Victims of Poverty and Gender Roles: The Marriage Practices, Gender-based Violence, and Trafficking That Hmong Women Face in Their Daily Lives'

Willa Sweeney
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Asian Studies Commons, Community-Based Research Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Regional Sociology Commons, Rural Sociology Commons, Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons, Women's Studies Commons, and the Work, Economy and Organizations Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2098

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
Victims of Poverty and Gender Roles:
The Marriage Practices, Gender-based Violence, and Trafficking That Hmong Women Face in Their Daily Lives'

Willa Sweeney
Independent Study Project
ISP Advisor: Le Thi Phuong Thuy
Head of Department of Consulting and Development Support for the CWD
SIT Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development
Spring 2015
Acknowledgements:

My research would not have been possible without the help of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for giving me the opportunity to study on this program. After interacting and meeting many Hmong women who are living in difficult and unimaginable situations, I am constantly reminded of my privilege and of the unending and unconditional support that my parents provide me with on a daily basis.

A large thank you must be given to the family of the Lakeview Hotel, who made Sapa feel like a home during my independent study period. Additionally, my research would not have been possible without the cooperation and willingness of the women and men that I interviewed in Sapa. They gave me vital insights into issues that I was studying and that they were living.

Many thanks to Le Thi Ngoc Bich and my advisor Le Thi Puonh Thuy whom were crucial in understanding the work and struggles of organizations like the Center for Women and Development and the Peace House Shelter project that are fighting against trafficking and domestic abuse.

Interviews with substantial community figures would not have been possible without the connections and tireless efforts of my academic director Duong Van Thanh and her SIT staff, Anh Phat and Chi Linh. Co Thanh introduced me to knowledgeable and influential academics and professionals that were crucial to the success of my research, and for that I am truly thankful.
# Table of Contents:

Title Page 1

Acknowledgements 2

Abstract 4

Introduction 5

Literature Review 7
  i. Hmong Cultural Background & Gender Issues 7
  ii. Marriage Practices 8
  iii. Gender-based violence 10
  iv. Trafficking in Persons 11

Methodology 14

Research Findings & Analysis 16
  i. Marriage 16
    a. Findings
    b. Poisonous Leaves 18
  ii. Domestic Abuse 19
    a. Findings
    b. ‘A’ 20
  iii. Trafficking in Persons 22
    a. Findings
    b. Mai and Ping 27
  iv. Recommendations for Future Research 30

Conclusion 31
Abstract:

Sa Pa is a district in Lao Cai Province in the northern mountainous regions of Vietnam that is home to many ethnic minorities, including the Hmong. While Vietnam as a country is a spectacular success story in terms of its remarkable economic growth since the early 2000s, the lives of many ethnic minority groups, including the Hmong, paint a very different picture. Though the Vietnamese government has attempted to implement policies to improve the living conditions of the Hmong, lack of specificity and follow-through have not managed to break the cycle of poverty that many Hmong families experience.

Through informal conversation interviews and participatory research methods, this present study found that, economically and politically left behind, the women and girls of the Hmong suffer the most. Faced with a steadfast patriarchal society that favors sons and filial piety, and often living in geographically isolated communities, Hmong women are rarely able to alter the trajectory of their lives. With poor access to resources such as education and health, and facing deeply entrenched gender norms, Hmong women often experience marriage and childbirth at frighteningly young ages; they regularly experience gender-based violence, and are particularly susceptible to traffickers. This paper focuses on the struggles of Hmong women in regards to marriage, gender-based violence, and trafficking.

As a disclaimer and for the sake of convenience, the ethnonym Hmong will be used when referring to research participants in this paper, despite the understanding that there are several sects of the Hmong group with distinct cultural differences. No undue generalization is intended.
I. Introduction

“...for the Hmong, who, with a population of over 1 million, are one of Viet Nam’s largest ethnic groups. They continue not only to suffer from poverty rates as high as 80%, but to have the lowest average age of marriage and a fertility rate in excess of double the national average. They are also the only ethnic group with a primary school gender gap greater than 10% and a high school enrolment rate in single digits (Jones V).”

The original focus and purpose of this independent study project was the trafficking of Hmong girls in Sapa and the province of Lao Cai. However, after initial field research findings, it became clear that it would be negligent to merely report on trafficking when it is so clearly interconnected with the cultural situations and developmental problems facing Hmong women in the region. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the connections between domestic abuse and trafficking, and to identify the main factors that are allowing these issues to persist.

Research found that at the root of problems like trafficking and domestic violence that endemically affect these young women are issues such as gender norms and roles, poverty, and lack of access to opportunity and education. Hmong women and girls continue to lack the same opportunities as boys and the larger Kinh majority. The World Bank reported in the early 2000s that the literacy of Hmong women was around a mere 22%, nowhere near the literacy rate for Kinh women at 92% (Nguyen S203). Hmong female adolescents rarely have proper access to secondary or upper secondary school levels, and even if they do, they are often times forced to withdraw from school due to family economic pressures.

Hmong girls often experience excessive home duties, between being an extra laborer in the farm fields and taking care of chores and domestic work that sons are never expected to complete. Pervasive alcoholic gender-based violence continues to threaten the well-being of Hmong girls and wives. Most of the girls interviewed for this project expected to be hit or physically punished by their husbands in the future. There appears to be a lack of options for
women experiencing gender-based violence; divorce is not possible for the majority of women, unless the husband is the one instigating the separation. There is deep distrust of the police and often times the police do not have effective punishments for men that are abusing their wives. Many young girls that grow up in households with abusive fathers and/or in poverty find themselves at risk for being trafficked, lured with false promises of money or a caring husband.

Trafficking in persons feeds on poverty, despair, crisis, and inexperience, all of which can be found in these rural areas of Vietnam. According to some of this research’s interviewees, it appears that many girls from Sapa between the years of 2011-2013 were victims of the trafficking industry, sold in China as brides or prostitutes. Vietnam’s government enacted a new trafficking law in 2012, with 2013 seeing the issuance of joint circulars that outline harsher penalties and punishments, and greater policy details that explain proper protocols for law enforcement. However, the problem of trafficking in persons still persists, and the stigmas surrounding rescued victims still abound. Combating the trafficking and gender-based violence of Hmong women will not be manageable until larger problems affecting the Hmong community are addressed through detailed, creative, and specific policies that are enforced consistently by the Vietnamese government.
II. Literature Review

i. Hmong Cultural Background & Gender Issues

There are currently significant populations of Hmong people in Vietnam, China, Thailand and Laos. The ethnic group began migrating from Southern China during the 18th century to other neighboring countries to escape political persecution and find more fertile lands (Nguyen S201). Their diasporic history and geographical, mountainous location has physically separated them from outside influences and given rise to a tenacious culture. Thus, it has often been found during research studies conducted in Vietnam that the Hmong favor their ethnic traditions over the majority Kinh culture (Jones 12).

Hmong culture is commonly described as, “patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (Nguyen S203).” Many studies on the Hmong have confirmed that Hmong society emphasizes patriarchal hierarchies and filial piety, with women rarely acting as the head of their households. Females are always considered subservient to men; in line with Confucian values, a woman follows her father when she is young, her husband when she is married, and her son when she is a widow (Jones 18). Often times, women do not own property; in the Overseas Development Institute report on early marriage within the Hmong, it was written, “…the concept of women’s property rights was non-existent, as all land was divided between sons under the assumption that daughters would ultimately have access to land through their husbands (Jones 15).” The report further found that most girls could not imagine expressing their own opinions within their family as that would be usurping male authority (Jones 18). The ability for women agency in Hmong culture is severely limited by patriarchal traditions and patrilocal practices.
The patrilineal practice of the Hmong society leads to a deep preference for baby boys. Sons are preferred because they can inherit and own land, maintain the family lineage, and will be able to theoretically care for their parents as they age. It has been found that son preference is a key reason for high fertility rates among Hmong women. Gender preference also results in women having no control over their own fertility and puts girls at a greater risk of having more siblings, larger families, and poorer outlooks (Teerawichitchainan vii). Often times, girls are considered an extra laborer that will eventually leave the family through marriage. Many girls are pressured by parents to leave school early to help in the fields and learn domestic work in order to prepare for their inevitable marriage. It was reported in ODI’s document that, “…from early childhood they are given the lion’s share of household chores, with girls tending to ‘work twice the amount of boys: caring for siblings, doing household chores, collecting wood and water, and caring for buffalo (Jones 14).’”

### ii. Marriage Practices

Hmong women are still widely known to marry very young, despite national laws that state marriage is not allowed until a girl is 18 years of age. The ODI reported that while most of its study’s participants were married between the ages of 18 and 20, “a significant proportion marry at 17—and a small minority continue to marry against their will as early as 14 (Jones vi).” Early marriage is often encouraged by families with financial troubles in an effort to lessen the amount of mouths to feed and so that they can receive a handsome bride price for their daughter. Bride price can be paid in cash or by livestock such as buffalo. Girls also continue to marry young because it is believed that if a girl waits too long, she will be considered too old and will bring shame to her family. While the government has attempted to curb this stigma and
encourage later marriage, poor policy follow-through has done little to stop the tradition (Jones 26). While it appears that more women are starting to choose their own marriage partners, many parents still arrange marriages for their daughters for fiscal reasons.

Newly married women tend to find their independence greatly reduced; they spend the majority of their time integrating into their husband’s families and performing their wifely duties. They may find that they have to request permission from their husband to leave their house or village, and many are pressured by their new family to leave school (Nguyen S211). While many new husbands are able to stay enrolled in school and receive formal education, often times the wife is expected to devote herself entirely to domestic chores (Nguyen S211). Delaying marriage seems impossible while alternatives appear unattainable. Hmong girls rarely have role models to aspire to; all of their teachers are Kinh or foreigners and they do not have enough money or time to continue their education. Jobs outside of the agricultural sector are scarce, despite increasing jobs as tour guides and handicraft sellers. Yet, even those jobs do not pay enough money to allow women to support themselves.

One result of the seemingly imminent road to marriage is that girls become more vulnerable and dependent. The Hmong tradition of bride kidnapping or ‘wifesnatching’ reinforces the vulnerability and lack of independence that many young girls possess. This tradition is widely reported in literature regarding Hmong marriage practices. A Hmong boy is allowed to kidnap a girl—using force if necessary—and hold the girl in his house for three days. After those three days, during which the girl’s parents are unaware of her whereabouts, the girl’s soul is considered to have joined his household and she can no longer return to her home without risking social shame, isolation, and the wrath of her ancestors (Jones 32). The consequences of this practice are far-reaching and can be extremely detrimental, specifically in regards to
domestic abuse and trafficking. Often times, bride kidnapping can signal the start of a violent, abusive, and controlling relationship, where the woman is simply seen as a child bearer and domestic servant.

iii. Gender-based Violence

Women have remarkably few options when dealing with gender-based violence. Drinking is prevalent among Hmong men, and can often lead to alcoholism and physical abuse. As the ODI report noted, “Drunken violence is so pervasive in the villages in which we worked that a good husband…is seen as the one who sleeps when he is drunk – rather than beating his wife. Indeed, adolescent girls and young women see wife-beating as a totally normal part of Hmong life (Jones 40).” The report also stated that girls anticipate their husbands will be abusive, sometimes believing themselves to be at fault, and in order to be good wives are expected to bear the violence in private.

Divorce is rarely plausible for a woman in an abusive marriage, for several reasons. The main impediment to divorce is the belief that women’s souls are claimed by their husbands’ family; it is commonly held that a woman cannot leave her husband without corrupting her soul and suffering an early death. If she were to finally leave, she would experience intense social isolation—sometimes even from her natal family (Jones 41). Even if a woman’s family was willing to take her back in, however, she most likely would not leave her husband since she would not legally be allowed to keep her children due to patrilineal traditions. Taking her children would leave them without a lineage and with bleak social and economic prospects (Jones 43). Divorce is allowed and socially accepted when the husband initiates it, but children of the marriage will still remain with him and not with the wife. Additionally, there would truly
be little opportunity for a divorcee to support herself economically as she would have no property and little to no education. Thus, if a woman were to divorce, she would most likely end up having to remarry— with the possibility of her winding up in another abusive relationship quite real.

It appears that there is little to no effective punishment for Hmong husbands that abuse their wives. While there are laws that should theoretically protect women, these laws do not outline reasonable punishments for perpetrators, nor do they detail proper procedures and protocols that are necessary for law enforcement officials. Often times, punishments come in the form of fines, which economically fall on the entire family, and harm the wives just as much as the husbands (Jones 41). As far as recent reports suggest, gender-based violence continues to be a pervasive problem within Hmong communities, subjecting women and their daughters to dangerous and overwhelming living conditions. Daughters sometimes also find themselves on the receiving end of their fathers’ abuse, which can sometimes cause them to withdraw from school and friends and make them more willing to run away or seek shelter elsewhere. These girls are particularly vulnerable to other dangers like human trafficking.

iv. Trafficking in Persons

“Human trafficking and domestic abuse often occur on a continuum of violence, and the dynamics involved in human trafficking are frequently connected to those of domestic violence. Traffickers exploit the already damaged self-esteem of people who have experienced abusive family lives. At the same time, trafficking survivors are extremely vulnerable to domestic violence upon their return home (Sheal 38).”

According to the U.S. 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report, Vietnam is ranked as a Tier 2 country in regards to trafficking in persons. The Vietnamese government does not fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act’s minimum standards, but is making a substantial
effort to address the problem of trafficking (57). Vietnam is surrounded by Tier 3 countries that are doing little to stop the trafficking in persons’ trade. This further complicates and undermines the Vietnamese government’s attempts to implement initiatives regarding trafficking. The formal definition of “trafficking in persons” is, “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subject to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (9).” Vietnam has long been labeled a ‘source country,’ with men, women, and children being trafficked to countries such as China, Cambodia, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, the UK, and many more (57). Formal statistics about how many Vietnamese have fallen victim to the trafficking industry are difficult to obtain since trafficking in persons is often done clandestinely and victims do not always come forward due to social stigmas.

Trafficking women and children to China has been a documented issue since the days of French colonial rule. When the French government made traveling easier by building roads and ports, the border between Vietnam and China became fluid and tougher to monitor (Lessard 6). Most people claim that the One Child Policy in China is the reason that Vietnamese women, in recent years, have been trafficked to China. While the gender imbalance in China may account for the recent spike in trafficking cases in the northern region of Vietnam, frequent findings in the literature on this issue suggest that the trade continues for many reasons. Chinese men have gone on record stating that there is a demand for brides from Vietnam because Vietnamese women are known to be more docile, quiet, and hard working. “Now married to a Chinese woman, Zhang seemed nostalgic about his Vietnamese wife, who, he claimed, had been “more considerate and hard working” than his current Chinese wife. As for Pei Xing Fu, he estimated that around 30 to 40 percent of the men in his village had Vietnamese brides (Lessard 2).”
The Hmong are particularly susceptible to the trafficking industry because of their shared ethnicity with Hmong still living in China and because of their minority status. Members of ethnic minorities are notoriously at higher risk of falling into a trafficker’s trap due to economic and political marginalization (Trafficking in Persons Report 36). Conditions of sustained and cyclical poverty, lack of educational and economic agency, and alcoholic and abusive fathers are all factors that make young Hmong girls extremely vulnerable to traffickers. The Peace House Shelter has acknowledged the frequent connection between households that are dogged with poverty and abuse and girls ending up in China as trafficking victims. Their book about survivors’ stories wrote, “Their families had to struggle with difficulties and violence, even with tragedy, before the girls themselves came to harm outside. In other words, these unlucky girls have been victims twice (Sheal 86).” Traffickers ensnare young Hmong girls in various and underhanded methods that are constantly changing so as to not appear suspicious. One of the Peace House’s stories described a young Hmong girl who ran away from her home, which was plagued with poverty and an abusive father. She met a friend online, who turned out to be a trafficker. The man claimed he could get her a short term job in China, and she believed him because she was desperate for some kind of happy ending. When they finally arrived in China, she was forced to work as a prostitute and she was physically beaten if she tried to refuse work or escape (Sheal 72-76). Sometimes it is not just the girls that are believing, but family members too. There are reports of girls who were sold by their trusting families to Hmong families living in China, who in turn betrayed them and sold them to Chinese traffickers.

Victims of trafficking in persons often suffer horrible psychological and traumatic stress. Vietnam has a few shelters for victims of trafficking, some through the government and others through NGOs and non-profits. Yet, because of the stigma associated with prostitution and
trafficking in general, girls that manage to survive and return to Vietnam often times do not report their traffickers’ crimes. Not only are social pressures overwhelming, but often times, law officials do not handle trafficking cases properly because they are not trained adequately. The year 2012 saw the enactment of a new anti-trafficking law in Vietnam. The year 2013 saw the issuance of joint circulars that outline harsher penalties and punishments for offenders and explain proper protocol for law enforcement (Trafficking in Persons Report 57). However, there has still been a lack of enforcement because of scarce resources and corruption.

III. Methodology

The primary purpose of this research was to learn and then raise awareness about the complicated conditions and situations that Hmong women find themselves in. From mere literature review, it became clear that these young women and girls are extremely vulnerable and find themselves dealing with dire surroundings that are unimaginable to privileged people in this world. Wanting to hear the stories of these girls and then share them in a meaningful and useful manner, background research quickly began in Hanoi for one week.

In Hanoi, formal interviews were conducted with the head counselor for the Peace House Shelter, Le Thi Ngoc Bich and the head of the Peace House Shelter Project, Le Thi Phuong Thuy. A few of their staff members suggested a service-learning project, but this part of the project never came to fruition as they were not able to finish their grant writing in time. Another formal meeting and interview occurred with Dr. Hoang Huu Binh, former high ranking official on the National Committee for Ethnic Minorities and currently a senior consultant to the Government on ethnic minority issues.
Six more in-depth interviews were completed in Sapa; these longer interviews were supplemented with smaller, shorter ones on the streets of Sapa, as there were plenty of Hmong women walking and trying to sell their handicrafts. For the sake of anonymity, some interviewees have been relabeled. Participant A was a 29 year old Hmong trekking guide. Participant B was a foreigner whom had lived in Sapa for over a year. Participants C and D were a Red Dao guide and a Red Dao homestay hostess, and Participant E was a 35 year old Hmong woman selling handicrafts on the street. Mr. Giang Seo Ga, a Hmong himself and the Head of the Culture Center in Sapa district was also briefly interviewed for this project. While a follow up interview was unable to be scheduled with him because of the timing of the national Vietnamese holiday, the contributions he made during his short interview were substantial.

Interviews with Participants A through E were informal and conversational. They were “informal” because this allowed for a more relaxed and authentic atmosphere; they were conducted while trekking, chatting, meeting on the street, etc. Informal interviewing also allowed for topics to be revisited and never formally concluded, which was helpful in many cases. Interviews were “conversational” because they were often a two-way exchange. Interview questions were broad and open-ended, and allowed for more clarity and communication between interviewer and interviewee. The “snowball” technique was also used when establishing connections with interviewees. When new acquaintances were made, friends, family, and coworkers were met in an effort to recruit future research subjects. Additionally, participatory research methods were used during research. Participatory inquiry and the gathering of oral testimonies from locals were made possible by several treks and by living in a local village for a week.
IV. Research Findings & Analysis

i. Marriage

a. Findings

Participant E was a 35 year old Hmong woman with three children, ages 17, 16, and 10. Her 17 year old daughter had graduated from high school but was already married. It was her daughter who wanted to marry her boyfriend of two years. The participant’s husband’s job is somehow—and this part was unclear due to language barriers—connected to the government. Since her husband works for the government, they help her family pay for her children’s education. When asked about the legal age of marriage in relation to her own children, she said that her daughter will report the marriage to the government after she turns 18.

Dr. Hoonah Huu Binh confirmed that young marriage among the Hmong is still occurring in the region. He stated that the government has made multiple attempts to stop the Hmong from marrying while still underage but that these policies fail for primarily two reasons: 1) Vietnam is still a poor, low-middle income country so there are limitation of resources and finances and 2) The red tape, bureaucracy, and corruption impede the government’s ability to truly be effective. The real money for these projects is siphoned off by corruption. Dr. Binh also stated that it has proved more challenging to target only one ethnic minority group, since some tend to live in close proximity to one another. Rather than target one specific group, the government has opted to focus on larger areas instead. However, though the government has put significant resources towards the betterment of poorer communities and families, nepotism and corruption make it difficult to equally share resources. Dr. Binh’s testimony correlates with Participant E’s story; both mentioned that those working with the government or who have relational connections to the government tend to receive more help.
Interviews with multiple women on Sapa’s streets echoed Dr. Binh’s statements and sentiments. None of the women that were interviewed, besides Participant E, had daughters that would be attending upper secondary schools because it was too expensive. They preferred that their daughters marry young, though Participant A did express that if money was not an issue, she would want her daughter to seek higher educational opportunities. Additionally, many of the women interviewed were younger than 20 but already had children, meaning that they easily could have married before they were of legal age.

The findings of these interviews suggest that government mandated fines for underage marriage have proven ineffective—as both Dr. Binh and several documents analyzed in literature review have suggested. As the ODI reported, “Those who had taken advantage of Hmong custom, and merely moved in with one another to establish their marriage, explained that they simply waited until they were of legal age to report their marriage to the commune (Jones 47).” Participant E’s daughter is doing exactly this, as was stated above. Other field work findings also seemed to agree with the ODI report when it came to the Hmong preferring to maintain many of their own cultural practices, despite Kinh recommendations. For instance, Participant A refused to go to the hospital because she wanted to follow Hmong birthing traditions (Jones 40). Hmong women dislike having to disrobe in front of others, which they would have to do if they were to receive prenatal care at a hospital. Participants C and D, though Red Dao, live in a village that is co inhabited by Hmong people. They have many friends who are Hmong and who they are close to. They confirmed that young arranged marriages still happen, where underage daughters are forced to marry a husband that they have never met before because their parents are poor, cannot afford to send them to school, and would rather receive a bride price than have an extra mouth to feed.
**b. Poisonous Leaves**

An important, and unpredicted, piece of information related to Hmong marriage practices emerged during field work. Apparently, suicide is not uncommon among young Hmong people. There is a poisonous leaf that grows in abundance in the mountains of Sapa. During fieldwork, it was mentioned numerous times by interviewees under different names such as, “poisonous leaf,” “poisonous plant,” “lang-un,” and “heartbreaking grass.” Apparently, it is not unusual for a Hmong girl—or boy—to eat a leaf of the poisonous plant and kill him/herself if parents are arranging a marriage. Participants C and D all knew young Hmong girls that had taken their own lives. In fact, Participant A reported having eaten half of a leaf herself. Her parents were attempting to force her to marry at 16 because a young man was aggressively courting her, but she did not want to get married yet. She ate half of a leaf to scare them and they finally agreed to stop talks of marriage. Though her own parents were willing to concede defeat, she said that many Hmong parents are not. As a result, many young Hmong lives continue to be lost. While actually conducting research in the village of Ta Van for this study, one young man took his life by eating the leaves, and his body had to be carried down the mountain by his friends early in the morning.

The effects of this leaf on marriage practice in Sapa have appeared to be significant. While the leaf can become leverage for a girl that does not want an early marriage, it can also be abused by boys that do. Often times, even if parents wish to follow marriage laws, boys can convince their parents to let them marry an underage girl by using the poisonous leaf as a threat. Surprisingly, the literature on poisonous leaves and their subsequent effect on the Hmong community has been scarce. Of all of the articles read for this paper, only one appeared to have recorded anything about it. The ODI report stated, “Even boys’ parents, who are culpable in that
they are often asked for permission before a kidnapping, feel relatively powerless in the face of their sons’ desires. As one young man noted, ‘parents have to listen to their son’—otherwise he ‘may eat poisonous leaves to kill himself if she is allowed to go’, leaving them without an heir (Jones 32).” This poisonous leaf has given young men remarkable power over their parents and in many ways has left young women even more vulnerable to a forced marriage, unless they themselves are willing to commit suicide. In order to effectively stop the practice of bride kidnapping, the threat of the poisonous leaf will have to be eliminated, or incentives encouraging parents to not condone the practice will need to be created.

**ii. Domestic Abuse**

**a. Findings**

When interviewing Mr. Giang Seo Ga, he had much more to say about trafficking in Sapa than domestic abuse. He stated that while violence used to be a large problem in the area, it has tapered off in the last few years. He confirmed that men are still most definitely the head of their household, but he argued that women run the house and that he personally runs every decision he makes by his wife. His description of gender roles seemed to emphasize that though women do not legally own homes or property, they metaphorically own the house by commanding its day to day proceedings.

All of the women interviewed for this study disagreed. It was noted by Participants A, B, and C that it is quite common for men to punish their wives in physical ways and that husbands and their families most certainly own the houses that they inhabit. However, though physical punishment was not uncommon, only Participant A called her own situation “abusive,” and remarked that, while all of the women in her village are hit by their husbands, she was the only
women in her village to experience extreme abuse. Whether or not domestic abuse overall is truly on the decline in Sapa and Lao Cai would require more detailed data collection that was beyond the scope of this project’s abilities. Yet, there is much to be learned from Participant A’s story.

b. ‘A’

As previously discussed in section i of Research Findings & Analysis, A’s parents originally wanted her to marry very young. She managed to delay marriage until she was 21, when she finally accepted a man from a neighboring village after feeling increased societal pressures. She is now 29 years old and has two children: a daughter who is six and a son who is four. Her husband is a farmer, and she used to sell handicrafts before she learned enough English to become a tour guide. At first, her husband was caring and hard working. Around two years ago, he started spending time with other women, drinking more, and becoming violent. He began to emotionally and physically abuse ‘A’; he sometimes sexually assaulted her at night and became increasingly controlling. For instance, ‘A’ noted that she was not allowed to play cards when offered because her husband instructed that it is a “game for men,” and, “isn’t allowed to be played by women.”

‘A’ tried to divorce her husband. She returned to her parents’ house for a month. However, her husband continuously came to her front door everyday, which is the Hmong way of saying that he did not agree to the divorce. She felt forced to return because her spirit was attached to her husband’s home and she believed that she would die an early death if she remained under her parents’ roof. She also worried endlessly about her children, whom were on the receiving end of their father’s abuse when she was not in the house. ‘A’ stated that the real reason she continues to live with her husband is for the sake of her children—that otherwise she
would most certainly leave him. ‘A’ repeatedly remarked that she was confused and distraught by her husband’s actions, especially given that she had always tried to be “a good wife,” by working hard, raising their children, and being loving and comforting. When she learned that her husband had a girlfriend, “I asked him to not make baby with her.” ‘A’ was actually relieved to hear he had a girlfriend, and hoped that he would finally consider divorcing her. Her husband’s girlfriend eventually did have a baby, which meant that it was ‘A’s husband’s responsibility to financially care for the child. Though the baby died in infancy, ‘A’ said that “she couldn’t get past it.” She now no longer truly cares about being “a good wife,” because he has been, “a terrible man.” She says she lives for the sake of her children and hopes that her daughter will, “marry much later in life to a much nicer man.” She also remarked that she secretly tells other women and her parents about the way that her husband treats her so that, “when he does kill me, everyone will know how I died.” ‘A’ believes that her husband will, in fact, one day kill her because he soberly tells her that sometimes at night.

‘A’ has turned to drinking as a way to cope with her situation. She appeared sad and dispirited when it was time for her to return home. When asked why she had not reported her abuse to the authorities, she stated that she does not trust the police. She said that the Kinh in town call the Hmong women that sell their handicrafts, “cats.” The term is meant to be derogatory and she has often found the police to be intimidating and unhelpful. Participants C and D shared ‘A’s hesitation to seek help from the police. Participant D once knew a Hmong woman who was harshly interrogated by the Vietnamese police because she did not speak Vietnamese well enough to explain that she did indeed have a tour guide license. Participant C said that there are actually two levels of law enforcement: the Vietnamese police and local police, but that both are nepotistic and wealthy, thus unrelatable.
Escaping her husband’s abuse seems hopeless to ‘A,’ even though there may be ways for her to do it. After contacting the Center for Women and Development, it was discovered that ‘A’ might be able to receive help through the Lao Cai Women’s Union. This piece of information was difficult to obtain, and would have been nearly impossible for ‘A’ unless she had heard about it through word of mouth. Hopefully ‘A’ will be open to working with the Kinh women in the organization and will receive help.

Participant A’s experience is not far from what is widely reported in literature. Her story portrays the lack of control and options she has had over and during her life, and unfortunately, her story is not unusual. As ODI’s report states, domestic abuse is, “endemic, even when not reported (Jones 22).” Mr. Ga confirmed that patriarchal practices are still central to Hmong culture, and Participant A’s interview confirms that patrilineal and patrilocal traditions are still deeply present in Sapa, Lao Cai.

iii. Trafficking in Persons

a. Findings

According to Mr. Ga, trafficking of girls in Sapa tends to happen in three main ways and spiked in the years 2011-13. Ms. Le Thi Ngoc Bich, Ms. Le Thi Phuong Thuy, and Participant B all confirmed Mr. Ga’s reporting’s, yet had additional information to add on the methods that traffickers were using to kidnap girls. Participant B personally knew girls that had fallen victim to the trafficking trade. He stated,

“I was friends with a group of girls there when I was teaching English there in 2010 and I knew this group of ten girls and five of them were in fact trafficked. And they were trafficked from Sapa. One of them came back and then was trafficked again from her village right outside Sapa…I personally knew a girl who knew about more than twenty different girls who had been trafficked (personal communication, April 2015).”
While young Hmong girls can find themselves trafficked to a number of Southeast Asian countries, the country that most are taken to is China due to the close proximity of the country’s border. Interviewees listed a number of ways that young Hmong girls are trafficked. The following methods were universally listed by every interviewee asked about trafficking:

1) They are courted by a Hmong man or foreigner, are convinced to marry them or take a trip with them, and are subsequently trafficked.
2) Either their parents or they themselves are told that they can get a high paying job if they go to China.
3) Parents intend to sell their daughters for marriage to Chinese Hmong or wealthy families; most end up in less than desirable marriages to Chinese men or working as prostitutes.
4) There are many accounts of Hmong girls fleeing their own homes to escape abusive fathers. These girls may meet a trafficker through the internet or through a mutual friend, and through a number of different ways (drugging, kidnapping, etc.) find themselves in China.

In Lizard’s article, he wrote that some women that live near the Chinese-Vietnamese border “are quite literally grabbed and kidnapped (2).” Several of my interviewees said that it was much easier for girls closer to the border to fall victim to the trade. Ms. Thuy also stated that traffickers have recently invented a new method to ensnare girls and women; they organize tour trips to China, and then once there, seize important documents such as passports and visas and trap the women. Participant A stated that she knew girls that had gotten taken while trying to visit extended family in China. The fact that the Hmong ethnic group migrated from Southern China makes Hmong girls particularly susceptible to traffickers, since some have extended family in China and are more easily willing to make the journey there.

Participant A had family members that had actually participated in the trafficking trade. Her father’s sister used to convince young girls that they could be married to wealthy Hmong
men in China. She would sell the girls to an intermediary that would then sell them to prostitution rings operating along the Chinese border. Participant A said that her aunt had been caught and is currently in jail. Though her aunt became a trafficker because her family needed money, Participant A said that her father did not condone his sister’s behavior. Interviewees tended to stress that it is a misconception that only men traffic women. Ms. Bich made a point of emphasizing that women can easily be traffickers too, and that the popular notion that only men are perpetrators is a widely circulated misconception that is dangerous because it makes at-risk girls even more vulnerable to accidentally falling into a trafficker’s trap. When asked why there is a demand for Vietnamese women in China, every interviewee listed China’s skewed gender ratio as a result of the One-child Policy as the main reason—similar to what was discovered during literature review. Ms. Thuy also stated that, One-child policy or not, the phenomenon of Vietnamese women disappearing to China is not unusual or unprecedented. Similar to what was discussed in Lizard’s article in the literature review of this paper, Ms. Thuy claimed that Chinese men have always preferred Vietnamese wives because they find them to be more docile and submissive than Chinese women.

Participant B, Ms. Bich, and Ms. Thuy all mentioned the connection between the cultural tradition of bride kidnapping and trafficking. Participant B stated,

“Hmong marriage by abduction…it really facilitates trafficking in the area… often the families and friends believe that girls have been taken for marriage and as per the custom there they just wait at home for a couple of days and do nothing. By the time those three or four days have finished, the girl could be anywhere (personal communication, April 2015).”

Ms. Thuy discussed that sometimes families know that their daughters have been kidnapped to China, but they rarely realize that it could be for prostitution as bride kidnapping has long been a part of Hmong culture. She also stated that the Hmong are a difficult group to educate about the
fact that bride kidnapping easily facilitates trafficking; there have been attempts by Kinh social workers in the past to try and make communities understand the connection, but the Hmong villages have put a tree at the gate of their community to signal that they do not like the Vietnamese interfering with this aspect of their culture. With carefully planned messaging, the ODI believes that the Vietnamese government could substantially curb this practice. “Boys need to hear that ‘kidnapping’ is never an acceptable way to find a wife, with messages emphasizing that happier wives—older girls who can make their own choices—ultimately mean happier husbands (Jones Ix).” The report also suggests that parents need to be properly incentivized, such as imposing heavy fines, if they condone their sons’ marriage to an underage girl or if he tries to kidnap his wife.

However, though the Vietnamese government does technically impose fines for underage marriage on the Hmong, because of limited resources, manpower, and ineffective implementation of policies, these traditions such as child marriage and kidnapping still persist. It was often stated in the interviews with Peace House Shelter representatives that the Vietnamese government is spread too thin, with too many issues to focus on. As a result, funding for movements such as the anti-human trafficking movement gets shortchanged, because the government would rather allocate resources elsewhere. Due to lack of funding, the Peace House Project has to limit the number of people that they can help and also can only focus on helping victims. Preventive measures are too expensive to fully take. The shelter does try to organize awareness campaigns, and for this particular research project, they donated many pamphlets and flyers. However, these pamphlets were useless for the Hmong women who cannot speak Vietnamese and whom are illiterate.
There are other NGOs and non-profit organizations that are actively trying to save women who have been trafficked to China. Participant B had done a lot of work with the organization Blue Dragon, an Australian NGO, and the U.S. Pacific Links Foundation has really emphasized preventative trafficking programs and education. All of these organizations—including the Center for Women and Development—receive a majority of their funding from the international community. Yet, the ability of these organizations to function and help rescue victims is impeded when Vietnamese and Chinese diplomatic relations sour. When Participant B was trying to rescue a friend from China, Blue Dragon’s ability to operate within China was very limited given a flare up in the East Sea political debate between Vietnam and China. Ms. Thuy confirmed that some women, who were stripped of their important documents once they were trafficked, have to spend months in jail before they are allowed reentry into Vietnam because they are considered illegal immigrants by the Chinese. This would perhaps be avoidable if there were more cooperation between the Chinese and Vietnamese governments. There also seems to be a lack of coordination between the Vietnamese and Chinese border police. Some women who were rescued by NGOs or the Chinese police are brought to the border and then instructed to get back home on their own, with no help or money. This is particularly dangerous, especially since the border area is crawling with traffickers, and some of these women could easily end up trafficked a second time.

b. Mai and Ping

Participant B, personally, knew two girls, Mai and Ping, whose lives have been greatly affected by trafficking. Participant B is a photographer from Australia who worked in Sapa for over a year teaching English. Mai and Ping were trafficked five months apart from one another,
but were both ensnared the same way and trafficked by the same Chinese Hmong couple. They met Hmong men who became their friends and convinced them that they were in love. They then offered to take them on a trip to visit their distant villages. Instead of taking them to the promised destinations, they drugged them, brought them to China’s border, and sold them to a Chinese Hmong couple. The couple essentially put them up for sale. Whoever bid the highest on them would decide their fate; prostitution, organ donor, or brides. They were both bought by Chinese men looking for Vietnamese wives.

About a year later, Participant B managed to locate them both in China, despite the fact that they were over one hundred miles apart. Both had already had a child and felt trapped in their relationships with their husbands. Mai’s husband in particular was controlling and abusive, so it was much tougher for Participant B to maintain consistent contact with her. It took about a month of him being in her village before he was finally able to see her, and even then, her husband stood close by. When ‘B’ finally met both girls in person, it was their first real contact with the outside world in over a year.

Ping’s mother wanted her to come home. Her daughter had told her via phone calls on ‘B’s phone about the situation she had fallen into, and her mother fully supported Participant B’s efforts to find her. Mai’s family was a different story. Mai had originally lied to her family about her situation, claiming that she was happily married to a Hmong man. She had been ashamed to admit that she had been trafficked and that she now had a child with a Chinese man. As a result, when she tried to tell them her true situation, they did not believe her. Her father told her to be a better wife and to work harder. This made all the difference when it came time to rescue the girls. Ping had decided, despite the fact that she would not legally be able to take her child that she wanted to return to Vietnam. Mai decided to stay; Participant B says it was unclear if she had
fallen pregnant with her second child or if she simply could not deal with the social stigmas that would most definitely befall her upon her return to Vietnam.

Though Participant B was attempting to arrange Ping’s escape with Blue Dragon, the organization’s ability to work in China had been greatly reduced because of political tensions between Vietnam and China regarding the East Sea conflict. Ping decided she could not wait any longer and took it upon herself to cross over 150 km in China to reach the border of Vietnam. This was particularly dangerous because she easily could have been retrafficked or caught by border police and thrown in jail. She managed to make it home, but unfortunately, her troubles did not end there.

Ping and her mother now wonder if it would have been better for her to have remained trafficked in China. Her marriage prospects at home are undesirable. A young Hmong man took an interest in Ping upon her return, but he was known to be violent and erratic. He told her that he planned on kidnapping her and forcing her to marry him, and the truly scary part was that he had the ability to do it. He was essentially the leader of a gang, and police either feared him or were working with him. His parents condoned his behavior because he threatened to consume poisonous leaves if they did not let him kidnap Ping. Participant B managed to get Blue Dragon professionals involved in Ping’s case, and the situation, though being addressed, is still ongoing and precarious.

The most unfortunate part regarding Mai and Ping’s tale is that these stories are not unusual. Ms. Bich and Ms. Thuy stated that the root of trafficking is the cycle of poverty that these girls experience, and their lack of awareness of the dangers of the trade. If this poverty and lack of awareness is not addressed, more girls will continue to fall victim to traffickers’ false promises of a better life. The level of poverty in Hmong communities puts them in a state of
desperation, where girls are looking for a way out, and fellow community members are desperate enough to sell them. Traditional family structures, attitudes towards gender roles, abusive families, and poverty all make a girl more vulnerable to the trafficking industry.

Ms Bich said that there is a great difference between trafficked and domestic abuse victims; she says that many times, trafficking victims feel as though they have lost the most important aspect to them, their virginity. She has seen some women go mad because they have been so physically, psychologically, and emotionally abused, and they have difficulty reintegrating into their old communities. Though the government’s approach to trafficking is changing, with the emergence of a new trafficking law in 2012, as author Vijeyarasa points out, “the new law still refers to ‘social vices (Vijeyarasa 2015).’” Language like this has the indirect consequence of making survivors feel that they have been a part of an evil society, that it is their fault that they were trafficked, and that they are to blame for their circumstances. Perhaps the best way to change these perceptions regarding trafficking victims is through media campaigns and awareness. The UN wrote, “How the media reports on human trafficking is just as important as what is being reported, and the overall impact of these stories is reflected in the way the public, politicians, law enforcement, and even other media outlets understand the issue ( Trafficking in Persons Report 30).” Perhaps there needs to be more emphasis on the connections between poverty, gender roles, marriage practices, domestic abuse, and trafficking so that the suffering and choices that victims make can be better understood.

When Participant B was first living in Sapa, like any other tourist, he was completely unaware of some of the larger, lurking problems that ethnic minority women face. Though there are policies already in place that could potentially have far-reaching benefits for Hmong women, a lack of financial resources, trained personnel, and poorly coordinated and sporadic enforcement
means that these policies are not properly implemented and therefore have proven to be ineffective.

**iv. Recommendations for Future Research**

There were many limitations and barriers to research, one of which was the inability to speak the Hmong language. This inevitably changed research results, as only Hmong people that spoke English well enough could be interviewed. Attempts were made to interview many Hmong women on the streets, however, while it appears that they understand English, they are just repeating English phrases that they hear other women say such as, “you buy from me?” and “where you from?” If a Hmong person that could eventually speak English well was found, it was almost always a woman between the ages of 18-40. This significantly alters this research’s results, as children, men, and older members of communities were unable to be interviewed.

It was a conscious budgetary decision to not search for a Hmong translator; it would have been too expensive to pay for a translator while simultaneously going on treks. It was found that in order to get usable and accurate information, one had to pay for handicrafts or pay for a good trekking guide—which again, the budget for this project could not afford. Therefore, the number of in-depth interviews obtainable for this project was limited by financial constraints. Additionally, various concepts that were never breached due to the lack of a Hmong translator are also excluded from this research, but perhaps would have changed results if discovered. If research were to continue on this topic, a Hmong translator would need to be acquired, a larger sample size would need to be found, and more participatory methods could be employed. Small
focus groups would be particularly beneficial, as this has been seen to work well in past studies for the Hmong.

The other element that restricted this research was time. Four weeks was not nearly long enough for a full comprehensive study of the gender issues that many Hmong women and girls face. Additionally, Reunification Day occurred during the research period, which limited abilities to conduct interviews and stay in Sapa town. If research were to be continued, more time would need to be allotted to data collection and analysis.

Additionally, more topics to focus on could be: educational fees, waivers and aid; whether or not fines incentivize behavioral or cultural changes; community consensus regarding a girls’ ability to leave an unchosen marriage; identifying more long term trends of marriage and education; and policies regarding the abuse of rice wine and alcohol.

V. Conclusion

Though this research was initially met with skepticism regarding the presence of domestic abuse and trafficking in Sapa, hopefully, the two stories shared in this research paper can convince some that these two problems are still issues in this region of Vietnam. While some officials and perhaps the larger public now assume that because the growing tourism industry in Sapa has started to protect women and young girls from gender inequalities and poverty, this specific research did not find this to be the case. While this research is drawing from a very small sample size, the larger amount of literature recently published on these two issues seems to correlate very well with this research’s findings.

Women and young girls, in particular, suffer the most when in poverty. They are marginalized and do not have the same kind of access to education, work possibilities and
control over their lives in the manner that Hmong men do. The marriage practices and deeply entrenched gender norms in Hmong culture greatly impact opportunities that young girls are provided. Often times, girls are pushed to marry early and have children young, which means that they leave school and continue their cycle of poverty. This leaves them with very little economic independence and with little to no personal agency. Due to their lack of future alternatives, many women seem resigned to their fate of an unhappy, abusive relationship. The presence of abusive and alcoholic behavior in a house can have gravitous effects on the lives of daughters and make it more likely that they themselves will one day suffer from gender-based violence or fall into the trafficking in persons industry.

While there are policies that have been enacted by the government in recent years with a focus on solving some of the difficulties that women face, they have not been implemented at local levels. Awareness of these issues may be the first steps towards pushing the government to reevaluate their policies and methods of enforcement. Hopefully, these issues can be addressed within the near future so that more girls do not continue to suffer as ‘A’, Mai, and Ping have had to.
References


