, fair and ethical, however, and potential workers can easily be lured by illegal agents and agencies disguised as official ones. Trafficking and smuggling are important problems of the deregulated and privatized Asian labour migration industry (Piper 1999).

In addition to the increases in work migration in Asia, marriage migration is on the rise with men from richer nations looking for wives in poorer ones (Piper and Roces 2003; Constable 2005). Vietnam is known for having supplied nearly 100,000 brides to Taiwanese men since the mid 1990s, and unknown numbers have married to men from Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and China (Wang and Chang 2002). Agencies specializing in the recruitment of "cheap" brides facilitate the trade because these agencies take charge of the whole process on behalf of the men and their families. Foreign brides are advertised on national television networks, national newspapers and on the Internet. While some of these agencies operate openly and respect their commitments, others function more as trafficking networks using deception and abuse through the process of finding or offering a wife to a client. The link between marriage migration and trafficking is therefore important in this context with globalization having changed the characteristics of migration (Skolnik and Boontinand 1999).

¹ Institute for Social Development Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam

² The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

³ Institute for Social Development Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam

Besides politics, policies and uneven socioeconomic development, the demographic landscape also contributed to the increasing demand for workers and wives within Asia. First, in richer nations, population aging and labour force shortages partly explain the migration of workers. Second, the demise of marriage by women in their thirties and forties in many Southeast and East Asian countries has created a demand for foreign brides who are constructed as suitable for housework and motherhood, in contrast to local women who prefer to work and, perhaps, not to have children (Jones and Ramdas 2004). Third, the female deficit in some regions of Asia also prompted a need for female workers and spouses, thus leading to a demand in female migrants from other regions or countries. The female deficit, brought about by two decades of sex selective abortions and female discrimination (Attané and Véron 2005), is an acute problem on the Chinese side of the Vietnam-China border, which creates high demand for female workers and for wives (Attané 2005). In this paper, we thus examine migration and trafficking in women partly as a consequence of the female deficit on the Chinese side of the border⁴. Moreover, we approach the demographic imbalance as one contextual factor, among others, creating demand for Vietnamese women on the Chinese side of the border. Migration policy, socioeconomic policy, nuptiality patterns, and gender constructions and relations are all part of the factors increasing female migration and trafficking from Vietnam to China. Nevertheless, the Chinese female deficit, a powerful demographic determinant of social practices and processes, certainly plays an important role in shaping cross border movements and activities.

This paper thus focuses on transnational migration, marriage and trafficking at the Vietnam-China border. This region is an interesting case because it comprises the contextual factors mentioned above. First, uneven socioeconomic development between China and Vietnam make Vietnamese seek new opportunities through cross-border economic activities or migration. However, China and Vietnam do not have an official bilateral agreement for the export-import of workers. Labour migration from Vietnam to China is thus relatively small in scale and largely prompted by individual initiatives, although some private agents actively recruit potential workers. Because it is unofficial, this recruitment is not submitted to any official regulations or policies. Second, the bordering provinces of Guang Xi and Yunnan have among the highest sex ratios in all of China resulting in a shortage of women (Banister 2004). Numerous media reports feature cases of female kidnapping and studies concerned with trafficking in Vietnam have focused on this area among other ones. Third, recent policies have opened the border to the extent that Chinese and Vietnamese nationals do not need a passport to cross the border. Some engage in intense commercial and petty trade that take place over the border on a daily basis, while others seek opportunities to live and work 'on the other side'. The train line between China and Vietnam has been reopened in the 1990s, increasing the possibilities of travel and migration between the two socialist nations. Among people that cross the border, Vietnam women figure predominantly: they enter China as voluntary (illegal) migrants or as trafficked persons.

In this paper, we argue that the conceptual separation of migration and trafficking as two independent and different phenomena hampers our understanding of cross border movements between China and Vietnam. Evidence from this paper is drawn from survey data collected in 2005 with 213 women and from interviews with a sub sample of 30 of them. All women had migrated to China (voluntarily or not) and had returned to Vietnam at the time of the study. These data offer insightful information on the complexity of these women's experiences and

⁴ It should be noted that according to the last census of Vietnam (1999) and recent analyses of hospital data, there is severe problem of sex selective abortions in Vietnam. See: Bélanger, D., T. O. Khuat, et al. (2003). "Are Sex Ratios Increasing in Vietnam?" *Population* 58(2): 231-250.

on the relationship between voluntary and forced migration. Data analysis points to the wide ranges of moves, from forced, involuntary, to voluntary ones. The degrees of voluntary/involuntary in their experiences are not always easy to capture. Some women voluntarily left despite difficulties to reach their destination. A number of women felt victims of deception, but later found themselves in acceptable situations. In many cases, part of their trajectory was voluntary, but throughout the migration process, they were deceived and abused. Many wanted to go to China and once they had expressed this desired in their households or publicly, it put them at risk of being trafficked. Few were literally kidnapped and sold on the Chinese side of the border. A second argument of this paper is that, among women who initiated the migration process, the desire to marry is a strong motivation for crossing the border. While economic motivations and the desire to improve one's material life is an important theme emerging from the data, marital and reproductive desires figured predominantly in many of the stories and trajectories. The high demand for wives and female workers on the Chinese side, partly an outcome of the Chinese female deficit, is echoed on the Vietnamese side by an awareness of this demand and the realization that perhaps, one's future as wife, mother and worker lies north of the nation's border.

Cross-border migration, marriage and trafficking in persons from Vietnam

The rapid increases in work and marriage related migration flows within Asia has been accompanied by a flourishing trafficking market, particularly in women and children destined to forced marriages or forced labour, often in the entertainment and sex industry (Kelly and Le Bach Duong 1999; Le Thi Quy 2000; Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002). The situation is particularly exacerbated at bordering regions where crossing the border does not require a passport or a plane ticket. With problems of deficient border control and corruption, crossing a border might be relatively easy, albeit costly. At the regional level, it is estimated that over the past few decades, 30 million women and children have been trafficked in Asia (Flamm 2003). This number only include those trafficked for sexual exploitation and does not take into account trafficking for marriage, begging, forced labour such as domestic, agricultural and factory work.

For Vietnam, starting from the early 1990s, the country has been a source, transit and, to a lesser extent, destination country for persons trafficked. While the actual scope of the phenomenon is hardly known (due to the illicit nature of trafficking and the problems with defining what consists in trafficking), official estimates indicate that dozens of thousands of women and girls have been trafficked to Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and other third countries in Australia, Europe and North America. Estimates suggest increases in trafficking over the past decade. Three major flows have been identified – trafficking of Vietnamese women to China and to Taiwan for marriage, and trafficking of both women and girls to Cambodia for prostitution. Little is known, however, about the magnitude of trafficking in men and boys, although there are known cases of this type of trafficking. For example, trafficking for forced labour of men has been reported. Also, child adoption is also recognized as one potential form of human trafficking in Vietnam (Kelly and Le Bach Duong 1999).

Initially, trafficking took place only from a few provinces adjacent to the international borders between China and Cambodia. Due to improvement of roads, means of transportation, open border policies, and especially rapid increase of cross-border trade and tourism, it has now occurred in all provinces, and the major flows are from the deltas of the Red and Mekong

rivers. Overall, reports on prevalence of women and children being trafficked are primarily speculative and inconsistent.

Theoretical framework

Migration theory aiming at 'bringing gender in' is the first theoretical body of literature framing this research. Since the 1990s, migration theory has been criticized for largely ignoring female migrants and the gendered nature of migration flows and outcomes. Research pointing to the large numbers of female migrants not corresponding to the stereotype of the 'trailing wife' prompted the development of migration and gender specific research uncovering important phenomena. In this project, we particularly draw from Piper's contributions to gender and migration theory (Piper 1999; Piper 2003; Piper and Roces 2003). Piper argues that women have been left out of migration theory because of the definition of labor that ignores two of the most widely occupied jobs by female migrants: sex work and domestic work. Moreover, Piper situates the gendered nature of migration within a gendered political economy and a global patriarchal system. This feminist reading of migration allows for the inclusion of gender as a central aspect and determinant of migration flows, labor patterns, trajectories and experiences. Finally, through her empirical work on female Asian migrants in Japan, Piper shows that boundaries are blurred between marriage migration, labour migration and trafficking and puts forward a new theoretical framework which calls for the integration of these three phenomena. This conceptualization of these three types of migration is particularly important for the development of comprehensive migration policies. This paper contributes to this theoretical discussion by offering evidence from a case study of two developing nations, while most research involves migration between a developed and a developing nation.

Second, this paper treats trafficking as part of migration as opposed to trafficking as an independent type of human mobility. In fact, it is our objective to provide more evidence about the need to conceptualize migration and trafficking as related phenomena as opposed to distinct ones. In the case of the region studied in this paper, studying either migration or trafficking alone would not account for the nature of human movements and activities across the China-Vietnam border. In general, migration theories do not pay much attention to trafficking in human. Trafficking is generally studied by different researchers and from other perspectives. In this paper, by considering the two phenomena as intertwined, we wish to highlight women's agency in the process of going to China, even if they are victims of traffickers at some point in the trajectory. Rare are those that would portray themselves as having been victims from the beginning to the end of their trajectories.

The third theoretical line of inquiry we wish to contribute to is demographic theory. This paper is concerned with the long term consequences of a female deficit in one population at a border region. The female deficit is not an issue in the Vietnamese border regions. The link between demographic structure and migration is a recurrent theme in demographic literature. However, the particular case of how a prolonged deficit of women may prompt certain migration and trafficking pattern has received scant attention. Due to the particular border context of China and Vietnam, the issue of demographic imbalance as a factor prompting migration needs to theoretically be considered central to the migration and trafficking flow examined in this paper.

Migration and trafficking at the China-Vietnam border region

Because of its proximity to China with convenient transportation and cross-border trade, the Quang Ninh and Lao Cai Vietnamese provinces have been important source and transit provinces for international migration to China in the past few years. The opening of the border since the late 1990s, while facilitating economic exchange, have at the same time exposed populations from both sides to economic and social opportunities, including risks of trafficking, that are geographically dispersed but interlinked. The Vietnamese border town of Mong Cai, for example, has developed quickly into a busy commercial center between Vietnam and China. In 2001 alone, the total volume of cross-border trade at Mong Cai amounted to USD 598 million.

Together with the flows of goods and capital are the cross-border movements of people. Figures released by Mong Cai People's Committee in the same year shows that there were 105,000 "within-a-day" person-trips and 194,000 longer-term person-trips to other inland localities in Vietnam by the Chinese. From the opposite direction, 32,000 "within-a-day" person-trips to China were made by the Vietnamese through the border official gates. To cross the border, all needed is an ID card with a photo, a hand-written request, and VND25000 fee paid to Chinese border guards. There are, however, numerous illegal trips through informal routes.

Most of the moves are for trade of cheap consumption goods produced in southern Chinese provinces to Vietnam and of agricultural products from Vietnam to China. Large markets are established along the border, particularly on the Chinese side, as focal points for the trade. The vibrant economic activities at these markets have fueled the formation of a cross-border labor market of "*cuu van*", a Vietnamese term referring to goods transporters. Many of these transporters are Vietnamese women. It is at these market that, according to many observers, many Vietnamese women are "trafficked". The reasons for their movement are varied. Some go for business or employment purposes – to trade goods across the border or sell goods at the transit markets; to be recruited as "*cuu van*"; to run service establishments for tourists and local people, such as restaurants, karaoke bars, hotels, and hair and beauty saloons; or to serve at these establishments as employees. It is reported in Vietnamese newspapers that many of these service establishments are in fact disguised brothels.

The trafficking in women from Vietnam is mostly for force marriage to Chinese and for force labour in the sex industry. While trafficking for the purpose of sex work is widely known and explored in previous studies, little is known about trafficking for the purpose of marriage. Two key factors come to explain the demand for wives from Vietnam. The first factor is demographic, reflected in the important female deficit of the Chinese southern provinces. The second factor is economic, since the inflation of the bride price on the Chinese side, makes the marriage to a Vietnamese woman a lot cheaper. For some poor Chinese families, it is the only way to find a spouse for their son. Demand creates supply, and trafficking in women, including in young girls, from Vietnam is responsive to this wife market drive. According to a study conducted in two districts of the province of Quang Ninh (Hai Ha and Dong Trieu) by the International Labour Office, by the end of 2000, up to 1,188 women had left for China. Most of them are believed to have been trafficked for the purpose of marriage. A small percentage of them have returned home so far, but most still stay in China (legally and illegally), and little is known about them.

Strong traditional gender roles and expectations (more in rural areas) also have a role to play in this marriage market: Vietnamese adult daughters are not expected to live with parents all their lives; they need to get married and follow their husbands (to live in the husband's house). At the same time, they are expected to contribute financially and emotionally to their family of origin in exchange for their parents' efforts and work towards their education and upbringing. This context leads some families to send their daughters away for marriage in exchange of a sum of money. Without fully realizing what they are doing, some parents participate in the trafficking and selling of their daughter. The international markets to Taiwan and China take advantage of parental expectations towards daughters and of daughters' very strong desire to help their parents. Marriage abroad is constructed as one way of possibly honoring the intergenerational contract.

In Vietnamese society, contradictory constructions of women marrying to Chinese or Taiwanese men abound. On the one hand, there is a negative opinion about this type of marriage and migration because it departs from social norms and local ideals. Women marrying to non-Vietnamese and away from home are often almost considered sex workers selling their bodies to remote individuals. On the other hand, these women are pitied and somewhat respected for their courage to fulfill their female responsibilities by making a very difficult choice. These responsibilities include getting married; have children and helping one's natal family through remittances. In spite of the negative image of women marrying to Taiwanese and Chinese men, Asian international marriages are increasing in number. Agencies and traffickers are skilled at putting forward the numerous advantages that such marriages *might* offer to both women and their families, often deceiving them about the very high risks involved in these arrangements. This situation puts women at risk of being deceived, abused and trafficked. Apparently honest agents are often disguised traffickers only interested in making profit. Rural families have limited understanding of the phenomenon and are often trusting of these agents, therefore sometimes involuntarily selling their daughters.

Migration and trafficking tied to the sex work industry is better known in the region. Newspapers and reports in Vietnam have reported on establishments located in Chinese border towns adjacent to Quang Ninh and Lao Cai provinces where Vietnamese sex workers are working. Respondents approached in this and other researches reported that there are hundreds of Vietnamese women and girls at these establishments run by Vietnamese and sometimes Chinese entrepreneurs. Clients of these disguised brothels are both Vietnamese and Chinese. With the tourist industry booming in the Chinese southern provinces, many Vietnamese now travel across the border without a visa or a passport. Many Vietnamese men find sex services in these establishments very appealing. While being in China, they have a choice of sex workers coming from different provinces of Vietnam, with some as far as from the Mekong River delta. Chinese sex workers can also be found in these establishments. This development of commercial sex market in the context of opened borders has led to the migration and trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls to these Chinese provinces, sometimes not only limited to border towns but also to far regions into Chinese territory, for example to Guangzhou and beyond.

Method and data

Data for this article is drawn from a study conducted by the International Organization of Migration. The study was carried out in three localities: Ha Long city, Mong Cai town, and Yen Hung district of Quang Ninh province. These sites are documented as important source and choke (transit) points of trafficking in women and girls, not only from Quang Ninh

provinces but from all other provinces in Vietnam as well. A short description of the research sites follows:

Ha Long city

Shooting site of the famous movie 'Indochine', Ha Long is the first tourist attraction in Vietnam. Important flows of European, North American, Asian and Vietnamese tourists converge to this small town where demand for entertainment services is booming. Demand for sex workers is also growing. Vietnamese nations from all over the country migrate to Ha Long in the hope of finding unskilled and low-skilled jobs. Ha Long is considered as a destination for domestic trafficking and as a transit point before being further trafficked to China.

Mong Cai town

The town has a border gate with China. It is an important trading point between the two countries, and there is a high mobility of people across the border to serve trading activities. Like Ha Long city, the town is believed as a transit point of cross-border trafficking.

Yen Hung district

Yen Hung district is an agriculture area, which is located in the middle of the national high way connecting Hai Phong and Ha Long (both cities are located on the Northern east coast of Vietnam). Since farming does not create sufficient work to the local population throughout the year, the district has a relative large number of female out migrants, who work far from home in the two nearby economic developed centers – Ha Long and Hai Phong. Without being equipped with relevant information and knowledge, the mobile women become vulnerable to both domestic and cross-border trafficking. In addition, the district does not have any counter trafficking project yet.

Sample and data collection tools

The data were collected through a questionnaire with 213 women who were trafficked, and/or had migrated to China, had lived in China for some time and had returned to their Vietnamese community of origin by the time of the study. The objective of the survey was to describe the population of migrants/victims of trafficking and to understand the process by which women had been trafficked. Questions were asked to study participants about the process of migrating/being trafficked to China, their life in China and their return to Vietnam.

Through the support from the local authorities (District People Committees) and the Vietnamese Women Union (a national mass organization), a number of women who were reported to have been victims of traffic were identified and approached. Interviews were undertaken with those women. Afterwards, each woman was asked to approach three other women they knew who had been trafficked. The initial set of respondents interviewed the second set of women themselves. This method facilitated the identification of cases and put women more at ease during the interview process. The initial set of participants received adequate training for the administration of the questionnaire. This respondent-driven sampling method allowed the identification of a total of 213 women who had been trafficked to China at some point in their lives. It is interesting to note here that the definition of 'having been trafficked' was initially set by the local authorities. Some women, however, disagreed with this label in describing their trajectory. The local authorities' definition encompassed any migration process within which there was deception or abuse in the destination and reason for migration.

To have a qualitative assessment of trafficking information, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) were also utilised. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted. The interviewees and informants comprised of trafficking victims, families of victims and other local people as well as cadres of the local authorities and of mass organizations. The semi-structured in-depth interviews and FGD aimed to discover individual, community, and policy factors that make people vulnerable to trafficking. It also provided rich information on migration/traffic as an experience and a process.

One limitation of these data is the reliance on the experiences of returnees. In many cases, returnees have been forced to go back, or they have escaped from situations of forced labour or forced or difficult marriages. As such, we do not have a sample which is representative of the trafficked as no information is known of those who stay.

Sample characteristics

Age

The mean and median of ages of the 213 trafficked women (at the time of their being trafficked) are 25.3 and 24 respectively; with the age distribution skewed toward group age 30 or less (accounting for 78.1 percent of the total). Contrary to the common belief that trafficked women are of young ages, the data collected from 213 women show that they can be of old ages as well: the range of their ages by the time of their departure is from as young as 12 to as old as 50, and the time span of the trafficking from as early as 1984 and as late as 2004, a few months before the study (March 2005). Another important finding is that there is a relatively high number of women who were trafficked when they were younger than 18, accounting for 11.2 percent of the sample. If we include also those aged 18 as children, as does most literature on this issue, then the figure jumps up to 20.4 percent. Indeed, the largest age group consists of women who are between 18 and 24 years old, accounting for 40.3 percent.

Ethnicity and religion

Almost all of the studied women (96.2 percent) are Viet (Kinh), the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam. There are only 8 women of this group who are of other ethnic groups (3.7 percent). The international literature suggests that ethnicity is an important dimension of trafficking, viewing women of ethnic minorities living in mountainous communities as particularly likely to be trafficked to China because they are much poorer and have little education. They are believed to be more easily tricked. This view is not supported by the data collected in this study, despite the fact that the actual population of trafficked women is unknown to give a valid conclusion. One possible explanation is that women of ethnic minorities have clung more tightly to their traditional cultures because of their isolation and group migratory practices, and have not been influenced by other cultures such as the rural Vietnamese have (Kelly and Le, 1999). In terms of religious belief, most of the studied women (89.2 percent) do not follow any world religion. A total of 8.45 percent follow Buddhism (the major religion in Vietnam) and 2.35 percent follow Catholicism.

Marital status

There is a very high rate of divorce, which account for about one fourth (26.8 percent) of the total study group. This is largely due to the fact that many had gone to China for marriage, voluntarily or forced, and then returned/escaped to Vietnam. About a half of them (51.4

percent) is currently married, some with husbands (Chinese) living in China. Single women account for 18.4 percent of the total. There are 4 women (1.9 percent) currently living with a male partner but without being officially married. Also, 7.5 percent of the women surveyed are widows.

Educational attainment

The educational attainment levels of the respondents are relatively low. However, most of them have some education. Only 4.2 percent are illiterate. The majority (42 percent) have attained primary education and lower secondary education (46.2 percent). The proportion of women with upper secondary education is low (7.5 percent).

Occupations and income

At the time of the study, 68.8 percent of the group was unemployed. One of the reasons is that many of them cannot easily reintegrate into the community and lack access to land. Unemployment is always a key dimension of vulnerability regarding poverty and risk of trafficking, as confirmed by the literature. Stories told by the respondents themselves show that the need to find a job and earn an income is one of their reasons for migrating. After leaving, many of them became victims of traffic at place of destination.

Regarding occupational structure, a high percentage of them work in agriculture (56.3 percent). The second largest number of women is working in low-income petty trade and small business, accounting for 20.8 percent. Most of them work in Ha Long and Mong Cai town. There are also many women who worked as hired labourers (15.1 percent).

A closer examination of these hired work reveals their characteristics of low-paid and sporadic in nature: construction assistant (*phu ho*), baby sitting (upon request), cook and dish washing at food-stalls in the market, coal-pieces pickering (to sell), goods transporters (to markets, including markets in China), house/food-stall cleaning, porter, ploughing (for hire), soil digging, etc. There are 2.6 percent of the returnees that work as garbage collectors. This figure for the vulnerable women is 4.7 percent. Finally, a number of the studied women work in fishing, not on boats, but simply catching sea and freshwater creatures like crabs, snails, fishes, etc.

Being trapped at that bottom of the local labour market, all the women under the study have to struggle to maintain an insufficient income for themselves and their family. In responding to the question of their opinion on family income sufficiency, 90.6 percent answered that it is insufficient, of them 64 percent consider it is not enough at all. Only 9.4 percent of the entire sample finds it relatively enough. In addition, many (79.8 percent) have to support family members. In average, they have to support about 2 dependents (mean and median of dependents are 1.91 and 2 respectively) who are their own children, old parents, brothers, and sisters.

Crossing the border

An important finding of this study is that although the women surveyed were labeled as past victims of traffic into China, the vast majority wanted to go to China initially. It was through their attempts to find ways to migrate and live in China that they felt between the hands of traffickers. For the study participants, the two most important motivations for leaving are economic and family related. On the one hand, women construct China as a land offering more job opportunities than Vietnam and hoped to find a cash earning activity there. On the

other hand, many women wished to find a husband and have a child and, after having failed to do so at home, imagine that China will give them a better chance to achieve this desire. In many cases, the desire to marry and work overlaps and equally prompts women to consider and initiate migration.

Marriage

Women in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas, are under strong social pressures to get married and have children, particularly son(s). The pressures come not only from their own family, especially their parents, but also from the community. Women of 24-25 years of age are considered to be already “old” or “impossible” to get married (Bélanger and Khuat 2002). Their parents consider them as “burden”, as “delayed-action bomb” (i.e. a threat to the family economic and social well-being). Older single women are shameful and potentially harmful to their family’s reputation. Single women considered too old to marry are often the victims of gossips and stigma (Bélanger and Khuat 2002).

The social pressure for marriage is particularly strong for women who are beyond the socially-defined appropriate age for marriage (18 to 24 or 25 years old), or those having some “problems” like being considered “ugly” or not very resourceful or stupid. “Those women who are ugly go there (China) to get married” (FGD with local authorities in Hai Dong commune). For them, China looks like a land of social opportunities, as they can find a husband there. Thus, they are highly at risk of being trafficked. “Vietnamese being trafficked there [in China] include also those who are old, deaf, or widow.... I followed her [trafficker]..... Some people said something to her that I could not understand, but when I asked her later, she told me that they wanted to buy me”. Older women in their 40s are “sold” as wives for men in their sixties and seventies.

The desire to get married explained the departure of many women of the study sample (close to 30 percent), of them some were trafficked: “I did not think that life there was better than here. She [the trafficker] said that if I went there [China] my life will be good because Chinese husbands will do everything to support a wife and children and I will not have to do anything. But I told myself that it is impossible that a husband would do everything and I myself should also work. I just thought I should go for my own life... as a woman I need a husband and children” (Trafficked returnee).

In addition to the desire to get married or find a good husband, there is a strong need for women to have children. All married women are expected to have children and at least one son in order to continue the husbands’ family line. At the individual level, the need to have children is commonly felt for both emotional and economic reasons. Economically, women themselves find that having a child is an important asset, as they can be supported by their children when they reach old ages. Emotionally, the importance of children is even more pressing. Such needs are particularly acute for women in their thirties and older. As admitted by one returnee: “I do not think that I was trafficked. For my own life, I wanted to have a child, so I went. I was already old when I left [32 years old]. As I am getting old, I want to have a child. Many people left for the same reason, not only me, so I went”. (Trafficked returnee).

In addition to the social pressure of meeting social norms with respect to marriage and childbearing, economic consideration also lies behind the desire to get a husband of some women. The idea of having a husband as an economic asset underlines the decision to migrate

for many women surveyed and interviewed. “Many women are like me, abandoned by husbands, very poor. So we thought just go to get a husband to rely on him.” (Returnee),

Many women in the sample left their home villages and crossed the border with the expectation of a better life with a Chinese husband. Most of them, however, had received been deceived either involuntarily by well-intentioned relatives and friends who were poorly informed themselves, or by traffickers who lure women into wishing for something that rarely exists.

“... We live here and often traveled to China to sell goods. We know some Chinese words, enough for simple communication. Because we were abandoned by our husbands, when someone came and asked if we wanted to get married with a Chinese, the offer sounded very interesting. They were saying getting married with the a Chinese is very good, because of this and of that, he will take care you very well, you do not have to work hard, do not have to sell goods in market, poor you to be abandoned by your husband etc. Even women friends said ‘we should not work this hard. We should get married to the Chinese to have plenty of Yuans to spend.’ ” (Returnee).

As such, social pressure for marriage, and to have children, has produced vulnerabilities for women. Getting marriage was thus widely reported by most of respondents in the present study, and many others, as the main trap attracting adult single/divorced women (or women with unhappy family situations) to go to China to get married.

While some women voluntarily go to China, a relatively high percentage (29.1 percent, or close to one third) were in fact sold to Chinese men as “wives”, legally or illegally. It is reported in government reports and other researches that many Vietnamese women are forced to marry old and disabled men, sometimes with multiple men, as documented in the aforementioned ILO in which one woman had to marry three brothers as a common wife and another woman were forced to marry four men (Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002). The present study also comes across similar cases: “She [daughter] was sold to get married with an old [Chinese] man aged like her grandfather for 5,000 Yuan. She [the trafficker] told my daughter that she gave me 2,000 Yuan but I in fact received less than 500,000 Dong. She [daughter] has a child with the old man. Then he got blind and forced her to marry his younger brother. Then she ran away.... See, get bind then transfer his wife to his brother... just to keep their family line [to have children with the younger brother]” (Mother of a trafficked woman). Son preference in China, like in Vietnam, remains strong, previous researches have documented cases trafficked women were abandoned by their Chinese husbands as they could not give birth to sons for them.

Labour

Poverty has been considered in the literature to be one of the major causes of trafficking, or trafficking risk. For the present study, poverty and economic difficulties are the recurrent themes heard in all the interviews with the returnees. Statistics of the study also show that all the returnees are from very poor families.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the link between poverty and trafficking is by no means direct. As observed by the Youth Union leader in Mong Cai town: “Generally speaking, almost all of them [the trafficked] are poor, thus are easily cheated to go to China. Women from better-off family never are”, poverty has been translated into expectation of people to migrate in order to seek for better economic opportunities, making them vulnerable

to tricks of traffickers who can easily lure these women into their criminal human trade. Thus, poverty should be regarded as the indirect cause of trafficking. Literature on migration repeatedly call for careful consideration in linking poverty directly to migration, as studies across the world have shown that poorest areas are by no means the only places of origin of migratory flows, including trafficking in humans.

Another risk factor at the individual level that is highly correlated with low economic status is vulnerable employment status, including unemployment, underemployment, and unstable employment. For the study sample of women, a large number of them were working in agriculture (close to 60 percent). About one fifth of the women were working in petty trade, and slightly smaller number of women was working as hired labourers. These jobs provide very low, unstable and precarious incomes, barely enough for daily survival. Low education, lack of marketable skills to work in non-agricultural sectors, and their very low position in the labour market are all factors explaining their income insufficiency which eventually into the decision to migrate. When approached by traffickers, and given their low awareness and understanding of trafficking, they easily fell into traffickers' deception.

"I was selling rice rolls in the market when a young woman whose face was wrapped beneath a scarf approached and asked 'Do you want to have a job. Why are you selling these things? It's not enough to buy rice to eat. If you want, I will introduce you to jobs that can give you hundreds of thousand [dong]. I left my rice rolls baskets to follow her immediately. She took me to Dong Hung [in China]. We stayed two days, and then traveled two more days to Guangzhou. I later escaped with five other Vietnamese women" (Trafficked woman).

"I made about 20,000 dong a day [about US\$1.3] but my job was not stable, once in a while after four or five days. I work only a few days a month..... Some months I made 400,000 dong [about US\$25], but in other months I made no money. How could I not try to go?" another returnee admitted.

The problem of unemployment is particular acute among the youth. In Mong Cai town, for example, "up to 20 percent of the youth is unemployed" (Women's Union leader). Meanwhile, in this town "there are only a few small enterprises with low employment demand". Indeed, the lack of skills needed by local business enterprises is another cause of youth's unemployment. It is even harder for them to develop their own business, due to the poor local business opportunities, their low capability in terms of skills, and, last but not least, their lack of capital, according to the leader of the Mong Cai Youth Union. Therefore, income possibilities across the border are appealing to most of them. As aforementioned, at the border town of Mong Cai, cross-border trade has led to the formation of a cross-border labor market where both men and women are actively participating, mainly as *cuu van* or traders. "If you stay at the border, you will see how large the number [women crossing the border to work] is.... Not only in my community, but in all Mong Cai, two thirds [of women] are working in China (Returnee). Then what may happen is trafficking situations in which many of the women under this study fell into: "She said I should go to her home to carry oranges to Vietnam to sell. I came and saw she did have oranges in her home. She said I should wait for her and we would go back [to Vietnam] together. I waited for a long time, then wanted to leave but she then stopped me, forcing me to get married with a Chinese man" (FD, Hai Dong).

Sex work

Although the major purpose of trafficking in Vietnamese women to China, according to the literature, is for marriage with Chinese husbands, there are also reports about trafficking for purpose of commercial sex work. The study of the ILO reports that from October 15, 2000 to October 15, 2001, there were 32 cases of illegal exit to China to work as sex workers. It quoted a border guard saying:

“For young women, they are cheated to China to work as sex workers in bars and restaurants. In this case, the traffickers may receive 300-500 Yuan (Chinese currency). When they are no longer fit for the job, the owner may sell them again [for those Chinese men who want to marry Vietnamese women] for higher prices”, and

“There are many Vietnamese women work as cave (prostitute) in China. They are majority in nearly all brothels”. (Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002)

For the present study, 15 out of 213 returnees (or 7 percent) were trafficked to work as sex workers. This number, however, does not tell us the actual scope of commercial sex work in Chinese towns. According to the in-depth information provided by one returnee alone, in her establishment (a hotel) there are dozens of Vietnamese sex workers. Her establishment is just one among many others, with Vietnamese girls and women are serving clients, both Vietnamese and Chinese. Sex workers might be underrepresented in our sample since it might be particularly difficult for sex workers to escape. Working as illegal workers, their employers confine them so they do not run away.

Traffickers

The Vietnamese supply of wives and commercial sex workers into China is brought about by traffickers. While no interview was made in this study with traffickers, and no police report or court case statistics are available to have a sketch of traffickers' profile, interviews with the returnees and their relatives provide some information of who the traffickers are and what tricks they use to lure women and girls.

Traffickers that approached women surveyed are from different backgrounds. They are mostly women, although occasionally there are men involved, as in the case of one respondent who was approached by a Vietnamese man who offered the woman to marry to a Chinese middle-aged man. Traffickers can be relatives, friends, or people from the same community.

“Sometimes, they can be our neighbors. They convinced us to follow them to get a job with good income. There are cases they [traffickers] are even cousins. I know a case when a sister-in-law cheated her husband's younger sister. The parents [of the victim] thought she [the victim] went to China to work with her sister-in-law” (GD, Hai Dong).

Being in such a close relationship, traffickers can easily gain trust from their potential targets. As admitted by one returnee, she followed a cousin to China simply because “I do not think that relatives can make any harm to me” (Young female, 24 years old). Another respondent was persuaded by her (female) friend to travel to China as a tourist and then ended up being sold.

Traffickers can also be just an acquaintance or a stranger who befriends a woman or girl and persuades her that there is a good job with high income and an easy life for her if she accompanies her. Many women in the study sample were promised by the traffickers to follow them for simple work of carrying goods from markets across the border to Vietnam:

“She told me to carry pairs of jeans, for the price of 50,000 dong a bag”. (Victim, 19 years old, Ha Coi). In any event, traveling abroad sounded appealing to them, particularly the young ones: “Many did not know where they [the trafficker] took them to, simply thought that we would do some trading. Now, for most women, if someone offers them to go abroad, they would certainly like to go.” (GD in Hai Dong with local government officials).

Upon arriving in Chinese land, what often happened is that the traffickers immediately contacted other traffickers to close the “deal”: “There [in China], it was about 6:00PM. I asked why we were still here. She said just wait for a little longer then she would take me back. She said that the merchandise should come soon [for the victim to carry back to Vietnam]. They talked over the phone about ‘goods’, and how much the ‘goods’ cost. Later I found out that the ‘good’ or merchandise is me” (Returnee, Ha Coi).

While open kidnapping of women and girls are rarely documented in both government reports and other researches, we have a few cases in our sample. One returnee, for example, told the interviewers of the situation in which she was offered a coffee by a trafficker. She drank and slept. When she awoke, she was in China. Another story was told by the mother of one trafficked young woman: “She [the trafficker] came to my home twice, telling me that I am so poor that she will give me money to help me but that I must let her take my daughter in exchange. I said that I would never sell my daughter, so please leave us alone. Then on September 9th, 1998, she came again and took my daughter away [in secret]” (Relative of a trafficked victim).

She explained that her daughter was watching television then. When she returned home, the woman had taken her away. The trafficker later told the mother that it was her fault of “not letting her daughter to go with her”, so that she was kidnapped “by someone”. By 2002, the mother received a letter from her daughter and realized that it was precisely that woman who did the kidnapping.

Indeed, trafficking is a profitable business. Information from a group discussion in Ha Long show that the price of the trafficked varies from 5-7 million dong, but can be much higher if the trafficked is young and beautiful. The study under the ILO project reveals that to marry to a “beautiful” Vietnamese woman, the cost is only about 7,000 to 8,000 Yuan (Chinese currency). If the woman is considered not to be beautiful, the cost is about 3,000 to 4,000 Yuan (Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002).

Life and work in China

For women trafficked for the purpose of marriage

Women married to Chinese men were both wives and domestic workers of the family they lived with. Moreover, nearly one half cultivated the household land plot. For most of them, life was very hard: they worked 9 hours per day on average.

As admitted by a returnee: “You know that agricultural work is very hard. I am their daughter-in-law, so I should work” (Returnee). “No one asked me. I left by myself. It turned

out that life there was so hard. I could not stay. I returned home after a few months” (Returnee).

Despite their hard work, only 12.1 percent of the returnees can have some saving – which is about 10 percent of what they made. Very few (just 3.8 percent) were able to send remittances home which had no significant influence on their family income. For the sample of the ILO research, none was able to send any money home to help their parents (Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002).

In some cases, trafficked women experienced physical abuse from their husbands and husbands’ family members. For example in a group discussion at Ha Long city, participants mentioned that: “In Mong Cai, there are two or three women. I do not know if they escaped or were kicked out by their husbands. They were beaten up so severely that they became stupid” (GD, Ha Long). In one interview with the mother of a returnee: “They [the Chinese husband’s family] did not allow my daughter to sleep on a bed when she was sick. They put her on a wooden board.... This time, for some reason she got a swollen leg, thus could not work, could not eat. When we received the telegram, my husband and I sold our pigs for 2 million to go visit her. We then asked her [husband’s] family to take her to the hospital, not to let her lying on the ground and give her some medicine. I stayed with her for a week, asking them to let her go back with me but they refused. So I had to leave” (Mother of a returnee). In another case, a woman was sterilized without her consent: “Yes, probably they [Chinese doctors] know that she already has one child, so after she delivered the second child, they sterilized her” (Relative of a trafficked woman).

Nevertheless, there are cases reported in which some women find their marriage satisfactory. As witnessed by the mother of one woman who got married with a Chinese man: “When I visited my daughter [in China], I found that her family is pretty good.... He [Chinese husband] is nice with my daughter. He likes me too. I think that he is pretty kind” (Mother of a trafficked women), or admitted by a returnee “My Chinese husband is very good. I had a daughter with him” (Returnee).

In most cases, the women surveyed and interviewed found that their expectation before departure was very far from the reality they encountered on the other side of the border. “No one persuaded me. I went there myself, thinking of finding a husband who would have money to help me raise my children. I was shocked to discover that life there was even worse than here. I could not live. I stayed for a few months only” (Trafficked woman). Economic hardship, in combination with cultural differences, made their experience bitter: “It’s really hard. I left my home village but there I also lived in a poor rural commune, in the mountainous area. The weather is different. I do not know their language. I became very home sick. So I left” (Returnee). The respondent admitted that her Chinese husband was very nice to her. She had a daughter with him, but as her economic expectation could not be fulfilled, she took her daughter back to Vietnam.

For women trafficked to work in prostitution

For those working in prostitution, key features of their work are revealed by their stories, as the follows:

Heavy work load

Quantitative data of the survey show that the women in the study sample served at least two clients a day while working in various establishments in Chinese towns. The number of clients they served, however, can be much more. For example 25 percent of them had to serve 10-15 clients a day, and 87.5 percent had to serve at least 5 clients a day.

“The sisters [other sex worker] when they just came, they often served up to 20 clients a day. Now they serve less, but at least 3 or 4 clients a day”, a returnee reported to the researchers.

Forced labor

Few women in the study sample voluntarily worked in the sex sector in China, as most of them were forced to work (86 percent). Sometimes, enforcement is as rude as the following experience reported by one of the women: “She is from Gia Lam, Ha Noi. She is now about 28, 29 years old. She loved a man when she was 15.... She got pregnant..... She was cheated by her friend and sold to China. She was eighth-month pregnant but they [employers] steamed her child out so that she can work. It was a boy.”

Slavery-like work

Once being held to work as sex workers, chance for these women to escape is little, if possible: “We work without knowing when we can escape, when we can return home, days after days, months after months” (Trafficked woman). Sometimes they were sold from establishment to establishment by their employers, a common practice found in the sex industry.

Fear of being arrested by police

While Chinese police can be a source of rescue, without effective cooperation across the borders between Vietnam and China, or with the lack of clear policy towards foreign sex workers in China, the police became a source of harassment: “We came to the hotel by the backdoor [to serve clients] and also got back also by the back door.... It is very dangerous if the [Chinese] police come. Sometimes when we were with clients upstairs, we heard the siren of police cars and were so afraid that some jumped out of the windows, or ran from roof to roofs. If arrested, they will abuse us. If the employer pays for us to be released, then we have to work more to pay that debt” (Trafficked woman)

Physical punishment

Physical punishments were used to repress the women if they were against employers' orders, or when they attempted to escape: “There was a sister who was afraid of working, so she hid herself in the wardrobe. She was found and beaten up unconsciously with electric wires. They poured water over her so she woke up and was forced to work. So other sisters convinced me that I should work to avoid being beaten and that when the opportunity comes, I can escape”.

Close watch

A woman in the present study was sold to China to work in a brothel. She was also sold from one brothel to another. She was locked in the brothel, under close guard. If she went out to the market, someone followed her. She has to work at the brothels or can be transferred to others depending on clients. “Yes, they locked us in the house and forced us to serve clients” (Trafficked woman)

Escape, rescue and return

The length of stay in China among women of the sample varied. Most of the women did not stay very long. Half of them (50.7 percent) stayed in China less than one year before making their way back to Vietnam. Failure to have their expectations realized is the major reason for returning, while a few who were trafficked without any intention to go to China always wished to return and succeeded. Another 27.5 percent stayed from 1 to 2 years. Less than 10 percent stayed from more than 2 years to 5 years, while 7.7 percent stayed from more than 5 years to less than 10 years. Just a few of them, about 4.3 percent, stayed for more than 10 years (the maximum years of stay is 16).

Regarding their return, more than a half of the women (55 percent) escaped by themselves. The escape is often extremely difficult and dangerous. “Some could not go back because they were taken too far [into Chinese land]. Recently we met some and they said they just escaped. They said many could not go back because they do not know how to go” (GD of local government officials, Hai Dong).

A relatively large number, 21.1 percent, returned with the help of other people, or the Vietnamese whom they met by accident: “I myself helped two women to escape. I went to Dong Hung to collect potato leaves for pig raising. They had been kidnapped to serve a Chinese family as wives and domestic servants. They cooked daily for them. I saw them standing by the window, crying. I helped them to break the window. I gave them my shirts and we three carried potato leaves back to Vietnam... One stayed there for one year and was 24 years old. She took her one-month old baby with her” (FGD, Hai Dong). Of these 21.1 percent, 7.2 percent escaped with the help of the traffickers who sold them earlier. In general, the family contacted the trafficker, paid a lump sum in exchange for the trafficker to bring their daughter back. This clearly shows that some traffickers are known by the local population, but the legal system is still ineffective in dealing with them. Another 9.6 percent (trafficked women worked as sex workers) escaped with the help of clients who were sympathetic and wanted to help. Sometimes, these women were supported by the local Chinese people (4.3 percent).

Direct help from relatives in their rescue was also effective, accounting for 9.1 percent of cases. Interviews with family members of those who were trafficked show that they themselves can rely on their social network to find their lost relatives, and many are successful in doing so. One story is about a woman who found the Chinese men who hold her daughter (to work as sex workers). The negotiation ended up quite positive: “The Chinese guy said ‘if she [the victim] is your relative, you can take her home’” (GD, Hai Dong). Other stories told that family members can ask “resource” people to go to China in search of their loved ones. But the cost can be high, and the search can be clueless. Sometimes it took several years to find nobody, and cost millions of dong, such as a case in which a woman searched two years for her daughter by asking everybody she met and never found her. She explained: “I heard that we can ask someone to go to China to find our relatives [the trafficked]. But it will cost millions. I am poor so I cannot do so. So I simply ask people if they saw my daughter. I am also waiting for her letter” (Mother of a trafficked woman). The situation is better when the trafficked women found ways to send letters home, and this is a clue for their relatives to find them.

For women who migrated to China voluntarily to get married, returning home is sometimes a matter of choice. The study data show that about 9.6 percent of them simply visited their

homes in Vietnam and then decided to stay, leaving their Chinese husband. They often took their children with them. A few returned to Vietnam after the death of their Chinese husbands. Some even returned home with their husband's consent.

The above information ultimately highlights the effectiveness of informal network and individual efforts made by the trafficked women and their relatives. It clearly shows how ineffective state intervention in rescuing efforts, particularly cross-border cooperation between China and Vietnam. Of all the returnees, only 5.3 percent returned with the help from police. A story told by one respondent tells how the situation can be: "Yes, I still remember the first day Chinese police arrested me.... Other sisters who were arrested several times said: Don't be afraid. They [the police] will release you after three days. Our employers will come, pay some money, and get us out".

There is a case under the study that a woman returned to Vietnam due to (Chinese) state enforcement on abortion. She had two children already with her Chinese husband. Then when she was pregnant, the local authority forced her to take abortion: "My husbands already agreed with the abortion but I did not agree. I was pregnant so I wanted to give birth and raise my child. But the police forced me to go for abortion. As I refused, the police would surely arrest me. So I escaped through hills and mountains, leaving everything behind" (Returnee).

Reintegration or leaving again?

Statistics collected from the returnees show that, in their opinions, most find no change (74.6 percent) in the attitudes of their family and community when returning to Quang Ninh. Some returnees (16.4%) even find sympathy and support from the community. In the opinion of a resource person: "We think it's no serious. Some even support them [the returnees]. Initially people keep distance from them but after we had propaganda activities here [awareness raising on trafficking], we understand and support them".

Nevertheless, this does not mean reintegration is an easy process. About 10%, reported facing degrading rumours, stigma and discrimination from the community people "Going to China" is a phrase that can immediately bring negative meanings such as prostitution, money loving (which is culturally negative), and marriage to an "outsider" (also culturally negative). In a group discussion in Hai Dong, for example, some participants openly expressed their views about the returnees: "Here we have many returnees. We know that they returned from China so we do not want to meet or associate with them. Some even disdain them... They are often asked 'You return from China, don't you?'...Generally speaking, they must feel shameful to death" (FGD, Hai Dong).

One major difficulty that the returnees in the study are facing is to get back their civil and household registration upon returning to Quang Ninh. Meanwhile, without it, the returnees faced serious problems. The first one is relating to cultivation land: "The biggest difficulty for them is that they have no land. They can stay with their parents or other sisters and brothers, but they do need their own land to make their living" ((Head of Women Union). As such, "She has lost her household registration since then [when she left for China]...[As a result] she has to rent land to cultivate" (Relative of a returnee). In addition to land, household registration is linked with access to all social services and entitlements. Therefore "without it [household registration] it is very difficult to support them [the returnees]. It relates to the education of their children [children cannot enrol in schools without household registration in

the local neighbourhood]. We hope that local authority will allow them to register. If not, they will find themselves marginalized, and may go [to China] again” (FGD in Ha Long).

The problem is correctly pointed out by a resource person, “our legal system has not been refined regularly. Some changes have occurred and are not been covered by the current laws” (FGD in Ha Long). In fact, realizing the problems, community authority in Mong Cai have already reported the situation to the municipal police, but it will take time to reach the central government level and even longer time for any policy change. One local cadre said: “In real life, a lot of things happen. So it is important for the local authorities to inform the central government timely. But they cannot act as long as they do not receive feed-back instructions from the government. Since central government offices only deal with macro issues, they do not fully realize how things can be at the ground level”. The cadre suggested that one way to raise awareness of the government and national attention to the issue is to ask the Vietnam Television to have a report on trafficked women who now return to their communities.

Children of returnees who were born in China also have difficulties in getting household registration. The children are considered Vietnamese-Chinese by the local authorities who do not know how to deal with these cases. An interview with a respondent tells us how the situation is: “I have a certificate from the hospital where I delivered my child. I also have a household registration. But his father is in China [she married him but has returned home]. So they [the local authorities] said my child is Chinese and did not give him a birth certificate here. In ten years, I have not been able to obtain a birth certificate for my son so he went to school only with his hospital birth certificate.... Finally, cadres of Vietnamese Women told me to report that I had my son with a Vietnamese man without marriage licence to have the official certificate... But it was not easy. It actually cost me some money to do it” (Returnee).

In any event, without instructions from the higher level, local police simply refuse to register the returnees and their children as local residents. This obviously creates discontent from the community: “As far as I know, even foreigners can apply for Vietnamese citizenship. So can't they? They are Vietnamese. They are simply women who were cheated and now return. But they are not allowed to have household registration. The police should have instructions of how to register them. They cannot simply say no. It's irresponsibility.... We cannot abandon our citizens like this” (FGD, Ha Long). Without household registration, some cannot even stay in their home: “When she [the returnee] knew that there is an unused kindergarten nearby, she wrote a request letter to the sub district People's Committee seeking permission to stay there. It took a very long time to get the approval, but she cannot stay there for free. She pays 150,000 dong a month” (Relative of a returnee).

Lacking household registration, their civil rights as citizens are denied and they can fall victims of the local police misconduct. For example, a trafficked woman went back to her community, but “whenever she ‘sneaked’ back, police often come and threatened her, even took her to the police station... This made her decided to go back [to China]” (Relative of a trafficked woman). Rarely the returnees express their objection to these misconducts since they are considered as having committed an illegal act because they crossed the border without legal permission. Often, they are even denied repatriation from the Vietnamese side because they are wrongly considered as criminals. The ILO research reported that trafficked women from Vietnam sometimes were rounded up by Chinese authorities and sent back to Vietnam (at different illegal entry points along the border) or officially repatriated to Vietnam through the international border gate in Mong Cai. However, as most of them crossed the

border illegally, with no passport or identification, they lacked the necessary conditions for Vietnamese Border Guard officers to accept them through official repatriation (Vu Manh Loi and Nguyen Tuan Huy 2002).

Regarding the role of local authority in the reintegration of the returnees, a number of activities have been undertaken. The key actor at community level is the Women's Union which are responsible for raising awareness of the community of the need to "sympathize" and support the returnees so that they can reintegrate 'smoothly' to the community. Members of the Women's Union also approach the returnees themselves, doing counselling and helping them to form "peer club" for mutual support among them. The local Women's Union also runs saving and credit programs aiming at the target group of the returnees, so that they can get loan to improve their living. However, due to budget limitation, the returnees can get only small loans (about 1 million dong). Therefore, the effectiveness of these programs is not high.

In the study, all the women were asked about their plan for future migration. Astonishingly but understandably, 84.6 percent have considered migrating somewhere. Obviously, migration remains the major solution for these women encountering economic hardship and social stigma. Among them, 20.6 percent considered going abroad, more likely to China.

While migration has been taken worldwide as a means to escape poverty, and for social upward mobility as well, it also contains risks, including being victims of trafficking. The fact that there are up to 50 percent of the women in the study do not know what job they may find at place of destination, who their employers will be, and how much they will earn shows the potential vulnerabilities they are facing.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the factors leading to migration/traffic of Vietnamese women to China at the Northeastern Chinese-Vietnamese border. Our first argument was that it is impossible to examine voluntary and forced migrations without considering how intertwined they may be. In the case of the women studied here, nearly all of them intended to go to China or accepted the idea after it was proposed to them. That is to say, they were migrants before they became victims of traffic. Moreover, some women exerted agency is voluntarily following people they were uncertain about, in the hope that they would be lucky and achieve their objectives. The women studied here are far from being victims only; they actively contributed to their leaving, and once abused and deceived, actively worked towards their return and rescue. While the drama lived by some women victims of trafficking needs to be told, it is equally important to acknowledge that the desire to have a better life is often a pre-condition for ended up being traffic by traffickers. While the continuum and alliance between migration and traffic seem logic conceptually, studies in most developing countries fail to consider them in tandem. The separation of migration and trafficking can only lead to unsuccessful policies and interventions.

Secondly, our objective was to document the family reasons motivating women to go to China. An important proportion of women aimed at finding a husband and at having a child. This finding shifts the focus from purely economic reasons for migration to more complex sets of reasons including family, marriage, work and poverty.

The deficit of women on the Chinese side of the China-Vietnam border is clearly creating a market for Vietnamese women. The respective governments should be honest about the

situation and deal with these migratory and trafficking flows as soon as possible. Currently, migrants and trafficked persons have no rights in China and lose their rights upon their return to Vietnam. The fact that most of these migrants/trafficked persons are poor women who illegally cross the border in the hope of a better life or as victims of traffic speaks to the gendered nature of the whole issue. On the one side of the border, females are missing due to discrimination. On the other side, some women try to take advantage of this need for Chinese women by migrating to China, but, in the end, Vietnamese women are also discriminated against. This situation is unacceptable and calls for more research, including on the Chinese side of the border.

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