

Human trafficking— not what I imagined

by Ta My Ngan

I have learned that human trafficking is much more complex than how it is often presented in the media. In July 2008, I was introduced to a Spanish PhD candidate, Nicolas Lainez, who was looking for a field assistant for his research about women's migration in the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam. The research site was Chau Doc located near the border of Cambodia—a small but interesting town not only because of its longtime reputation for being a religious location, but also because it is a fascinating developing town. The fieldwork was done from July 2008 to September 2009.

At first, my job was to be a translator, but soon my responsibilities switched to that of a field researcher, and my job was to collect data from targeted people, such as poor girls, sex workers, street people and poor families. The objective was to understand what was going on in reality about human trafficking. Some of the topics that we worked on were filial piety, informal credit for poor people, and family economics.

Before working on this research project, I had no idea what human trafficking really was. In most of the stories about human trafficking that I'd heard and read, usually the victim was a girl who was young, from a rural area, naive, helpless, unable to make reasoned judgments, or to be fully responsible for her decisions; traffickers deceived her with false promises of work in order to confine and exploit her in a foreign country (for more on this see Lainez's 2010 article, "Representing Sex Traffick-



ing in Southeast Asia? The Victim Staged,” in Tiantian Zheng’s forthcoming book, *Anti-trafficking, Human Rights, and Social Justice*).

It is true that there have been a large number of women and children who were deceived and sold for sexual or labor exploitation. However, after my time working on those topics in Chau Doc, I realize that trafficking sometimes is more complicated than “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of

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persons” as defined by the supplemental United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. The case study of one family which is heavily indebted and forced their daughter to turn to prostitution can be useful to understand the complexity of the reality.

Hien, 19 years old, has lots of cigarette burns on her arms and several pierces in one of her ears. Her father is the only person in her family who earns money. Her mother stopped working when she developed asthma some years ago. Now she spends most of her time drinking coffee, gossiping and gambling. Although the mother doesn’t work, she manages to maintain her hobbies with the money from her husband and children.

Her family has a long debt history. Here are the most remarkable events. In 2003, the family moved from a tenement house to their current location because the former place was demolished. To build a new house, they borrowed 10 million dong (about \$527 US) from a professional money lender with an interest rate of 20% per month. By 2005, the debt had climbed to 40 million dong (\$2106 US). When the parents could not pay the interest, the money lender and his people came to their house every day to shout at them and insult them.

The girl’s life changed when her mother convinced Hien to sell her virginity. The family got 10 million dong from the sale. Then Hien worked in cafés in several nearby provinces. During that time, she got pregnant by a lottery ticket seller, and she married him. She got divorced when her daughter was one year old. Soon after that, she got married a second time—to a cycle-rickshaw driver—with whom her mother continues to force Hien to maintain the rela-

tionship in order to get money from him. Another approved sex partner of Hien's is a rich old man who adopted her as his granddaughter when she was 13 years old.

However, Hien is not merely a girl who is "naive, helpless, and unable to raise reasoned judgments or to fully be responsible for her decisions." She has the capacity to access the freedom to do what she wants. Because of the fact that her mother is so strict with her, Hien lies to her mother a lot in order to maintain the relationship.

For instance, if she wins 40,000 dong (about \$2 US) from gambling, she will tell her mother she won 20,000 dong and give her mother 20,000 dong. On the one

hand, she pleases her mother because she fulfils her obligation to her mother—giving her mother all of the money she has. On the other hand, she can still have some money of her own. She also has tricked her parents to manage trips to Saigon and Vinh Long with her lover for a week, and then brought some money back to her mother to prove that she went to work. She didn't appear to be a professional sex worker, but in order to have money to spend and to give the mother, she slept with men who she calls "boy-friends."

Hien is a victim of her mother who sold her virginity and constantly forces her to exchange sex for money. Although those general facts make almost all of the trafficking stories sound the same, Hien's case proves that each girl has her own story to tell. There is the parents' power over her, her family economy, gambling, and debt. Yet, more than that, Hien is not a victim in all the circumstances that she's been through. She is not always deceived, or forced. She has the capacity to deal with her mother and to manage her relationships.

It is difficult for the media to portray this complexity in their reports on human trafficking, yet it is important to keep this complexity in mind as we learn about the subject. While it is true that some women from Chau Doc and An Giang province are truly trafficked—which means they are deceived, transported and exploited abroad in Cambodia, Malaysia or elsewhere—the reality in this area is much more complicated than most people would imagine. 📌



In Vietnam, human trafficking may take the form of arranged marriages that frequently result in women becoming domestic slaves rather than wives. Other survivors find themselves in prostitution instead of in the factory job they were promised. Lack of information and education perpetuate the cycle of human trafficking.