

## **The Tragedy of Sex Trafficking: A Study of Vietnamese Women Trafficked into Malaysia for Sex Purposes**

**Shalini Nadaswaran\* and Carol Elizabeth Leon**

*English Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

Sex trafficking is an abhorrent crime in our contemporary times. Malaysia is currently both a transit and destination country, where women from different countries are trafficked in and out of Malaysia for sex purposes. This article focuses specifically on the trafficking of Vietnamese women into Malaysia. We, the researchers of this paper, interviewed a group of 10 Vietnamese women who were caught in a single police raid at an illegal ‘gambling center’ and placed in a women’s shelter in Kuala Lumpur. While this article explores the tragedy of sex trafficking and the plight of trafficked victims, it also focuses on the politics of the body of the trafficked woman, discussing how the female body has been abused and condemned through manipulation and oppression. This article also reveals how systems of oppression, namely patriarchal cultural practices and gendered discrimination, have helped form a prejudice and suppression of Vietnamese women. Ketu Katrak and Elleke Boehmer’s discussions on the politics of the female body construct the basis of this article’s theoretical framework. At the same time, the literary approach of ‘lived narratives’ offers a unique blend of multiple disciplines of study, including literature, sociology, gender, and politics, to discuss sex trafficking in Malaysia. Overall, this article provides a glimpse into the complex dynamics of sex trafficking in Malaysia.

*Keywords:* Gendered discrimination, patriarchy, police raid, politics of the body, sex trafficking in Malaysia, trafficking of Vietnamese women, transit and destination country

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*E-mail addresses:*

[shalinadaswaran@um.edu.my](mailto:shalinadaswaran@um.edu.my) (Shalini Nadaswaran)

[caroleon@um.edu.my](mailto:caroleon@um.edu.my) (Carol Elizabeth Leon)

\* Corresponding author

### **INTRODUCTION**

Questions on the female body and gendered inequalities are often at the forefront of academic and feminist debates. Within the context of sex trafficking, this focus becomes more pronounced as female subjectivities are often abused and disempowered. This paper

discusses the female body of Vietnamese victims who are trafficked into Malaysia for sex purposes. It proposes an approach to understanding this situation through lived experiences of sex-trafficked women. These experiences are recorded narratives from interviewed victims, read as forms of literature, and understood by using particular literary lenses. These lived stories merge various contexts and hence enable the application of multiple disciplines to study them, including literature, sociology, gender, and politics, to discuss sex trafficking in Malaysia. Malaysia is both a transit and destination country for sex trafficking, and it is on Tier 3 on The US Embassy Trafficking in Persons Report of 2021, where women from different countries—Vietnam, Africa, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, among others—are brought into Malaysia and forced to work as sex slaves. For the purpose of this paper, we limit our focus to Vietnamese women trafficked into Malaysia. We hope to provide a holistic understanding of these women's experiences. Furthermore, Vietnamese women compose a large percentage of foreign women trafficked into Malaysia.

In order to research and analyze sex trafficking from a multi-disciplinary and comprehensive perspective, we first need to locate and contextualize our discussion. Many assume that slavery ended with the abolition, but in reality, it continued to persist, evolving and taking on different forms and faces over the years. There are millions of people enslaved in the world today. In our contemporary times, one form of slavery which charts a high record of

incarcerating women and children is forced sex slavery or what is referred to as sex trafficking. Sex trafficking involves forcing individuals to perform sex work for the profit of their traffickers. Sex slavery does not include those who perform sex work by choice but rather focuses on those who are enslaved as a result of incarceration, coercion, or debt bondage, among other reasons (Murphy, 2014).

The transnational business of modern slavery is a vital concern all over the world, including Malaysia. Evidently, by being placed in the second-tier watch list of the trafficking in persons list, the growing number of women and children (approximately 142,000 sex-trafficked victims, out of which 8,000 to 10,000 are located in Kuala Lumpur<sup>1</sup>) trafficked into the country and then moved out of Malaysia for the purpose of sex slavery is alarming, a clear indication that Malaysia is a destination country for human traffickers, reporting high and increasing numbers of sex trafficking slaves.

Siddharth Kara, an eminent scholar and researcher in the field of sex trafficking, states that “the global magnitude of victimization of young women ... is staggering” (Kara, 2009, p. 3). However, despite this shocking victimization of women and children, “every minute of every day, the most vulnerable women and children in the world are raped for profit with impunity, yet efforts to combat sex trafficking remain woefully inadequate and misdirected” (p. 3). There are a few pertinent reasons why the business of selling

<sup>1</sup> These figures are not final as many victims are undocumented and remain incarcerated.

women and children flourish, and literature in modern times is being used on varied platforms to address the growing concerns of society and the world. It certainly can be used to discuss sex trafficking (Katrak, 2006). Likewise, literature too can aid in the abolitionist movement of modern-day human trafficking by lending a discourse that “[values] the voice of the powerless and [honors] those who suffer” (Murphy, 2014, p. 10).

In Malaysia, as argued by Hazreen Begum Hamid, “there is scant literature on sex trafficking in Malaysia that is based on systematic qualitative data” (Hamid, 2019, p. 136). She also aptly posits that when approaching, perceiving, and dealing with victims of trafficking, most instances reflect “how government institutions have effectively denied women’s agency through its anti-trafficking laws, and highlights the continuum of harm experienced by women throughout the trafficking and post-trafficking stage” (Hamid, 2019, p. 135). Mahalingam and Sidhu, in their article, “Inside the Crime of Sex Trafficking in Sabah, Malaysia,” express similar ideas within the context of sex trafficking in Sabah where,

while the main motive of sex traffickers and corrupt enforcement is to earn quick and easy money, the victim’s desire for better-paying jobs in Sabah places them in a vulnerable position which in turn leads to their being exploited in the commercial sex market. (2020, p. 14).

This article gives a more focused discussion on the context of sex trafficking in Sabah while articulating at the same time “a range of crime prevention possibilities” (Mahalingam & Sidhu, 2020, p. 15). In a recent book on human trafficking, Sheila Michael discusses the repercussions of human trafficking on individuals where “the physical, mental and emotional abuse of the victims is traumatic and has long lasting effects that stay with them for a long time” (2019, p. 108). However, while Michael’s discussion gives an overview of the condition of human trafficking in Malaysia, our paper discusses the specific experience of Vietnamese women within the context of sex trafficking in Malaysia, offering fresh, new, and focused insights on the experiences of a particular group of women. Nevertheless, Michael is apt in stating that “human trafficking [as a whole] causes human insecurity due to exploitation by the perpetrators of their victims for long term profit” (p. 88). Thus “the illegal movement of people across borders poses threats to national security, and when it involves the exploitation of innocent and vulnerable people including women and children, it also affects the security of the people” (p. 88). While a 2014 newspaper article written in the *Star* newspaper states that “sex is not an industry in Malaysia, the term ‘sex activities’ is more accurate” (Cheng, 2014, para. 5), the same cannot be said for the context of contemporary Malaysia in 2021 as Malaysia is now not only a transit country but also a destination country. Given this, it is vital

for us to understand the conditions as well as the experiences of women trafficked into Malaysia for sex purposes.

We, the researchers, felt the approach of recording the stories was important because it allowed these trafficked women to speak for themselves about their experiences which were brutal, violent, and terrifying. Their individual stories reveal a collective plight on the ways in which women's bodies have been abused and mutilated for commercial profit. The use of the narrative genre in our article reveals lived truths about slavery that expose this inhumane commerce and, conversely, offers these women an avenue to 'tell' their stories. In this way, we do not 'generalize' all narratives and experiences of trafficking as similar, and we pay attention to the individual's specific story (however similar it may be).

In researching survivor testimonies, it became increasingly apparent that 'freedom' is a word that is only common to individuals who live a life of freedom and, as a result of that, are able to speak freely as well. The atrocious lived-truths these trafficked victims experience remove their freedom not only when they are trafficked but even after they are rescued as they continuously live in fear of their traffickers. Many misunderstand the issue of trafficking in contemporary times (especially within the context of Malaysia), assuming that women willingly enter the sex trade. Some of these assumptions are based on the victim's refusal to speak about their traffickers or their experiences, suggesting that these women consciously participate in the trade. Others stem from the fact that

society does not see the brutality inflicted on these women, and this is often masked by the volume of trafficked women that enter a country. It indeed reflects the complexity of trafficking.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is part of an FRGS (Fundamental Research Grant) project dealing with the phenomenon of sex trafficking in Malaysia. The methods and materials used are qualitative. The data used in this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. In order to read lived experiences as forms of literature, we use the interviews from sex trafficking victims to understand the experience of being trafficked or re-trafficked into Malaysia. To discuss the condition of sex trafficking in Malaysia for this paper, we interviewed a group of 10 Vietnamese women<sup>2</sup> caught in a single police raid at an illegal 'gambling center'<sup>3</sup> and placed in a women's shelter in Kuala Lumpur. We were permitted by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development to carry out interviews at this women's shelter, which allowed us to speak to some of these victims from this gambling center raid. The selection of respondents was based on purposive and snowballing sampling techniques,

<sup>2</sup> Some of the information in this paper has been adjusted due to security reasons. Thus, the number of women caught in the raid, the location of the shelter as well as the names of the trafficked women have been altered.

<sup>3</sup> In our research on sex trafficking, we discovered that gambling centers are often a front for brothels. While gambling activity is involved, the main business comes from selling sex services at the center.

which according to Merriam (1997), are appropriate techniques that glean quality information for exploratory research such as ours. The Vietnamese women (respondents) were selected based on the women shelter's case worker's recommendations as well as these women's involvement in the sex trade.

The respondents were given semi-structured, open-ended questions for the interview process, and the same set of questions were given to each respondent. These interview questions were first piloted, and based on the piloted responses, were redefined to meet the needs of this said research. The purpose of the study was explained to the respondents, and they gave their consent to be interviewed. For the purpose of security, vital in this circumstance, we were not allowed to record our interviews but had to take careful notes during our sessions. A few strategies were used to address issues of reliability and validity of the interview data, including the willingness of individuals to share their experiences for this study (Kilinc & Firat 2017), speaking to respondents individually to garner more in-depth insights into their individual experiences of trafficking as well as an attempt to build rapport with respondents to create a more comfortable and welcoming conversation. The primary data is supported by other sources: local Malaysian authorities, NGOs, newspaper articles, academic books, and journal articles.

For this article, we use a few theoretical ideas to frame our discussion. Scholarship argues that trafficking is a form of gender-

based violence and "that intervention to address trafficking should be located within this context" (Watson & Silkstone, 2006, p. 110). Thus, locating our discussion within the overarching idea of gender-based violence, as well as the historical bias of women's inferior position, abuse and vulnerability, we use two prominent literary and feminist theorists (who can be read through the lenses of gender-based violence) to theorize the position and condition of trafficked women's bodies. Elleke Boehmer's theorization on woman's positioning in nation and society is particularly relevant for this discourse on lived experiences of sex trafficking. It not only reveals the ways in which women are often excluded from the mainstream narrative but are also marginalized and subjugated to the margins of society. In her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Boehmer posits that "women writers have questioned, cut across, upended or refused entirely the dominant ... they have placed their own subjectivities, sexualities, maternal duties, private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives" (Boehmer, 2005, p. 6). She argues that this was necessary because "nationalist movements led by men, especially those of a nativist brand, have promoted homogeneity and feminized traditions" (p. 6), where women are oppressed under male-dominant strictures. This trope of seeing "women as the bearers of national culture" (p. 4) is in effect an oppressive tool. Furthermore, in discussing the exclusion of women from these positions

of power and agency, Boehmer outlines the conditions of subjugation faced by women. An extension of this is also the subversion of the female body, which is often seen in a superficial light, deemed unworthy and insignificant. In considering “masculine patterns of authority” (p. 14), the female subject is placed in a “differential position against men in relation to the nation-state” (p. 8).

Within the context of research in sex trafficking, critics have often discussed the socio-economic and political implications that have allowed trafficking syndicates and activities to burgeon. We further posit that the objectification of trafficked women finds its roots in the historically biased perception and oppression of women, as argued by Elleke Boehmer. In this context of masculine authority and differential positioning, Vietnamese women trafficked into Malaysia are dominated by their traffickers and are placed in vulnerable positions requiring them to provide sex services. It is also important to recognize that Vietnamese culture is patriarchal, a point asserted by Lynellyn D. Long, who states that “the sexual exchange of girls and women embodies deep cultural practices and is historically embedded in many family and kinship systems ... [encouraging] and [rationalizing] sexual trafficking girls and young women in times of stress [famine, unemployment] and dislocation” (Long, 2004, p. 8). This idea fits in well with Boehmer’s theorization of the gendered nature of women’s narratives.

To further cement our exploration on the politics of the female body, Ketu

Katrak’s *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* is instructive in understanding what constitutes the broad strokes surrounding the construction of the female body within patriarchal discourse. Katrak engages insightfully in an exploration of “the exilic conditions of the female body” (2006, pp. 3-4), which includes “socialization involving layers and levels of ideological influences, sociocultural and religious, that impose knowledge or ignorance of female bodies and construct woman as a gendered subject or object” (p. 9). Furthermore, she argues that the “sociocultural parameters of womanhood...are grounded within economic, political, and cultural norms that consciously and unconsciously constitute an ideological framework that controls women’s bodies” (p. 9). We find this framework particularly useful in theorizing the sex trafficking of Vietnamese women in Malaysia because it brings to light the ways in which a trafficked subject is actually an object which can be controlled and sold repeatedly for profit. Thus, for these Vietnamese women, their trafficked experience reflects “domination [that is] gender-specific and rooted in the control of female sexuality throughout [their lives]” (p. 9). It is indeed reflective of the realities of their lives as many of the women interviewed reported that they were in Malaysia for the second or third time when caught in the raids, reflecting the cyclical nature of their oppression and the inability to free themselves from their oppressors (traffickers).



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the following research questions, which are; 1. Why are Vietnamese women lured into sex work in Malaysia? 2. How are these Vietnamese women caught up in the cycle of exploitation and commodification of their bodies? 3. What happens to these women after they are rescued during police raids, i.e., what realities do they face? Thus, the following discussion is multifarious, and the ideas discussed anchor on the three pertinent research questions raised.

Sex slavery is a violation of the human body. This compels us to articulate the injustices attached to the gravity of this situation, focusing on the horrific experiences expressed by the Vietnamese women we encountered at the women's shelter in Kuala Lumpur. It is important to note that before delving into our discussion on the trafficking of Vietnamese women in Malaysia, we must first understand the context and history of trafficking in Vietnam. The contemporary trafficking of Vietnamese women and children is rooted in a historical precedent. Vietnamese women and children have been trafficked as early as the colonial period, where they were "often kidnapped, stolen, or tricked into a life of servitude as they were forcibly removed from their families, homes, and villages" (Lessard, 2015, p. xiii). Women and children were always seen as "a product of trade" (p. xv) which also reveals the gendered ways in which Vietnamese society looked at "childhood and about the status of women" (p. xv). Even as early as the French

colonial period in Vietnam, the flourishing of this trafficking trade was a reflection of the "undeniable proprietary attitude toward women and children" (p. xv), an anathema of sorts, which continues till today in contemporary Vietnam. As an extension of this idea, anthropologist Lynellynn D. Long states that "in addition to specific cultural practices, periods of famine, depression, and social economic transition place girls and women at risk of being trafficked" (2004, p. 13), which is the context in which contemporary Vietnamese women and children in our research find themselves in - extreme poverty and desperation which leads to their trafficking (Lessard, 2015). For the Vietnamese women we spoke to in our interviews, it was clear that "poverty, family obligations and personal opportunism are among a range of factors that contribute to the creation of sites of vulnerability" (Yea, 2005, p. 88). Thus, "located in [this] cultural rhetoric" (p. 88), Vietnamese women and children's vulnerability are a product of their cultural and economic circumstances, firmly embedded within a historical reality. Undoubtedly, "it is clear that the intersections of various political and economic factors with gendered norms of a society make women doubly vulnerable to trafficking" (Ray, 2015, p. 317). This is also "an indicator of the lack of agency and control that women have on their lives" (p. 317).

The narratives we discuss in this article further establish the "gendered vulnerabilities" (Ray, 2015, p. 316) of contemporary Vietnamese women

and children. Amongst the women we interviewed, it was quite apparent that poverty was one of the root causes of their ‘vulnerability.’ Many of these women came from poorer or smaller regions in Vietnam like Tay Ninh province, Soc Trang province, and An Giang province. They also mostly came from larger families where either one or both parents were farmers. Thi’s story is similar to most of the stories told to us by the Vietnamese women we interviewed. Thi came from the Tay Ninh province, a smaller, poorer provincial city, 90 kilometers away from Ho Chi Minh. She recounts her life in Vietnam and speaks animatedly about her family:

*There are six of us in my family. My mother and father are paddy farmers. I have four brothers and sisters, and I am the second child in the family. In Vietnam, I worked in a shoe factory, and I made shoes. All my other brothers and sisters are also working.*

Another woman we interviewed, Tram, came from Ho Chi Minh city. In the interview, she tells us:

*I am 25 years old, and there are four of us in the family. My mother is a housewife, and my brother works in the cooking gas line. My younger sister is ten years old, she is still in school. I don’t know where my father is. He left the family years ago. I didn’t have a job in Vietnam. My boyfriend gave me money. He fixes cars and motorbikes.*

The above narratives throw light on the socio-economic and political context to which trafficked Vietnamese victims belong. The similarity in their individual stories of plight gestures towards poverty and scarcity as the root cause of their trafficking. With their families either being small-scale farmers or earning a minimum daily wage, it is clear that these women come from families that are not able to sustain themselves. In the case of Tram, her non-existent father and housewife mother were not even able to provide the bare necessities for their children, leaving Tram and her siblings to either depend on their older siblings or, at times, even fend for themselves. In the absence of constant and sustainable income, women like Thi and Tram have no choice and find themselves pushed into sex trafficking. Marred by these circumstances, their ‘bodies’ are the ones that are made vulnerable, as they find themselves participating in sex work.

According to Samwya Ray, “traffickers use soft tactics of luring the girl ... bringing them into their circle of trust, and then removing the girl from her zone of security” (Ray, 2015, p. 311). Thus, after being “duped and lured into sex trade ... force is used after the woman is brought out of her familiar environment” (p. 310). In the context of the women we interviewed, they were not as forthcoming in disclosing their trafficking experiences. The truth was only elicited when we discussed their stories with their caseworker, who also happened to be the head of the women’s shelter. It was here that we were able to gather information



on these women's circumstances and how they were involved in sex trafficking at a 'gambling den'/brothel. All of the women we interviewed were very animated when they spoke about their families and experiences. However, as soon as we asked them questions about how they ended up in Malaysia or whom they lived with when they were here, their answers became what we referred to as a 'generic narrative.' In our interview with Tran, she tells us:

*I came to Malaysia to visit an old friend. I came by aeroplane, probably Vietnam airlines. I am not sure. I do not know where my friend lives. I came to Malaysia for a holiday.*

We were given a similar story by Hue:

*I came alone to Malaysia by aeroplane. I do not know which airlines. I came to meet my friend, who is also Vietnamese.*

Clearly, both their stories are similar. When prodded further to tell us about their 'friend' in Malaysia whom they visited and stayed with, their responses were equally vague and similar. Tran told us:

*My friend told me it is ok to visit her, but now I am scared of Malaysia. I enjoyed myself when I first came to Malaysia. I knew my friend from Vietnam, we were childhood friends. I don't know what my friend's husband does, he goes out to work and comes back late.*

On the other hand, Hue said:

*I came for a holiday in Malaysia. I came to meet a friend. She is also Vietnamese. But I don't know her very well.*

The women never tell us anything concrete about the nature of their 'visit' to Malaysia or their relationship with the 'friend' they visit in Malaysia. Despite these unclear answers, it can be surmised in the above contexts that these women were in fact recruited into the sex trafficking trade. The women who pose as their 'friends' are actually female traffickers who prey on the vulnerabilities of these women by offering them false promises of good employment. As argued by eminent scholar and activist Laura T. Murphy, "in so many of the cases of modern-day slavery that we encounter, the only lure a trafficker needs to convince someone to walk into enslavement is the simple offer of a job" (2014, p. 24). Furthermore, the caseworker at the shelter home in Kuala Lumpur reiterates a similar stance, that women who have worked in Malaysia in the sex trade often pull their relatives and friends into the same work in Malaysia, hence making Malaysia now a destination country as well as a transit country for sex trafficking.

Furthermore, a representative from a well-known Vietnamese NGO<sup>4</sup> that

<sup>4</sup> The details of the social worker and the NGO this individual worked for remain anonymous for security and safety reasons as they work very closely to rehabilitate Vietnamese victims of sex trafficking in Malaysia. Furthermore, social workers who work for NGOs combating sex trafficking often receive death threats from traffickers and take extra measures

works closely with Vietnamese women at Malaysian shelters told us that sometimes the women are not as forthcoming because they too might be in cahoots with their traffickers for many different reasons. The most predominant reason for this secrecy is that they fear the traffickers themselves. Extending on the idea of the pervasiveness of violence against women's bodies, traffickers are even more brutal and merciless towards trafficked women who divulge information about them. Also, women do not easily speak against their traffickers because invariably, there is a huge feeling of indebtedness to their traffickers, who are also seen as their providers and source of income. Alongside offering them the means to make money, they constantly entice them with material goods like expensive handphones. In their ability to provide these luxuries, traffickers often convince victims that there is nothing wrong with 'selling sex' and that they can make money with their bodies. Thus, these women are often resigned to this type of circumstances and reality. It was hardly surprising then that some of the women we spoke to are repeat offenders who have been caught in raids once or twice before and keep returning to Malaysia for sex work because the money is good as the exchange rate between the ringgit and the dong is profitable. According to the caseworker at the shelter home in KL, many of the women who repeatedly return to Malaysia after being deported are, in fact, 'ibu ayams' who are not only recruiters but influencers who control the lives and conduct of the other trafficked women.

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and precautions to ensure their safety and those of their loved ones.

A common denominator we discovered in our discussions with trafficked Vietnamese women was that they often mentioned the presence of a 'friend' in Malaysia but were never able to elaborate further about this said 'friend.' In fact, interestingly enough, this 'friend' is always absent during the raid these women were caught in. They often have just stepped out to go for a walk or even to buy food. This 'friend' always leaves them during a police raid, once again reflecting these women's vulnerable state as well as their 'victimization' and abandonment. Thi states:

*I am now scared of Malaysia and the police who caught me in the gambling shop. I went there to gamble with my friend. My friend gave me money to play. My friend went out for a walk. Suddenly, the police came to catch us in the gambling shop. I don't know where my friend is now.*

On the other hand, Tram tells us that:

*I came to Malaysia for a week. My friend brought me to the gambling shop to play games. Suddenly, the police came and caught me. They caught many other men and women in the gambling shop. I don't know why they caught me. I don't know where my friend was when the police came. She left earlier before the police came. I don't know where the gambling place is. I don't like it here in Malaysia, and I want to go home.*

The significant gaps in the narratives by the women who were caught are demonstrative of their differential positioning. As trafficked women, they are completely unaware of significant details, especially the location of their dubious ‘friend’<sup>5</sup>. They are deserted by their traffickers, easily disposed of, and replaced as ‘merchandise.’ As trafficked subjects, their bodies are not only objects for sale but ‘merchandise’ that is easily disregarded specifically within the context of a raid where they are abandoned and left to fend for themselves by their traffickers. Despite this, their lives are still deeply intertwined with their trafficker. They refuse to disclose any information that might incriminate or reveal their trafficker’s identities but are expected to remain in muted and silenced spaces in the face of incarceration with the police and the legal system set in place. Thus, in the construction of their female bodies and personhood, traffickers have control over these women beyond the brothel, as these women wait for their court trial and deportation.

Many assume that women who are caught and rescued in raids have begun their process towards freedom. However, this is far from true. In actuality, these women spend many months isolated in shelter homes, living in liminal spaces, not knowing when they will be deported back home.

<sup>5</sup> In our discussions with the shelter home caseworker and NGO representatives, the ‘friend’ often referred to by trafficked women are usually their recruiters and traffickers, who are never at the scene whenever there is a raid. These women are told to say that their friend left them for a short while, and because of the raid, they do not know what has happened to said friend.

While their bodies may be physically free from their traffickers, they not only live in fear of their traffickers but also live in fear of the future as they no longer have a source of income and money to send back home to Vietnam. Furthermore, many months may pass as they remain in the shelter home awaiting questioning and trial. It again keeps them helpless since they desperately want to go home and earn a living for themselves and their families. Some of these older Vietnamese women also have children they long to see and need to take care of financially. This is Linh’s story:

*This is my second time in Malaysia. My friends asked me to come to Malaysia to work. I won’t come back again to Malaysia after I go back to Vietnam. I don’t like Malaysia. I don’t know why the police caught me. I have a child in Vietnam. I miss my child very much. I used to work in a hair salon in Vietnam. I will go back and work there. Please, when can I go home, miss?*

Tram tells us tearfully:

*I don’t want to work in Malaysia. I don’t like it here, and I want to go home. I don’t want to come back to Malaysia when I go home to Vietnam. Please, I want to go back home fast. Can you please help me? Please help me go home.*

For Thi, she is very emotional by the end of the interview. She starts crying, telling us

*Please, I want to go back. I miss home. Please, when can I go back?*

It became somewhat obvious that local Malaysian enforcement on these women failed to assist them sufficiently. In their gendered vulnerabilities, they are the ones severely affected in this situation. Most traffickers go unpunished, unlike these Vietnamese women, who seem to be continuously placed in helpless positions due to their gendered circumstances. In our research on the sex trafficking of Vietnamese women in Malaysia, many of these women have come back to Malaysia for the second or third time, despite being deported before. The return to Malaysia indicated in their case files depict for us the true nature of their circumstances, where these women are never truly free from the flesh trade and return to work in Malaysia out of desperation. Their desperation is also reflected in the conversations above as they express their ardent wish to return home to Vietnam. Perhaps what is unspoken in this plea of desperation is also their need to return to Malaysia to work as sex workers because selling their bodies is the only option readily available to them, further complicating the discourse surrounding the politics of the body.

The dynamics surrounding the sex trafficking trade are complex, where freedom is often a contested site. While these women should be free from their traffickers and the flesh trade they initially find themselves trapped in, reality looks very different as they are held captive by this situation. Laura Murphy provides a

succinct description of the condition of modern slavery and freedom, positing that modern-day slaves have a false sense of freedom where

“though they may be held captive in rooms with unlocked doors, though they may know their captors quite intimately, though they may have the ability to go to the store or on errands without accompaniment, though they may come in contact with kind strangers and even police during their daily lives, they are just as enslaved as a black woman on an antebellum plantation in North Carolina.” (2014, p. 91)

As articulated in the earlier paragraph, this idea even extends to when these women are in police custody or even when they are deported back home to Vietnam, as “freedom was not merely a status ... but an understanding of [self] as an independent and self-determining citizen” which these women lack and do not see themselves as independent and self-determining, once again reflecting the vulnerability of the female body within this gendered, patriarchal discourse (Murphy, 2014, p. 94). Hence, when these women “are out of slavery, few alternatives are available to them other than exploitative labor, and so they end up enslaved or exploited once again” (p. 94). Julius Trajano, in *Combating Human Trafficking in East Asia: Mind the Gaps*, notes that “the lack of sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returning irregular migrants, including

rescued trafficking victims” contributes towards women’s re-trafficking (Trajano, 2018, p. 12). While NGOs in Vietnam try their best to rehabilitate rescued victims, most women find themselves returning to the trade “due to the absence of sustainable full-time employment and livelihood assistance,” which makes them “more susceptible to be victimized again” (p. 12). Indeed, within such cyclical and continuous enslavement, it “makes it difficult for people to imagine themselves as free,” which is why many of these Vietnamese women we spoke to keep returning to Malaysia for sex work, seen in the fact that they have been deported out of Malaysia before, like Linh in the above narrative (Murphy, 2014, p. 94). Arguably then, “freedom is [indeed] a fragile concept. Simply leaving the site of enslavement does not necessarily free a person from the slaveholder’s power”, clearly reflecting the context of these Vietnamese women in our research (p. 95).

## CONCLUSION

Our research observations reveal the difficulties and intricacies involved in deciphering the realities of sex trafficking in Malaysia. Our interviews lay bare the conflicting layers of understanding required in looking at the body of the trafficked woman. While they are commoditized and victimized for the sexual functions of their bodies, these women are also inextricably linked to this abhorrent trade due to their harrowing socio-economic circumstances. Linked further to gendered norms within patriarchal discourse, this places Vietnamese

women at a double disadvantage. In the context of Vietnamese women and their return to Malaysia into the sex trade, they may not fit into our “normative expectations of what victims look like, how they act, or what they need,” however this does not mean that they are any less vulnerable or victimized because they have been betrayed by systems like patriarchy and political economy that legitimize their oppression (Trajano, 2018, p. 11). Within these disparities of power and control, these women’s sexual exploitation can also be seen as a representation of all women who live in increasingly commodified bodies.

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