

Shadows of War: Exploring Vietnamese Sexploitation and Its Legacy

by

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In the tumultuous political landscape of mid-20th century Southeast Asia, amidst the upheaval of historical conflict, an insidious phenomenon emerged that would cast a long shadow over the region: sexploitation. The most notorious conflict that stirred up and brought to light the issues regarding this problem was the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, or the not only reshaped Southeast Asia geopolitically but also catalyzed a wave of sexploitation that continues to reverberate in the region's social fabric. During the conflict, the demand for sexual services surged among American soldiers stationed in Vietnam, leading to increase of sex work and the proliferation of brothels. This period brought to light a sex industry that would persist long after the war's end, exploiting vulnerable populations and perpetuating cycles of poverty and abuse. The commodification of sex, fueled by wartime circumstances, also set a precedent for the exploitation of women and children across Southeast Asia, laying the groundwork for a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue with far-reaching consequences.

However, one dimension of the Vietnam War that gets pushed is the notion that women were often just victims of the conflict. But contrary to this belief, women played a significant role during the war, as they fought alongside men, provided support to soldiers, and helped rebuild the country after the war. Still, American soldiers became notorious for paying many women for sex work, which had vast consequences on the local level, and also led to a future culture of sex work in Southeast Asia. This project will discuss the issues of sexploitation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and its repercussions from the past and the present, along with the history of sex work in the region as a whole. We will also discuss the challenges that arise in collecting information about Vietnamese women and the sources available.

Given the time period and technological circumstances, the historiography of Vietnamese women during the war is rich and varied. Much of this project will draw its sources from

scholarly journal articles, as the topics discussed are typically sub-topics brought up in greater context to the Vietnam War. Additionally, some video interviews will be utilized as many survivors of the Vietnam War did not have a voice then, but thanks to the internet, they do now. Other scholars have focused on the experiences of women during the war, such as their roles as soldiers, nurses, and spies. Obviously, media during the war may be one-sided, however *some* first-hand accounts from the Vietnamese side do exist. Scholars have explored the role of women in different aspects of the war, including their participation in the National Liberation Front, their contribution to the war effort, and their experiences as refugees.

After the war, the sources are equally, if not more, rich and diverse. As decades went on, more women began speaking about their experiences in the war. Unlike other communist nations, Vietnamese people see a bit more liberty in terms of speaking about their past, as Vietnam is still strongly tied to Western economies and socio-political spaces¹. On top of this, a product of the Communist revolution in Vietnam actually encouraged a stronger Vietnamese identity, which led to its people wanting their voices heard. Scholars have begun exploring the challenges that women faced in the aftermath of the war, including their struggles to rebuild their lives and the country. Many works have focused on the experiences of women as refugees and their struggles to adapt to new lives in other countries.

Collecting information on Vietnamese women can be challenging due to various factors, including language barriers, limited access to primary sources, and old cultural norms that may discourage women from speaking openly about their experiences.² However, there are many sources available, including memoirs, oral histories, government documents, and media

¹Hookway, James. "Rise of Mobile in Vietnam Fuels Push for Free Speech; Internet Freedom Movement Gains Momentum." *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition. New York, N.Y: Dow Jones & Company Inc, 2013.

²Sheat Fun, Chow. "Strategic Ambiguities: Rewriting Identity in Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*." *Women's Studies* 43, no. 6 (2014): 774–787.

accounts, many of which can be found in databases. Memoirs and oral histories are essential sources for understanding the experiences of Vietnamese women during and after the war. These sources provide valuable insights into the daily lives of women, their experiences during the war, and their struggles to rebuild their lives after the conflict. Government documents, such as reports and statistics, can also be useful sources for understanding the policies and programs aimed at promoting women's rights and supporting their participation in the post-war reconstruction efforts.

Another aspect that will be discussed is the difference in sex work between the socialist North and capitalist South, if there is any. Discussing this side of the industry can help better understanding of what it means to participate in sex work, and how it affects people from different political backgrounds.

Media accounts, such as newspaper articles and documentaries, can provide a broader perspective on the role of women during and after the war. However, it is essential to approach these sources with a critical eye, as they may be biased or reflect the perspectives of the dominant western societies that push these sources.

American media and movies have played a significant role in shaping the portrayal of Vietnamese women during and after the war. During the war, American media often portrayed them as helpless victims who needed to be saved from the communist threat. Later on, Hollywood films, such as "The Deer Hunter," "Full Metal Jacket," and "Good Morning, Vietnam," often portrayed Vietnamese women as either prostitutes or passive victims of the war.³ These depictions reinforced the idea of Vietnamese women as powerless, erasing their agency and contributions to the war effort. In fact, much of the inspiration for this project came from a

³Boczar, Amanda. "Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Policies in South Vietnam." *The Journal of American-East Asian relations* 22, no. 3 (2015): 187–220.

viewing of “Full Metal Jacket,” after the “*Me love you long time*” scene, in which a Vietnamese sex worker interacts with and distracts an American soldier, who ends up getting his camera stolen by a sneaky Vietnamese man. What is typically described as every-day hijinks and comic relief in these films is a loose and inaccurate representation of what actually happened. After the war, the portrayal of Vietnamese women in American media shifted, but it continued to be problematic. American media bolstered stereotypes that Vietnamese women were exotic, mysterious, and docile—this representation taught many Americans to believe they were submissive and obedient by nature, and largely contributed to the sexual objectification of Vietnamese women by American men.

In a 1970 video interview by ABC news, an American GI describes the Vietnamese girls as “bummers”. When asked to clarify, he explained that “they ain’t worth a damn”.⁴ Yet, when asked what the other GI’s generally think about Asian women, he gleefully tells the reporter that he has been happily married to his Japanese wife of thirteen years. So, even between different races of Asian women, there are differing opinions. The women that participated in sex work were seen as the less favorable, or “alright” ones, while other Asian women were more respected. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that venereal disease, or VD, was commonplace in the spaces where GI’s mingled with the women. Still, there seems to be a sense that the American soldiers fetishized many of them.

Though there are many stereotypes, it can be argued that stereotypes come from some semblance of truth. Should these stigmas be true, then the experience of Vietnamese women would be very similar to their representation in media, even if it’s portrayed as one-dimensional. But how were these women actually treated by western soldiers and local residents? This is also

⁴1970 SPECIAL REPORT: "VIETNAMESE PROSTITUTES"
<https://youtu.be/oUJL9qz1JAQ?si=FBJPOX-TU3PvOcEr&t=367> minute 6:07

a question that should be answered, because it can reveal reasoning behind the machinations of sex tourism that still continues in the present day. These depictions have had a lasting impact on how Vietnamese women are perceived in American culture. Other stereotypes have led to Asian women being fetishized and objectified even further. This serves as a strong juxtaposition to rising hate crimes against Asian populations, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of including Vietnamese women's voices and experiences in the narrative of the Vietnam War. Scholars and activists have worked to challenge these stereotypes and to highlight the diversity and complexity of Vietnamese women's experiences during and after the war.

Public opinion on the war may also affect how we view its history. Since the Vietnam War was one of the first televised wars, it was brought to Americans' living rooms for the first time. The conflict was quick to fall out of favor by the American public, so many pieces of media and literature may be swayed to portray the United States as the aggressors, rather than look at the ordeal from an impartial, historical point of view. However, this is not to ignore the actual hardships that the Vietnamese women faced; if anything, that's the whole point of this project.

It is also important to discuss the current implications that sexploitation has on Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. In Western society, those in higher tax brackets take advantage of their socioeconomic position to participate in sex tourism. It is important to find out why they travel to do this; it can be assumed that they do this because it would otherwise be wrong to do so in their own country, as it can be more easily traced back to them. This raises some questions on how westerners view women of Southeast Asian descent. It has racial implications, and sexual stereotypes, as mentioned before.

Despite there being laws combating prostitution and sex work in these countries, it is seldom enforced, as lack of resources and the influence of western money can cause sex work to go under the radar or disregarded. For decades, there have been extralegal organizations in place to protect these women. However, even if some of the women participating consent to the transactions, there are those who cannot consent: children.

There is also another interesting aspect regarding sexuality in southeast Asia. Men who cross-dress are becoming more common, as they call themselves “ladyboys.” From some research, one could interpret that they aren’t necessarily transgender in the way a westerner would describe it, however all the traits are there. But what is their sexuality? Gender identity? Are these people fetishized by westerners? Were these aspects of society influenced by exploitation from the war? Although it may not directly relate to sex work stemming from the Vietnam war, these questions are important because they can tell us what society is like in these countries, and some connotations can be drawn from how westerners interact with them.

The experiences of Vietnamese women during and after the war were multifaceted, and their stories have helped to challenge harmful stereotypes and erasure of their agency. However, collecting information on Vietnamese women's experiences can be challenging due to various factors, including language barriers and limited access to primary sources. Additionally, the socio-political circumstances surrounding the Vietnam War may influence the narratives that are presented in historical accounts, and it is essential to approach sources with a critical eye. Despite these challenges, it is crucial to continue exploring the experiences of Vietnamese women to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the war and its impact on Vietnamese women in society. This project will explore the origins of sex work in relation to the Vietnam War, and later sex tourism in the decades following.

To begin discussing sex tourism, we must elaborate how sex work and exploitation evolved in the region before the Vietnam War. Also, we do not need to delve excessively into defining sex work, but rather focus on discerning the point at which it transitions into sexual exploitation.

When sex work is envisioned in Vietnam, obvious images of wartime sex work purchased by American soldiers come to mind, as previously mentioned. Unfortunately, many people are biased and may assume that America's typical dealing of a bad hand in an impoverished country created these circumstances. On the contrary, sex work had existed in Vietnam and in the rest of Southeast Asia even *long* before globalization; sex work has literally existed since human beings could have sex. So, in the context of the Vietnam war, one could assume that the customer base simply expanded from local populations, to foreign soldiers. Yet, it is crucial to keep in mind two things: that sex work was taking place in secret for many years; it was always just a part of society, and that sex work can be voluntary or nonconsensual.

Kathleen Barry argues that poverty does not directly cause prostitution. Instead, it is the marginalization of women in the labor force, and the genderization of the leisure activity of prostitution, that causes women to end up in situations of sexual exploitation. While sex work has indeed existed for thousands of years, calling it "the oldest profession" does not excuse any subsequent exploitation. As Kathleen Barry puts it, it is the foreign imposition of indigenous sex work that results in the colonization of women's bodies.⁵

Before a discussion on American involvement in Vietnam can continue, it is important to bring up what was going on in French Indochina in the years leading up to the war. It is also a good point to mention how the Vietnamese saw the conflicts on their land.

⁵Barry, Kathleen. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Twentieth-century Vietnam was undoubtedly a place of political turmoil and upheaval. The seeds of resistance against colonial rule were sown long before the arrival of American troops. In the 1930s, amidst the Great Depression's global turmoil, Vietnam witnessed the rise of Ho Chi Minh, a figure who would come to embody the aspirations of his people for independence. With his indomitable spirit and Marxist ideology, Ho Chi Minh galvanized the Vietnamese populace against the French colonial oppressors. Then, in 1941, as the flames of World War II engulfed the world, Ho Chi Minh seized the opportunity to establish the Viet Minh, a guerrilla force aimed at thwarting the Japanese invasion and liberating Vietnam from foreign domination. The year 1945 marked a pivotal moment in Vietnamese history, as Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh declared the birth of a free Vietnam, inspired by the principles of self-determination and national sovereignty. However, this declaration was met with immediate challenges. In 1946, following the end of World War II, the French sought to reassert their control over Vietnam, igniting the flames of the first Indochina War. This conflict would become a protracted struggle for Vietnamese independence, pitting the Viet Minh against the French colonial forces in a bloody and relentless battle for freedom. This fighting lasted until 1954, in which the Viet Minh came out the victors, for the most part. The 1955 Geneva Conference split Vietnam between the Communist-backed north, and the Capitalist South. If this sounds familiar, it should, because of its similarity with Korea.⁶

To look at the operations of sex work, we should begin during French Indochina. How much did the French administration contribute to the industry? What were the laws surrounding it like? This may be surprising to some, but there were actual laws in place to protect those involved and regulate the operations. The socio-political definition of prostitution in today's Vietnam is different from the colonial one, especially considering the infiltration of French

⁶Anderson, David L. *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

culture/rule in the region at the time. During the colonial period (1858-1954), prostitution was legal and regulated in the French-controlled areas of Tonkin (present-day northern Vietnam). The colonial regulation system required sex workers to register with police, pay steep taxes, submit to invasive venereal exams, and, if they tested positive, be quarantined.⁷ It is imperative to note, however, that any laws in place were not necessarily in the best interest of the women; instead, any regulation of sex work was to protect French colonials.

However, not all sex work was consensual. At that point, it should not be called sex work, but abuse. In “Vietnamese Women at War,” Sandra C. Taylor describes the harsh conditions that women faced in French rubber factories alongside their male counterparts, and how they were mistreated when they did not work hard enough.⁸ This mistreating came in the form of beating, but also sexual coercion. If they sought medical help at the infirmary, those same women may be forced to sleep with French medical personnel. This was all convenient to the colonial government, as they mandated the ancestral customs that endorsed women’s submission.⁹

After Ho Chi Minh expelled the French in 1954, The United States quickly occupied the Southern region within the year. Catholic-influenced southern administration attempted to quell sex work outright. However, many attempts led by religious and legislative groups had trouble with this: “During the American war, although prostitution was considered illegal, the authorities turned a blind eye on and even encouraged prostitution.”¹⁰

⁷Oppermann, Martin. *Sex Tourism and Prostitution : Aspects of Leisure, Recreation and Work*. Elmsford, N.Y: Cognizant Communication Corp., 1998.

⁸Taylor, Sandra C. *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution*. University Press of Kansas, 1999. p. 20-21

⁹Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 22

¹⁰Nguyen, Hahn T.L. *Prostitution in Vietnam in Recent History: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Critical Studies of Inter-Asian Societies. 2022

On the other hand, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) took steps to redefine women's sexuality and relationship with sex for revolutionary purposes. Additionally, As a result, sex work became less of an occurrence in the North. The goal of the ICP, as was seen in other Asian revolutions at the time, was to strengthen the masses via the familial unit. One way the ICP could do this was by doing away with feudal polygamy and arranged marriages, especially for very young women. The ICP's subsequent encouragement of abstinence came not from a sense of puritanism, but from the notion that one could not fight a war and carry on a romance simultaneously.¹¹ Failure to do so could result in jail time and expulsion from the party.

In fact, the National Liberation Front (NLF for short– the Viet Minh's organization for the masses) saw what had happened during the French Colonial period, and the current state of sex in the south, and used that to lure people to its side. The ICP complained that the Americans had “attempted to turn Saigon into a brothel.”¹²

Saigon was a different story, obviously. The American conflict reduced over 500,000 women to prostitution.¹³ Most of these women were widows, or victims of abandonment or rape. One Vietnamese woman, Le Ly Hayslip, found herself forced into prostitution after being raped by both North and South Vietnamese men. Unlike her siblings, who willingly chose to sell sex, she did not want to. And, being her father's favorite child, she was looking to be married off to a suitable partner. However after being raped, she did not see herself as pure for marriage. So, after some bartering, when a couple American GI's presented her \$400 for some “boom-boom,” as they described it, she imagined how \$400 could have supported her family for over a year. In her mind, there was nothing those “American boys” could do to her that hadn't been done before – at least in this case, these men could pay her back for what other men had taken. This interaction,

¹¹Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 63

¹²Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 64

¹³Barry, Kathleen. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 149

and the American's use of the term "boom-boom" was a common way Americans could manipulate and "play" with these women – as was portrayed in the 1987 Kubrick film "Full Metal Jacket."

Some research for this project comes from "Sex Tourism and Prostitution: Aspects of Leisure, Recreation, and Work" by Martin Oppermann. It is a comprehensive collection presented in 16 chapters, which range from the theoretical to detailed case studies of individual countries and persons. Several authors worked together to put this book together, with Oppermann as the editor. As for Vietnam, Cooper and Hanson describe it as "a developing country where rural overpopulation and the demands of an emerging and diversifying urban economy are rapidly transforming economic and social relationships."¹⁴ Like in many other developing societies, sex work was the only source of income available for uneducated rural women. This is an important fact to consider, as it can help improve how people think about people in that position. It should be mentioned that another motive of this project is not to determine whether or not sex work is morally apprehensive. Instead, it is to discuss how sex work has evolved in Southeast Asia and the harmful aspects of it regarding exploitation.

If sex work in Southeast Asia is observed from an objective lens, the only shortcomings of it would be possible diseases that could harm those involved. However, Martin Oppermann notes that "the greater the legal and societal suppression is, the greater the potential for the prostitutes to be exploited or... the greater the number of middle persons and parasites who benefit from this illegality." This is where it must be considered that exploitation occurs here, not because the government turns a blind eye to the industry, no; the lack of resources and regulations within the operations causes many things to go unseen.

¹⁴Oppermann, Martin. *Sex Tourism and Prostitution : Aspects of Leisure, Recreation and Work*. Elmsford, N.Y: Cognizant Communication Corp., 1998.

This relates to Le Ly, because at the end of the day, she herself did not blame women for selling sex if it was voluntary and if they were of age, and if that is how they could have fed their families. In a society where poverty is rampant, and the main authority is a foreign power, this power imbalance can exist very easily.

The sad reality is that Le Ly saw the sex industry differently. The only issues she had with it was the fact that not only were these women being coerced into sex work, so too, were children, who could not consent.

It would be a disservice to only speak about women in terms of sex work in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Obviously, the goal of this project is to discuss the history of sex work and how exploitation can be stopped, but it is important to explain the overall role of women during Vietnam's most transitioning times. As stated in the introduction, this thinking can combat the way westerners view not just Vietnamese women, but also Asian women as a whole.

When the ancient Chinese empires began invading Vietnam, the teachings of Confucius soon spread. Taylor notes that as the Chinese conquered their southern neighbor, the Vietnamese learned that women could not be educated, belonged only within the family compound, and that "a hundred daughters are not worth one son."¹⁵ For thousands of years, women were expected to be celibate until marriage, and when the husband died, to become celibate again. Not only this, women also had to accept their husband's concubines, especially if she could not bear a son, even if they could not practice polygamy themselves. While there were some exceptions, they were typically seen among the elites, as with other cultures; the rich always had more resources.

Despite the pervasive influence of Confucian ideology in Vietnamese society, the presence of powerful women and revered goddesses has always been deeply ingrained in

¹⁵Taylor, Sandra C. *Vietnamese Women at War*. University Press of Kansas, 1999. 20-21

Vietnamese culture, history, and folklore. One prominent example is the legendary tale of the Trung sisters. In the year 40 AD, Vietnam found itself under the dominion of Chinese rule, which had persisted for over a millennium. However, the arrival of Trung Trac and Trung Nhi marked a turning point. Faced with the oppressive imposition of Chinese culture and laws, including harsh penalties for dissent, the Vietnamese populace suffered under unjust taxation and repression. The execution of the nobleman Thi Sach for speaking out against these injustices sparked outrage among the people. In response, his widow, Trung Trac, and her sister, Trung Nhi, exhibited remarkable courage and leadership. They garnered support from tribal leaders and ordinary citizens alike, embarking on daring acts such as slaying a fearsome tiger and rallying their compatriots to resist. With a formidable army of eighty thousand, they successfully ousted the Chinese forces, proclaiming themselves as sovereign queens of an independent Vietnam. However, Vietnamese independence was short-lived, lasting only three years before the Chinese reconquered Vietnam in A.D. 43. The Trung sisters reportedly committed suicide to preserve their honor.¹⁶ Today, temples and shrines across Vietnam honor the sisters, and an annual holiday commemorates their bravery and sacrifice.

When Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh rose to power in 1930, the main goal of the ICP was to establish a new Vietnam. Not unlike China's Cultural Revolution a few decades later, the notion was that the old way of thought had to be replaced by a new one through revolution.¹⁷

Vietnamese revolutionaries appealed directly to women to help liberate the country by promising equal socio-political and economic rights, as well as revolutionary education under a new regime.¹⁸ Alongside the ICP, the Women's Union was also founded:

¹⁶Manning, Keri L. "Harder Than War? Making Peace in Southeast Asia." *Transformations* XV, no. 2 (Fall, 2004): 98.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fharder-than-war-making-peace-southeast-asia%2Fdocview%2F220385547%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

¹⁷Barry, Kathleen. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. St. Martin's Press, 1996. p. 38

¹⁸Barry. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 39

“The focus of the Women's Union, like its name, has changed since its founding. What did not change was its role as the party organization responsible for the political mobilization, education, and representation of Vietnamese women. Organized at every level of society beginning with the village, the Women's Union can claim as a member virtually every woman who has held a position of authority in the Vietnamese government. The Women's Union was one of the 'functional organizations' established to build a social base for the ICP... In Ho Chi Minh's words, 'Women are half the people. If women are not free then the people are not free.' The ICP recognized the importance of women to the revolution by sending a woman, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, to represent the party at the Seventh International Congress in Moscow in 1935. Eighteen Female workers and peasants took part from the beginning in the upsurge of revolutionary activity following the foundation of the ICP and women carried the bulk of the supplies destined for the secret bases of the revolutionaries. Some women became revolutionary martyrs: Nguyen Thi Minh Khai was captured and guillotined by the French in 1941.”¹⁹

Nguyen Thi Mnh Khai is one quintessential woman revolutionary during the French conflict. Daughter of a trader and railroad worker, the peasant girl made a name for herself after she escaped her family to avoid an arranged marriage, and joined the newly formed ICP in 1930. She used her father's rail station to hide revolutionary literature from the French, and spent years spreading her message. Despite her fate, her message spread to countless women and pushed others to continue the fight.

¹⁹Barry. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 40

Another incredibly prestigious woman was Nguyen Thi Dinh, “whose career in the NLF and later as president of the Women’s Union would give her respect among women.” (Taylor, 43). At the age of fifteen, joined her brothers in the war against the French in 1935. Soon after becoming pregnant after her loving marriage with a friend of her brother’s, she and her husband were arrested and sent to different prisons. Prison radicalized her even more, and when she was moved to house arrest due to her declining health, she learned her husband had died in prison. She vowed, for the rest of her life, to avenge his death. The dissolution of French legislation and imprisonment meant she was free. She began by radicalizing women for the Women’s Liberation Association, which was formed three months after the NLF in 1960. Through her extraordinary leadership abilities, During the Vietnam War, Dinh served as a commander in the National Liberation Front (NLF), also known as the Viet Cong, leading military operations against the South Vietnamese government and US forces. She became known as the "Queen of the Delta" for her leadership in the Mekong Delta region. Following the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, Dinh held various high-ranking positions in the government, including serving as Vice President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. She continued to be an advocate for social justice and women's rights throughout her career.

Another important group worth mentioning is The Long-Haired Warriors.²⁰ This group of women were notorious for their leadership and importance at the Mekong Delta uprisings, which was a push by the NLF to take back the agricultural center of the South. These women fought just like their male Viet Cong counterparts; setting traps, digging underground labyrinths, and building bunkers. Led by Nguyen Thi Dinh, these women were not only fierce in battle, but also served as propaganda and morale-boosters for the rest of the National Liberation Front through

²⁰Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 71

publications and photographs. Ultimately, from 1954 to 1965, female revolutionaries in the South suffered 250,000 deaths, 40,000 disabilities from torture, and 36,000 imprisonments.²¹

As is a topic throughout this project, children were also, unfortunately, part of the fighting. The stories of a young fighter like Nguyen Thi Dinh rising to power are not all that uncommon; when it came to seeking a new way of life, it was an “all hands on deck” affair. Young adolescents and preteens were “recruited in ways that suited their ages.” Sometimes, the NLF banked on children’s trauma from the war, and the Confucian ideology that stressed duty to family.²² While it is not the intention to fault any of the fighters, it is important to understand how the war could have negatively affected children.

The recurring theme is that during Vietnam’s most transformative periods, women assumed diverse roles beyond those commonly associated with marriage and sex work. When they weren’t fighting, women balanced familial duties amidst the turbulent socio-political landscape. For many women, the way of the revolutionary prevented them from having families, as was described before. While they still longed to have families eventually, they were still competent fighters:

“Vietnamese male soldiers knew full well that the very same women who comforted the wounded and dying were also capable of handling an AK-47... when Vietnamese women turned their gaze toward their men, they saw not powerful patriarchal figures but comrades trying to survive with dignity and sometimes losing the struggle.”²³

²¹Barry. *Vietnam’s Women in Transition*. p. 47

²²Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 94

²³Turner-Gottschang, K., & Phan, T. H. (1998). *Even the women must fight : memories of war from North Vietnam*. Wiley. p. 135

Moreover, the historical narrative of women in Vietnam and Southeast Asia is marked by stories of both adversity and empowerment. Some women found themselves relegated to the status of concubines, trapped in systems of exploitation and subjugation. Others, however, defied societal norms and actively participated in resistance movements, alongside the NLF. Women guerrilla fighters stood shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, particularly with the Viet Cong in the north. Thanks to the ICP, women found themselves free of polygamous relationships present during feudal eras, and able to *choose* a way of life that suited them.²⁴ To support this, the ICP issued a declaration regarding women's role in the new order that read as follows:

Women are not only equal to men in society, they are also equal to their husbands.

We will abolish inequality between husbands and wives. We will abolish polygamy... Women are equal to men in standing for elections... Women must be free to choose their own professions... Since they carry out the same work as men, women are to receive the same pay as men...²⁵

Additionally, as Vietnam underwent periods of modernization and economic reform, women emerged as key drivers of the nation's development. From toiling in factories to managing small enterprises, women played vital roles in propelling the country's economy forward. However, this newfound economic agency was often accompanied by challenges such as workplace exploitation and unequal access to resources. Recognizing the importance of gender equality in fostering sustainable development, the ICP launched initiatives aimed at educating and empowering women. By providing access to education and vocational training, the party sought to equip women with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate fully in the

²⁴Barry. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 40

²⁵Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War*. p. 54

nation-building process. Through these efforts, strides were made towards creating a more equitable society where women could contribute meaningfully to Vietnam's socio-economic progress, especially after the Vietnam War.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and during the Doi Moi era, Vietnamese sex work underwent significant transformations influenced by both historical legacies and socio-economic changes. One of the historical legacies was the re-education of women under the ICP towards the end of the Vietnam War. The Doi Moi era, initiated in the mid-1980s, marked a pivotal shift in Vietnam's economic and political landscape, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy.²⁶ Much like similar Westernization trends in Asia at the time, this period of reform brought about rapid industrialization, urbanization, and increased integration into the global economy, profoundly impacting various aspects of Vietnamese society, including the sex industry. The lines between capitalism and socialism were also blurred, as Vietnamese people began enjoying some aspects of free market consumerism.

Post-Vietnam War, the sex industry experienced its own shifts in its dynamics. Not only had Vietnam witnessed a sex work "build-up" by the U.S. military, so too did Vietnam's neighbors, Thailand and the Philippines. While it decreased for Vietnam, prostitution was "industrialized in nearby countries and the hundreds of thousands of prostitute women expanded to over one million in Thailand alone by the mid 1980s, and around two million in the 1990s".²⁷ With the influx of foreign aid workers, journalists, and soldiers during the war, sex work became prevalent in areas frequented by these individuals, such as major cities and military bases. However, following the war's conclusion, the landscape of sex work evolved, adapting to

²⁶Tran, V. T. (2013). Vietnamese Economy at the Crossroads: New Doi Moi for Sustained Growth. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 8(1), 122–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12012>

²⁷Barry. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 151

changing socio-economic conditions and government policies. While prostitution was officially banned under the socialist regime, it persisted in underground or semi-legal forms, often existing in red-light districts or entertainment establishments.

A 1993 study, 'The Risk of Aids in Vietnam', found that in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon), the sex industries are still small businesses but that large enterprises are developing and some brothels function as international business... by the early 1990s, only four years after prostitution began to increase in Vietnam, the customers are increasingly local Vietnamese men".²⁸

A pattern that can be inferred is that once Vietnam became a unified country post-war, it allowed for a more lax governing of sex work, since there was no longer a strong imposing force on the country. Sex work decreased in the years following the war due to the lack of oppressors taking advantage of the population. So, the women that still did participate in sex work did so consensually. Prostitution later increased again due to rapid industrialization and globalization, which made the industry much more lucrative.

Moreover, the expansion of the informal sector and the proliferation of entertainment venues, such as bars, nightclubs, and massage parlors, provided avenues for sex work to thrive. While prostitution remained officially illegal, enforcement varied, with periodic crackdowns interspersed with periods of tolerance. The ambiguity of the legal framework surrounding sex work contributed to a complex and often precarious environment for sex workers, characterized by vulnerability to exploitation, violence, stigma, and disease. In fact, a 2008 study provides evidence to suggest that the prevalence in HIV infections has to do with the passing of Doi Moi policies. The author of the study, Harriet M. Phinney, states that "Doi Moi has instigated an

²⁸Barry. *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. p. 151

iterative process among a global market economy that produces men's desire for women outside the home (and supplies these women), facilitates a notion of masculinity tied to commercialized and sexualized leisure (ensuring the demand for sex workers), and generates the means to purchase these sexual "commodities." This process began in 1986 when the Vietnamese government started to transform the economy from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with a socialist direction".²⁹

Despite the challenges, some sex workers were able to leverage the opportunities presented by the Doi Moi era to improve their economic prospects. For marginalized women from rural areas or disadvantaged backgrounds, sex work offered a means of survival and income generation in the face of limited employment options. However, the lack of legal protections and social support systems left many sex workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, highlighting the need for comprehensive policies addressing the rights and welfare of sex workers in Vietnam's evolving socio-economic landscape.

Although the Doi Moi era has continued into the present day, for the sake of this paper we will refer to anything past 1995 as "current day", since many of the policies brought up during the nineties still affect today's occurrences. Additionally, the majority of this section relies on the aforementioned *Sex Tourism and Prostitution* by Oppermann.

A 1995 Save the Children Fund (SCF) research study stated that there were one-hundred forty-nine brothels in Ho Chi Minh city, and around sixty women from several of these establishments were interviewed. Like in Saigon of the past, many of these women worked outside of bars, where sex work took place behind the establishment or elsewhere in the vicinity.

²⁹Phinney, Harriet M. "Rice Is Essential but Tiresome; You Should Get Some Noodles': Doi Moi and the Political Economy of Men's Extramarital Sexual Relations and Marital HIV Risk in Hanoi, Vietnam." *American Journal of Public Health* (1971), vol. 98, no. 4, 2008, pp. 650–60, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2007.111534>.

When some of these women were arrested, they were taken to a detention center, many of which were bailed out by the brothel owners. Once they are working again, however, they have to work extra to make that money back and pay the owners. High interest rates meant that the women had to be “loyal” to the brothel owner. Unfortunately, some of these girls were as young as seventeen years old. Yet, many of them only see sex work as a voluntary way of escaping rural life, and the hardships along the way are only part of the process.³⁰

One could infer that the decriminalization of sex work could help women work their way out of sex work. Decriminalization could be chalked up to the fact that the sheer number of sex workers would mean the punishment of all of them would be a logistical nightmare. On top of alleviating psychological damage, it could allow governments to monitor the industry, which could diminish the spread of infectious disease.

However, it is imperative that we highlight the less favorable situations many of the women and girls find themselves in today. The notion of a girl using sex work as a means to escape poverty can further encourage the stereotype that these women are all victims and need saving. If we help women seek alternative means to support themselves, such as helping to provide more education, this can set them on a better path. Unfortunately, many westerners use this as their excuse: “They are already there, so why not just participate?” A 2017 study by the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers, “Implications of Sexual Tourism”, claims that “approximately 250,000 people travel internationally to engage in sex tourism with children and youth and that the industry generates over \$20 billion in revenue.”³¹ Mentioned several times in this project was the fact that the morality of prostitution will not be argued, unless it is to critique those who involve children. Arguably, one of the ways that governments

³⁰Oppermann. *Sex Tourism and Prostitution*. p. 149-151

³¹Intl. Assoc. For Medical Assistance to Travelers. *Implications of Sexual Tourism*. Article. October 2017. Web Accessed 12 May 2024. <https://www.iamat.org/blog/implications-of-sexual-tourism/>

can combat this is not by banning prostitution outright, as that will cause it to go underground, but to regulate it and educate those involved to ensure proper conduct.

Finally, arguably the most consequential aspect of the Vietnamese sex industry lies in the profound implications for the children born out of such circumstances. The intersection of American soldiers and Vietnamese women gave rise to a generation of approximately twenty to thirty thousand individuals of mixed heritage³², their identities inherently shaped by the complex dynamics of war, exploitation, and cultural hybridity. The existence of these children posed a poignant challenge to authoritative powers and societal norms, as their dual heritage often left them marginalized and stigmatized. Their very existence forced a reckoning with questions of identity, belonging, and legitimacy, challenging entrenched notions of citizenship and nationality. Moreover, the treatment of these children by both the Vietnamese and American authorities varied widely, reflecting divergent attitudes towards race, ethnicity, and the legacy of colonialism. In many cases, these children faced discrimination and exclusion, denied the full rights and privileges afforded to their peers. One account is from siblings Tung Joe and Julie Nguyen, who “consider Vietnamese as [their] family, but they don’t think of [the children] the same way.”³³ The complexities of their half-American, half-Vietnamese existence underscored the enduring legacies of the Vietnam War and its profound impact on the lives of individuals and communities across generations.

A dimension of the sex work industry that should be touched upon is the popularity of “LadyBoys” in countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. The presence of

³²Lee, S., & Bartels, S. A. (2019). Self-interpreted narrative capture: A research project to examine life courses of Amerasians in Vietnam and the United States. *Methodological Innovations*, 12(2), 2059799119863280–2059799119863280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799119863280>

³³DeBonis, Steven. *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers*. United States: McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2017.

Ladyboys, or transgender women, in Southeast Asian societies presents a complex intersection of cultural norms, gender identity, and sexuality. Ladyboys hold a unique place in society, often revered for their beauty and grace, yet simultaneously marginalized due to societal stigmas surrounding gender nonconformity.

In this section of the paper, we will delve into the multifaceted implications of ladyboy culture on sexuality and the potential for sexploitation within these communities. By exploring the historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts surrounding Ladyboys, we aim to shed light on the challenges they face and the vulnerabilities that may predispose them to exploitation.

In the bustling streets of Southeast Asia, amidst the vibrant tapestry of cultures and traditions, exists a community that challenges conventional notions of gender and identity. Ladyboys, or transgender women, are an integral part of the social fabric in these Southeast Asian countries. Known for their beauty, poise, and unique cultural significance, ladyboys occupy a complex space where societal acceptance intersects with deep-seated stigmas.

While ladyboys are often celebrated for their talent in entertainment, fashion, and beauty pageants, their presence also highlights the broader topics of sexuality and exploitation within Southeast Asian societies. Through an exploration of historical narratives, cultural dynamics, and contemporary realities, we aim to examine the ways in which ladyboys navigate societal expectations, negotiate their identities, and confront the specter of sexploitation. By illuminating these issues, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender diversity and the complexities of sexuality in Southeast Asia.

While sources on Vietnam remain scarce, there is an abundance of information about trans women in countries such as Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, and especially Thailand. In fact, interest in this aspect of sexuality comes from a viral video that surfaced in 2023, where an

American tourist is interviewing a woman on a street in Thailand. After receiving a compliment from the interviewer, she proudly states that she is a “ladyboy”, much to the disbelief of the American.

Given the popularity of ladyboys in countries such as Thailand, and their frequent appearance in red light districts and adult entertainment centers, one could make the connection that foreigners greatly participate in sex tourism with these women. According to the Asia Pacific Transgender Network, there are over 314,000 transgender people living in Thailand.³⁴ In Thailand, ‘*kathoey*’ is the commonly used umbrella term that describes biological men born with “distinctly female hearts and minds.”³⁵ The way that many sources describe transgender women makes it seem like they are not only accepted, but that it is a way of life.

A 2013 research article describes “that the sex industry facilitates the emergence of new third-gender identities among [male-to-female] sex workers.”³⁶ Therefore, the inference can be made that although transgender culture may have to do more with societal norms in the region, the sex industry absolutely provides an engine for foreigners to experience this aspect of their society.

When I first watched the film “Full Metal Jacket” as an adolescent, the concept of wartime prostitution interested me. Not in the sense of something perverse, but instead a genuine curiosity of how these women could have possibly been treated. It seemed important to do research on the topic and find ways to combat stereotypes and improve ways of thinking. As a man, it was easy to feel apprehensive about writing about this topic, however through

³⁴<https://weareaptn.org/location/thailand/>

³⁵Aldous, Susan. *Ladyboys: The Secret World of Thailand's Third Gender*. Ireland: Maverick House, 2015.

³⁶Ocha, W., & Earth, B. (2013). Identity diversification among transgender sex workers in Thailand’s sex tourism industry. *Sexualities*, 16(1–2), 195–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712471117>

reassurance from my advisor, it became clear to me that this was a topic that could yield good intellectual conversation.

The experiences of Vietnamese women during and after the Vietnam War were diverse and complex, challenging harmful stereotypes and highlighting their agency and resilience. Despite the multifaceted nature of their stories, collecting information on Vietnamese women's experiences presents significant challenges, including language barriers and limited access to primary sources. Furthermore, the socio-political circumstances surrounding the Vietnam War have influenced historical narratives, necessitating a critical approach to sources. However, it remains crucial to continue exploring the experiences of Vietnamese women to develop a comprehensive understanding of the war and its enduring impact on Vietnamese society. This project has delved into the origins of sex work in relation to the Vietnam War and subsequent sex tourism, shedding light on the historical and contemporary repercussions of sexploitation in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. By examining the complexities of sexuality and gender identity in the region, we gain insight into broader societal dynamics and the lasting legacies of wartime exploitation. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Vietnamese women's experiences and their ongoing struggle for recognition and empowerment.

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