

**“THERE WAS NO ONE WHO COULD ESCAPE THIS
HORRIBLE SITUATION”**

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE
AMERICAN-VIET NAM WAR, 1954-1975**

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Abstract

This thesis examines southern Vietnamese revolutionary women's experiences of gender-based violence in the context of the American-Viet Nam war. At present, southern Vietnamese women's war experiences, and especially those related to sexual violence, have tended to be overlooked. Drawing upon interviews collected during an eight-month field trip to Viet Nam in 1998 and contemporary literature on gender-based violence in war, I begin to rectify this oversight by presenting the testimonies of my interviewees.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. In Chapter One, I reflect upon the research process in Viet Nam. The reality of carrying out interviews in Viet Nam—in particular, the group nature of the meetings and the involvement of the Vietnamese Women's Union—dramatically contradicted recent literature concerning the “ideal” feminist interviewing scenario. By extension, I should have failed in my endeavour to collect the women's oral histories. In the first part of the thesis then, I ask *why* were the women so prepared to speak with me. Moving on, in Chapters Two and Three, I present the women's oral histories. In the first, I discuss the women's revolutionary activities, and in the second, I present their testimonies of violence. As becomes apparent, gender-based violence in the American War took many forms—for example, prostitution, rape during military operations, and detention—and occurred at the hands of multiple actors, for example, soldiers, policemen and prison guards. Finally, in Chapter Four, I begin to bring the thesis to a close by addressing the issue of redress with the context of this war, with an investigation of the US Army's judicial system and the courts-martial convictions secured during the conflict for sex-related crimes against Vietnamese nationals.

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Author's Declaration

Although all the work in this thesis is original and unpublished, I have drawn upon and expanded my own previously published material in two areas. Chapter One, a discussion of my research methodology, contains elements previously printed in "Travelling Light? The Intersections Between Research, Being White and Foreignness in Viet Nam" in *White?Women: Critical Perspectives on Race and Gender*, eds., Heloise Brown, Madi Gilkes and Ann Kaloski-Naylor (York: Raw Nerve Books, 1999), 79-89. Elements of Chapter Three, the interviewees' testimonies, have been replicated in "Missing from History: The Other Prisoners of War," *Trouble and Strife* 41 (Summer 2000): 61-68. Although unpublished, the Introduction draws upon my 1995 MA dissertation on sexual violence in war, completed whilst a Masters student in the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York.

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence in War

In the last decade or so, the gender-based sexual abuse of women in conflict has at last become widely acknowledged, principally as a result of the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia. With the recent development of analyses relating to war rape, it is now possible to look back to women's experiences in other conflicts. This thesis examines the prevalence of war sexual violence in one specific war: the American-Viet Nam War. In 1965, the first US Marines landed in Da Nang, Central Viet Nam. The arrival of combat troops marked a rapid escalation in the war of attrition against the National Liberation Force of South Viet Nam (the "Viet Cong") and the North Vietnamese Army, a war which was not to end until the withdrawal of US forces in 1973 and the fall of Saigon to the Communists in 1975. Not surprisingly, the massive increase in foreign troops on Vietnamese soil (including South Korean, Thai and Australian forces) paralleled a rise in Vietnamese women's experiences of sexual violence at the hands of combatants.

At present, accounts of war rape in the American-Viet Nam conflict are restricted to comments made within American veteran narratives and oral histories. Although Vietnamese women's war experiences have recently undergone research, at present this analysis is still limited, and the issue of gender-based violence in the context of this particular conflict has more or less remained overlooked. The intention of this thesis is to rectify this oversight by presenting the testimonies of approximately twenty southern Vietnamese revolutionary women whom I interviewed during a field trip to Viet Nam in 1998. As becomes clear from an analysis of these

testimonies, Vietnamese women considered war sexual violence to be an extensive element of the conflict, occurring in various different scenarios and at the hands of many different perpetrators.

By way of an introduction, I begin this thesis with a brief overview of the themes evident within contemporary literature of war sexual violence. Using this as a foundation, I then draw upon veteran testimonies to present a glimpse of the perpetrators' perspective on sexual violence during this conflict.

Why Gender-Based Violence in War?

As Brownmiller points out, war sexual abuse differs markedly from other atrocities which occur in war:

[R]ape in war is qualitatively different from a bomb that misses its military target, different from impersonal looting and burning, different from deliberate ambush, mass murder or torture during interrogation, although it contains elements of all of the above. Rape is more than a symptom of war or evidence of its violent excess. Rape in war is a familiar act with a familiar excuse.¹

Following the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, extensive literature has surfaced pertaining to rape in war. This literature may loosely be divided into three categories. The first relates to the nature of the sexual violence and the consequences which such abuse has for the victim. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter

¹Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Penguin Books, 1975, 32).

Three of the thesis. However, as is now recognised, the costs of war sexual violence can be devastating, resulting in extensive physical, psychological and social damage.² The second category of the themes relates to the functions of war sexual abuse: as a means of communication between enemy male combatants; as an expression of victory and retaliation; as propaganda; as troop appeasement—to alleviate boredom, reward or bounty, maintaining troop morale and pornography; and as a military tactic, which at its most extreme may lead to genocide.³ The third category focuses

²See, for example, Dragica Kozaric-Kovacic, Vera Folnegovic-Smalc, Jarmila Skrinjaric, Nathan M. Szajnberg, Ana Marusic, "Rape, Torture, and Traumatization of Bosnian and Croatian Women: Psychological Sequelae," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 65, no. 3 (July 1995): 428-433; Shana Swiss and Joan Giller, "Rape as a Crime of War: A Medical Perspective," *JAMA* 270, no. 5 (August 1993): 612-615; Mary P. Koss, Lori Heise and Nancy Felipe Russo, "The Global Health Burden of Rape," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): 509-537; Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic ed., *Women, Violence and War: Wartime Victimization of Refugees in the Balkans* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

³Amnesty International, *Women in the Front Line* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1991); Human Rights Watch/Women's Rights Project, *The Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women's Human Rights* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995); Ruth Seifert, "War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis," in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 54-72; Ruth Seifert, "The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars," *Women's Studies International Forum* 19, nos. 1-2 (1996): 35-43; Cheryl Benard, "Rape as Terror: The Case of Bosnia," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6, no. 1 (1994): 29-43; Deborah Blatt, "Recognizing Rape as a Method of Torture," *New York University Review of Law and Social Change* 19, no. 4 (1992): 821-865; Siobhan K. Fisher, "Occupation of the Womb: Forced Impregnation as Genocide," *Duke Law Journal* 46, no. 1 (October 1996): 91-133; Anne Tierney Goldstein, *Recognizing Forced Impregnation as a War Crime Under International Law* (New York: Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, 1993); Alexandra Stiglmayer, "The Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina," in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 82-169; Dorothy Q. Thomas and Regan E. Ralph, "Rape in War: Challenging the Tradition of Impunity," *SAIS Review* (Winter-Spring 1994): 81-99; Beverly Allen, *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Rape, Genocide, and Women's Human Rights," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 17 (Spring 1994): 5-16; Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide," in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994), 73-81. (One critique of this last article is that by Vesna Kesic, "A Response to Catharine MacKinnon's Article, 'Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide,'" *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (1994): 267-280.)

upon the prohibition and prosecution of war sexual abuse within international law,⁴ and more specifically, its prosecution under the International War Crimes Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.⁵

⁴See, for example, Tamara Tompkins, "Prosecuting Rape as a War Crime: Speaking the Unspeakable," *Notre Dame Law Review* 70, no. 4 (1995): 845-890; Yougindra Khushalani, *Dignity and Honour of Women as Basic and Fundamental Human Rights* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982); Margareth Etienne, "Addressing Gender-Based Violence in an International Context," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 18 (Spring 1995): 139-170; Christine Chinkin, "Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women in International Law," *European Journal of International Law* 5, no. 3 (1994): 326-341; Danise Aydelott, "Mass Rape During War: Prosecuting Bosnian Rapists Under International Law," *Emory International Law Review* 7, no. 2 (1993): 585-631; Jasminka Kalajdzic, "Rape, Representation, and Rights: Permeating International Law with the Voices of Women," *Queen's Law Journal* 21 (1996): 457-497; Amy E. Ray, "The Shame of It: Gender-based Terrorism in the Former Yugoslavia and the Failure of International Human Rights Law to Comprehend the Injuries," *The American University Law Review* 46, no. 3 (February 1997): 793-840; Liz Philipose, "The Laws of War and Women's Human Rights," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 46-62; Kelly Dawn Askin, *War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunals* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1997); Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace," in *On Human Rights. The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, eds., Steven Lukes, Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993): 84-109; Theodor Meron, "Rape as a Crime Under International Humanitarian Law," *American Journal of International Law* 87, no. 3 (1993): 424-428.

As the testimonies I collected have all been those of women who remained in Viet Nam, I have not examined the related issue of rape (and war gender-based violence), gender, persecution and refugee status. However, an extensive literature is also developing in this field. For example, Linda Cipriani, "Gender and Persecution: Protecting Women Under International Refugee Law," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 7, no. 3 (October 1993): 511-548; Jacqueline R. Castel, "Rape, Sexual Assault and the Meaning of Persecution," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 4, no. 1 (1992): 39-56; Krishna R. Patel, "Recognizing the Rape of Bosnian Women as Gender-Based Persecution," *Brooklyn Law Review* 60 (1994): 929-958; Maureen Milligan, "Obtaining Political Asylum: Classifying Rape as a Well-Founded Fear of Persecution on Account of Political Opinion," *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 10, no. 2 (1990): 355-380; Emily Love, "Equality in Political Asylum Law: For a Legislative Recognition of Gender-Based Persecution," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 17 (Spring 1994): 133-155; David L. Neal, "Women as a Social Group: Recognizing Sex-Based Persecution as Grounds for Asylum," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 20, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 203-257; Elizabeth A. Kohn, "Rape as a Weapon of War: Women's Human Rights During the Dissolution of Yugoslavia," *Golden Gate University Law Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 199-221; Arden B. Levy, "International Prosecution of Rape in Warfare: Nondiscriminatory Recognition and Enforcement," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 255-297.

⁵See, for example: Alex C. Lakatos, "Evaluating the Rules of Procedure and Evidence for the International Tribunal in the Former Yugoslavia: Balancing Witnesses' Needs Against Defendants' Rights," *Hastings Law Journal* 46, no. 3 (March 1995): 909-940; Catherine N. Niarchos, "Women, War, and Rape: Challenges Facing the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia," *Human Rights Quarterly* 17 (1995): 649-690; Kathleen M. Pratt and Laurel E. Fletcher, "Time for Justice: The Case for International Prosecutions of Rape and Gender-based Violence in the Former Yugoslavia," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 9 (1994): 77-102; Oren Gross, "The Grave Breaches System and the Armed Conflict in the Former

Why do previously law-abiding men commit sexual abuse during conflict? Peter Karsten has suggested that a man⁶ will commit a war crime due to a combination of internal and external forces. Internal forces include the values and attitudes a recruit brings with him into the military (character and personality traits, ethnocentricity, and ideological leanings).⁷ Undoubtedly, issues of gender, race (and nationality, ethnicity, religion) and sexuality are central to the issue of rape in war, with the suggestion that sexual violence in war is an expression of the misogyny already present during peacetime.⁸ As Mezey points out, sexualised aggression in combat has conventionally been rationalised as “a normal behavioural correlate of an abnormal event (i.e. war)” whilst rape in peacetime “represents an abnormal and idiosyncratic event without external provocative or triggering factors.”⁹ However, in reality,

Yugoslavia.” *Michigan Journal of International Law* 16 (Spring 1995): 783-829; Fionnuala Ni Aolain, “Radical Rules: The Effects of Evidential and Procedural Rules on the Regulation of Sexual Violence in War,” *Albany Law Review* 60, no. 3 (1997): 883-905; Sharon A. Healey, “Prosecuting Rape Under the Statute of the War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 21, no. 2 (1995): 327-383.

⁶As will be stressed within the thesis, soldiers are not the only figures with state-supported power/authority who commit war crimes. Although Karsten’s analysis focuses upon trained, organised/institutional soldiers, much of his argument may also be extended to include such other figures as prison-guards, paramilitaries and police, and to explain their perpetration of war crimes.

⁷Peter Karsten, *Law, Soldiers, and Combat* (Westpoint, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 32.

⁸Seifert, “War and Rape,” 65-66.

⁹Gillian Mezey, “Rape in War,” *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry* 5, no. 3 (1994): 585. Early theories into rape traditionally explained rape in two respects: as a rare, psychopathological problem carried out by individual “sick” men or by attributing responsibility for the assault to the victim. Motivations for attack have traditionally been attributed to uncontrollable sexual impulses, unhappy childhoods, unsatisfactory male-female relationships, hypermasculinity as a consequence of insecurity in sex role identification, or as an evolutionary function. See, for example, Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla, “Convicted Rapists’ Vocabulary of Motive: Excuses and Justifications,” *Social Problems* 31, no. 5 (1984): 530-544; Menachem Amir, *Patterns in Forcible Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); D.J. West, C. Roy and F.L. Nichols, *Understanding Sexual Attacks: A Study Based Upon a Group of Rapists Undergoing Psychotherapy* (London: Heinemann, 1978); Nicholas A. Groth, Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, “Rape: Power, Anger and Sexuality,”

research on rape in peacetime has determined that non-rapists have been found to be considerably sexually aroused by depictions of sexual violence towards women¹⁰ and the use of aggression, force and coercion to secure sexual intercourse is condoned by non-rapists.¹¹ War not only legitimises the use of violence but through misogynistic and homophobic elements of military training and culture vividly links sexuality with aggression and violence,¹² whilst racist elements facilitate the targeting of a specific enemy.¹³ This may be exaggerated through the manipulation of propaganda or through the use of pornography.¹⁴ Thus it is argued that war simply

American Journal of Psychiatry 134, no. 11 (1977): 1239-1243; Joseph Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

¹⁰Neil M. Malamuth, "Rape Proclivity Among Males," *Journal of Social Issues* 37, no. 4 (1981): 138-157; Neil M. Malamuth and James V.P. Check, "Sex Role Stereotyping and Reactions to Depictions of Stranger versus Acquaintance Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (1983): 344-356.

¹¹J.D. Goodchild and G. Zelman, "Sexual Signalling and Sexual Aggression in Adolescent Relationships," in *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*, ed., N. M. Malamuth and E. Donnerstein (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 233-243; R. G. Stille, N.M. Malamuth and J. R. Schallow, "Prediction of Rape Proclivity by Rape Myth Attitudes and Hostility towards Women." Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, August, New York, 1987. Cited in Mezey, "Rape in War," 585.

¹²Helen Michalowski, "The Army Will Make a 'Man' Out of You," in *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence*, ed., Pam McAllister (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), 326, 329; Madeline Morris, "By Force of Arms: Rape, War, and Military Culture," *Duke Law Journal* 45 (February 1996): 651-781.

¹³As Thomas and Ralph point out, race, class, religion, ethnicity, nationality as well as gender are significant factors in determining which women are raped in war. Thomas and Ralph, "Rape in War," 90-91. As these other factors tend to be overlooked, it is important to remember the racial element of military training.

¹⁴The relationship between gender-based violence and propaganda facilitates the abuse of women in war on three levels: by excusing the violation of enemy women through the association of the abuse of the nation's women with the abuse of the nation; by providing justification for intervention; and by propelling the stories to such heights that the women's stories are disbelieved. For example, in relation to World War I, see Ruth Harris, "The 'Child of the Barbarian': Rape, Race and Nationalism in France During the First World War," *Past and Present* 141 (1993): 171-206; and Nicoletta F. Gullace, "Sexual Violence and Family Honor: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War," *American Historical Review* (June 1997): 714-747. More recently, it has been claimed that reports of

provides an environment in which “ordinary joes” “give vent to their contempt for women”¹⁵ or “do in war what they do in peace, only more so.”¹⁶

Karsten suggests that a soldier will commit a war crime because of external forces such as the conditions of war itself (combat theatre conditions, leadership quality, and the nature of weapons involved).¹⁷ Seven factors are determined as contributing to human rights abuses by (United States) armed forces: weak leadership; poorly trained or ill-disciplined troops; unclear orders or missions; a tendency to dehumanise the enemy; a high frustration level among troops; an inadequate

rapes by Serbs were used by NATO officials and member states in order to justify NATO policies in Yugoslavia and to draw attention away from the civilian casualties caused by NATO. Human Rights Watch, *Kosovo: Rape as a Weapon of “Ethnic Cleansing”* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000), 8.

The abuse of women is also facilitated by the “demonising” of the women through propaganda. For example, preceding the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s, Tutsi women were presented as arrogant and looking down on Hutu men and as dangerous spies aiding the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) against the Hutu Habyarimana regime (Habyarimana was killed in 1994 when the plane he was travelling in was shot down): “The propaganda warned Hutu men to beware of Tutsi women ... For example, it said if she gives you a good child, the child is not really for you—the child is really for her Tutsi brothers. ‘These women are very sexual, and they sleep with their Tutsi brothers. You will be deceived by them.’” Similarly, Albanian women in Kosovo were portrayed, in the decade preceding the war as “indiscriminately fecund” and as “open-legged, stupid, uneducated women ready to have sex.” Kalliope Migirou, “The Genocide in Rwanda. Sexual Abuses and Violence Against Rwandan Women.” Paper presented at the Violence, Abuse and Women’s Citizenship Conference, Brighton, England, 10-15 November 1996. (Copy of paper held by author); Human Rights Watch/FIDH interview, Kigali, 25 March, 1996. Cited in Human Rights Watch/Africa and Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996), 16; Julie Mertus, “Women in Kosovo: Contested Terrains,” in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, ed., Sabrina Ramet (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 178. Cited in Human Rights Watch, *Kosovo*, 10; Human Rights Watch interview, Sevdie Ahmeti, Pristina, 11 July, 1999. Ibid.

For the role of pornography in conflict, see MacKinnon, “Rape, Genocide, and Women’s Human Rights,” 14; MacKinnon, “Turning Rape into Pornography,” 73-81.

¹⁵ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 32.

¹⁶ MacKinnon, “Rape, Genocide, and Women’s Human Rights,” 16.

¹⁷ Karsten, *Law, Soldiers, and Combat*, 32.

understanding of the complexities of unconventional war; and high casualties.¹⁸ As Benard points out, as modern armies on the whole do not condone rape, it is often seen as a failure of leadership, an indication that the command structure and morale of the troops have crumbled.¹⁹ If, as evidence has shown, there is a direct link between rape, legitimate violence and violent attitudes²⁰ and a significant minority of men would rape (or have done so) if immunity from prosecution is guaranteed,²¹ the decay of the military command structure and its subsequent inability to control or punish troops may foster a violence-condoning atmosphere of war, which legitimises the abuse of women by removing many of the controls which prevent men from committing rape.²²

One such control is the threat of punishment. War rapists have consistently been treated with impunity, with the abuse largely going unpunished. In part, this has

¹⁸General Barry R. McCaffrey, "Role of the Armed Forces in the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights," *Military Law Review* 149 (Summer 1995): 234-235.

¹⁹Benard, "Rape as Terror," 33.

²⁰L. Baron, M.A. Straus and D. Jafee, "Legitimate Violence, Violent Attitude and Rape: A Test of the Cultural Spillover Theory," in *Human Sexual Aggression: Current Perspectives*, eds., R.L. Prentky and V.L. Quinsey (New York: Academy of Sciences, 1988), 79-110. Cited in Mezey, "Rape in War," 590.

²¹E. J. Kanin, "Date Rapists: Differential Sexual Socialisation and Relative Deprivation," *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 14 (1985): 219-31; M. Koss, C. Gidycz and N. Winiewski, "The Scope of Rape," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 55 (1987): 162-170; J. Briere and N. Malamuth, "Self-Reported Likelihood of Sexually Aggressive Behaviour," *Journal of Research in Personality* 17 (1983): 315-23; K. Rapaport and B. Burkhardt, "Personality and Attitudinal Characteristics of Sexually Coercive College Males," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 93 (1984): 216-21. All cited in Mezey, "Rape in War," 588. Neil M. Malamuth and James V.P. Check, "Sex Role Stereotyping and Reactions to Depictions of Stranger versus Acquaintance Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (1983): 344-356. For a summary of both feminist analyses to rape and psychological evidence see, for example, Colleen A. Ward, *Attitudes Toward Rape: Feminist and Social Psychological Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 1995): 18-37, 66-89.

²²P.E. Dietz, "Social Factors in Rapists' Behaviour" in *Clinical Aspects of the Rapist*, ed., R.T. Rada (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1978), 59-115. Cited in Mezey, "Rape in War," 589.

been facilitated by the traditional approach to war rape, which not only characterises rape as a “personal” act or as war booty, but also as a crime of honour rather than an act against the victim.²³ This licence is reinforced through the weak position of war rape within international law, which as mentioned previously, in conjunction with the prosecution and punishment of war sexual violence, has featured heavily in contemporary literature on gender-based violence in conflict.

As Brownmiller writes, “[t]here is no precise moment in history when bells clanged and rape in war universally came to be considered a criminal act, outside the province of a proper warrior.”²⁴ War rape of civilian women has long been prohibited under both customary and codified international law. Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rules applicable in armed conflict—the *jus in bello*—were of a customary nature only. Although rape by soldiers had been prohibited historically under national military codes²⁵ or within individual States’ treaties,²⁶ it was not until the Lieber Code of 1863 that the first significant attempt at modern codification of the

²³Thomas and Ralph, “Rape in War,” 91-92.

²⁴Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 27.

²⁵For example, under the military codes of Richard II (1385), violators were subject to capital punishment:

III. Item, that none be so hardy as to rob and pillage the church, nor to destroy any man belonging to holy church, religious or otherwise, nor any woman, nor to take them prisoners, if not bearing arms; nor to force any woman, upon pain of being hanged.

Cited in Theodor Meron, *Henry’s Wars and Shakespeare’s Laws: Perspectives on the Law of War in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), n.143.

²⁶For example, Article 23 of the *Treaty of “Amity and Commerce” Between the United States and Prussia* (1785), which specified that: “If war should arise between the two contracting parties ... and all women and children ... shall not be molested in their persons.” Cited in Khushalani, *Dignity and Honour of Women*, 3.

law of war was made, which also expressly prohibited rape as a capital crime.²⁷

Prior to World War II, however, international laws of war did not explicitly designate rape as a war crime. Although the laws and custom of war were defined within the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, no explicit reference was made to the prohibition of war rape. Rather, under Article 46 of the Annexe to the Convention, women were protected from attack by the more general (for which read vague) provision of protecting family honour.²⁸ Nonetheless the Preamble of the Conventions did reaffirm customary law in force at the time, which did prohibit rape.²⁹ a move further reaffirmed by Nuremberg International Military Tribunal when

²⁷Although the Lieber Code was originally meant for the United States Army, in reality it was adopted by a number of European countries—Prussia, the Netherlands, France, Russia, Spain, Great Britain—as a basis for their laws of war. Rape was prohibited and punished under the following articles: Article 22: “The principle has been more and more acknowledged that the unarmed citizen is to be spared in person, property, and honour as much as the exigencies of war will admit”; Article 37: “The United States acknowledge and protect, in hostile countries occupied by them, religion and morality; ... the persons of the inhabitants especially those of women; and the sacredness of domestic relations. Offenses to the contrary shall be rigorously punished”; Article 44: “All wanton violence committed against persons in the invaded country ... all rape, wounding, maiming or killing of such inhabitants, are prohibited under the penalty of death, or such other severe punishment as may seem adequate for the gravity of the offence”; and Article 47: “Crimes punishable by all penal codes, such as arson, murder, maiming, assaults, highway robbery, theft, burglary, fraud, forgery, and rape, if committed by an American soldier in a hostile country against its inhabitants, are not only punishable as at home, but in all cases in which death is not inflicted, the severer punishment shall be preferred.” Francis Lieber, “Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field”, originally published as “US War Department, Adjutant General’s Office, General Orders No. 100 (Apr. 24, 1863).” Cited *ibid.*, 5-7.

²⁸Article 46: “Family honour and rights, the lives of persons ... as well as religious convictions and practice, must be respected.” Convention Respecting the laws and Customs of War on Land, with Annexe of Regulations, October 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277 (Hague Convention No. IV), reprinted in Dietrich Schindler and Jiri Toman eds., *The Laws of Armed Conflict: A Collection of Conventions, Resolutions and Other Documents* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), 63-98. Khushalani asserts that Article 46 of the Hague Regulations is a mandatory provision guaranteeing women protection from rape. Khushalani, *Dignity and Honour of Women*, 10.

²⁹This was the famous “Martens Clause” which stated that “[u]ntil a more complete code of the laws of war has been issued ... the inhabitants and the belligerents remain under the protection and the rule of the principles of the law of nations, as they result from the usages established among civilised peoples, from the laws of humanity, and the dictates of public

it acknowledged that, by 1939, the Hague Conventions on Land Warfare had been recognised “by all civilised nations and were regarded as being declaratory of the laws and customs of war.”³⁰

The Nuremberg Trials failed, however, to prosecute perpetrators of war rape. As Brownmiller points out, accounts of rape as military reprisal, retaliation or as sexual torture were submitted or documented but not prosecuted as independent crimes.³¹ In contrast, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East specifically identified rape as a war crime—the first time that this had happened. Many Japanese military commanders were convicted on charges of war atrocities which included rape or enforced prostitution.³² Moreover, commanders were determined as responsible for acts committed by their troops, and defendants were denied the defence of superior

conscience.” Ibid., 10.

³⁰*American Journal of International Law* 41 (1947): 248-9, cited in Schindler and Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflict*, 63. The Convention formed the basis for the Military Tribunal’s definition of war crimes as:

namely, violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include, but not be limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave labour or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.

Agreement for the Prosecution and Punishment of the Major War Criminals of the European Axis, 8 August 1945, reprinted *ibid.*, 911-919.

³¹Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 51-53. See also Kelly Dawn Askin, *War Crimes Against Women*, chapters 4-5.

³²International Military Tribunal for the Far East, Judgement 1012, 1018-1019, 1160-61, 1181, Annex A-6 at 113, 116-117 (1948), cited in Fisher, “Occupation of the Womb,” 104.

orders, including in charges of rape.³³

The international protection of civilian women developed further with the adoption in 1949 of the Geneva Conventions, the Fourth Convention—which outlined the humanitarian angle of the laws and customs of war—being particularly pertinent to the protection of civilians during conflict.³⁴ Pursuant to Article 27:

Protected persons are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons, their honour, their family rights ... They shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence ...

Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.³⁵

In addition, subject to interpretation, rape was prohibited under Article 3 of the Fourth Geneva Convention which specified the fundamental guarantee that: “Persons taking not active part in the hostilities ... shall in all circumstances be treated

³³For example, Admiral Soema Toyoda, former Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese combined fleet, was charged with violating the laws of war because he allowed forces under his command to commit human rights abuses, including rape. He was, however, later acquitted of these charges. William H. Parks, “Command Responsibility for War Crimes,” *Military Law Review* (Fall 1973): 69-73, cited in Fisher, “Occupation of the Womb,” 104.

³⁴The Geneva Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, *opened for signature* 12 August, 1949 (entered in force, 21 October 1950), 6 U.S.T. 3516, 75 U.N.T.S. 287, reprinted in Schindler and Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflict*, 495-594. The Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War also contains two provisions which (implicitly) proscribe rape. Pursuant to Article 13, “prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity.” Article 14 states that “[w]omen shall be treated with all the regard due to their sex and shall in all cases benefit by treatment as favourable as that granted to men.” Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, *opened for signature* Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3316, 75 U.N.T.S. 135, reprinted *ibid.*, 400-493. The Geneva Conventions adopted before 1949 were concerned with combatants only, not with civilians, although some provisions for the protection of populations against the consequences of war and in occupied territories were contained in the Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907 (nos. 7 and 8, Annexes).

³⁵The Geneva Convention (IV). *Ibid.*, 495-594.

humanely, without adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion, or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.” Moreover, sections of the same article (a & c) prohibited the acts of “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture” and “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment.”³⁶ Under Article 32, Contracting Parties were also prohibited “from taking any measures of such a character as to cause the physical suffering or extermination of protected persons ... This prohibition applies not only to murder, torture, corporal punishments, mutilation ... but also to any other measures of brutality whether applied by civilian or military agents.”³⁷

However, references to rape within the Convention were problematic. Implicit referrals necessitated interpretation in order for the prohibition to exist; on the other hand, explicit references which directly named rape or forced prostitution were tied up with the categorisation of the attack as one against the woman’s *honour*, which in turn reinforced the guilt and dishonour customarily attributed to the victim, yet hid the fundamental violence of the act. As a result, rape in war was treated separately from crimes of violence such as murder, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture.³⁸ As Copelon argues, the failure to recognize rape as violence resulted in the lesser status of rape in humanitarian law,³⁹ and although rape was prohibited, the act was not specifically designated as a “grave breach”, as outlined under Article 147 of

³⁶This is repeated in Article 75 of the Protocol (I) Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1977.

³⁷The Geneva Convention (IV). *Ibid.*, 495-594.

³⁸Rhonda Copelon, “Surfacing Gender: Re-Engraving Crimes Against Women in Humanitarian Law,” *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 249.

³⁹*Ibid.*

the Fourth Geneva Convention.⁴⁰ As such, Article 146 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, under which Contracting Parties were obliged to search for and punish perpetrators of grave breaches, was not applicable to the prosecution of war rape.⁴¹ As I will show, this non-designation of rape as a grave breach had implications for the prosecution of rape in the American-Viet Nam conflict.

However, this situation is now beginning to change. More recently, the prohibition and prosecution of war rape has reached a milestone with the establishment of the International War Crimes Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda: the first time that the UN has condemned the rape of women in wartime, and the implicit recognition of rape as a grave breach.⁴² Under Articles 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the Yugoslav Statute, rape (and sex crimes) may now be prosecuted as a violation of the grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, as a violation of the Laws or Customs of War (following Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention), as torture and cruel treatment (following Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions), as genocide and a crime against humanity,⁴³ and as torture.⁴⁴ As yet, however, it remains to be seen

⁴⁰Grave breaches are defined as the following acts: wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment; the wilful causing of great suffering or serious injury to body or health; unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement; compelling a protected person to serve in the forces of a hostile Power; the deprivation of the rights of fair and regular trial; the taking of hostages; extensive destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity. Article 147 of the Geneva Convention (IV), cited in Schindler and Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflict*, 547.

⁴¹This limitation is exasperated by the non-applicability of the concept of “grave breaches” to non-international conflicts.

⁴²Hilkka Pietila and Jeanne Vickers, *Making Women Matter. The Role of the United Nations*, 146 (1994). Cited in Askin, *War Crimes Against Women*, 298, n. 957.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 369-370.

⁴⁴This follows the 1998 Furundzija judgement, para. 141. Cited in Kelly D. Askin, “The International War Crimes Trial of Anto Furundzija: Major Progress Toward Ending the Cycle of Impunity for Rape Crimes,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 112, no. 4 (1999): 947.

how successful the Tribunals will be both in prosecuting war sexual abuse and acting as a deterrent for future conflicts.

Gender-Based Violence in the American-Viet Nam War

Whilst three themes may be identified within contemporary literature on sexual violence in war, they have not, as yet, been extensively applied to an analysis of war rape in the American-Viet Nam War. This particular conflict is still predominantly defined in the West along American veteran lines, and although there are exceptions,⁴⁵ any analysis of sexual violence in the context of this conflict has to be drawn from American veteran accounts, notably, *ad-hoc* tribunals (which took place at the time of the conflict)⁴⁶ and collective oral history and psychiatric accounts

⁴⁵For example, Arlene Eisen Bergman's *Women of Viet Nam* (San Francisco: People's Press, 1974) contains references to the rape of Vietnamese women although she does often have to draw upon veteran accounts. Accounts of Vietnamese women's war experiences too are limited, with a tendency for Western literature either to present American women's experiences of the conflict as the defining female experiences of the conflict (for example, see Joe P. Dunn, "Women and the Vietnam War: A Bibliographic Review," *Journal of American Culture* 12 [Spring 1989]: 79-86) or to present the oral histories of the southern Vietnamese who fled Viet Nam following the fall of Saigon to the Communists. However, exceptions specifically detailing Vietnamese women's experiences of the conflict do exist, even if they are still few in number. In addition to Bergman's work, see for example, Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Lady Borton, *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese* (New York: Kodansha International, 1996); Nguyen Thi Thu-Lam, *Fallen Leaves: Memoirs of a Vietnamese Woman from 1940 to 1975* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1989); Nguyen Thi Dinh (translated by Mai V. Elliott), *No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs Nguyen Thi Dinh* (New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1976); Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai, *The Rubber Tree: Memoir of a Vietnamese Woman who was an Anti-French Guerrilla, a Publisher and a Peace Activist* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 1994); and for a perspective on the Northern Vietnamese, Karen Gottschang Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War From North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998).

⁴⁶These tribunals themselves took three forms. One was the anti-war, GI movement. Two examples included the Citizens' Commission of Inquiry (the testimonies of which are included in James Simon Kunen's *Standard Operating Procedure. Notes of A Draft-Age American* (with the cooperation of the Citizens Commission of Inquiry on US War Crimes

(which proliferated afterwards).⁴⁷

As has been generally recognised, the use of (auto) biographical/fictional texts as historical sources is problematic. War stories are no exception: as with all narratives, experiences are adapted, reinterpreted and embellished according to audience and with each retelling. For example, in her work on wartime killing by British, American

in Indochina) (New York: Avon Books, 1971) and “The Winter Soldier Investigation.” Vietnam Veterans Against the War. *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes*. Available from http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_entry.html; last accessed 16 August 1999. An abridged version exists as Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

In November 1969, with the organisation of the Citizens’ Commission of Inquiry, the US peace movement began to document US war crimes in Indochina by collecting the testimony of Viet Nam veterans. Citizens’ commissions of inquiry were held, over the next few months, in Richmond, Virginia; New York City; Buffalo, Boston; Minneapolis; Los Angeles; and Portland, Oregon. In 1970, the CCI joined forces, with amongst others, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, to plan the Winter Soldier Investigation. Initial collaboration of the CCI and the VVAW also included joining forces with Jane Fonda and Mark Lane, the latter whom was denounced for his book, *Conversations with Americans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970). A split ensued between the CCI and the WSI, although the goals of the resultant hearings (the CCI organising the National Veterans Inquiry in Washington, and the WSI, in Detroit), were substantially the same. (The CCI was also involved in organising *ad hoc* hearings for Richard Dellums.) Tod Ensign, “Organizing Veterans Through War Crimes Documentation,” *Vietnam Generation* 5, no. 1-4 (1994): 146-147.

The second form of tribunal was that of the International War Crimes Tribunal, organised by Bertrand Russell and other anti-war activists, two sessions of which took place in 1966 and 1967 in Sweden and Denmark respectively (the latter taking place four months before the massacre at My Lai). The hearings encountered widespread attention in Europe but were widely ignored by the American media, bar a *New York Times* editorial, which described the Tribunal as a kangaroo court lacking legal or moral authority (Ibid., 145). Testimonies from the Tribunals can be found in John Duffet, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence. Proceedings of the International War Crimes Tribunal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970)

The third form of tribunal was the Congressional tribunal. This was the Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam, 25 April, 1971. This *ad hoc* hearing lasted for four days and was under the chair of Republican Ronald V. Dellums. The hearing is available at <http://members.aol.com/warlibrary/vwch1.html>; last accessed 16 August 1999. Although outlining American “war crimes”, these two forms of tribunal did not explicitly refer to the sexual abuse of Vietnamese women.

⁴⁷See, for example, Mark Baker, *Nam. The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (London: Abacus, 1993); Ellen Frey-Wouters and Robert S. Laufer, *Legacy of a War: The American Soldier in Vietnam* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1986); Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War. Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974); Kim Willenson, *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (New York: New American Library, 1987); Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

and Australian servicemen in the two World Wars and in Viet Nam, Joanna Bourke notes that veterans have been known to recount “contradictory, consolatory and often fantastical stories,” or suffer flashbacks of fictional or embellished battles.⁴⁸ This has been reiterated in relation to the conflict in Viet Nam. As one veteran and writer has remarked:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. ... And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.⁴⁹

Yet even if [the war story] did happen—and maybe it did, anything's possible—even then you know it can't be true because a war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.⁵⁰

Later, O'Brien writes:

In other cases, you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling.⁵¹

Viet Nam War veteran testimonies have been subject to criticism for constituting a “war crimes industry.”⁵² Lewy has argued that anti-war proceedings—such as the

⁴⁸Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing. Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 9.

⁴⁹Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991), 69-70.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 79.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 70.

⁵²Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University, 1978), 311.

Winter Soldier Investigation, convened between 31 January and 2 February 1971—and retrospective reports must be regarded with suspicion as they are subject to distortion through the veterans' attitudes towards the military and their difficulties in adjusting to civilian life after discharge.⁵³ Some texts have also been discredited: for example, Mark Lane's *Conversations with Americans* has been denounced as a “disreputable book” and “a hodgepodge of hearsay,”⁵⁴ with some of the alleged “witnesses” having been found never to have served in Viet Nam;⁵⁵ whilst sworn statements of several veterans were said to have been collected from veterans supposedly at the Winter Soldier Investigation, but who in fact claimed not have attended the hearing in Detroit.⁵⁶ In addition, it is necessary to ask to what degree such texts are representative of veteran experiences in Viet Nam. As Richard Overy remarks in relation to Bourke:

Bourke may well be challenged on just how typical her cross-section of killers really is. Millions of men and women in the armed forces of all three wars never saw combat; even within combat formations, we know, and Bourke acknowledges, that only a small percentage actually kill the enemy. Of that proportion, an even smaller percentage actually kill the enemy in face-to-face combat, even fewer with the bayonets and knives whose bloody work over populates the pages of Bourke's text. There may be a greater degree of self-selection among Bourke's killers than is immediately apparent.⁵⁷

⁵³Ibid., 319.

⁵⁴James Reston, Jr, *Saturday Review*, 9 January 1971, 26. Cited *ibid.*, 316.

⁵⁵Neil Sheehan, *New York Times Book Review*, 22 December 1970. Cited *ibid.*, 316.

⁵⁶Office of the Director, Judge Advocate Division, Headquarters USMC, Winter Soldier Investigation files. *Ibid.*, 317.

⁵⁷Richard Overy, “Simple Pleasures of Killing,” *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 14 May 1999.

Such an argument may also be applied to the conflict in Viet Nam. Only about twelve percent of the servicemen sent to Viet Nam actually participated in combat. At the war's peak (1968), eighty-eight percent of all servicemen were assigned to noncombat occupational roles (manual, technical and clerical);⁵⁸ also at the conflict's height, fewer than 250,000 servicemen (equivalent to about only six percent of active-duty troops) were engaged in combat operations at any one time.⁵⁹

Taking these reservations into account, how do veteran accounts explain rape in the context of this war?

As becomes clear, rape in veteran texts can be seen as a metaphor for the victimisation of the American soldier, facilitated by sex/violence⁶⁰ and misogynist⁶¹ elements present within military training and war. Prior to the 1960s, American military victories and technological and logistical superiority had led to the centrality of war and warriors as symbols reinforcing American dominance and masculine virility.⁶² The veneration of combat, made explicit by Hollywood, informed the

⁵⁸Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 52.

⁵⁹Ibid. As Baskir and Strauss remark: "Overall, the risk of combat service was so low for Vietnam-era servicemen that life insurance companies did not charge extra premiums for military personnel, except for pilots and others on unusually hazardous missions." Ibid.

⁶⁰Karen Stuhldreher, "State Rape: Representations of Rape in Viet Nam," *Vietnam Generation* 5, no. 1/4 (April 1994): 156. See also Susan Jeffords, "Rape and the Winter Soldier," *Vietnam Generation* 5, no. 1-4 (April 1994): 152-154 and Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America. Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 69-71, 175-176.

⁶¹Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'She's a Pretty Women ... for a Gook': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," *Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 3 (1989): 56.

⁶²J. Gibson, "Paramilitary Fantasy Culture and the Cosmogonic Mythology of Primeval Chaos and Order," in *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*, a special edition of *Vietnam Generation* 1, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1989), ed. Jacqueline Lawson: 14.

Introduction

expectations of young soldiers prior to their involvement in combat. Of particular significance was John Wayne's role as a cultural icon, promoting stereotypical notions of masculinity through his representations of patriotism, courage, confidence and leadership.⁶³ The combat version of this identification focussed upon military pride, battle lust and prowess in killing.⁶⁴

As recruits, the young men were subjected to a military training designed to break their civilian socialisation. However, as such training was to take place over a short period, it relied heavily upon the interchangeability of military traditions with those of the street corner.⁶⁵ Although Marine training was more brutal and isolated than that of the US Army, essentially the two systems—their methods and goals—were the same.⁶⁶ The primary objectives were to promote an obedience and aggression among the recruits which eventually would be channelled towards a designated enemy by a self-regulating, self-disciplining cohesive military unit.⁶⁷

For the first half of eight weeks basic training, recruits were reindoctrinated and their bodies reconditioned into the military mould. Three processes were employed to ensure psychological control over the young men. The first two processes were *authorisation*—where the recruit learnt not to challenge specific actions or

⁶³Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 1992), 19.

⁶⁴Lifton, *Home from the War*, 219.

⁶⁵Charles Levy, "ARVN as Faggots. Inverted Warfare in Vietnam," in *Men's Lives*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 203.

⁶⁶Appy, *Working Class War*, 90-96.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 96-97.

authority—and *routinisation*—the daily conditioning and structuring of activities.⁶⁸ One veteran described this training as “a kind of programming”;⁶⁹ another as “it’s just to be a machine. When you’re wound up and when your button is pushed, you’ve gotta react. If you don’t react the way they want you to, you’re in trouble with them.”⁷⁰ Drill instructors sought conformity and obedience to their orders through verbal intimidation: “You are pukes, you are scumbags, you are the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human. You people are nothing but a lot of little pieces of amphibian shit”;⁷¹ through physical punishment, such as forcing recruits to eat rubbish or to put their heads in to toilets they had failed to clean properly; through the sheer physical exhaustion of both scheduled and punitive rounds of physical training; and through a climate of strict impersonality where privacy and intimacy were denied, and where every single aspect of day-to-day life was regimented and controlled.⁷²

By pitting recruits against each other in physical competitions—and later on, against other units—and by collectively punishing a unit for an individual’s failures to conform, instructors sought to heighten levels of an aggression which eventually could not only be redirected toward the enemy but which could also be engaged to

⁶⁸Wayne R. Eisenhart, “‘You Can’t Hack It Little Girl’: A Discussion of the Covert Psychological Agenda of Modern Combat Training,” *Journal of Social Issues* 31, no. 4 (1975): 15; Herbert C. Kelman, “Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanisation of Victims and Victimiziers,” *Journal of Social Issues* 29, no. 4 (1973): 38-52.

⁶⁹Major Jon Bjornson, 8th Field Hospital, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*.

⁷⁰Cpl. John Geymann, 3rd Marine Division, *ibid.*

⁷¹Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (New York: Summit Books, 1978), 4. Cited in Appy, *Working Class War*, 87.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 88.

ensure unit self-discipline. Individuality had to be wiped out in favour of military unit cohesion—for a unified unit was an efficient, fighting unit. As one veteran stated:

They shave your head. They make you lose your entire sense of identity. Instead of reacting as the individual, you are reacting as a group. The group, honorary eliteness—that's not quite the word, but it's forced upon you. You must react together or you're all punished. This continues and continues and continues.⁷³

As the accounts of military training illustrate, group unity was also based upon adherence to the military's concept of an aggressive, exaggerated, heterosexual group masculinity, premised upon the subjugation of the enemy. As women and homosexual men were the antithesis of this construct, they, in effect, became the enemy—or as Appy remarks in his study, “failure as a soldier constituted failure as a man and left the recruit with the status of a woman.”⁷⁴ Drill instructors would deride recruits as “faggots”, “cunts”, “girls” or “pansies” and if one soldier came to be labelled as non-masculine, other soldiers would accept the stereotyping of him as effeminate, passive and homosexual.⁷⁵ Yet, recruits were forced to submit passively to such labels out of compliance to military authority. This polarity created within them a need to be aggressive and violent over an “Other”⁷⁶ or encouraged feelings of (heterosexual) superiority and dominance over an “enemy”. When combined with

⁷³SP/4, Donald Donner, 86th Combat Engineers, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*.

⁷⁴Appy, *Working Class War*, 101.

⁷⁵ Michalowski, “The Army will make a ‘Man’ out of You,” 331.

⁷⁶Cynthia Adcock, “Fear of ‘Other’: The Common Root of Sexism and Militarism” in *Reweaving the Web of Life. Feminism and Nonviolence*, ed. Pam McAllister (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), 217.

a rhetoric which eroticised violence, evident in many military songs and training drills, women's bodies became legitimate targets through which adherence to a militarised masculinity could be proven—or to put it in another way, homophobia within the military served as a measure of masculinity, whilst misogyny sanctioned violence against women as its proof.

After four weeks, the goals of basic training shifted. Having succeeded in achieving obedience and heightening levels of aggression amongst recruits, drill instructors would alter their approach—less harassment, more encouragement and the easing of restrictions.⁷⁷ In response, recruits would become more confident and start to internalise the attitudes of their drill sergeants. As one army recruit commented: “Everybody falls in because they are so willing to get out from under this shit that they have been catching. By the end of training they're all gung-ho.”⁷⁸

It was at this stage that the third psychological process involved in basic training—*dehumanisation*—came into play. Drill instructors would start to channel the aggression stirred up within training towards the Viet Cong. The enemy was labelled a “gook”, “dink”, “slope” or “slant”. But this racist rhetoric was applied to *all* Vietnamese, regardless of whose side they were on, thereby turning them *all* into the enemy and making them easier to abuse. One veteran commented that:

You are trained to be a racist. When you go into basic training, you are taught that the Vietnamese are not

⁷⁷Appy, *Working Class War*, 103-104.

⁷⁸Kennet Fred. Emerick, *War Resisters Canada* (Knox: Knox, Pennsylvania, Free Press, 1972), 84. Cited Appy, *Working Class War*, 105.

people. You are taught that they are gooks and all you hear is “gook, gook, gook, gook.”⁷⁹

Another came to see the life of a Vietnamese as so unimportant that: “if a gook got killed, it was like me going out here and stepping on a roach.”⁸⁰

Throughout training therefore, recruits were pushed towards a new sexual identity which eroticised violence and through which women came to be regarded as sexual objects. Violence and sexuality were so tightly bound that, as one veteran stated: “Combat feels like subjugating women. Combat feels like you’re fucking like gangbusters, macho-mean, like you’re punishing the woman—or the enemy.”⁸¹ When combined with the racial and homophobic elements of military training, it is not surprising that Vietnamese women, deemed inferior by virtue of their race and sex, were legitimised as sexual targets.⁸²

⁷⁹Sgt Jamie Henry, 4th Infantry Division, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*

⁸⁰Baker. *Nam*, 51.

⁸¹Chaim F. Shatan, “Happiness is a Warm Gun. Militarized Mourning and Ceremonial Vengeance: Toward a Psychological Theory of Combat and Manhood in America, Part III,” in *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*, special edition of *Vietnam Generation*, ed. Jacqueline Lawson, 1 no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall, 1989): 131.

⁸²Incidentally, however, whilst foreign women were especially vulnerable, as shown in the testimonies of women veterans of the conflict, American women soldiers, Red Cross workers and women nurses in Viet Nam also found male soldiers considered them there for their benefit—as caretakers and to cater for their sexual needs—rather than as direct participants in the war. Renny Christopher, “‘I Never Really Became a Woman Veteran Until ... I Saw The Wall’: A Review of Oral Histories and Personal Narratives by Women Veterans of the Vietnam War,” in *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*, special edition of *Vietnam Generation*, ed. Jacqueline Lawson, 1, no. 3-4 (1989): 39. This attitude was not limited to soldiers however. Visitors to Viet Nam also brought these attitudes with them. In his memoirs, Colonel Jack Crouchet recalls how a female friend of his was sexually assaulted by a US Senator’s aide visiting Viet Nam. When she saw the aide the next morning in the Officer’s mess, he showed no remorse for his actions and joined her for breakfast, without invitation. Colonel Jack Crouchet, *Vietnam Stories: A Judge’s Memoir* (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 221.

Introduction

This was compounded by the nature of the conflict and the US presence in Viet Nam. The war fought by the Vietnamese against the Americans was one of guerrilla warfare and was one which the American military was ill-prepared to fight. Fighting a guerrilla war which constituted “a kind of magic network which holds the enemy in its meshes, scatters his forces, harasses him day and night, wears him out and drives him to a war of attrition without a way out,”⁸³ American troops found themselves emasculated and forced into the defensive, fighting an enemy who, as one veteran said, “fight on their fucking terms, not on ours.”⁸⁴ Unable to act out the aggression and violence which both defined and proved their militarised construct of masculinity, soldiers found that in attacking civilians they were able to reject the impotence forced upon them⁸⁵ or able to replace the grief felt at the loss of a buddy.⁸⁶

Veteran testimonies reveal that women’s bodies served as a means through which to scapegoat the enemy for the harsh realities of the battlefield. Physically slight, a Vietnamese woman was an easy target for the US soldier: in the villages, male protection was reduced as all eligible Vietnamese males were serving as combatants and the predominantly all-male presence in interrogation centres placed female prisoners at risk of abuse. One GI paraphrased his thoughts as he was about to commit rape-murder as:

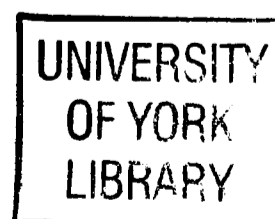
[Y]ou dirty bitch, you killed Wilson and you killed Weber and Cox and Rotger and Dell, and you got me

⁸³Hoang Van Thai, *Some Aspects of Guerrilla Warfare in Vietnam* (Ha Noi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965). 14.

⁸⁴Levy, “ARVN as Faggots,” 202.

⁸⁵Lifton, *Home from the War*, 50.

⁸⁶Shatan, “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” 137.



here and look what you're making me do and look what my buddies are doing, and I hate this war and it's your fault I'm here.⁸⁷

This sense of powerlessness however could also be coupled with a sense of omnipotence for the soldiers. The sexual abuse of women served as intimidation, directed towards civilians and enemy soldiers alike. It was also of communicative value between American soldiers. The abuse of Vietnamese women's bodies proved the ideal means upon which one's commitment to the "gook syndrome" and brutalised heterosexuality could be visibly demonstrated. In abusing a Vietnamese woman, a soldier could demonstrate his dedication to the "American cause" and the unit: it also served as the pinnacle of male bonding and the culmination of misogynist military training.

Due to a shortage of strong and effective leadership with battle experience and the ability to enforce discipline, especially at platoon and company level, military personnel could find themselves in constraint-free environment:⁸⁸

Let's face it. Nature is nature. There are women available. Those women are of another culture, another colour, another society. You don't want a prostitute. You've got an M-16. What do you need to pay for a lady for? You go down to the village and you take what you want.⁸⁹

But in the Nam you realised that you had the power to take a life. You had the power to rape a woman and nobody could say nothing to you. That godlike feeling

⁸⁷Paraphrased by Martin Gershen. Cited in Lifton, *Home from the War*, 54.

⁸⁸Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 330; Louise Brown, *War and Aftermath in Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991), 196; Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories*, 53.

⁸⁹Baker, *Nam*, 146.

you had was in the field. It was like I was a god. I could take a life, I could screw a woman. I could beat somebody up and get away with it. It was a godlike feeling that a guy could express in the Nam.⁹⁰

Many officers did not prevent abuses—whether from the belief that this was the nature of the war and of American strategy, that it would reduce the soldiers' morale and aggressive fighting spirit, or out of a feeling that they could do nothing to prevent it. In not controlling their troops behaviour, officers could be argued as implicitly authorising such sexually abusive acts.

Outline of the Thesis

One of my original objectives when I started the thesis five years ago was to look at gender-based violence in war as a continuum; rather than neatly compartmentalising women's experiences of sexual violence as specific to their allegedly distinct statuses as soldiers, civilians and refugees, I wanted to highlight how women are subjected to abuse at all stages of the "war process" and not simply as the result of one particular identity. I therefore hoped to hear Vietnamese women's experiences from both sides of the conflict, Communist/pro-Revolutionary and non-Communist, and at the hands of the different participants, for example, the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), the American, Australian and Korean militaries, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong.

As I show in the first chapter of this thesis, this intention proved naive and I was

⁹⁰Ibid., 134.

forced to limit the scope of my research to the stories of Southern Vietnamese women revolutionaries and the American military. Moreover, I soon discovered my thesis would never reveal the “truth” as such of sexual violence in the Viet Nam conflict. As I outline in my research methodology, the problem of a single or “true truth” ran deeper within my research than simply the use of oral histories, with the “truths” of the opposing sides—veteran (written) oral histories versus interviewee testimonies; American documentary resources against Vietnamese resources (with the latter rather than the former repeatedly dismissed as unreliable or stained with political or Communist bias);⁹¹ or Communist versus non-Communist testimonies—constantly contradicting and battling against each other, vying to be *the* truth which was believed.

My over-reliance upon American veteran sources (I was logistically unable to collect testimonies or information for the other military forces present) has resulted in a somewhat unbalanced understanding of sexual violence, emphasising the American presence and violations in Viet Nam whilst simultaneously obscuring the actions of the other forces present. The production of a “hierarchy of worst offenders” was not my intention yet I realise my analysis risks demonising one military force whilst ignoring the others. The forced American-bias in my analysis therefore must be held in mind when reading the thesis.

⁹¹Why do we automatically assume that Vietnamese/Communist reports are completely rife with bias and propaganda, whilst those of the US and its allies are not? As Edward Sherman remarks, *The New York Post* (4 November, 1969) carried the story that the Thieu government closed down several newspapers which printed stories of birth defects resulting from the use of chemical warfare in the countryside for “interfering with the war effort”: as reported in the *New Yorker* (7 February, 1970), the US government similarly attempted to suppress such information. Edward Sherman, *Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 79, n. 107.

I realise that this bias as well as my thesis subject matter has resulted in a negative criticism of US servicemen in Viet Nam. I have not looked at the “good” relationships between American servicemen and Vietnamese women, of their marriages, or how US servicemen tried to help women out of Viet Nam as Saigon fell. I acknowledge I have not looked at how servicemen would visit orphanages or charities, or those who took the time to learn about the culture and the people. I have not looked at those who did not participate in sexual violence. The thesis is not intended to lambast America nor its servicemen: I have been criticised on different occasions⁹²

⁹²There have been at least two occasions when this has happened, both of these times by American nationals. One occurred when I was in Viet Nam and an American couple who I met socially interrogated me, I felt quite aggressively, as to why I had chosen this topic and referred to the conflict as the “American-Viet Nam War” as opposed to just the “Viet Nam War”. The other “attack” came in response to my Masters dissertation on sexual violence in the American-Viet Nam and Bosnian conflicts. An American veteran e-mailed me with regards to the dissertation:

Was there crime against the local population? Deplorably yes. Was there wide-spread disrespect of the local population? Yes. Was sexual misconduct part of official military policy? No. Can you put 19-year old males, away from their societal restrictions, in the shadow of death and expect them not to seek pleasure and comfort in the company of young women? Each day might be their last chance. I am not condoning even one case [of] rape and the poverty/economic dislocation was sad. However, comparing American and Bosnian forces under the guise of academic inquiry is the saddest piece of misinformation I have seen in some time.

... Don't build a masters thesis on a few quotations culled from the disaffected and pulled from a handful of books, some of which were written by people who have never been there. (E-mail received 5 June, 1999.)

The receipt of this e-mail disturbed me. However, aside from the writer's misreading of the dissertation (for example, I did not state that sexual violence was an official part of military policy and I also stressed in the introduction that the dissertation was not intended as a comparison between the two wars or military forces), the comment was interesting for it corresponded with a point made by Kali Tal that it is assumed an individual is unqualified to comment on this conflict if he (or she) did not actively participate in it. As Tal writes of veteran war literature, “there seemed to be a symbiotic relationship between author and reviewer (man-to-man) which was predicated on the reviewer's acceptance of the author's objectivity or “knowledge”. The only way the reviewer could know whether the author's tale was authentic was if the reviewer had, even vicariously, experienced, war.” (Kali Tal,

for researching sexual violence in the American-Viet Nam conflict and for therefore being “anti-American.”

Nor is it intended to argue that the sexual abuse in this conflict was comparable/analogous to that in other conflicts, such as in Bosnia, in terms of scale or motivation. There has been much debate as to whether or not American military policy did, in fact, amount to a genocide of the Vietnamese people,⁹³ including a statement by Jean-Paul Sartre, as presented at the Russell Tribunal, who claimed that the US, being engaged in neo-colonialism, had adopted a policy of the genocide of the Vietnamese nation as its basis for an anti-guerilla warfare strategy.⁹⁴ However,

“Feminist Criticism and the Literature of the Vietnam Combat Veteran,” in *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*, ed. Jacqueline Lawson, special edition of *Vietnam Generation* 1, no. 3-4 (1989): 90.) There is a paradox here. On the one hand, there is the obligation to accept the “gritty realism” and “authenticity” of the texts, yet on the other, such “authenticity” is suddenly denied when such texts are used to detail the perpetration of war crimes by US personnel in this conflict. This is supported by Elshtain:

Because women are *exterior* to war, men *interior*, men have long been the great war-story tellers, legitimated in that role because they have “been there” or because they have greater entree into what it “must be like.” ... Part of the female *absence* has to do with how war gets defined (where *is* the front?) And with who is authorized to *narrate*.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Brighton: HarvesterPress, 1987), 212-213.

⁹³See the articles by Hans Morgenthau and Edward M. Opton in *War Crimes and the American Conscience*, ed. Erwin Knoll and Judith Nies McFadden (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1970); David Welsh, “Pacification in Vietnam,” in *Crimes of War*, eds. R. Falk, G. Kolko and R. J. Lifton (New York: Random House, 1971); and Richard Falk in *The Wasted Nations: Report of the International Commission of Enquiry into United States Crimes in Indochina*, eds. Frank Browning and Dorothy Forman (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972). All cited in Hugo Adam Bedau, “Genocide in Vietnam?” in *Philosophy, Morality, and International Affairs. Essays edited for the Society for Philosophy and Public Affairs*, eds. Virginia Held, Sidney Morgenbesser, Thomas Nagel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 6 nn.3-8.

⁹⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, *On Genocide* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 67. Sartre argued that the American government had chosen to follow a policy of war as opposed to a policy of peace, and as a consequence of this choice, genocide became “*the only possible reaction* to the rising of a whole people against its oppressors.” *Ibid.*, 83. The Second Session of Bertrand Russell’s International War Crimes Tribunal also returned a guilty verdict against the United States Government of genocide against the Vietnamese people. “Verdict of the Second Session” in

whilst the evidence clearly shows that the United States committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Viet Nam,⁹⁵ it has not been proven that the extermination of the Vietnamese people, as such, was the sole objective of American policy—despite a description, in 1969, of the pacification programme by an unnamed “high US field commander” that, “if the people are to the guerrillas as the oceans are to the fish, then ... we are going to dry up that ocean.”⁹⁶ Instead, as Bedau states, although the counter-insurgency warfare methods employed tactics which could be labelled genocide-like acts—unrestricted air and artillery bombing, free-fire zones, “search and destroy” missions, “scorched earth” policies including defoliation—they were not committed with the *intention* of killing any part of the people of South Viet Nam, as would be necessary to qualify as constituting “genocide” under the Genocide Convention.⁹⁷ Bedau argues that these acts were committed with the intention of “killing people who were simply in the way, simply there, because in the judgement

Prevent the Crime of Silence. Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal, founded by Bertrand Russell, eds. Ken Coates, Peter Limquenco and Peter Weiss (London: Penguin Press, 1971). 366.

⁹⁵See Neil Sheehan, “Should We Have War Crime Trials?” *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 March 1971, 1-3, 30-34.

⁹⁶Edward S. Herman and Richard B. Du Boff, *America’s Vietnam Policy* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1966), 115; Cited in Bedau, “Genocide in Vietnam?” 39.

⁹⁷Under Article II, genocide is defined as:

- [A]ny of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious groups, as such:
- a. killing members of the group;
 - b. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
 - c. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
 - d. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
 - e. forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), available in PR. Gandhi, ed., *International Human Rights Documents* (London: Blackstone Press, 1995), 18-21. America had not ratified the Genocide Convention.

of field officers, they might at a later point prove to be Viet Cong or because they were in a zone or area of South Vietnam where one could not be sure that any of the natives were loyal to the Saigon government.”⁹⁸ Although I am aware that this may be in part a reaction to what Bedau points out is a great reluctance to accuse a nation of a crime such as genocide, especially when the horrors of World War II remain the paradigm to which all such allegations are compared,⁹⁹ from my testimonies, I do not believe that the sexual abuse of Vietnamese women during this conflict resulted from a genocidal policy.

It is the testimonies of southern Vietnamese women rather than those of the veteran servicemen which form the crux of my thesis. My desire to foreground the women’s experiences has led to this thesis taking an atypical form. As I footnote throughout the dissertation, extensive literature now exists, following the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, relating to sexual violence in war, its forms, functions and nature, the physical, psychological and social consequences for the victim, and judicial redress. However, little literature currently exists either pertaining to Vietnamese women’s war experiences, let alone the issue of rape within this conflict. As I stress above, the majority of the literature which does exist tends to focus upon the veterans’ perspectives. Whilst deciding to acknowledge these three contemporary themes, I came to two decisions regarding the format of the thesis in order to ensure that the women’s testimonies received full attention. The first was to relegate the male/veteran perspectives on the violence to the introduction and fourth chapter of the thesis; secondly, in order to avoid any repetition which would detract from the

⁹⁸Bedau, “Genocide in Vietnam?” 43.

⁹⁹Ibid.. 9.

impact of the testimonies, I decided to incorporate contemporary literature on war sexual violence into my analysis of the interviewees' testimonies. As a result, in contrast to the traditional thesis-style, the thesis does not begin with a conventional literature review.

Instead, I begin with my research methodology. In the first chapter, I justify my decision to use oral history and testimony as my main research method; having done so, I precede to discuss my experiences of conducting interviews in Viet Nam during my eight-month field trip there in 1998. As I soon discovered, the circumstances specific to my field trip prevented me from meeting preferred/"ideal" feminist standards for interviewing, especially with relation to researching sensitive or traumatic issues; however as I was surprised to discover, this did not prevent the women from talking about their experiences. It is this contradiction which forms the focus of the methodology chapter.

Moving on to Chapter Two, I begin my analysis of the interview testimonies with a description of the women's participation in the revolutionary movement. From the testimonies, it becomes clear that many of the women joined the revolution following the destruction of their family or their environment by the conflict. As participants, they engaged in both political and military activities, demonstrating against "the enemy" forces of the ARVN and Americans, rallying support for the National Liberation Front (NLF), or providing logistical and military support to the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). It is these activities which are described here.

The analysis of the women's revolutionary activities provides the context for the third and main chapter: southern Vietnamese women's testimonies of gender-based violence. As revolutionaries, the women's activities often placed them at risk of arrest

and detention, and subsequently sexual violation under the guise of interrogation or punishment. However, as becomes apparent in the testimonies, non-combatant status did not protect women from sexual violence, as the women's stories of prostitution, forced marriages and rape during military raids illustrate. From the women's stories it is possible to argue, as has been the case in certain veteran testimonies, that sexual violence was in fact a pervasive element of the conflict in Viet Nam and that women were violated at the hands of multiple perpetrators—soldiers, military advisors, policemen, prison guards—multiple nationalities, and in multiple scenarios.

In the fourth chapter, by way of conclusion, I return to the American military to end the thesis with an examination of the US Army court-martial system as providing judicial redress for victims of sex-related crimes in during the American-Viet Nam conflict. As becomes apparent, the system failed the women survivors of gender-based violence in this conflict; the hope can only be that with the establishment of the War Crimes Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia, such failure will not be repeated in the future.

Finally, before moving on to the first chapter, there are a few points I would like to make. Firstly, my definitions. Although as I specify in the following chapter I did not define “gender-based violence” as a term to my interviewees, my analysis has undoubtedly been influenced by my reading around this topic, and the subsequent definitions offered. For the purposes of the thesis, I have worked around two outlines. The first is that presented by Pratt and Fletcher:

Gender-based violence encompasses physical violations directed at women *on account of* their gender. Rape, forced impregnation and forced maternity constitute gender-based violations in that: (a) the physical consequences of the violence are ones

which only women endure (e.g. only women can be impregnated as a result of rape, and only women can be forced to carry to term a pregnancy resulting from rape); (b) women's social status makes them targets of these acts; and (c) there are gender-specific injuries which result from these acts, due to the social status of women (e.g. stigmatization, blame for the violation, loss of social status, and survivor's fear of reprisal.)¹⁰⁰

The second is that offered by Aron, Corne, Fursland and Zelwer:

Forms of sexual abuse that can be identified are best divided according to whether they occur as part of (a) the standard operating procedures (SOP) of the military while a woman is in detention (e.g. rape as a component of torture), (b) the SOP while the woman is in the community (e.g., capricious exploitation by a soldier who, because of this military connection, has license to abuse), or (c) improvised abuses generated by extreme situations.¹⁰¹

Secondly, as I outline in the following chapter, the period under discussion differed depending upon whether the conflict was being discussed from a Vietnamese or American perspective. When my interviewees were talking of the "American War", they were using the timescale of 1954-1975. However, American texts, whilst recognising American involvement in the conflict prior to the mid-1960s, focus upon 1965 (the first year of the US combat involvement in Viet Nam) to 1973 (with the signing of the Peace Agreement and American troops withdrawal). As Jeffords remarks:

[T]he "end" of the Vietnam War itself is difficult to identify. Is it with the fall of the Saigon government in

¹⁰⁰Pratt and Fletcher, "Time for Justice," 78, n.4.

¹⁰¹Adrienne Aron, Shawn Corne, Anthea Fursland, Barbara Zelwer, "The Gender-Specific Terror of El Salvador and Guatemala: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Central American Refugee Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* 14, no. 1-2 (1991): 41.

1975? the withdrawal of American troops from battle in 1973? the Tet Offensive of 1968, when according to many historians, the war was perceived by the American public to be lost? And its beginning with the large-scale introduction of American troops in 1965? with the commitment of American financing and advisors in 1962? the assumption by the United States government of debts and institutions of the French in Vietnam in 1945? or the declaration by Ho Chi Minh of an independent Vietnam in 1945?¹⁰²

The disparity between the two perspectives and respective dates needs to be borne in mind when reading the thesis. When using the women's testimonies, I will use the 1954-1975 timescale; when discussing the American perspective and Army courts-martial, I will be using 1965-1973 as my markers, unless expressly stated otherwise.

And finally, a brief comment on the naming of my interviewees. I had frequent dilemmas throughout writing the thesis as to whether to reveal or conceal the names of the women who gave their testimonies to me. On the one hand, I am aware of the issues surrounding confidentiality and naming; on the other, my interviewees were incredibly keen for their stories to be told in the West and all the revolutionary interviewees gave permission for me to use their names. In the end, I decided to compromise. Out of a respect for the women's desire to have their own individual stories known, I decided to use their own first names; however, I have not used the women's family names and the geographical locations given are vague, so in effect, protecting the women's privacy. However, when using oral testimonies collected by the Women's Museum, Ho Chi Minh City, I have decided to quote the full names of the museum's interviewees, on the assumption that these texts are relatively public documents and as such, the issue of confidentiality does not arise in the same way.

¹⁰²Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America. Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 6.

Chapter One

“[W]ith the Presence of This Girl Here, [...] I Have An Appeal to Make.”¹ Researching Gender-Based Violence in the American-Viet Nam War

In this chapter I discuss my experience of researching war sexual abuse through oral history interviews in Viet Nam. I have decided, however, to take a different approach here to conventional theses which usually begin with an overview of research methodology literature, followed by a critique of what does and does not work for specific forms of research, and then an analysis of particular methods and methodologies. Rather than repeating an analysis of different feminist approaches to interviewing and to researching sexual violence² I have decided instead to address two specific issues which arose in relation to my research. Firstly, my research took place in far from ideal situations, especially in view of the difficult and sensitive nature of my research focus, justifiably problematised within feminist literature. How did these circumstances affect the oral histories collected and what does this say about the use of the oral history interview in talking about war sexual violence? Secondly, rather than simply an interaction between myself and the interviewee, my

¹Gom, interview by author, tape recording, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²For one bibliography on feminist research methods, see Rebecca Campbell, “Weaving a New Tapestry of Research: A Bibliography of Selected Readings on Feminist Research Methods,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 18, no. 2 (1995): 215-222. An extensive discussion of different examples of feminist research is available in Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a discussion of different approaches to research on male violence against women, see Purna Sen’s doctoral thesis, “A Basket of Resources: Women’s Resistance to Domestic Violence in Calcutta” (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 1998), 73-102.

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interviews involved a number of others: additional interviewees, two Vietnamese academic contacts and representatives of the Vietnamese Women’s Union. How did both I and the other participants impact upon the research process?

To answer these two specific questions, the chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first, I outline my decision to use the oral history interview as my key research method. In the second, I give a brief description of my interview experiences in Southern Viet Nam. Finally, I begin to ask why the women spoke of their experiences as they did and how the presence of multiple participants in the interview process may have helped or hindered their testimonies.

My Research Methodology

As I outlined in the Introduction, Vietnamese women’s war experiences are infrequently represented in conventional literature on the American-Viet Nam conflict. One explanation may be traditional history’s dependence upon concrete events, activities, and facts and figures which can be written down as opposed to subjective thoughts and feelings. As women comprise the majority of the world’s illiterate population and the act of writing itself is both class- and culture-bound,³ women’s representation within conventional history has been severely limited.

My methodology was based predominantly upon the collection of “personal

³Susan Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 2 (1986): 335.

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experience narratives”⁴ of war sexual abuse through the oral history interview.⁵ For my purposes, I chose the definition of oral history suggested by Willa Baum:

A way of taking down reminiscences by means of a tape recorder, not of random reminiscences but planned interviews on a subject of historical interest about which the narrator can speak with authority ... [The interviewee] can be someone who was in an influential position at the time of the event ... or an observation post ... or articulate representative of a class of person ... or old timer who can describe a past way of life.⁶

As Geiger points out “there is nothing inherently feminist about women’s oral histories or women doing women’s oral histories.”⁷ However, oral histories have proven a useful tool in challenging the conventional, restrictive approach to the past. Unlike other research methods which tend to focus upon particular aspects of an individual’s life,⁸ the life history method positions those experiences not only within the contexts of the individual’s own overall life experience and interpersonal relationships, but also within the broader social world—in short, emphasising how

⁴Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 15.

⁵As Reinharz has pointed out, confusion has arisen as to correct terminology—the label “oral history” often used interchangeably with “case-study”, “in-depth life history interview”, “biographical interview”, “life history” and “personal narrative”. Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 129.

⁶Willa K. Baum, “Oral History for the Local Historical Society.” Presentation at a seminar of the Oral History Association, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, October 1970. Cited in Ruth R. Martin, *Oral History in Social Work: Research, Assessment and Intervention* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 4.

⁷Rather it is the consideration of a number of issues—the objectives of the researcher, the research questions, the character of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and the intended audience and beneficiaries of the research—which turns the collection of women’s histories into a feminist act. Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories,” 335.

⁸Paul F. Armstrong, *Qualitative Strategies in Social and Educational Research: The Life History in Theory and Practice*, Newland Papers, no. 14 (Hull: University of Hull School of Adult and Continuing Education, 1987), 10.

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the person “copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals.”⁹ Furthermore, in contrast to the fragmentation and simplification of women’s experiences which arise from the conventional question-answer format of the survey method,¹⁰ oral history captures the “full flavour of the speech of the people, the slang, the nuances, the hesitations, the laughter and the tears,”¹¹ in culturally-appropriate forms or stories. Thus it becomes possible to “write against the wind”¹² and to create a written record of an interviewee’s life using her own words.

In many ways then, the collection of oral history becomes a political act, for:

When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge “truths” of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories.¹³

Life histories “force us to examine our assumptions, incorporate more actors into our models, and generate more inclusive concepts for understanding the actual

⁹David Mandelbaum, “The Study of Life History,” in *Field Research: A Sourcebook and Field Manual*, ed. Robert G. Burgess (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 146.

¹⁰Hilary Graham, “Surveying Through Stories,” in *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, eds. Colin Bell and Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 119.

¹¹Armstrong, *Qualitative Strategies*, 5.

¹²From the epigraph of Shostak’s *Nisa*:

I’ll break open the story and tell you what is there. Then,
like the others that have fallen out onto the sand, I will
finish with it, and the wind will take it away.

Marjorie Shostak, “‘What the Wind Won’t Take Away’ The Genesis of *Nisa—The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, ed. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 228-240.

¹³Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack and Judith Wittner, “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 15 (1987): 104.

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complexities of social institutions and the processes of social change.”¹⁴ By subverting the traditional research focus—away from the “downward” imposition of societal structures upon the individual, to the interplay between individual and society from the individual’s own perspective—the life history method facilitates the investigation of lives historically neglected whilst simultaneously challenging dominant and orthodox beliefs. Thus the conventional criticism of the life history method as a “soft” research tool which fails to meet traditional research criteria—objectivity, verifiability, reliability, representativeness—conversely proves to be its strength. It has been argued that such notions of objectivity, truth and knowledge are androcentric and are constructed through the lenses of the dominant gender, class and race and thus they fail to represent the experiences of minority groups or “others”.¹⁵ In this light, it is “precisely because of [life histories’] subjectivity—their rooted-ness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character—that we value them.”¹⁶

My decision to use the oral history was also influenced by the notion of the material being produced serving as *testimonio* or testimony. Although *testimonio* literature has a long history, it proliferated in the 1960s in connection with national liberation movements, especially in South America. In order to bring about social change and social justice, *testimonio* draws upon liberation theology and “conscientization”—the

¹⁴Michal McCall and Judith Wittner, “The Good News about Life History,” in *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, eds. Howard Becker, Michal McCall (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 46.

¹⁵Personal Narratives Group, “Origins,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, eds. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), 4.

¹⁶Personal Narratives Group, “Truths,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, eds. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), 263-264.

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process of becoming conscious of unjust political and social reality and its causes.¹⁷

It also includes a number of forms—autobiography, oral history, memoirs, diaries, eyewitness reports and the life history,¹⁸ as well as visual forms¹⁹—although its intention is distinct from oral history:

The word *testimonio* translates literally as “testimony,” as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. This connotation is important because it distinguishes *testimonio* from recorded participant narrative, as in the case of “oral history.” In oral history it is the intentionality of the recorder—usually a social scientist—that is dominant, and the resulting text is in some sense “data”. In *testimonio*, by contrast, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself.²⁰

Although testimonies are first-person narratives and contain experiences unique to the narrator, as Westerman found in his work with Central American refugees, experiences often resemble those of other actors within the group and as such, there are often thematic and structural similarities between testimonies.²¹ Testimony itself serves four functions: as a political act denouncing injustice; as a religious act; as an

¹⁷William Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimonies and Performed Life Histories in the Sanctuary Movement,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 228.

¹⁸John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center. On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative),” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 92-93.

¹⁹Westerman suggests that articles such as embroidered tapestries as well as wounds inflicted can also serve as forms of testimony. Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimonies,” 230.

²⁰Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 94.

²¹Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimonies,” 227.

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act to create solidarity between the narrators and listeners of the government held responsible for the injustice, possibly leading to political action; and as a therapeutic act.²² As a political or religious act, there is the belief that bearing witness can right wrongs, so that “the silenced may find a voice, cry out for justice, demand to be seen.”²³ By producing a testimony, the survivor is able to contextualise the experience personally, politically and socially, whilst simultaneously denouncing the violence and creating a political and legal weapon against the aggressors.²⁴

Used in work with Holocaust survivors, political prisoners, campaigners for “the disappeared” in Argentina and El Salvador, and women refugees,²⁵ the idea of testimony as a therapeutic act is based upon Freud’s emphasis on the value of spoken language in dealing with trauma, where:

If the success of these reactions is of sufficient strength, it results in the disappearance of the great part of the affect. If the reaction is suppressed, the affect remains united with the memory. An insult retaliated, be it only in words, is differently recalled than one that has to be taken in silence. Thus, the

²²Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimonies,” 230. See also Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, with Graham Dawson, eds., *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (Routledge, London, 1999) for the value of oral history as a therapeutic act.

²³Jean Bethke Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), xii.

²⁴Ana Julia Cienfuegos and Cristina Monelli, “The Testimony of Political Repression as a Therapeutic Instrument,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 53, no.1 (1983): 50; Inger Agger and Soren Buus Jensen, “Testimony as Ritual and Evidence in Psychotherapy for Political Refugees,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 3, no. 1 (1990): 108. See also Amy Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 47-59.

²⁵Adrienne Aron, “Testimonio: A Bridge Between Psychotherapy and Sociotherapy,” in *Refugee Women and their Mental Health: Shattered Societies, Shattered Lives*, eds. Ellen Cole, Olivia M. Espin, Esther D. Rothblum (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1992), 173-189; Inger Agger, *The Blue Room: Trauma and Testimony Among Refugee Women: A Psycho-Social Exploration* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Agger and Jensen, “Testimony as Ritual,” 115-130.

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reaction of an injured person to trauma might be said to be truly “cathartic” only if it is expressed in a form equal to the insult, a form such as revenge.²⁶

As Judith Shepherd remarks, oral history, and by extension, testimony, may aid mental health practitioners dealing with traumatised refugee women suffering from PTSD as it affords them a historical/cultural context in which to position the women's lives and offers a greater understanding of both the women's negative and positive reactions to their experiences than can be gained from psychosocial questionnaires and checklists.²⁷ The act of testimony therefore reaffirms both the individual's belief in one's own value as a human being and as a member of a community.²⁸ As a result, a private shame is transformed into a political dignity,²⁹ for it is argued:

Retelling history from the victims' perspective is an act of resistance against the victimizers that transforms them from being mere objects of the regime's terrible campaign to participants in the telling of their country's history. Their testimony destabilises the perpetrator's claims to justice and legitimacy.³⁰

It was for these reasons then that I chose “personal experience narratives”, collected

²⁶Cienfuegos and Monelli, “Testimony of Political Repression,” 45.

²⁷Judith Shepherd, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnamese Women,” *Women and Therapy* 13, no. 3 (1992): 284. This issue of *Women and Therapy* (with numbers 1-2) was simultaneously issued as Ellen Cole, Oliva M. Espin, Esther D. Rothblum, eds., *Refugee Women and Their Mental Health: Shattered Societies, Shattered Lives* (New York: Haworth Press, 1992).

²⁸Aron, “Testimonio,” 178; Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 181-183.

²⁹Agger, *The Blue Room*, 9.

³⁰Karen Slawner, “Interpreting Victim Testimony: Survivor Discourse and the Narration of History”; available from <http://www.yendor.com/vanished/karenhead.html>; Internet; accessed 29 March, 1996.

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through oral history interviews, as my research method. Through my research I wished to challenge the conventional silence surrounding women’s history and more specifically of Vietnamese women during this particular conflict, whilst simultaneously enabling the women to produce testimonies of their experiences. In this way, I hoped to be able to understand how “culture, gender, and coping skills factor into our understanding of women’s mastery of trauma during wartime.”³¹

My Research Experience in Viet Nam

I had originally intended to carry out my doctoral research in England, interviewing women refugees in two Vietnamese community centres in southern England. Although at the outset feedback indicated this would be feasible, in practice it was not: in one centre, the women’s geographical backgrounds and dates of arrival in England meant they were unsuitable interviewees; in the other centre, my access to interviewees dried up when I rather awkwardly refused a dinner invitation from the male centre manager.

When it became evident I would not be able to carry out my research in England, I realised my only option was to go to Viet Nam. As neither I nor the University of York had any academic working relationships in Viet Nam at this time, this proved problematic. Despite advice from an American woman living and working in Viet Nam to make myself “stand out from the rest” by sending relevant articles to academic and NGO organisations who might be willing to sponsor an extended-stay

³¹Shepherd, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” 284.

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visa, I did not receive any replies to my letters requesting help. This was particularly problematic for as I was to discover once in Viet Nam, I was unable to conduct my research independently: as Chanoff points out in his own work, Vietnamese survival has been dependent upon secrecy and as such, they are suspicious of foreigners who cannot not be vouched for through mutual friendships and connections.³² Fortunately, I discovered I could enrol for a Vietnamese language course in Ho Chi Minh City and in this way, I was able to ensure a long-term stay in Viet Nam, hoping that I would be able to find willing contacts upon my arrival. Once in Viet Nam, I was lucky: CN, an academic researcher agreed to help me and arranged for her colleague, KC, to act as my interpreter.

I left England in mid-January 1998. For the first three weeks I was effectively a tourist; a friend had travelled out with me, and I used this time and the moral support to get my bearings in Ho Chi Minh City. In this period, we also travelled to Ha Noi. Mid-February to the end of March was spent in a combination of private and group language classes and trying to establish contacts. I also revisited Ha Noi for five weeks from the end of March until the end of April.³³ May was spent chasing up Ho Chi Minh City contacts and organising a field trip schedule with the interviews finally starting in June. During my stay, I also visited three museums to collect research material: the Women’s Museum in Ha Noi, the War Remnants Museum

³²David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Vietnam: A Portrait of its People* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 207.

³³During my five-week stay in Ha Noi, I conducted five interviews, with the support of the Ha Noi Women’s Union, as well as carrying out research at the Women’s Museum and trying to find potential research contacts. These interviews gave me my first taste of what conducting interviews in Viet Nam entailed and of working via an interpreter. However, the women’s war experiences were not directly relevant to my focus upon gender-based violence and so served more as background information and interview practice than specific research material.

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(formerly known as the American War Crimes Museum) in Ho Chi Minh City, and the South Vietnamese Women’s Museum, also in Ho Chi Minh City. I left Viet Nam towards the end of September 1998.

As I wanted to focus upon Southern Vietnamese women’s experiences of gender-based violence my research base was in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), in the south of the country. Although my initial plans had to be modified I eventually spoke with forty-two women in seven regions in the south: Ho Chi Minh City and Cu Chi (an area just outside Ho Chi Minh City), and the provinces of Tien Giang, Long An, Ben Tre, Binh Phuoc, and Ba Ria-Vung Tau. I chose these areas for three reasons. The first was that Vietnamese primary documents report high levels of soldier-civilian incidents and violence in these areas.³⁴ Secondly, some of the regions—for example, Ben Tre and Cu Chi—had been key sites for resistance against the South Vietnamese Government (GVN) so I assumed would have experienced heavy contact with enemy forces. Finally, these areas were accessible—at most, a one-day drive—from Ho Chi Minh City.³⁵

³⁴*Crimes of the US-Diem Imperialists Against the People of the South, 1955-1970. Report of the United Women's Movement to Liberate the South of Viet Nam in the War Against the Americans for National Salvation.* Held at the Women’s Museum, Ha Noi.

³⁵I had wanted to carry out a comparative study of the southern and central regions as the nature of the conflicts in these two regions differed greatly and I wondered what impact this might have had upon women's experiences. The Revolution's main (i.e. regular) military force, the People’s Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) had largely been kept along the borders the 17th Parallel through the Central Highlands and south to Cambodia, whilst in the populated coastal areas and the Mekong Delta, the brunt of the fighting was borne by militia and guerilla forces. Thus, the nature of the war and the identity of the Vietnamese “enemy” altered if the fighting occurred in the southern or central regions. Moreover, the war in the Central region was one predominantly fought by all-American units, whilst the war in the south was fought by a combination of US and South Vietnamese (ARVN) units, or South Vietnamese units with US advisors. I wondered how this affected the nature of Vietnamese-American interactions. In practice, this plan were too difficult to implement.

The Interviews

My interviews can be divided into three categories—“unofficial”, “semi-official” and “official”—with each term relating to the degree to which I was personally able to arrange a meeting. Two of my interviews were completely “unofficial”—they were arranged through a mutual friend, rather than through the Vietnamese Women’s Union³⁶ and my academic contact, and they were conducted in English with only myself and the interviewee present. Two sets of interviews were “semi-official” for they were organised with the help of CN. The remaining interviews were “official” and were organised between CN and the President of the Women’s Union of the province which we wanted to visit. Help from the Province’s Women’s Union was subject to a letter of permission obtained by CN from the Central Women’s Union’s headquarters in Ha Noi, permitting us to visit the area.

The official interview field trips followed a more or less set pattern. I would organise a car to drive CN, KC and myself from Ho Chi Minh City to the headquarters of the Women’s Union in the province we were visiting. Even though the field trips were carried out in provinces selected in part by the possibility of one-day round trips, due to the poor condition of Vietnamese roads, even the shortest distance could take hours to cover or involve ferry trips. On average, we would leave Ho Chi Minh City around six o’clock in the morning and arrive at the destination between eight and ten o’clock. We would travel to the provincial headquarters of the Women’s Union (WU)

³⁶The Viet Nam Women’s Union was founded in October 20, 1930, and is a mass organisation charged with the education and training, mobilisation and enhancement of women at domestic, social and national level. The Union is organised on four levels: nationally/central (based in Ha Noi), the province, district, and communal (grassroots) level. E. Pamela Wright, Nguyen Kim Cuc, Le Thi Thu Ha, *Women Speak Out: Health Issues in Southeast Asia* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1995), 63.

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and be met by the Vice-President of the Women's Union of the Province and possibly other Women's Union representatives. In this initial meeting, CN would show the letter granting permission from the Central Women's Union to the President and introduce herself, KC and myself. The purpose of the research would then be explained by CN.³⁷ If the interview was to be held in the interviewee's own home, we would drive to the interviewee's house, accompanied by representatives of the Women's Union. In the case of the Tien Giang interview, we drove to the Vice-President's home. Alternatively, interviews were held at the province's WU headquarters and the interviewees would turn up at a pre-ordained time. Around noon, we would stop for lunch and to accommodate the siesta. On the days when we held individual interviews in the interviewees' homes, KC, CN, our driver and myself would be invited to lunch in a restaurant by the WU's representatives. When interviews were organised at the WU's headquarters, the interviewees would also join us for lunch—in a restaurant or at the headquarters itself. Any remaining interviews would be conducted in the afternoon, and we would leave the province in time to arrive back in Ho Chi Minh City around six or seven o'clock in the

³⁷The transcript for the Tien Giang interview gave one example of how my work was explained:

Ms Madeleine came here to prepare to write her dissertation for a doctorate degree and to do so, she must choose a subject. She chose to write about war and the atrocities that happened in the war. She writes about other atrocities caused by war; for example in Europe and in South Africa. To write about the atrocities of the Viet Nam War, Ms Madeleine wants to be in contact directly and see the reality of it. She has heard and seen such things on radio and TV but that, of course, is not reality. In her country, Ms Madeleine has read many documents that discussed how miserable the war was for men but not much about how women suffered. But here, in the country, she can observe how women were and how they suffered.

Interview by author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

evening.

The organisation for the “unofficial” and “semi-official” interviews was much less formal. In the “unofficial” interviews, I visited the office where the women worked. (I was a friend of their boss.) I conducted the interviews in a spare office, alone, and in English. In the first “semi-official” interview, CN and myself went to the interviewee’s home. The interview was carried out in English although every so often the interviewee would revert to Vietnamese to explain a point to CN. In the second “unofficial” interview with this woman, I went alone to her house to read documents she had collected related to her experiences and an unscheduled interview developed. In my other “semi-official interview”, CN, KC and myself caught a taxi to a Pagoda to meet with some Buddhist nuns and the interview was conducted in one of the open rooms there.

The interviews themselves were based upon the use of an interview guide.³⁸ In the first section, the questions were geared towards establishing the interviewee’s biographical details and gaining an impression of how the American war impacted upon the area in which she lived. Included here were questions to determine the different ways in which Vietnamese women came into contact with enemy soldiers in this specific area, generally, and the reputations which the different soldiers had.³⁹ In the second part, I asked the interviewee to describe her own experiences of contact with enemy soldiers during the war. The third section was directed towards

³⁸See Appendix B for the Interview Guide.

³⁹As troops from a number of different nationalities were involved in the conflict in Viet Na, I used the term “enemy soldiers” as I did not want to presume whom the interviewee identified as “the enemy”. However, due to the predominant political bias of the interviewees, my initial expectation of interviewees also including North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers in this category was not realised.

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understanding the social, physical and psychological effects the woman's experiences had had upon her in both the short- and long-term, and what support networks had existed. Finally, the fourth section of the interview guide examined the role importance to the interviewee of “justice” and the “recognition” of her experiences. What factors helped a woman come to terms with her experiences? What constituted “justice” for a survivor of war gender-based violence? My questions were intended to be open-ended and were often quite vague, with no direct reference to rape or other forms of sexual abuse. This was owing in part to my feeling uncomfortable about being so blunt and specific, especially in view of the fleeting, one-off nature of the interviews, but also due to an awareness that meanings and definitions of rape differ according to cultural and historical settings and thus, any definition I used would not necessarily coincide with that of the interviewees.⁴⁰ As it transpired, this vagueness proved an asset and forced me to reassess the scope of my research, with women talking about experiences, for example, of imprisonment, which I had initially overlooked.

KC acted as my interpreter in each of the “official” interviews and in one of the “semi- official” interviews. At each meeting, KC, CN and myself would have a copy of the interview guide. KC would begin the interview with the collection of the interviewee's biographical details and would then work her way through the questions. When pertinent, she would ask supplementary questions to clarify a point

⁴⁰According to Dr. Richard Mollica, “every society and subculture has a different way of dealing with rape.” Lance Morrow, “Unspeakable”, in *Time Magazine*, 22 February, 1993: 28. Cited in Ivana Filice and Christine Vincent with Amina Adams and Fersada Bajramovic, “Women Refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina: Developing a Culturally Sensitive Counselling Framework,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 6, no. 2 (1994): 215. Such differences in how sexual abuse is defined by its victims is also supported by the work for example, of Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

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or ask the interviewee to elaborate further upon a particular answer; likewise, CN or others present at the interview would also ask questions or supplement a respondent's reply with additional information, clarification, or personal recollections. At appropriate lulls in the conversation, KC would verbally summarise what the interviewee had replied for me and would ask if there was anything else I wanted to know.

The interviewees ranged in age from their forties to their late eighties although the majority fell within the mid-fifties to seventy age group. Although some of the women had received a university education, as the Vietnamese Women's Union tends to draw its members from the poorer, less well-educated sections of Vietnamese society⁴¹ (with professional or educated women tending to join the body catering for intellectuals), it can be speculated that the majority of my interviews had only had access to basic levels of education. Due to their age, the majority of the interviewees were no longer formally employed, although they may have been involved in family-run businesses, such as cafes. In contrast, the younger interviewees came from a variety of professional backgrounds: Vice President of a Province's Women's Union; employees of the Province's Women's Union; law; pharmacy; NGO administration; or Buddhist nuns.

The women's activities during the conflict were equally diverse. My two “unofficial” interviewees had been schoolgirls during the war and had not participated in any war activities; the interviewees of my “semi-official” interviews had been involved in the anti-war/peace movement; others had been involved in pro-Revolutionary militia activities or had been nurses; three women were “heroic mothers” (a title

⁴¹Conversation with KC 17th July 1998.

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given by the government to a woman who lost her husband and/or children in the French or American-Viet Nam Wars, or both);⁴² and one woman had not participated in any revolutionary activities at all. Virtually all the interviewees had undergone some form of detainment—whether by South Vietnamese, American or Australian troops for interrogation purposes, or as actual prisoners in Ben Tre, Chi Hoa, Phu Loi, My Tho Tan Hiep or Con Dao prisons. If imprisoned, the women had been held as political prisoners.

In practice, my “semi-official” and “official” interviews took three different forms. The first was where we spoke with the interviewee individually; the second was where the interviewee spoke individually but in the presence of other interviewees; and the third was the group interview, where the participants contributed to a joint discussion. Owing to the involvement of the Women’s Union in my research, all “official” interviews were conducted with some sort of entourage. (The forms my “official” interviews took are outlined in Table 1.) Not surprisingly, the predominance of the multiple interviewee interview generated the telling of multiple stories. The majority of the women told of their own experiences of gender-based violence during the war. In addition, interview participants would recount friends’ experiences, occasions they had witnessed, or events they had heard of i.e. hearsay.

⁴²This form of recognition of women’s war experiences first began in 1994, and entitles the recipient to a certificate and small pension. According to a map in the room dedicated to “Heroic Mothers” at the Army Museum in Ha Noi, the provinces south of the 17th Parallel with the highest number of Heroic mothers are: Quang Nam Da Nang (3366), Ho Chi Minh City (1088), Long An (1082), Tien Giang (1040), and Ben Tre (938) (as of my visit to the museum on 3rd April 1998)

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Date	Province	Number of Interviewees	Interview style	Number of people immediately present	Interview location
23 6 98	Ho Chi Minh City	1	Individual	4	Ho Chi Minh City WU headquarters
25 6 98	Cu Chi	4	Individual	6-7	Interviewees' homes
10 7,98	Tien Giang	4	Individual in group setting, then group discussion	9	WU Vice-President's home
10 7,98	Long An	2	Group	7 (plus family)	Interviewees' home
14 7.98	Ben Tre	4	a) 3 individual interviews in group; b) 1 individual	a) 8 b) 5 (others around)	1) WU's province headquarters 2) Interviewee's home
17.7.98	Binh Long District, Binh Phuoc Province	4	Individual but in group setting	3 (but 6 others milling around)	WU Headquarters of Binh Long district
11 8 98	Vung Tau, Vung Tau-Ba Ria Province	7	Individual speeches, group setting	17	WU Headquarters of Vung Tau
11 8.98	Ba Ria, Vung Tau-Ba Ria Province	4	Individual speeches, group setting	11	WU Headquarters of Ba Ria
5 9 98	Cu Chi	6	Individual in group setting	12	Commune's People's Committee HQ

Table 1: My “official” interviews

Methodological Problems⁴³

From my reading on research methodology, prior to going to Viet Nam I developed my own notions as to what constituted a “good” feminist interview. As I outline in Table 2. I conceived a “good” feminist interview as a private, individual, one-to-one affair, ideally collaborative and non-exploitative, in which the differences and power imbalances between the researcher and researched were minimal. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, I did not expect my interviewees to find talking about their experiences easy. My interview experience in Viet Nam contrasted sharply however with my preconceptions and so, according to the literature, I should have failed in my attempt to collect the women’s testimonies. In view of the discrepancy between feminist literature on circumstances likely to facilitate talking about sexual violence and the circumstances in which my interviewees spoke, why then *did* the women talk about their experiences? *How* did they talk about their experiences? Does this make the testimonies collected problematic and what does it tell us about researching southern Vietnamese women’s experiences of trauma, the influence of the public/private dichotomy when talking about sexual violence, and the creation of testimony? In order to address this issue, I shall in part use Plummer’s analysis of storytelling as involving multiple actors: the “producers”, the “coaxers”,

⁴³My discussion in this section focuses upon the problems raised in the conduct of my “official” interviews, my justification being that it was in these interviews that the women disclosed accounts of war sexual abuse.

The "Good" Interview	My Interviews
Private	Public
Individual	Group
One-to-one	Use of interpreter
Established relationship with interpreter	(Initially) unknown interpreter
Find own interviewees	Interviewees chosen for me by the Vietnamese Women's Union
Minimal differences between researcher and researched	Multiple differences: age, race, nationality, language, political background. (Only possible similarities: gender and sexuality)
Difficulty talking about sexual violence (especially in public setting)	Apparent willingness to talk about experiences
Minimal power imbalance between researcher and researched	The interviewer as "celebrity" Power/control of a third party: the Vietnamese Women's Union
Collaboration, reciprocity, non-exploitative	Problematic
Repeat interviewing	One-off interviews
Involvement of interviewee in checking interview transcript, interpretation etc.	Impossible or unwanted

Table 2: Characteristics of "good" and my interviews

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and the “consumers”.⁴⁴ Applying Plummer’s analysis to my own research experience, my interviewees could be seen as the storytelling “producers” (of testimonies), and CN, KC, the Vietnamese Women’s Union and myself simultaneously both the “coaxers” and “consumers” of these stories.

The Interviewee as “Producer”

An oral history is both a social and individual construction. As a social act, a story emerges from the interaction between “producer”, “coaxer” and “consumer” (as will be shown later).⁴⁵ As a personal construction, an individual’s recollection of past events is both informed by the present and the individual’s sense of her own life⁴⁶ and “predicated on the fact that the narrator always knows the outcome of the story, and commences with the problem already resolved.”⁴⁷

How women reflect upon their experiences is heavily determined by both the cultural and social contexts in which such reflection occurs—the individual woman comparing her feelings and thoughts against the yardsticks of existing social and cultural stereotypes, her family and peers, and her subordinated social positioning.⁴⁸ As has been found, in the Vietnamese context, the ease with which individuals are able to talk about their lives is further limited by fear and the concern that any critical discussion of the Vietnamese government may provoke harm upon oneself

⁴⁴Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 20-21.

⁴⁵Ibid., 22.

⁴⁶J. Olney. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: npub, 1972). Cited in John Murphy, “The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory,” *Historical Studies* 22, no. 87 (October 1986): 167.

⁴⁷Murphy, “The Voice of Memory,” 170-171.

⁴⁸Anderson et al., “Beginning Where We Are,” 116.

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or one’s family. As Chanoff points out, “[t]heir history has taught them not to reveal themselves. Survival requires silence and never letting anyone know where your heart is.”⁴⁹

More specifically, as Plummer points out, cultural and social contexts have historically made the telling of stories of sexual violence specifically difficult.⁵⁰ Such concerns are not restricted to the West. As psychiatric studies with Indochinese refugees have shown, the collection of detailed trauma histories can be problematic, especially when the trauma entails sexual violence.⁵¹ This can be compounded by Vietnamese cultural and social customs which restrict the display of emotions to all but immediate family and friends in order not to “lose face”.

In light of this, what motivated my interviewees to speak to me as they did? According to Plummer, people have multiple motives for telling stories, including the therapeutic value of storytelling, relief from tension, financial incentives, a desire for immortality and exhibitionism.⁵² I can only speculate as to why my interviewees agreed to participate as I did not ask them directly. However, as I discuss later, one motivation may have been the involvement of the Women’s Union in the organisation of my research. Another may have been the opportunity for the

⁴⁹Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Vietnam*, 207. See also Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 161-165.

⁵⁰Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 26-28, 75-76

⁵¹Richard F. Mollica, Grace Wyshak, James Lavelle, “The Psychosocial Impact of War Trauma and Torture on Southeast Asian Refugees,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144, no. 12 (December 1987): 1570. Conversely, other studies have argued that there is often a compulsion for Southeast Asian refugees to recount their experiences to the extent that the collection of such narratives is a source of relief for the interviewees. Nicola North, “Narratives of Cambodian Refugees: Issues in the Collection of Refugee Stories,” *Oral History* (Autumn 1995): 37.

⁵²Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 34.

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interviewee to “keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.”⁵³ Certainly there was no financial incentive to participate. Although some of my interviewees perceived my research as a means of inviting foreign aid into Viet Nam, they did not personally receive payment for their participation. I had expected to financially compensate my interviewees for their time, but in practice CN suggested that a packet of sweets or biscuits was sufficient for each woman.⁵⁴ Further, although I offered to pay for the WU lunches, my gesture was refused by CN. Instead, it was suggested that I offer a donation of 250,000 dong to the province’s Women’s Union (approximately £20.00). Apart from the lunches which the women enjoyed courtesy of the WU, the only way I could try and thank the women individually was through sending a sufficient number of copies of the group photographs taken at the end of each interview, to be forwarded on. As I did not have any means of contacting the individual women directly, I was reliant upon the Women’s Unions to pass on the photographs and my gratitude.

But whatever the motivation, as Jackson points out, the recall of memories enables the producers to reconstruct themselves,⁵⁵ and become the “myth-makers, story tellers, dreamers, definers of situations, scriptwriters, world-markers, producers of

⁵³Ibid., 41.

⁵⁴However, I discovered that not all the women received these biscuits. At the Binh Long interview, the four interviewees were all professional women. Yet, when CN went to get the presents to pass them on, she was told by the WU representative not to give them in front of everyone. When I asked KC why this was, she explained that because of the professional status of the women, it could be seen as insulting. In contrast, due to the lower status of the majority of the interviewees, in other interviews, such simple presents were acceptable. I was unable to find out how, if at all, the women from the Binh Long interview were thanked for, as we were told that the WU would distribute the biscuits later on.

⁵⁵Stevi Jackson, “Telling Stories: Memory, Narrative and Experience in Feminist Research and Theory,” in *Standpoints and Differences: Essays in the Practice of Feminist Psychology*, eds. Karen Henwood, Christine Griffin and Ann Phoenix (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 53-54.

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‘programmes.’”⁵⁶ One of the values of oral history is that it enables the interviewee to make sense of the difficulties of her own life experience through a creation of a “self” or the “genesis of an individual,” specifically in the context of the telling.⁵⁷ This “reconstruction of self” is of especial significance for survivors of violence, enabling the survivor to evade the feelings of secrecy, guilt and self-blame which have historically and culturally met narratives of violence, and to create a more positive identity instead.⁵⁸ For example, in her work on how Asian immigrant women construct their cultural identities in contexts of (domestic) violence, Supriya writes: “immigrant women’s testimonies of abuse are resistant and oppositional because they name the abuse and abusers as well as mark their own agency ... their testimonies function as powerful forms of resistance.”⁵⁹

My interviewees’ testimonies similarly presented stories of their personal resistance and agency. The women positioned themselves as survivors, as Vietnamese nationals who had survived against impossible hardship and a war of aggression, and as women who had survived immense personal abuse. Sandra Taylor found the same heroic descriptions in her research on Vietnamese women’s participation in the conflict.⁶⁰ Taylor suggests that such memories are:

paeans to the glories of a particular ideology,
testaments to the righteousness of their cause,

⁵⁶Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 35.

⁵⁷Martine Burgos, “Life Stories, Narrativity and the Search for the Self,” *Life Stories/Recits de Vie* 5 (1989): 30.

⁵⁸Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 76.

⁵⁹K.E. Supriya, “Confessionals, Testimonials: Women’s Speech in/and Contexts of Violence,” *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 100.

⁶⁰Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 18.

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testimonies to the need to persist against what these women saw as the cruelties of a foreign imperialist and its local supporters, even a justification for life as it is lived today.⁶¹

I wonder if there is an additional explanation. In presenting themselves as “revolutionaries” and “heroines” and by detailing their agency in the war of resistance, my interviewees were able to evade the status of “rape victims” and so, possibly, the stigma which such a label normally evokes.⁶² Plummer has suggested that, “shame may prevent a story being told, pride may lead to it being shouted.”⁶³ If this is correct, is it possible that this recreation of self as heroine may have made it possible for my interviewees to disclose their experiences of war sexual abuse, even in situations which were far from the feminist interviewing “ideal”?

The “Coaxers”

As Plummer remarks, “coaxers”—those who provoke stories from the people—play active roles in the assembly of producers’ stories.⁶⁴ There were a number of “coaxers” involved in my research: the Vietnamese Women’s Union, other interviewees, CN,

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²As Minow writes:

[U]nless people have the chance to tell the stories of their pain and suffering, they are diminished and yes, victimized. Yet telling one’s story as a victim story risks reducing oneself to stereotypes of suffering. Describing yourself as a victim has a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating feature; and yet, failing to acknowledge or assert one’s victimization leaves the harm unaddressed and the perpetrators unchallenged.

Martha Minow. “Surviving Victim Talk,” *UCLA Law Review* 40, no. 6 (1993): 1431.

⁶³Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 28.

⁶⁴Ibid., 21.

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KC, and myself. In this section, I look specifically at the impact which both I and the Women's Union had upon the production of my interviewees' testimonies.

The Women's Union

The Vietnamese Women's Union was a very definite “coaxer” in terms of the production of my interviewees' testimonies. However, the Union was also my gatekeeper and as such, its different roles could be at odds with each other. The problems inherent to gaining access to research subjects through gatekeepers are well-known.⁶⁵ Having the Women's Union in this role restricted my research in many respects. It was the Union who, in conjunction with CN and KC, determined the dates and locations of the interviews.⁶⁶ More significantly, all my “official” interviewees were chosen for me by the Union and I was unable to determine to what degree an interviewee could refuse the Union's request to participate in a meeting. This significantly altered the political bias of my interview sample and the nature of the stories heard, with all the women in my “official” interviews, bar one, having been directly involved in, or supportive of, the Revolutionary movement. The involvement of the Union also determined the number of interviews and of interviewees present in one meeting. As this could be between one and eleven women in one day, in-depth interviewing was impossible, with interviews often curtailed by the Women's Union representatives—in one case, to just fifteen minutes—in order to ensure time for the next.

⁶⁵Raymond M. Lee, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 119-141.

⁶⁶Inadvertently, my original choice of interpreter, a *Viet Kieu*—returning Vietnamese—was ruled out as it was thought that the WU would consider her “too political” as she now held a British passport.

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The involvement of the Women’s Union not only determined the type and form of interviewee and interview; the political (both governmental and history-creating) element of the interviews was compounded by the presence of various officials in the interview entourage: the number of people present in the immediate interview surroundings could range from three to seventeen (as outlined in Table One). Aside from myself, CN, KC and the interviewees, the interview entourage consisted on different occasions of Women’s Union representatives (the President or Vice-President, and/or representatives from the WU at provincial, district, communal/hamlet level), a Youth League representative and a representative from the local police. At other interviews, non-official participants included our own or the WU’s driver, the leader of the province’s Old Soldiers’ Association (who was also the husband of an interviewee), a local television cameraman, employees of the WU there to take notes on the meeting, and the husband or family of the interviewee. In one of the interview field trips we also had one Canadian acquaintance of KC, in the midst of visiting Viet Nam, accompany us.

Such control over the interview process and interviewee sample and the lack of privacy was undoubtedly restrictive, especially in view of the subject matter under discussion, both in terms of what I was able to do and what I was able to hear. Yet conversely, it facilitated my research in more subtle ways. Firstly, the Women’s Union found my interviewees for me. As became apparent in the meetings, each province’s WU representative had a great knowledge of each individual interviewee’s experience. Whilst this could simply have been the result of a personal acquaintance with the woman or where individual women’s experiences were already publicly

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known,⁶⁷ in one area (Cu Chi), women’s wartime experiences, or at least those of pro-Revolutionary prisoners, had been subject to more formal recognition through the distribution of questionnaires intended to document the time spent by women in prison and any war injuries sustained.⁶⁸ Such knowledge ensured that the interviewees’ experiences “fitted” my research focus. I hope it also ensured that the women chosen for interview would be those most prepared to talk about their experiences; the prior organisation necessary to an interview ensuring that the women would be fully informed as to the painful subject matter of my research. Notably in two of the three least successful interviews (Long An and Binh Phuoc), pre-interview organisation had failed.⁶⁹

⁶⁷For example, in the Ben Tre interviews, one of the women had written about her experiences for a short story competition whilst another woman had been officially honoured as an “Army Heroine”. In Long An, the interviewees had had their stories published in a book published by the province’s Women’s Union on the region’s “heroic mothers”.

⁶⁸I was told that this was a national survey, however no other provincial WU mentioned such a survey. I was further told that in Cu Chi alone, 700 women had been imprisoned during the war.

⁶⁹In the case of Long An, CN did not contact the WU’s headquarters directly prior to our visit. Due to a previous research project she had participated in in this province, she was known by the president of the Women’s Union. In light of this prior relationship, CN decided to stopover in Long An on our way back from Tien Giang province interview. We were invited to wait at the headquarters, whilst WU representatives rang around possible interviewees, to see if they were in and willing to be interviewed. Although the women agreed and we went to their home, it was obvious to me that they were unwilling to talk about their war experiences.

In the case of the Binh Phuoc field trip, it was only after one very long and arduous car journey that I was told previous contact with the WU there had been unsuccessful, with one always absent when the other rang or returned calls. The President had, therefore, been unable to prepare for our visit as she did not know my research topic and so did not seek out suitable interviewees. This disorganisation was further compounded when we were informed that the headquarters of the Women’s Union was based in a district of little interest to us as it had been a liberated area (i.e. under the control of the NLF). We would, therefore, have to travel onwards to another area within the province which had been occupied by Americans and South Vietnamese Army soldiers. However, as no organisation had taken place prior to our arrival, we were reliant upon the WU’s President ringing the different district Women’s Unions within the province to see if anyone would be willing to find interviewees. The Binh Long Women’s Union accepted to help us, and in the couple of hours drive between the Provincial WU Headquarters and our arrival the representatives found three interviewees. However, as it turned out, their war experiences did not involve stories of gender-based violence and therefore just provided background information for the thesis. The lack of

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Secondly, the involvement of the Women’s Union conversely protected my interviewees as the Union’s presence indicated to the women that they had permission to talk to me. In a previous conversation with MP, the woman I had originally hoped to have as my interpreter, I was told that if I wanted to talk with anti-Revolutionary women, we would have to carry out our interviews in public spaces such as restaurants and cafes and, if anyone asked, under the guise of MP introducing me to a friend of hers. As I discovered with my two “unofficial interviews” and one of my “semi-official” interviews, there was a real concern that local police or their “spies” would be suspicious if they saw a foreigner repeatedly talking with them or visiting their home.

My foreigner status made me dangerous and “unsafe” to talk to. Yet the presence of a Women’s Union representative, whilst potentially restricting an interviewee from saying anything politically inappropriate, possibly freed the interviewee, her presence turning mine from “unsafe” to “safe”. This issue of safe versus unsafe did not just apply to me, despite the letter of permission from the Central Women’s Union Headquarters. Where a prior relationship had existed between CN and a specific province’s Women’s Union, CN was “safe” and so, by extension, was I. In these situations, interviews were allowed in the interviewees’ homes (unless, owing to distance, the Union’s headquarters was more central and easier for the interviewees to get to). However, when CN was unknown, my political safety as a

organisation behind this interview led to the surreal experience of one of the interview “entourage” present at the WU’s district headquarters volunteering his wife to be an interviewee, and zooming off on his moped to pick her up.

The other difficult interview was the second trip to Cu Chi. This trip was problematic, as the interviews had been rescheduled at short notice from the Saturday to the Sunday to fit in with a change in KC’s plans. As Sundays were regarded as “days off”, it is not surprising that the women came across as reluctant to speak, especially if their attendance was due to “cajoling” from the Women’s Union, rather than from a desire to talk about their experiences.

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foreigner could not be determined and interviews were not allowed in the interviewee's home. In these situations, a safe location, such as the home of the Women's Union President or the WU's headquarters would be used so as to avoid any difficulties gaining permission from the local police. I had been oblivious to this issue of “safety” until the third interview daytrip to Tien Giang. On this day, the interviews took place in the house of the province's WU President. As a relationship between CN and the President had not existed prior to our visit, I was “suspect”. However, after the interviews had finished, we were asked if we would like to visit the interviewees' homes. When I asked KC later about this, she explained to me that as the President had met us and had seen what I wanted for my research, she felt positive towards both myself and the project and so it was “ok” for us to visit the interviewees' homes.

Thirdly, the group or public nature of the meetings itself often facilitated the running of the interview, and it was in this context that the roles of the Women's Union representatives and of the others present in the interviews as “coaxers” were most obvious. As has been pointed out, others may be drawn upon in the building of one's own history, whether it be the recollections of “significant others” which are incorporated into one's own story,⁷⁰ or because others present may challenge what has been left out or unsaid.⁷¹ In my interviews, although the women at times would contradict one another's stories, at others, they would provide the verbal and nonverbal acknowledgement and affirmation necessary to maintain an interviewee's storytelling, ask questions to elaborate one another's stories or provide background

⁷⁰Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 39.

⁷¹Jackson, “Telling Stories,” 54.

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information.⁷² Importantly, the group nature of the interview often provided physical solace when telling one’s stories became too much, with the interviewees comforting each other when the memories became too painful.

The Researcher

From the above, I would argue that a triangular relationship of control and power was operating in my research. At one point was the interviewee who was in a position of power, as far as she was able to control how much she revealed in her testimony, yet who was less powerful in so much as she was invited to participate in the interview by the second “point” of the triangle, the WU, who controlled the organisation of the interview. I was the third point of the triangle. On the one hand, I was powerless, reliant upon the goodwill and cooperation of the WU, CN and KC, and the testimonies of my interviewees for my research; yet, on the other, I had control in relation to the interviewees as it was for my benefit that the meetings had been convened. These “powerful”-“powerless” relations had to be negotiated at each interview scenario and were responsible for “controlling and empowering, closing and opening, making some things possible and other things impossible” in each interview.⁷³ How then did my position in this power/control triangle manifest itself and what implication did it have for my role as a “coaxer” of the interviewees’ testimonies?

One way in which power manifests itself is in the interview process itself. Many feminist researchers have criticised more traditional “male” forms of interviewing

⁷²The issue of privacy and the advantages it can offer to the interview situation has similarly been raised in Sen, “A Basket of Resources,”93-95.

⁷³Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 26.

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and have attempted to minimise or redress the hierarchical imbalance present therein.⁷⁴ Such imbalance occurs on at least two levels: firstly, through the often exploitative and nonparticipatory nature of the researcher’s role in more traditional research methods used in interviewing, and secondly, through class, age, cultural, ethnic, racial, sexuality, educational etc. differences between the narrator and the interviewer. Within traditional interviewing techniques, Oakley argues that both interviewer and interviewee are expected to follow a prescribed, hierarchical interview model, where the research “values” of objectivity, detachment and “science” are followed. Following this format, the “ideal” interviewee is characterised (and actively constructed by the interviewer) as passive, whilst the “successful” interviewer must promote a rapport with the subject whilst simultaneously remaining impersonal and maintaining control over the interview process. This is achieved by ensuring that only the interviewer and not the interviewee asks questions, and secondly, by the interviewer not indicating his own beliefs or values to the respondent.⁷⁵

The use of such alienating and exploitative inquiry methods for career building and advancement has been termed “rape research”⁷⁶ and has been countered by the

⁷⁴Whilst first-wave feminists tended to work within the accepted, conventional model, methodological innovation has predominantly been carried out by second-wave feminists. Patti Lather, “Feminist Perspectives on Empowering Research Methodologies,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11, no. 6 (1988): 571, 631.

⁷⁵Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 35. Oakley’s objections to textbook prescriptions of the interview process however have themselves been criticised as “less the result of their inadequacies and the consequent need for an alternative methodology, and more the result of her inadequate exploration of their implications for the interview relationship and data collection.” Joanna Malseed, “Research Note. Straw Men: A Note on Ann Oakley’s Treatment of Textbook Prescriptions on Interviewing,” *Sociology* 21, no. 4 (1987): 631.

⁷⁶Lather, “Feminist Perspectives,” 570.

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argument that the only morally defensible way by which a feminist can conduct research of this nature is through the establishment of a two-way, non-hierarchical relationship in which the interviewer is also prepared to invest some of her own identity.⁷⁷ According to Finch, this is made possible through the mutual sharing of the narrator and researcher of the identity “woman”, where common ground is found through the subordinated status afforded by virtue of gender. As she writes, “being placed as a woman has the additional dimension of shared structural position and personal identification which is, in my view, central to the special character of the woman-to-woman interview.”⁷⁸

However, this approach is also problematic. As Finch recognises, the very effectiveness of the feminist interview model in promoting trust between the two (or more) participants paradoxically opens the interviewee up for exploitation, or may create a sense of betrayal, for example, should the interviewer fail to meet the expectations of the interviewee or not reciprocate or maintain the “friendship” established within the interview situation after the research has finished and entered the public/academic domain.⁷⁹

Moreover, the notion that woman-to-woman interviewing is automatically less exploitative by virtue of a “shared subordination” simplifies, or even overlooks, the differences between interviewer and interviewee and how such factors not only influence the perceptions and attitudes towards the interview and the interviewer-

⁷⁷Janet Finch, “It’s Great to have Someone to Talk To’: The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women,” in *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, eds. Colin Bell and Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 80.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁹Finch, “It’s Great to have Someone to Talk To’,” 80-82.

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interviewee relationship as a whole, but more significantly, how the people involved relate to one another *as women*, and the subsequent effects upon the research process.⁸⁰ Whilst the researcher may make efforts to minimise the more obvious verbal and non-verbal differences between interviewer and interviewee, such as language/linguistics, clothes and behaviour,⁸¹ the reality of these differences creates a power imbalance within the oral history relationship which cannot be so easily erased.

In the context of my research, I could not have been more different to my interviewees: we differed in terms of age, physical build, race, nationality, language, political backgrounds. The only guaranteed similarity was gender. Contrary however to the aforementioned feminist debates, I would argue that the power imbalances which evolve within interviews do not always fall in the researcher's favour. Although, as I outline below, my differences made me in part a “novelty” which may both have facilitated the meetings and been open to manipulation on my part, my differences also disempowered me and often threatened to remove me from the interview situation itself.

By far my most disempowering “difference” was the language barrier, forcing me as it did to rely upon an interpreter in the interviews and later, prompting the need for a translator. Approaches to using an interpreter vary, from verbatim interpretation—where the interpreter minimises her involvement in the interview

⁸⁰Catherine Kohler Riessman, “When Gender is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 172-207.

⁸¹Kristina Minister, “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview,” in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 36.

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and interprets the client’s words as closely as possible—to independent intervention, where the interpreter actively participates in the interview.⁸² To ensure effective interviewing when using an interpreter, the researcher and interpreter essentially have to work as one person⁸³ where the interpreter can guide the fieldworker in working in a more culturally-sensitive manner and prevent misunderstandings, inappropriate questions or offending the interviewee.⁸⁴ To this end, debriefing meetings are suggested after each interview where the meeting is reviewed and evaluated jointly by the researcher and interpreter.⁸⁵

The researcher-interpreter relationship however can be both a blessing and a curse. As North wrote on her double-edged need for her interpreter, Sok, in her work with Cambodian refugees, issues arise firstly in the choice of a suitable interpreter, and secondly, in the nature of the relationship between interviewer and interpreter. With regards to the choice of interpreter, North found conflict arose between finding an interpreter who met her own specific criteria—a full member of the Cambodian community, fluent in both English and Khmer and available as timetabling demanded—and the social, political, ethnic and rural versus urban tensions which underlaid objections from transcribers of the tapes. On her research relationship with

⁸²Nicholas Baker, “Social Work through an Interpreter.” *Social Work* (September 1981): 392-393.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., 393-394. See also Jane Shackman, *The Right to be Understood: A Handbook On Working With, Employing and Training Community Interpreters* (Cambridge: National Extension College, 1984).

⁸⁵P. Baker, Z. Hussain and J. Saunders, *Interpreters in Public Services: Policies and Training* (London: Venture Press, 1991); A.O. Freed, “Interviewing Through an Interpreter,” *Social Work* (July/August 1988): 315-319; P. Karseras and E. Hopkins, *British Asians’ Health in the Community* (Chicester: John Wiley and Sons, 1987). All cited in Rosalind Edwards, “Working with Interpreters: Access to Services and to User Views.” Chapter prepared for G. Wilson, ed., *Community Care: Asking the Users*. (Copy on file with author), 12.

Sok, North wrote:

The potential for her to overlay my questions and my participants' responses with her understanding and experiences was very high, yet at the same time her centrality to the study process facilitated the interlinking of stories ...

My reliance on an interpreter meant that I had less control on the direction these conversations took that would have been the case in a monolingual interview. There were times when the conversation drifted off the topic, and we did not return to the point of interest, but in most instances this could be remedied at our next meeting after I had reviewed my notes made during the interview. On other occasions my low level of control proved to be an advantage, as when the conversation ranged onto a subject that I hadn't previously considered, yet was highly relevant.⁸⁶

Thus, although North on the one hand lost a degree of control over the interview process, on the other, Sok proved invaluable in enabling understandings not only of linguistic and conceptual differences, but also in networking, providing key informants, and instruction in social mores and conventions with interviewees.⁸⁷ Obviously then, it is not only the interviewer's presence in the interview process but also that of the interpreter which impacts upon the interview and I would agree with Rosalind Edward's comment for the need to acknowledge that we work “with” rather than “through” interpreters.⁸⁸

In view of the precarious way I came to work in Viet Nam, I was very fortunate in my relationship with KC who served as my interpreter. We got on well and as KC is an academic and has been involved in many research projects herself, she understood

⁸⁶North, “Narratives of Cambodian Refugees,” 34.

⁸⁷Ibid., 35.

⁸⁸Edwards, “Working with Interpreters,” 10.

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what I needed. Most of the problems which did arise were due instead to the circumstances in which the interviews were conducted. As the interviews tended to have multiple interviewees, often with more than one woman speaking at a time, it was often more appropriate for KC to summarise at suitable moments what a woman had said rather than give a direct, running translation which would have led to many of the conversations being lost. This was often frustrating; I had to accept even less control over the interview process than I had envisaged, I was unable to follow conversations and therefore ask follow-up questions, and as I got the impression any follow-up interviews would be difficult to organise, I did not have the option of returning at a later date to fill in the gaps. However, as all the interviewees gave permission to be tape-recorded, I decided that to insist upon using a verbatim style would impede rather than aid the interview process and so decided to find a transcriber. As my relationship with CN and KC developed and they understood my research project more, I felt that my inability to participate in asking questions would be offset by their participation in the interviews. On the whole, this system worked well, and I was at least able to determine from the summaries whether the interviews were “useful” or not. However, on the occasions of the Vung Tau and Ba Ria interviews, our system fell apart completely. As the interviews had been arranged as prepared speeches, we were unable to direct the sessions ourselves with our questions. Furthermore, as the speeches were delivered immediately one after another, KC did not have time to summarise what had been said between each of the testimonies. In these interviews, more so than in others, I just had to keep my fingers crossed that the testimonies would prove to be useful.

A further illustration demonstrates how lost I could be in an interview, but this time due to Vietnamese cultural and social norms which determine that “a smile may

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serve to cover disturbing affects rather than being an expression of happiness.”⁸⁹ As became apparent during my interviews, the markers I normally used to read people’s emotional responses during conversation in my usual social and cultural environment in England, for example, body language, the tone or volume of the individual’s voice, did not work in Viet Nam. This was particularly the case during a conversation at the group interview in Tien Giang Province. As one woman was talking, a couple of others reacted by laughing and making comments, prompting further laughter. I assumed a joke had been made. However, when KC summarised what had been said, it transpired the first woman had been raped by a number of soldiers. Whilst the laughter may have been a shock reaction to the woman’s stories, it became evidently clear that I could not assume to “read” my interview groups in Viet Nam as I would in a similar situation back home and as such, my understanding of interviews was further restricted.

Conversely, at times, I wondered if my inability to understand Vietnamese somehow made me less of a threat, with the women perhaps speaking more freely than if I could understand. However, my non-Vietnamese language skills undoubtedly excluded me from the interview process. Rather than letting the language barrier prove an obstacle behind which I could hide (and detach myself from the interview completely), I had to find other ways by which I could try to *be* in the interview. I discovered the interviewees appreciated my poor attempts at conversation, even if my Vietnamese was incomprehensible. These attempts also served as ice-breakers

⁸⁹Bruce Boman and Maurine Edwards, “The Indochinese Refugee: An Overview,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 18 (1984): 42; Le Xuan Khoa and John Van Deusen, “Social and Cultural Customs: Their Contribution to Resettlement,” *Journal of Refugee Resettlement* 1 (March, 1981): 49. Cited in Elizabeth M. Timberlake and Kim Oanh Cook, “Social Work and the Vietnamese Refugee,” *Social Work* (March-April, 1984): 109.

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in the interviews. Thus, I tried when possible to say something to the interviewees in Vietnamese, however badly and to answer the stock questions asked about me—name, age, family, marital status—directly. Next, I found my willingness to try all types of Vietnamese food and my persistence at eating (badly) with chopsticks enabled me to interact with the interviewees even without a language—whether it was simply watching/laughing at the spectacle of a foreigner eating Vietnamese food or through the interviewees physically trying to teach me how to hold and eat with chopsticks correctly.⁹⁰ Thirdly, I tried to establish and maintain eye contact with the interviewees as they were talking, as I would in a similar English-speaking situation. I found I benefited from this as I felt more involved in the interview itself and less invisible or superfluous to the meeting. Moreover, I feel the interviewees responded to this. Although it was obvious that I could not understand what was being said, the interviewees would frequently and earnestly direct the conversation towards me, and not just the interpreter, as though I could understand.

One way to achieve eye contact is through seating arrangements. When interviews necessitate the use of an interpreter, it has been suggested that a triangular seating arrangement is used so that the researcher may remain non-verbally and psychologically included in the research process and be able to direct questions and

⁹⁰Food played an important part in every interview situation—whether in the form of lunch for myself, KC, CN, the Women’s Union representatives and the interviewees in a local Vietnamese cafe or the province’s Women’s Union’s headquarters; as a refreshment provided by the Union or interviewee during the interview; as a gift (e.g. fruit grown by the interviewee) to myself, CN and KC; or as a “thank you” in the shape of biscuits or sweets for the interviewees. However, there were times when such hospitality could be too much for me. As the “chief” guest, my bowl would be repeatedly filled and the select pieces of fish or meat chosen for me, even when it was clear that I had eaten my fill. Especially on the days when we carried out a number of individual interviews, by the third or fourth interview, there were times when I couldn’t bear the thought of having to eat yet *more* fruit but I was unable to refuse for fear of appearing impolite.

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remarks directly to the interviewee rather than the interpreter.⁹¹ Due to the multiple interviewee nature of my interviews and the different physical surroundings in which they took place, this “ideal” seating arrangement was not possible. Instead, I found the best arrangement involved two elements. Firstly, by sitting next to KC, she would be able to explain or translate sections of the conversation as the meeting progressed. Due to the noisy environments in which some of the interviews took place, sitting next to KC was essential if I was to hear her translations and ask further questions. Secondly, I tried when possible to sit near the interviewee so that I could establish eye contact. Whilst this was feasible in the smaller interviews, in the larger group meetings, it often was not, although the use of a circular table, as in the Tien Giang meeting, did make the interview process feel a little less formal.

In the worst interview scenarios, seating arrangements only added to the awkwardness of the interview. In the Binh Phuoc interviews, KC and I were sat on one side of a rectangular desk and the interviewee was sat immediately opposite us. As soon as one interviewee finished speaking, the next was ushered in to replace the her. Not only did the seating arrangements make me feel uncomfortable—as though KC and I were conducting a formal job interview—the manner in which the interviewees were ushered in and out gave the feeling of the interview being conducted as though on a conveyor belt. In contrast, in the Vung Tau interviews, the formality of the interview scenario (seventeen people present, the WU’s tape recorder and microphone, a local television station’s video camera) was further accentuated by all those present having to sit around an enormous oblong table, overlooked by

⁹¹For example, Freed, “Interviewing Through an Interpreter,” 315-319; J.H.S. Fuller and P.D. Toon, *Medical Practice in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford: Heinemann Medical, 1988). Both cited in Edwards, “Working with Interpreters,” 10.

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a statue of Ho Chi Minh. Not only was such a situation incredibly impersonal, I also felt it furthered the divide between myself (and by extension, KC and CN) and the interviewees.

The most significant way through which I could establish some sort of rapport with the interviewee, even when I did not have the language, was simply through touch. The majority of the Vietnamese women I interviewed were very tactile and affectionate and would often hold my hand or touch my arm or shoulder during the interview day. This was by far the best of way of making myself more “real” in the interview. But I also found it significant in another way. Brannen argues that “the only course open to the researcher may in fact be to listen and to endure and share in the person’s pain rather than to brush it aside too quickly with sympathetic words.”⁹² In one interview, where only KC, the interviewee and myself directly participated, the interviewee started to cry as she recalled one of her memories. At this interview, I was sitting next to the interviewee with KC sitting opposite us across a small table. In other (group) interviews, by virtue of the seating arrangements and the number of women present, if one interviewee became upset there would always be someone at her side who offered some form of physical comforting. Yet, in this particular interview, there was no one else present who could take on this role: although there were others present in the open-plan room, they had moved to another area to talk amongst themselves or to have a nap. My immediate reaction was to wonder what to do: on the one hand, my natural reaction was to reach out but on the other, I wondered if this would be appropriate or if I would be overstepping some line because I was a stranger and a foreigner. I decided to risk any inappropriateness

⁹²Julia Brannen, “Research Note: The Study of Sensitive Subjects,” *Sociological Review* 36, no. 3 (1988): 559-560.

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and went for the more instinctual response. This not only felt the more “human” reaction but the correct one; I had after all prompted the upset by asking the interviewee to share her experiences. By the interviewee’s reaction, it was clear that my more instinctual response was the correct one. Whilst this may seem to others a potentially insignificant incident or my response the obvious choice, I found it very significant. Not only does it raise the question of how rapport is established between the interviewer and interviewee but also of the correct *role* of an interviewer in such a scenario. How detached or otherwise can the interviewer-interviewee relationship be?

If my non-language skills impeded my participation in the interviews to the extent that I had to find strategies around this exclusion from the interview, how did my numerous other differences to my interviewees affect my research? How could I have disguised these differences? My physical build, height and white skin marked me out as anything but Vietnamese and this could not be hidden with clothing. On the one hand, to wear either the *ao gai*⁹³ or the other option of the Vietnamese matching trouser and shirt outfit would, I felt, have only made me more conspicuous as a foreigner, of trying to be something I was not, especially considering the increasing pervasiveness of Western clothing amongst young Vietnamese women and I was after all living in Ho Chi Minh City. On the other hand, jeans and T-shirts were inappropriate for my interviews as well as impractical due to the heat and humidity. Clothing proved a dilemma I could not happily resolve for myself and in the end I opted for long, loose dresses which whilst relatively cool and smart, were still very Western in style, and therefore, still highlighted my foreignness

⁹³The traditional dress of a long, knee-length close-fitting dress/shirt over loose trousers.

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What were the consequences of not being able to hide that I was a foreigner with a markedly foreign body? My physical build was frequently commented upon, whether in day-to-day encounters or in the interviews themselves: in the Women’s Museum in Ha Noi, I was surrounded by a group of women who, prodding my rather large stomach asked if I was pregnant; I had my arms stroked in the Mekong Delta for being “so white”; I was told I looked like Princess Diana and described as “a doll”; and I had my “Western” nose tweaked by an elderly woman in a shopping area. How could I have ever passed as Vietnamese? My physical build and clothing were constant markers of difference between myself and the interviewees: when combined with the “celebrity” I acquired by travelling with an entourage, I was simply unable to blend in with the crowd.

If, as Burgos argues, the researcher herself is seldom the target audience but rather a medium or representative of the “implied reader,”⁹⁴ what my whiteness/foreignness potentially symbolised to the interviewees, may on occasion have influenced how both I and my research were received and *how* the women told their stories.⁹⁵ In many ways, I feel my whiteness (and by extension foreignness) served as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides,

⁹⁴Burgos, “Life Stories,” 34.

⁹⁵In his research, Westerman found that narrators would often temper their testimonies, using less inflammatory or accusatory language in order “to develop a speaking style that would engage listeners, without making an audience feel threatened or become bored.” Westerman, “Central American Refugee Testimonies,” 228. I have wondered if the interviewees similarly tailored their language in relation to how they perceived my research and what they viewed its ultimate purpose as being. In a few interviews, the women did use Communist “jargon”, contextualising their stories within the “cause of national liberation and unification.” If all the women had been at least pro-Revolutionary, why did some use such language more frequently than others? Did they temper their language so as not to alienate me? Or could it be that their *current* positions, for example, within the Women’s Union, influenced how they recalled their *past* activities?

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codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.”⁹⁶ It made me a novelty and on most occasions, the women responded very warmly to me.

However, comments made in certain interviews revealed that my research was seen as a means of gaining international money for women war victims or that I was perceived as a link to the outside world through which their unknown stories could be heard. At times, it appeared that it was not just my foreignness which was significant but also my nationality. Firstly, if MP, my original choice as an interpreter was seen as “too political” because of her connection to Britain, did my foreign nationality mean that I too was “political”? If MP was “political” in a negative way, was I “political” in a positive sense, in relation to my interviewees? Secondly, it became apparent that the interviewees were occasionally unable to differentiate my British nationality from that of American or French (with one interviewee commenting how she couldn’t tell as we all looked the same to her). Unlike Britain, both countries had had extensive colonial involvement in Viet Nam. Confusing my nationality then, on one occasion, the interviewee informed KC that she hated all foreigners for what they had done in/to Viet Nam, whilst on another, the husband of one of the interviewees was unable to accept that I was British and not American, conflating the two. He remarked how the US government and my US university would refuse to accept or allow the Vietnamese stories I had heard as true and that I would have problems submitting my thesis because of its “truth”.

⁹⁶Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 291.

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Reactions like these only surfaced occasionally. However, it was clear that my obvious foreignness could be problematic for the interviewees. To deal with this, I realise, on reflection, that I unconsciously manipulated this apparent equation of “white equals foreign equals American/French”. By being British, I could avoid certain implications which being a foreigner could hold for interviewees, yet my connection with the West (especially with America as my father was living there at the time), meant that I also tapped into interviewees’ fascination with this part of the world. (None of the interviewees was ever interested in my mother’s Chilean nationality.) Thus, I could opt into the elements which helped my research yet, by virtue of my Britishness, I could also opt out of these elements which hindered the interview.⁹⁷

The “Consumers”

As I have just shown, both the Women’s Union and I participated as “coaxers” during my research interviews. However, whilst facilitating the production of the testimonies, we, and the other interviewees present at the interviews, similarly served as audiences or “consumers” of the testimonies. In my interviews, there were multiple “consumers”: the interviewee herself, the other interviewees present, the Women’s Union representatives (other officials, CN and KC) and myself, a foreigner. In turn, we represented individual, collective, national and foreign audiences respectively. Could it be that the women’s oral histories were influenced by these various listeners?

⁹⁷My experience in Viet Nam is discussed in Madi Gilkes, “Travelling Light? The Intersections Between Research, Being White, and Foreignness in Viet Nam,” in *White?Women: Critical Perspectives on Race and Gender*, eds. Heloise Brown, Madi Gilkes and Ann Kaloski-Naylor (York: Raw Nerve Books, 1999), 79-89.

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Testimony cannot exist without a listener. In his essay, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” Dori Laub describes the listener to a trauma narrative as being in the unique situation of witnessing a “record that has yet to be made.”⁹⁸ As Laub remarks, the listener is essential to the creation of testimony as, “[t]estimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.”⁹⁹

Although the Women’s Union and other interviewees were involved in the production of the testimonies, their influence could also be felt through their roles as the audiences or consumers of the stories. For stories to be successful, there needs to be “a strong community of support waiting to receive them.”¹⁰⁰ As Vietnamese nationals, revolutionaries, women, and survivors of gender-based violence, my interviewees were such a community, a community which would welcome, listen and accept the testimonies they heard.

Such a community also produces and consumes its own stories. In addition to creating individual stories, the women’s testimonies also created a communal/social memory or a “remembered history.”¹⁰¹ By their very nature, as Doris Sommer remarks, testimonials are “a collective memory or identity in particular historical crisis,”¹⁰² and thus present a “nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic

⁹⁸Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 57.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁰Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 16.

¹⁰¹Zygmunt Bauman, *Memories of Class: The Pre-History and After-Life of Class* (London: npub, 1982). Cited in Murphy, “The Voice of Memory,” 166-167.

¹⁰²Doris Sommer, “No Secrets: Rigoberta’s Guarded Truth,” *Women’s Studies* 20 (1991): 51.

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narrative.”¹⁰³ Just as my interviewees stressed their own individual “triumphs”, they also talked of how “women” as a homogenous group overcame and resisted the war. They would talk of how the unified community pulled together and offered support to one another both in and out of prison; how “women” as a group resisted the Americans and their “henchmen” through demonstrations and protests; and how they were united against the enemy, even under extreme pressure and torture.¹⁰⁴ Rarely would comments surface of women who fraternised with the enemy or confessed under torture; similarly, non-revolutionary or non-aligned women were excluded from the discussions.

Thus, in many ways the women’s stories presented a unified history in line with the national history of the conflict. Paradoxically, however, their memories were both the “object of hegemonic ideological manipulation by structures of cultural and political power” and “the source of vernacular alternatives and resistance to established power.”¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, the women would position their own stories within the conventional model of Viet Nam’s war for “national salvation” or preface their testimony with the current government’s advocacy of “closing out the past and forgetting the hatred.”¹⁰⁶ On the other, even when conforming, the women

¹⁰³Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 95.

¹⁰⁴As Plummer remarks, subjects in his own research often assembled aspects of their stories from other sources, for example, newspapers, films, plays, texts. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 41. It is quite possible that my interviewees had done the same: although I was unable to understand the storylines, when I was in Ha Noi for my second visit I did see some films on television based on women’s experiences in prison or as NLF fighting cadre.

¹⁰⁵Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch, Paula Hamilton, “The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives,” *Oral History* (Autumn 1994): 37.

¹⁰⁶Trinh, interview with author, tape recording, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

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simultaneously challenged this model. This occurred either by the simple act of talking about their experiences or by explicitly remarking that “ordinary” women’s experiences, as opposed to those of heroines, had been overlooked or not recognised.¹⁰⁷ Were the women constructing their stories to create such a (new) history, to fit in with the prevailing history, or both? Could it be that defining their agency and by locating their experiences within their nation’s history (whilst simultaneously challenging this history) facilitated women talking about their experiences of war sexual abuse?

If the interviewees and Women’s Union provided an sympathetic audience for the

¹⁰⁷When asked if women’s experiences were recorded in any way, one woman remarked:

There is the museum of war crimes but it only tells you of crimes committed against the Vietnamese people in general, and not just limited to crimes against women. Then you have the women’s historian group, but they are only interested in reporting and writing on prime examples of heroines, and they wouldn’t do anything like compiling reports and statistics on women victims and crimes against women during wartime. The reason is because such crimes were very popular at the time and there were so many women victims you could say almost every woman during the wartime had to suffer crimes one way or another, be it rape or torture, beating up, being arrested and jailed etc. So in the museum of war crimes you would only see exhibits such as handcuffs, guillotines, and torture machines, just general things like that to exhibit how cruel the torture methods were, and what methods did they use. But that was just about general things like that and nothing specific about women.

Phuong, interview by author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

There are, in fact, two women’s museums in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. Although as Enloe points out, the histories and experiences of many groups of women are overlooked within the museum displays, Taylor remarks that, from 1994, the women’s history museums and Women’s Unions were working to preserve the history of both the heroines and the common women. From some of my interviewees comments however, it would appear that some still feel their experiences have been overlooked. Cynthia Enloe, “Women After Wars: Puzzles and Warnings,” in *Vietnam’s Women in Transition*, ed. Kathleen Barry (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 299-315; Taylor, *Vietnamese Women At War*, 19.

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construction of personal, community and national histories, how did I impact upon the interviews as a “consumer” of their stories? If testimony necessarily takes a narrator-listener form, where the listener serves as transcriber and editor of the text, my position as audience and eventually interpreter and presenter of the stories must have influenced the nature of the testimonies, both in their production and interpretation. But, with such potential power differentials between myself and the interviewees and in the light of feminist debates on epistemology,¹⁰⁸ could I be the “knower” of Vietnamese women’s experiences? Could I, as a white researcher interview and produce the testimonies of non-white narrators? Could I produce accounts of the lives of minority and subordinated groups without imposing my own biased and privileged perspective?

Opinions on this issue differ. For examples, Lugones and Spelman ask:

But why is the outsider as an outsider interpreting your behaviours?... Why should you or anyone else believe me; that is why should you or anyone else believe that you are as I say you are? Could I be right? What conditions would have to obtain for my being right?¹⁰⁹

According to Lorde, “white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, [and as such] women of color

¹⁰⁸For example, Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Liz Stanley, ed., *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out Again* (London: Routledge, 1993); Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991); Mary Maynard, “Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research,” in *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, eds. Mary Maynard and June Purvis (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 10-26.

¹⁰⁹Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Have We Got A Theory For You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice,’” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983): 577.

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become “other,” the outsider whose experience and traditions are too “alien” to comprehend.”¹¹⁰ Others have suggested only minority scholars should study ethnic or race relations as they are better able to understand racial oppression.¹¹¹ Furthermore, as Hale points out, where cultural and racial differences exist, the interviewer-interviewee relationship may well bear resemblance to that of the colonizer-colonized.¹¹² hooks suggests however that the problems arise not so much in the decision of the white examiner to examine non-white people’s experiences, but in the later presentation of that work as “authoritative”:¹¹³

Even if perceived “authorities” writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced.¹¹⁴

This argument is reinforced for example in the work of Heather Walton on the

¹¹⁰A. Lorde, *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 114. Cited in Janice L. Thompson, “Exploring Gender and Culture with Khmer Refugee Women: Reflections on Participatory Feminist Research,” *Advances in Nursing Science* 13, no. 3 (1991): 33.

¹¹¹R. Blauner and D. Wellman, “Toward the Decolonization of Social Research,” in *The Death of White Sociology*, ed. J. Ladner, 329 (New York: Vintage, 1973). Cited in Margaret Anderson, “Studying Across Difference. Race, Class and Gender in Qualitative Research,” in *Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods*, eds. John H. Stanfield II and Rutledge M. Dennis (California: Sage Publications, 1993), 40.

¹¹²Sondra Hale, “Feminist Method, Process and Self-Criticism: Interviewing Sudanese Women,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 133.

¹¹³bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 48.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 43.

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involvement of black people in Methodism. For Walton, the privilege afforded to her by her white status proved impossible to overcome:

[T]he ethical problems were never really resolved. I wrote as a white person about the impact that black people were making in a white institution rather than being able to transcend the barriers of racial identity and examine a “multi-racial” situation as I had hoped. My small attempts to share power were only partially successful [...].¹¹⁵

I did not expect to be the true “voice” of the group of women I interviewed, nor did I want to be. Whilst I realised I would unavoidably affect the presentation of the narratives, rather than present myself as an authority on the women’s experiences, my intention was to collect the testimonies of the women and present the words of the women as closely as I could. However, due to the practicalities of accessing my interview material, once collected, and my initial emotional and “intellectual” responses to my research, I almost unwittingly ensured my interpretation became even more my voice and less those of the interviewees.

Before I could interpret, I needed access to the oral histories. Whilst I accepted my reliance upon an interpreter would ensure my subsequent reliance upon a translator, as I was soon to discover, the sensitive and political nature of the interviews made the finding of a transcriber difficult. Ideally, I would have liked to ask KC to transcribe the interview tapes; however, I was reluctant to do this on two counts. Firstly, as KC is a university lecturer, I did not want to ask her to give up even more time to transcribe the interviews for me. Secondly, as I did not know CN and KC very well and felt beholden to them, I was also worried that such a request would be

¹¹⁵Heather Walton, *White Researchers and Racism* Working Paper no. 10, Working papers in Applied Social Research (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1986), 16-17.

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insulting, implying that KC's interpreting was inadequate. Rather cowardly, I did not say anything to either of them.

At first, transcription did not pose itself as a real issue as the woman I had originally hoped would interpret for me agreed to do the transcriptions, before my return to England. However, after completing half an interview tape, she declared the testimony as “all lies” and failed to produce any more transcripts, despite repeatedly reassuring me both in person and on the telephone that she would continue and accepting more cassette tapes. When I discovered I would have to have my tapes “checked” before being able to take them out of the country, I began to panic that I would end up “losing” the interviews.¹¹⁶

On my return to England, I was unable to find any willing transcribers despite sending out posters to universities with South East Asian teaching and Vietnamese community centres: the one woman who replied refused after listening to a sample

¹¹⁶For an obligatory fee per item, any audio cassette or video tape and printed material to be taken out of Viet Nam has to be “checked” by cultural export officials. After being “approved” the items are returned to the owner in tightly wrapped parcels, secured by labels informing customs the packages have been approved. If the parcels have been tampered with or opened, they are not allowed out of the country. Due to this bureaucratic red tape, I “lost” the tapes for the last interview field trip in Cu Chi, as this would have meant submitting them after the main batch of tapes. Owing to my pending departure date back to England which would have prevented any “chasing up” of the tapes, and my heightened paranoia by this stage over my precarious research status, I was afraid I risked losing all the tapes and research material if I pushed another batch of tapes through. (The first batch had provoked an enormous bureaucratic fuss, necessitating my going backwards and forwards between different elements of the Ministry for Cultural Exports, and a contrived letter stating my university-supported research status.) With hindsight, it is easy to see how I gave myself and my research far too much significance. In view of my final exit from Viet Nam, where courtesy of a “thank you” equivalent to £20.00 I was able to ship my excess luggage and cassette tapes through customs and onto the aeroplane's container with barely a flicker from the officers, I could easily have risked taking a few more tapes out of the country.

Due to my overcautiousness, I also “lost” the two tapes of my two “unofficial” interviewees. Having transcribed their interviews and sent both hard copies (to England) and e-mail copies to myself, I decided to erase the interview tapes due to the concerns shown by the women that their interviews might fall into the wrong hands.

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interview, also declaring the material “as lies”.¹¹⁷ Six months after my return to England, I was put in touch with a Vietnamese student at a nearby university who would be willing to transcribe the tapes. After many months’ delay as her own work prevented her from concentrating on the interviews, we decided to try a new route: I would go over to where she lived and she would verbally translate a tape whilst I typed what she said. We managed five interviews in this way (one from Ho Chi Minh City, two from Cu Chi and three from Ben Tre) but had to stop when the student left England for her own research field trip. Completely desperate by this stage, I had to borrow more money from my father and sent the interview tapes for Tien Giang and Vung Tau to an interpreting company in the United States.¹¹⁸ It was not until April 2000 then (nineteen months after I returned from Viet Nam), that I finally had (half) my transcripts.

The difficulties I encountered in the transcription of the interview tapes, in addition to the problems faced during the organisation of the interviews themselves, had obvious repercussions for my interpretation. Firstly, I was only able to have a limited number of the interviews transcribed, thus affecting the degree to which the testimonies can be seen as representative of Southern Vietnamese women’s experiences during the conflict. Secondly, having to rely on one interpreter and two transcribers (or three, if I include MP) removed the interviewee’s privacy (and confidentiality). Thirdly, the two different approaches to collecting the transcripts

¹¹⁷Whilst this and the first woman’s reactions to my interview tapes may possibly be explained by the women’s backgrounds (they had both left Viet Nam for England, speculatively as refugees and therefore, unlikely to have been supporters of the revolution), the reactions had significant repercussions as to how I felt about the testimonies (see below).

¹¹⁸The US translating companies were cheaper than those in the United Kingdom but due to the still high cost of transcription, I had to restrict the number of cassettes I could have transcribed.

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resulted in two different styles of document; the transcription by the language centre providing a more “professional” translation of everything that was said, whereas the first approach missed out a lot of the awkwardness or “false starts” inherent to the interview situation. Moreover, there was the fear that the biases and emotions of the transcriber would influence the transcripts produced and I had no means of cross-checking them.

The transferral of oral history from verbal to written text however is not a matter of simple transcription. Clearly, in my case, the transcripts were not simply the words of the women themselves but the words of the women transposed into the words of transcriber, and transposed into a second language to be re-edited by me. But these words were themselves in issue in their interpretation. Although Devault states that “language inadequacies may be compensated to a degree through “woman talk” and interaction between female interviewer and female narrator,” a suitable language may simply be unavailable to the woman trying to discuss her life experiences, even when the interviewer and interviewee share the same language.¹¹⁹ This can be particularly true when talking of sexual violence. Thus as Devault continues, understanding can often be impeded through the lack of a suitable language and expressions through which women can adequately describe their experiences:

[E]liciting useful accounts of women’s experiences is not simply a matter of encouraging women to talk. Most members of a society learn to interpret their experiences in terms of dominant language and meanings; thus women themselves (researchers

¹¹⁹Marjorie L. Devault, “Talking and Listening from Women’s Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis,” *Social Problems* 37, no. 1 (1990): 102. Minster states that “women talking with women use a unique dialectical choice of words co-ordinate with a unique non-verbal system for the purpose of exploring and naming issues unique to women.” Minister, “A Feminist Frame,” 34.

included) often have trouble seeing and talking clearly about their experiences.¹²⁰ In order to compensate, a woman may therefore have to “translate” or adapt her experiences to fit the dominant language, yet as a result, aspects of her experiences may/will be lost or disappear.¹²¹

Without conscious awareness, this lack may create a power imbalance for, as the final producer and editor of the written oral history, the interviewer risks misrepresenting or ignoring those experiences which cannot be expressed through conventional language structures, unless she either collaborates with or understands the interviewee.

What happens then when you have the further problem, as I did, of moving from one language (in this case, Vietnamese) into another (English)? As Rosalind Edwards has written, the problem of interpretation begs the question of “matching languages”; translations from one language to other are approximations rather than exact versions. Not only are language, knowledge, agency and self variable constructions; concepts existing in one language may not exist in another, or may simply be inappropriate.¹²² For example, as Mollica discovered in his work with Indochinese refugees, the words “trauma” and “torture” have unique cultural meanings in each Indochinese culture which must be understood by the Western therapist: whilst in English torture is used to refer to the use of physical pain to elicit testimony, in Cambodian, torture is perceived as the consequence of their Karma, for negative

¹²⁰Devault, “Talking and Listening,” 100-101.

¹²¹Ibid., 101.

¹²²Edwards, “Working with Interpreters,” 5.

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actions in a past life.¹²³ From the above, it becomes apparent that the transferral of an interview into text is not a simple matter.

Having finally secured the transcripts, the next issue was the question of interpretation. Following Plummer:

[H]ow was I to write this? In [her] voice, or in my voice, or in [her] voice through my voice, or even in my voice through [her] voice?¹²⁴

Plummer writes that, “the consuming of a tale centres upon the different *social worlds* and *interpretive communities* who can hear the story in certain ways and hence not others.”¹²⁵ Life histories have multiple authors—the narrator, the researcher, and the researcher as an individual coming from her own specific cultural and social background. Murphy points out that the oral historian/compiler “acts as interpreter rather than cipher” of the narrator’s life history, but just as the interviewee interprets her own experiences in her specific social and cultural context, so does the historian/interviewer interpret the narrative in *her* own social and cultural context.¹²⁶ Through sharing a common revolutionary background, my interviewees formed such a community, a community in which one individual would interpret and understand another’s experiences in the light of her own. I, on the other hand, did not come from the same social world nor from the same interpretive community; my interpretation of the women’s experiences would

¹²³Richard F. Mollica, “The Trauma Story: The Psychiatric Care of Refugee Survivors of Violence and Torture,” in *Post-Traumatic Therapy and Victims of Violence*, ed. Frank M. Ochberg (New York: Brunner and Mazel, 1988), 306.

¹²⁴Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 12.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁶Murphy, “The Voice of Memory,” 164.

therefore be very different from those of the women themselves.

This problem of interpretation is exacerbated when both participants in the interview process come from different linguistic, cultural, social and class backgrounds. As Riessman has shown, when the narrative form used (whether temporal i.e. organised chronologically, or episodic, i.e. where a theme is developed through a series of episodes, and where connections must be inferred by the listener), differs from that used culturally by the listener, misunderstandings as to meaning occur, which cannot simply be overcome through the sharing of gender.¹²⁷ This was particularly true in my own research and has also been described by Chanoff:

Once talk did start, another Vietnamese characteristic was likely to surface—the tendency to regard the essence of an event as the only aspect of it worth relating. “Truth” is more likely to be general than specific. By and large, Vietnamese don’t have the American’s love for hard fact and concrete detail. ... As a people they have a taste for myths, legends, and moral tales; they are more interested in the “why” of things than in the “what”, in what events mean, not in what exactly happened.¹²⁸

My interviewees’ stories did not follow the chronological story-telling order that I am used to; rather, their stories would often dart about, often without supplying such details as names, dates and locations, as I would have expected from conducting an interview in my own social and cultural setting. To understand and interpret the women’s stories, I had to learn to read their testimonies in a new way.

In the light of my research experience as outlined in this chapter, it is not surprising

¹²⁷Riessman, “When Gender is Not Enough,” 172-207.

¹²⁸Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Vietnam*, 208.

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that I experienced a wealth of emotions, not only in relation to the stories told to me by the women but also the realities of the field trip itself. As Kirkwood argues, a researcher’s emotional response to her fieldwork and how this response either embellishes or hinders analysis is essential to the research process for it leads not only to a greater self-understanding and consciousness of the researcher, but subsequently informs the interpretation and analysis of the interviewer’s research.¹²⁹ Similarly, Lather points out that the life history method is an empowering praxis-oriented research method which facilitates “consciousness-raising” and as such enables the merger of feminist research with action/agency.¹³⁰ Such a premise entails self-reflexivity on the behalf of the researcher and hence a critical self-examination of the interviewer’s frameworks of understanding. It is necessary then that the researcher keeps a detailed account of the research process as it progresses, to document how her own opinions and feelings have altered through the research period.¹³¹

On reflection, my different emotional responses probably hindered my research. On a practical level, the different emotions I felt at the realities of a field trip in Viet Nam—frustration (at failing to understand how the “network system” operated, at not being able to implement feminist interview practices, at the obstacles which just kept appearing); intermittent loneliness (by virtue of cutting off my usual support network by going to a foreign country with an expensive telephone rate, slow postal services,

¹²⁹Catherine Kirkwood, “Investing Ourselves: Use of Researcher Personal Responses in Feminist Methodology,” in *Women’s Studies in the 1990s: Doing Things Differently?* eds. Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard (London: Macmillan, 1993), 18-39.

¹³⁰Lather, “Feminist Perspectives,” 572.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 575; Kirkwood, “Investing Ourselves,” 18-39.

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where I was unable to communicate with the local population, and with a transient English-speaking population); weariness (at not being able to escape the constant attention I received as a foreigner from hawkers and cyclo-drivers); and a paranoia that I would “lose” my research (arising from my precarious, unprotected research status, anecdotes about the local police, and comments about how my research might be viewed as potentially threatening relations with the US, to the extent that when my computer crashed, my initial irrational thought was that someone had been hacking into it)—probably made me cut my research short. Ideally, I should have taken a break from the country halfway through, but I was unable to and as a result, I think now I announced my research “finished” at the earliest possible moment, probably missing then the opportunity to reflect on the interviews and material gathered and so ensure I had everything I needed. My coping strategies—an over-reliance on e-mail, comfort-eating, sending e-mail attachments and paper copies of my fieldnotes to England—worked, but only for eight months.

My second major emotional reaction was to the interview material itself and the literature on sexual violence I read for background information. Although I would not compare my research preparation and experiences to the on-going work of counsellors working with survivors of sexual violence, in certain ways, my personal reactions resembled those of such counsellors or other researchers on sexual violence.¹³² As well as violence-related nightmares, I found my self-awareness of violence (or the fear and threat of violence) in both my own life and in those around

¹³²Laura J. Schauben and Patricia A. Frazier, “Vicarious Trauma: The Effects on Female Counselors of Working with Sexual Violence Survivors,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 19 (1995): 49-64; Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence*, 15-19; J. Moran Ellis, “Close to Home: The Experience of Researching Child Sexual Abuse,” in *Women, Violence and Male Power*, eds. M. Hester, L. Kelly and J. Radford (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), 181.

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me escalated. I became more anxious about my own personal safety and at times, was unable to rationalise my own reactions to either news reports of violent incidents against women, or the experiences of family and friends. Dori Laub has described this impact of listening to (Holocaust) testimony as: “The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning of the purpose of living; of the limits of one’s omnipotence”.¹³³

My emotional reaction to the interview material, however, was tempered by the nature of the interview experience. As I had not been able to understand what was said in the interview, the emotional impact at, and of, the interview was diluted as a result of hearing the stories via a third person and as summaries rather than word-for-word translations. The full emotional impact of the research was thus delayed until the receipt of the interview transcripts. As I had kept a research diary and photographs of each of the field trips and interviewees, I was still able to put a face to each of the transcripts, so despite a one to two year delay between interview and transcript, the stories were still very much those of the particular women rather than just “written texts”. Going through these transcripts, at times I once again felt overwhelmed by the women’s stories. I also found that I was unable to work on them last thing at night before going to bed.

In addition to my emotional responses to my research, I soon realised I also had to take into account my “intellectual” responses, if I was to interpret the women’s testimonies as honestly as possible. As Burgos comments, a narrator may tailor her story to the extent that it becomes:

¹³³Laub, “Bearing Witness,” 72.

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simply a reaction to the wishes and expectations of the person who formulates the questions rather than their subjective representation of truth. The informant is like to produce either a version which is too close, relevant only to her or himself; or too distant, being a reflection of the questions of the researcher who assumes to be in possession of a universal logic.¹³⁴

On reflection, I was able to realise the degree to which I brought my own biases with me to Viet Nam and how they blinkered my view of my research and the women’s testimonies. My biases festered in two ways: a tendency to define the conflict along American-centric literature, and to define “who” could legitimately claim to be a war sexual abuse victim.

Although I had tried to read Vietnamese perspectives on the conflict, the vast majority of texts I had had access to were US experience-weighted. As a result, even on very basic levels, I defined the conflict along Western lines. For example, my US-centric view included my initial tendency to follow the popular naming of the conflict in the West as “The Viet Nam War”—a term which succeeds in denying the conflict-ridden history the country. My interviewees, however, referred to the conflict as “The American War”, a term which I then began to use, especially as it enabled me to differentiate this specific conflict, for example, from the French period. I did not however start calling the conflict “The American War of Aggression” as it appeared in Vietnamese textbooks as I felt uncomfortable using this term. Another example of my US-slanted perception was evident in my “tidy” chronological definition of the period I was examining: 1965 (the landing of the first US group combat troops in Da Nang) to 1973 (the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement and final US troop withdrawal). However, it became apparent from my

¹³⁴Burgos, “Life Stories,” 29.

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very first interview that this framework did not agree with that of my interviewees, with the interviewee asking why I was looking at the war from 1965-1973 instead of 1954-1975.

But, I also realised that the bias of my prior reading had much more problematic consequences for my research. Firstly, my tendency to focus upon American narratives and texts promoted me to overlook, or at the very least, minimise, the role of the Southern Vietnamese—whether as soldiers or prison guards—in the conflict. Fixated upon the idea of *American* violence at the start of the research, when women spoke of their experiences at the hands of southern Vietnamese soldiers, I did not ascribe the same “research” significance to their stories, as opposed to those concerning foreign soldiers. This misconception further showed itself when I realised I would be unable to visit the Central provinces. Rather than simply accept this limitation, I felt as though my research had somehow lost its legitimacy. Thus I was guilty of that which Jack found in her research on women’s experiences of depression—that there is a temptation for the researcher to fit what the interviewee is saying into her already established framework/schema, without actually listening to what the woman is saying.¹³⁵ To remedy this, Jack suggests that feminist researchers must learn to listen in a different way.¹³⁶

I also became aware of the pervasive influence of Western war literature upon my thinking when it became apparent that I would not be able to interview women from both sides of the conflict. Again, I found myself questioning the “legitimacy” of my

¹³⁵Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, “Learning to Listening: Interview Techniques and Analyses,” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 19.

¹³⁶Anderson et al., “Beginning Where We Are,” 115.

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research if I was unable to collect a “balance” of Revolutionary and pro-South Vietnamese government/American stories. I realised that this in effect amounted to my valuing pro-American women’s experiences over those of pro-Revolutionary women. Reflecting upon this, I believe that my initial reaction could be due (at least in part) to having grown up in Western culture where one’s understanding of the American war has been predominantly restricted to “The American War Movie”. As I was born in 1971, I only became aware of this conflict in the early 1980s when I saw *The Deer Hunter*. Although the film had a significant personal impact upon me (evoking an interest in the war which has culminated in this thesis), it also communicated to me the notion of the Americans (the “good”) fighting against the Communists (the “bad”). I must have absorbed this message, only to find that it manifested itself in my disquiet about only interviewing pro-Revolutionary women. After analysing why I felt like this, I realised that I had subconsciously applied this “good”/ “bad” dichotomy to the pro-South Vietnamese government or politically neutral women I spoke to, and those who had been involved in the Revolutionary movement, respectively. This was not helped by my initial disgust at the way in which some of the women proudly spoke of killing the enemy (although, on reflection, I wondered how I would be if I had lived through similar experiences). Moreover, I realised that I was applying a “losers”/ “winners” dichotomy too—that because the pro-Southern Vietnamese government women were on the “losing” side, their experiences were more likely to be made invisible than those of the women on the “winning” side, and therefore, it was more important to document their experiences.

As my research developed, I realised that in addition to my own biases, I had to be aware of, and where necessary, fight off, the influence of others in how I perceived

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the interviews. Since, as David Thelen remarks, “people’s memories provide security, authority, legitimacy and finally identity in the present”, it is not surprising that “struggles over the possession and interpretation of memories are deep, frequent and bitter.”¹³⁷ The problem of other people’s agendas and attitudes arose repeatedly throughout my research. In addition to the reactions of the US visitor in Viet Nam and the American veteran, discussed in the Introduction, the question of other people’s agendas also arose in relation to finding a transcriber, as well as in the interviews themselves, for example, in the interview of one woman who asked me not to mention her father’s political activism in any discussion of her war activities as she would have participated anyway, regardless of his involvement.

My dilemma here was in part tied up with believing in the credibility or “truth” of the interviewee. The question of “truth” is problematic in the collection and use of oral history. As is now widely recognised, oral history is a means of constructing oneself, of interacting with others and reflecting upon ourselves,¹³⁸ specific to the particular moment and circumstances of the interview—it is “the truth for now”.¹³⁹ As such, it is now recognised that there will never be one complete, single historical narrative, although as Newman comments in her discussion of Linda Gordon’s

¹³⁷David Thelen, *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xvi. Cited in Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton, “The Memory and History Debates,” 40.

¹³⁸See N. Stevenson, S. Kippax and J. Crawford, “You and I and She: Memory Work and the Construction of the Self,” in *Feminist Social Psychologies: International Perspectives*, ed. S. Wilkinson (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996). Cited in Jackson, “Telling Stories,” 47.

¹³⁹Jane Mace, unpublished seminar paper, Mass Observation Series, University of Sussex, November 1993. Cited in Mary Stuart, “You’re a Big Girl Now: Subjectivities, Feminism and Oral History,” *Oral History* (Autumn 1994): 60.

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article, “What’s New in Women’s History”,¹⁴⁰ although concepts such as “universality”, “objectivity” and “non-ideological truth” may have been rejected as constituting, “good” historical narratives, there still exists a belief in the idea of the “limited” or “partial” truth, or of “better” or “worse” pieces of history, depending upon their degree of accuracy.¹⁴¹ However, as Armitage points out, believing in the credibility of the witness has other implications for, “if we do not respect the autonomy and authenticity of the women we interview, how can we then turn around and use our information to illustrate the historical validity and importance of those same principles.”¹⁴²

What happens then when narratives appear to be inaccurate or an interviewee is even deemed to be lying? It is here that I found the work on testimony, narrative and trauma to be of value. As John Beverley writes, *testimonio*:

is not, to begin with, fiction. We are meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real. The “legal” connotation implicit in its convention implies a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator that the listener/reader is bound to respect.¹⁴³

In “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” Dori Laub describes historians’ reactions to a woman’s narration of her witnessing of the Auschwitz uprising: factual errors in the woman’s narrative had caused the historians to doubt the account and

¹⁴⁰Linda Gordon, “What’s New in Women’s History,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 20-30.

¹⁴¹Louise M. Newman, “Critical Theory and the History of Women: What’s At Stake in Deconstructing Women’s History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1991): 61.

¹⁴²Susan Armitage, “The Next Step,” *Frontiers* 8, no. 1 (1983): 4-5. Cited in McCall and Wittner, “The Good News About Life History,” 70.

¹⁴³Beverley, “The Margin at the Center,” 95.

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hence the woman’s credibility and reliability.¹⁴⁴ Laub suggests however that too much historical knowledge can impede the interviewer’s ability to listen and hear what is (and is not) being said in the testimony, and its process: “I might have felt driven to confirm my knowledge, by asking questions that could have derailed the testimony, and by proceeding to hear everything she had to say in the light of what I knew already.”¹⁴⁵ Rather than simply glorifying historical “fact”, Laub suggests that as an interviewer and listener he had “to respect—not to upset, not to trespass—the subtle balance between what the woman *knew* and what she *did not, or could not, know*.”¹⁴⁶ (Emphasis in text). It was only by this respect that what the woman knew, rather than what the historians knew, could be heard:¹⁴⁷

[W]hat is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge—its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right. ... it was [the witness’] very talk to me, the very process of her bearing witness to the trauma she had lived through, that helped her now to come to know the event. And it was through my listening to her that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension.

She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination. The historians could not hear, I thought, the way in which her silence was itself part of her testimony, an essential part of the historical truth she was precisely bearing witness to.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴Laub, “Bearing Witness,” 61.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Ibid. 62-63.

Whilst I clung desperately to the notion of a “true” history of women’s experience during this war,¹⁴⁹ the conflicts as to which story was to be believed left me bewildered and doubting the veracity of the material I was collecting. In the end, the only way I could deal with this was by *not* trying to make sense of it all and by coming to the same conclusion as Wendy Lowenstein that “there is no such thing as truth, there are truths,”¹⁵⁰ and that the “disturbances, distortions and omissions of the remembered past—the “unreliable” elements of memory as far as empiricism is concerned—can be understood as equally revealing and symptomatic.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹This was also bearing in mind that the testimonies heard were the experiences of only a small number of women who in no sense could be seen as representative of “the” Vietnamese woman:

Although it has become standard operating procedure to assume an easy metonymic relation between the subjects of testimonial and the ethnic group from which she or he comes, such closure on difference with the group celebrates the elite reader’s ignorance as the group is conversely constituted as infinite duplicates of the “original” subject presented in the pages of the testimonial.

A careful reading of the testifying subject’s positioning of herself/himself, however, suggests the complex position of the “I” within this metonymic relation, revealing ways in which the speaking subject must negotiate her/his relationship within the oppressed group. The voice of testimonial that speaks for “her people” speaks specifically about the experience of a particular person working for and within a particular group, in a particular period, in a particular country, centering around one’s person’s life/story, although alliances can be and are often made.

Robert Carr, “Crossing the First World/Third World Divides: Testimonial, Transnational Feminism, and the Postmodern Condition,” in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Principles*, eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 157.

¹⁵⁰Wendy Lowenstein, “Foreword,” in *Boots and All: An Oral History of Farming in Victoria*, ed. C. Watson, iii. Collingwood: npb, 1984. Cited in Murphy, “The Voice of Memory,” 162.

¹⁵¹Murphy, “The Voice of Memory,” 174.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at how my Vietnamese interviewees produced their testimonies of sexual violence. As multiple, public events with multiple participants and gatekeepers, my interviews frequently took place in less than favourable environments, justifiably problematised within feminist literature on conducting research on sexual violence. In many respects then, my interviewees should have found talking of their experiences difficult and thus, I theoretically should have failed in my attempts to secure their testimonies. However, the women did talk of their experiences of gender-based violence in the American conflict. Although I can not be certain, in this chapter I have suggested that this may conversely have been due in part to the group nature of interviews, the political approval which the presence of the Women’s Union gave to the meetings and the opportunity which talking to a foreigner afforded of making their stories known outside of Viet Nam. Moreover, I have suggested that the ability of oral history as testimony to re-present the women’s experiences as those of heroines rather than victims may have contributed to their willingness to talk of their experiences.

Following on from this discussion of my research methodology, in the next chapter, I begin my analysis of the testimonies collected.

Chapter Two

“We Were Frightened by War and We Fought [With] Our Lives to Gain Peace”¹: Women’s Participation in the Revolution

Viet Nam's past is filled with both folkloric and historical accounts of women warriors. The more famous of these historical heroines include: the two Trung sisters, Trac and Nhi, who in 40 AD led a successful uprising against the invading Han which quickly spread across the nation and took two years to quell; Trieu Thi Trinh, who in 248 led a rebellion against the Wu, going into battle in a golden robe and astride an elephant; and Bui Thi Xuan, one of the leaders of the Tay Son peasant uprising in 1788.² More recently, the heroines Nguyen Thi Minh Khai³ and Nguyen

¹Phuong, interview with author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²On a less positive note, each of these women committed suicide although the act is presented as the ultimate in patriotic resistance. According to Vietnamese legend, the Trung sisters threw themselves into the Hat river so as to avoid falling into the hands of their enemies; Trieu Thi Trinh took her own life on Mount Tung in Thanh Hoa province, following a counter-attack by the enemy; and Bui Thi Xuan committed suicide in jail, after being captured in 1808. Each of these three stories is recounted in Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Vietnam* (Ha Noi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978), 311-312, 313-314, 318-323.

³Nguyen Thi Minh Khai became the highest-ranking female member of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in the 1930s. In August 1935, she addressed the Seventh Congress of the Comintern; as an undercover member of the Southern Region Committee, based near Saigon, she was responsible for expanding rural contacts, recruiting women, compiling instructional materials and organising training sessions. In 1939, she was selected as Secretary of the Saigon-Cholon party branch. She was arrested in 1940 on charges of attempting to overthrow the colonial regime and executed on 28 August, 1941. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920-1945* (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1981), 243-244. A brief, somewhat romanticised, biography is also given in an issue of *Vietnamese Studies*, entitled “Vietnamese Women.” *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966): 241-247.

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Thi Nghia⁴ participated in the struggle to create an independent Viet Nam. Women also participated in the military, political and economic struggles in the war against the French (1946-1954), as guerrillas, liaison agents, and *dan cong* (support),⁵ taking part in market strikes, the sabotage of enemy factories, the evasion of taxes, mass demonstrations against the coercion of their family members into the military, and direct confrontation with enemy soldiers.⁶

Vietnamese women, whilst glorified by war, have also been victimised by it. Contemporary literature on gender-based violence in war has tended to focus upon the abuse of *civilian* women in war yet one of the dominant images of the abuse of Vietnamese women present within American veteran narratives (as discussed in the introduction) and Viet Nam war movies is of the female Viet Cong who, by virtue of her enemy combatant status, is seen to be somehow deserving of sexual violation. The former perspective emphasises the vulnerability of the non-participant to abuse, the latter, the participant. However, from my testimonies, it soon becomes apparent that this division between combatant and non-combatant in this conflict is misleading. Although the majority of my interviewees had been supportive of or participated in the revolutionary movement, many had experienced gender-based violence without their enemy status either being discovered or proven. This chapter

⁴Nguyen Thi Nghia was responsible for maintaining contact between the ICP Central Committee and the Nghe-Tinh region during 1930. She was captured in the December where she bit off her tongue in an attempted suicide and feigned muteness during torture in order to avoid betraying Party secrets. She died in prison. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 244-245.

⁵According to Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, women participated in offensives in northern, southern and central regions of Viet Nam and comprised two thirds of the *dan cong*, transporting food and munitions to the front and returning the wounded to the rear. Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Vietnam*, 163.

⁶*Ibid.*, 165-166.

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is dedicated to examining my interviewees’ involvement in the revolution so as to illustrate how women’s *active* participation in the conflict increased their vulnerability to gender-based violence. However, there are two points which must be made. Firstly, as many of my interviewees had experienced abuse despite *not* being explicitly caught participating in the revolution, *upon suspicion* of being “Viet Cong” or as political prisoners, I will argue that to attribute women’s experiences solely to their combatant or non-combatant roles in the conflict is too simplistic an approach in this particular context. Secondly, this brief discussion is limited to the experiences of my interviewees who had participated in the Revolution, as opposed to those who had participated in the anti-GVN/peace movement of the “Third Force”. As it was only in the interviews with revolutionary women that I was told explicitly of gender-based violence, I have restricted my analysis to the activities of these women. The participation of women in the “Third Force” however is as yet little known and is an area in need of research.

Women’s Participation in the “War for National Salvation”

Joining the Revolution

A number of my interviewees had been involved in the revolution. Why did they join? Undoubtedly, the hardship and heavy familial loss which conflict caused were significant factors. Many of the interviewees had lost *several* family members to the war. For example, Tam lost two brothers, her uncle and father, Dau, three brothers, one brother-in-law and one sister-in-law, and four of Gom’s brothers and sisters, and her father, died during the French period, whilst one daughter, two sons and her

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husband died during the American conflict (hence, the award of “heroic mother”). Gom’s surviving son was invalided during the war. These losses were compounded by the paraphernalia of war:

After the liberation, there were many traps left behind, bombs, ammunition, and hand grenades that caused many accidents for women at Long Phuoc. Many lost limbs and many were killed. My mother went out to cut down a stem of bananas and used a hoe to dig out weeds. She used the hoe to try to remove a large rock but a hand grenade was set as a trap under the rock. When she moved the rock, the hand grenade exploded and blew the hoe far away. My mother and my youngest son, who was with her, suffered deafness from the explosion but were not hurt. It was fortunate that my mother could not lift the big rock or she likely would have been killed.

Many women, young men, and ladies were wounded by explosives left after the liberation. I could not count how many of them.⁷

The American War also impacted heavily upon the environment. Tam, for example, described how her home area had been bombed by B52s and napalm—in one incident, a school was hit, killing twenty-one children—and the use of Agent Orange, which destroyed the vegetation in the area and has since been connected to the high levels of birth deformities and defects in these areas. One interviewee described the famine created by the war conditions in Tien Giang:

1968 was the worst year with famine spreading. [...] We ate anything that was green to substitute for rice. Sometimes, we ate roots, corn, apples that grew in the forest in place of rice when we were hungry. Generally speaking, we ate anything that grew from the ground or from around a spring. The comrades usually tasted it first and, if it was not bitter or caused sickness or

⁷Women’s Union Representative, interview with author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith

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death, we ate it. There were green things we called “veggies,” and these were found everywhere. When we found spinach, we only had to remove the roots and then cook the leaves for a meal. A small can of corn was enough to make a big pot of soup. This “food for pigs” tasted nearly as good as our good food before because we were hungry.

Sometimes, we walked all day long and our only food were two roots about this big, not enough to fill each person’s stomach. When we were very hungry, our faces seemed to be deformed, looking like caricatures in a film.⁸

Ly told similar stories of hunger:

In 1969, at Long Khanh, can you imagine a mine was buried next to each cassava root? We were so hungry we could not control ourselves and we searched everywhere for cassava root to eat. We did not use the existing paths through the jungle; we used machetes and cut a trail. If we followed the paths, we were likely to step on mines laid by the enemy. [...] When I saw the cassava, I was happy. But I knew there might be a mine with the root and if I picked it up, the mine might explode. Do you believe that we were all afraid to pick up the cassava because there were several skulls lying close to it?⁹

On top of this was the social dislocation created by the migration of refugees and various population control programmes. Thao for one, had been forcibly uprooted in 1960:

A large number of all dwellers of five neighbouring hamlets were put into one strategic hamlet,¹⁰ making it

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ly, interview with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

¹⁰As Thao was referring to the year 1960, she was mistaken to use the term “strategic hamlet”, using this now common term retrospectively to describe the agrovillage of the government rural pacification programme, 1959-1961. President Diem’s strategic hamlet

overcrowded with each household living in an area of only ten square metres. Many households had five to eight people, including children. Dwellers in the strategic hamlet were allowed to go out from 7am to 4pm everyday to look for such essentials as food and fuel but not to go to their old hamlets or the “white area”. Anybody seen in the “white area” would be shot, no matter if they were men, women or children. However, as no food could be found anywhere nearby the strategic hamlet, many people made their way back to their old hamlets to catch fish, to get vegetables and fuel and so they were shot or put in jail. It was a difficult time in Cu Chi. [...] By 1962, the Americans were sweeping everybody into the strategic hamlet. They would beat up or shoot anybody who refused to get in the strategic hamlet. However, you know, a lot of us had sons or husbands taking part in the Viet Cong movement, so of course did not want to go into the strategic hamlet as we would then be cut off with our sons and husbands.¹¹

programme, on the other hand, began in February 1962. The premise was to fortify the majority of South Viet Nam’s hamlets and to concentrate the population into them, so allowing the South Vietnamese government to both physically control the people and deprive the National Liberation Front (NLF) of its mass support base. Areas outside the strategic hamlets were declared “free-fire zones”. As Pike points out, for this programme to work, three requirements had to be met: each of the 2,500 villages had to be physically defensible; the villagers had to be motivated to defend themselves against the NLF; and the villages had to be safe from guerilla attack. However, the programme failed, with an American study later showing that less than ten percent of the hamlets had achieved military security. Forced displacement escalated the grievances felt by rural populations and aid for building and food was barely enough to survive. This caused a swell in support for the NLF; in addition, from 1963 onwards, the NLF adopted a policy for the destruction of the strategic-hamlet programme, dismantling and damaging many of the hamlets whilst developing support in the remaining camps.

The strategic hamlet programme was suspended upon Diem’s assassination in 1963. A shift in approach to the issue of pacification took place: whereas before the intention had been to ensure villagers’ loyalty to the government and to force the NLF out of the hamlets, the new approach would be to destroy the villages and “dry up” the NLF’s support base. The strategic hamlets were succeeded by the New Life Hamlets (1964-1966) which in turn were succeeded in 1966 by the Revolutionary Development program and then by the use of herbicides against food crops and aerial bombardment which served as means of forcing populations in NLF areas to move to RVN controlled areas. Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: New Press, 1994), 132-137; Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 123-124, 156, 271; Douglas Pike, *Viet. Cong: The Organisation and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1966), 61-68.

¹¹Thao, interview with author, tape recording, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

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For the women living in “non-liberated” areas (those still under GVN, rather than NLF control), the presence of enemy soldiers meant their lives were in effect split into two: “we mixed with the American soldiers in the daytime; at night, we supported the other side.”¹² One interviewee at Vung Tau, Bao, told how:

If a person lived in a village that people called the “Tooth of Comb”, people in the daytime supported the South Vietnamese authority and at night worked for the revolution. This was the way of my village. In the daytime, the people were forced by the South Vietnamese authorities to dig defences for the strategic hamlet and were forced to live in the strategic hamlet. At night, the revolution cadres returned and invited some of the youth to undo the defences they had built in the daytime. But the people who lived there took sides with the revolution. Before, when I was young, my parents were forced to dig the defences of the strategic hamlet. They used a whip made from a stingray tail to whip them on the back and make blood come out. At night, the soldiers returned to their posts and the revolution cadres invited these people to undo the defences for the strategic hamlet. In the day time, they dug up and in night time they covered up.¹³

The hardship brought upon women by the war generally was often commented upon by my interviewees, with Phuong acknowledging how women suffered in many different ways and in many different roles: “every woman suffered in one way or another.”¹⁴ Although the women commented upon the uncertainty, fear and pain of not knowing whether one’s husband or sons were still alive, some also spoke of how

¹²Ri, interview with author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

¹³Bao, interview with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

¹⁴Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

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the war was easier for men than for women. Phuong remarked that: “In the war time, women were stuck at home suffering poverty, depression and suppression by the Americans—not like husbands and sons who had the choice to fighting,”¹⁵ whilst Gom said:

During [the American War] the women were those who suffered most. As for men, they took weapons and arms and guns to the battlefield and fought. If they were lucky, they survived and came back alive and if unlucky, they got shot and killed but as for the women, it was like a continuous suffering that they had. And also for the men, if they were alive, they could go elsewhere and escape the village and did not have to deal with the enemy, but the women, since they couldn't go anywhere, they stayed back in the village and every single night and day, they had to deal with the enemy and had to put up with them. There was no escape for the women. Plus they had to raise up children, support the husbands and sons—those who were not around, fighting, in hiding—and also participate in the defence of the village in case it was subjected to attacks and raids from the enemy. During the war time, it was the women who had to be both mother and husband.¹⁶

These motives to join the revolution can be attributed to the general conditions and consequences of war. In addition, several of the women have been compelled to join for much more personal reasons. In another piece of research on Vietnamese women's participation in the revolution it was found that experiencing or witnessing violence would often prompt women into anti-Thieu, anti-American feeling and action. For example, one heroine of the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), Le Thi Muoi Gam, became a guerilla when she was sixteen after witnessing the rape and

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

murder of her friend.¹⁷ Another joined for similar reasons:

I'll tell you another incident I saw. A woman was going to give birth in about two weeks. During a raid, GIs forced her back into a room and tried to rape her but she resisted. So the five GIs tied her to the bed and raped her to death. After that, they used their bayonets to pluck out the fetus. And they laughed [...] In my case, as a woman and a peasant in the South, I only worked very hard to live. When I witnessed these savage crimes of the GIs with my own eyes, I felt very strongly. In order to defend my own life and the lives of my family, I had no other way but to join other women and to fight back.¹⁸

Many of my interviewees expressed similar, if not identical, motives for personally becoming involved in revolutionary activities. Tam, for example, was driven to join the revolution after witnessing the torture of her father in her home by South Vietnamese soldiers when she was just fifteen years old:

At the time, under the Diem regime in the South, they promulgated this law, the 10/59 law,¹⁹ whereby they

¹⁷Gam died in combat at the age of 19. By the time of her death, she had killed twenty-six enemy soldiers. Arlene Eisen Bergman, *Women of Vietnam* (San Francisco: Peoples Press, 1974), 73.

¹⁸Huyn Thi Kien interview with Anne Dockery and Karen Kearns, “I Wanted to Spit in their Faces,” *Liberation News Service* no. 328 (24 March, 1971): 7. Cited *ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹From 1955-1959, President Ngo Dinh Diem led a campaign of terror in South Viet Nam aimed against the Viet Minh as well as leaders of the smaller political factions (for example, during mid-1955, he attacked the private armies of the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, who had been pro-French and French-backed, in order to secure his dictatorship from both Communists and anti-Communists). In 1955, contrary to the provisions of the Geneva Accords, he launched an Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign; the following year, he issued an ordinance which called for the arrest of those considered dangerous to the State as well as enabling the creation of political prison camps and suspension of habeas corpus laws. In 1959, he issued the 10/59 decree which established military tribunals—with no right to defence or appeal and which only handed out life imprisonment or death sentences—for those found to be, or collaborating with, Communists. It has been questioned to what extent Diem ordered many of these arrests and killings. Few of these arrests were conducted either in Saigon or in the larger cities—implying that Diem had not directly ordered them—but instead appear to have been the acts of officers operating on their own personal initiatives. Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 87-90; FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 89-91.

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brought guillotines around the country and whomever they suspected of being a VC, then they cut their head off and killed them straightaway. So my family was suspected. My father was suspected to be a participant in the revolutionary movement. And, after torturing him for a while without extracting any information, they went on to another form of torture, and it is this very form of torturing my father that I could never forget, and always stuck in my mind and urged me to participate in the revolution.²⁰

She elaborated: “In my case, growing up from just an ordinary girl, I was like any other girl, shy, reserved, but what I saw with my own eyes and experiences, and all the deaths of the family instilled a hatred in me. It forced me to join the revolutionary army and that was my path into revolution, and later on, to become a revolutionary leader.”²¹ Following the harassment of her family by enemy soldiers as a result of her father’s suspected NLF involvement, Tam realised that it would be impossible for her to continue attending school so decided to drop out of school to actively participate in the movement. Another woman, Trinh, told how:

There was a time when I still lived with my family and my parents, and I went to join the resistance when I was very young, too young to join the revolution. But the enemy tortured my family, they forced my parents into the strategic hamlet. Even though I was young, this caused me to join the revolution.²²

Hong similarly replied that it was a mixture of her own personal experiences (of being arrested and tortured at a time when she was not yet involved in the

²⁰Tam, interview with author, tape recording, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²¹Ibid.

²²Trinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

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revolution) and those of her around her which encouraged her to join the movement:

[U]nfortunately for me I got arrested that time. It was for six days with torture and electric shock, and upon release I got ill and also each time when it was raining and lightening, my body shook, as a result of the electric shock. Also upon release I realised a number of my friends and fellow students had been killed by American bombing. I could also see with my own eyes the plight of the people and hence I developed a hatred for the Americans. I realised that I couldn't carry on life in a shell like an oyster to do my studies, and wanted to participate in the revolutionary movement.²³

Aside from personally experiencing or witnessing violence, some of the interviewees joined the revolution due to a family tradition of resistance and activity. Dau, who had joined the revolutionary movement during the struggle against the French, cited poverty and an increased awareness of class and feudalism (through Viet Minh cadres visiting her father) as prompting her to participate. She said:

Why did I participate in the revolutionary movement at such a young age? The area I came from was a very deserted rural area where many revolutionary activists of the Vietnamese Communist Party often fled, during the years of the 1930s and 1940s. They took refuge in this area and stayed there or even lived there, and started their activities within the villagers' community. At the time, my family was very, very poor and we had to work for landlords. Usually we worked on five to six acres of land per year but all the harvest and crops that we produced were taken by the landlord and we were left with nothing. We didn't have any produce but still had to pay lots of taxes and fees. So, in such a remote area, the revolutionary activists who took refuge there, they came and talked to my dad and started to educate him, to talk to him about what was the reason he had to work such long hours, all year round and end up with nothing, and end up being denied of all his

²³Hong, interview by author, tape recording, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

produce, not having enough food and clothes, being hungry. For example, I myself, up to the age of eleven or twelve still went around almost naked, almost without clothes.²⁴

Both Than and Na's family had similarly been involved in the struggle against the French.²⁵

And, as some of the testimonies showed, participation could result from an individual's desire to improve her position through the opportunities offered by the revolution; or a woman could become a revolutionary almost by accident. Ly joined out of a desire to find her father and to receive an education:

When I was thirteen, still very young, I did not know much of anything. My family situation was very poor and we had much hardship. I was only a month old when my father was regrouped to the North after the French time. I was born in the jungle and my father was engaged in revolutionary activities at that time and did not have a chance to see his daughter. He intended to visit my mother and me whenever he could while he was doing his revolution tasks. On one of those occasions, he failed to report on ahead to his organisation and he was ambushed and captured by the enemy. My father was injured and was put in prison.

I grew up quickly at thirteen. I had to work in a hard labour job to help support my family. The young comrades told me they would teach me to read and write because I was illiterate. So there were two reasons I went to join the revolution: one, I wanted to learn to read and write, and two, I wanted to search for my father. It was those two reasons that motivated me

²⁴Dau, interview by author, tape recording, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²⁵Na and Than, interviews with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

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to join the local comrades in the area. At thirteen, I did not know much of anything.²⁶

Phuong on the other hand joined the revolution almost by accident. When asked if she had joined the movement voluntarily, she replied:

Partly voluntarily. I went to Vo Thi Sau School up to secondary level, eighth grade and then moved to Trung Vuong school where there were two boys who sometimes asked [me] to do things for them to a point that I realised that I was already involved in the intelligence service.²⁷

However, regardless of the prime motivation, the culmination of such hardship and of repression undoubtedly took their toll and compelled my interviewees to join the revolution. As two of the women remarked: “we were frightened by war and we fought [with] our lives to gain peace”;²⁸ “You had the choice of being dead or fighting against the Americans, so what would you choose?”²⁹

Women’s Participation in the Political Struggle

Under the 1954 Geneva Accords, provisions were made to establish a cease fire, a temporary division of Viet Nam at the 17th parallel, and the promise of free general elections by July 1956. In December, 1960, when it became apparent that the elections called for within the Geneva Accords were not to be held and that the Diem Government was not going to collapse, Lao Dong Party cadres in North Viet Nam,

²⁶Ly, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

²⁷Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

²⁸ibid.

²⁹Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

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with the support of Ha Noi, went south to establish a national, political-paramilitary organisation, the National Liberation Front of South Viet Nam (NLF) as a focal point for anti-President Diem activity and to establish a mass base of support. Prior to 1960, resistance to the Diem Government was conducted by clandestine organisations. The NLF drew upon these groups—the Viet Minh, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, minority groups, farmers’ organisations’ representatives, and intellectuals.³⁰ Whilst not exclusively Communist, the NLF served as a cover through which the Communists were able to exert control at all levels. The People’s Revolutionary Party of South Viet Nam (PRP) came into being in 1962 as a successor to the Southern Branch of the Viet Nam Worker’s Party and became the dominant party of the NLF.³¹

As Pike outlines, the NLF initially envisioned its goal of a nationwide, simultaneous movement by the people—*Khoi Nghia* or “General Uprising”—as being achieved through a combination of political and armed struggle (*dau tranh*). In reality, the political and armed elements of the struggle dominated at different periods of the conflict, in accordance with the strategies of the General Uprising and Revolutionary Guerrilla Warfare.³² Thus, between 1959 and 1963, the armed struggle was

³⁰Despite the use of the term “Viet Cong” (a contraction of *Viet Nam Con Sang*, meaning Vietnamese Communist) to refer to the “enemy” based in South Viet Nam, the labelling of the enemy opposition as one Communist entity was therefore mistaken. Rather, the National Liberation Front, to which the label “Viet Cong” commonly refers, was not a solely Communist movement. Douglas Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1969), 1, n. 1.

³¹However, my interviewees did not always make such a distinction between the NLF and the PRP; Dau, for example, repeatedly conflated the two in her testimonies.

³²Revolutionary Guerrilla Warfare was based upon the principles of turning the enemy’s strength upon itself, enabling motivation and mobilisation through organisation, meticulous attention to logistics and administration, and deception. As Pike points out, revolutionary guerrilla warfare went through three stages—defensive, equilibrium and general counteroffensive—during which political struggle was paramount during both the early and

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subordinated to the political struggle. During these four years, the political operations of the NLF underwent three phases: the social movement propaganda phase which focussed predominantly upon agit-prop work and social organisation; the political struggle phase (from 1962 to late 1963) which was intent upon mobilising rural Vietnamese and destroying the South Vietnamese Government (GVN)'s administration in these areas; and from 1964, the legitimisation-militarisation phase.³³ This third stage in the political element of the NLF was complemented by the adoption in 1964, until early 1966, of successful armed struggle, in part arising out of necessity due to the armed response of the GVN to the NLF and, from 1963, the increased intervention of the North Vietnamese Government (DRV) in the NLF's armed struggle movement.³⁴

When this initial military approach proved inadequate against the enemy's increased superiority of air power, long-range weaponry and increased mobility, as well as the swelling of enemy numbers with the arrival of US fighting forces,³⁵ a variant of the armed struggle was adopted (in 1967), which Pike refers to as the *ad hoc* or Interim Revolutionary Guerrilla War. According to General Vo Nguyen Giap, unification of Viet Nam could now only be achieved by military success on the ground, a strategy which resulted in the Winter-Spring Campaign of 1967-68 and included the 1968 Tet

final stages; the armed struggle was intended to enhance the political struggle and would continue to gain momentum during the conflict but only dominated the middle and penultimate periods when victory seemed within reach. Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, 109, 118-120.

³³Pike, *Viet Cong*, 154-165.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 101-102.

³⁵Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, 120-122.

Offensive.³⁶ The military Winter-Spring campaign was also supported by nonmilitary activity. Although the campaign officially ended on 1 July, 1968, certain elements still continued as the conflict drew to an end and the political struggle once again became prominent.³⁷

The political struggle movement itself operated on two fronts: working to attain immediate goals—for example, to “lessen enemy pressure, oppose military operations and terrorism, oppose the strategic hamlet and extortion, and halt the seizure of land, the corvee labour system, and the army draft”³⁸—and secondly, the active engagement and involvement of the people in the Revolutionary movement.³⁹ The second element was outlined in a 1963 directive which stated: “The political struggle ... is the mobilization of the masses and the assertion of the strength of the revolutionary climate ... with the masses moving deeply into the enemy’s rear to struggle directly with enemy officials. ... The forms and goals are firm, the masses bare-handed opposing the enemy’s military force.”⁴⁰

The “People’s War”, the political struggle, was to be conducted through three programmes: *dich van*, *dan van* and *binh van*. *Dich van*—“action among the

³⁶Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task* (New York: Praeger, 1967). Cited *ibid.*, 125-126. This campaign was conducted in three phases: the first, large, set-piece battles using predominantly North Vietnamese (PAVN) troops; the second, numerous, simultaneous assaults by small, predominantly PLAF (People’s Liberation Armed Forces) troops; and the third, the “second wave”. The final phase was intended to culminate in one decisive fixed battle although, due to the failure of the first two phases to evolve as planned, no one conclusive battle was fought although it did witness some of the greatest bloodshed of the conflict. *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁷Vo Nguyen Giap. Cited in Pike, *Viet Cong*, 87.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 92.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 93.

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enemy”—composed of NLF nonmilitary efforts to gain support amongst both urban and rural Vietnamese in GVN-controlled areas. Such activities included propaganda leafleting, agit-prop lectures and daily broadcasts of Radio Liberation as well as soliciting support from abroad.⁴¹ *Dan van*—“action among the people”—referred to NLF efforts in the liberated areas i.e. those areas free from GVN civilian administrative control. Meetings featured prominently in *dan van* activities, with mass meetings—denunciation, “misery telling”, commemoration or demonstration or struggle meetings—and small, face-to-face group and self-criticism sessions which, under the guise of offering support, served as indoctrination sessions.⁴² Other *Dan van* activities included “fundraising” elements such as the collection of “taxes”, material assistance in terms of the production of food and weapons, indoctrination through education and propaganda as well as creating combat hamlets which, with the help of PLAF forces would resist ARVN (Army of South Viet Nam) attacks.⁴³ Finally, *binh van*—“action among the troops”—comprised of nonmilitary, military and civilian propaganda activities among the GVN military forces and civil servants.⁴⁴ These activities took nine key forms: highlighting the NLF’s policy of welcoming individuals who renounced their pro-GVN position; rewarding those who did defect; encouraging others to defect through their treatment of previous deserters, defectors and prisoners (although the leniency of NLF treatment of such captives was often debatable); the selective use of terror against key civil figures and military forces; infiltration of the enemy’s military and civil service; coercion of individuals

⁴¹Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, 115.

⁴²Pike, *Viet Cong*, 97.

⁴³Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*, 114-115.

⁴⁴Pike, *Viet Cong*, 86.

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through familial and friendship relations; struggle movements and demonstrations within villages or at military bases, and within the military itself; appeals, e.g. through letter-writing and leaflets; and organising opposition to the military draft.⁴⁵ As will be shown below, women played a particularly prominent role in this aspect of the struggle movement.

In accordance with the political and military elements of the struggle, the NLF combined both a civilian and a military organisation. The civilian structure of the NLF comprised approximately twenty socio-political organisations and organised the mass movement through two systems of liberation associations. The first, the Administrative Liberation Association, was a quasi-government and operated through a hierarchy: at the top, the National Liberation Front Central Committee (the policy formulation unit); next, three interzone headquarters (responsible for indoctrination and training); then seven zones (to disseminate administrative directives from the interzone headquarters to the provinces); these led down to provincial committees (the chief operational units of the NLF entrusted with administering the liberation associations and assigning military duties to local guerilla units); and finally, the district, village and town committees and organisations conducting the political struggle, the military proselyting task and armed struggle.⁴⁶

Whilst the administrative liberation association operated vertically, the second system, the functional liberation association operated horizontally and only existed at village level. The main associations were the Farmers' Liberation Association, the

⁴⁵Ibid., 259-267.

⁴⁶Ibid., 112-113.

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Workers' Liberation Association, the Student Liberation Association, the Cultural Liberation Association (which included intellectuals, schoolteachers and religious figures), the Youth Liberation Association and the Women's Liberation Association. These mass organisations took three basic forms, would be semi-legal (semi-open) or legal (open) and were under the tight, yet covert, control of the PRP (People's Revolutionary Party—Lao Dong in the South).⁴⁷ Their objectives were to undermine popular support for the government, provide a cover for agitation, provide a means through which control of the local population (for example, through struggle meetings and self-criticism sessions) could be established and for members to offer one another support. As social movements, these functional liberation associations were means through which the NLF could inspire the masses to participate in the political struggle and in propaganda actions against the GVN.

Many of my interviewees had belonged to the Women's Liberation Association;⁴⁸ some had belonged to the similar organisation, the Youth Liberation Association. The Women's Liberation Association of South Viet Nam was established on 8 March 1961, three months after the formation of the NLF. By 1965, the Association had acquired a membership of over one million, with at least twenty percent of a village's women expected to belong to the Association.⁴⁹

⁴⁷One captured document on mass organisations supported this “covert” aspect of the mass organisations with the statement that: “to cover, protect, and insure the activities of the chapters and party members, we must organize the masses.” Cited in Michael Charles Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam: A Study of Organization and Strategy*, Department of the Army Pamphlet, No. 550-106 (Washington: US GPO, 1967), 79.

⁴⁸See Pike, *Viet Cong*, 172-178 and Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 37-38, 69-70, 125-126, for detailed descriptions of the Women's Liberation Association.

⁴⁹Pike, *Viet Cong*, 175.

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The Association operated at five levels: the national Women’s Liberation Association central committee at the NLF headquarters; the regional central committee (equivalent to the NLF Zone); the provincial central committee in the provincial capital; the district central committee, usually located in the major market town of the area; and the branch.⁵⁰ The branch, consisting of fifteen or more cells, was the basic unit of the organisation and functioned at village or street level. It would consist of an elected executive committee of seven members, who in turn elected a standing committee of a chair, deputy, and secretary, responsible for organisation-building, agit-prop work and indoctrination, and finances, respectively.⁵¹ Membership was open to any woman over sixteen years of age, upon the proposal of one regular member and the approval of the branch central committee, on the proviso that the candidate “agree to follow the precepts of the association; she must take an active part in the struggle movement aimed at overthrowing the US-Diem clique; and ... she must have a clean past and identity.”⁵²

The Women’s Liberation Association was dedicated to the political struggle movement, issuing appeals, statements, manifestoes, condemnations and open letters dedicated to the political struggle movement at village level. Although members did not have to be Party members to join the Women’s Liberation Association⁵³ and the role of the Communist Party within the Association was often concealed, women

⁵⁰Ibid., 176.

⁵¹Ibid., 175-176.

⁵²Ibid., 173, 175.

⁵³It was not always directly apparent in my interviews whether the women had actually been party members as well as members of the Women’s Liberation Association.

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could also become cadres and assume administrative tasks.⁵⁴

Women cadres would work to raise the political consciousness of and teach ideology to the Association's members.⁵⁵ In their interviews, Khanh, Gom, Phuong, Tam and Dau discussed their participation within the social movements of the Women's Liberation Association and the Youth League and/or the PRP. Khanh told how, whilst living in the jungle, she would “return to hang around the enemy area to educate and encourage women to continue the struggle.”⁵⁶ Gom joined the revolution in 1954. In that year, she was made the leader of the women in her hamlet by the revolutionary organisation and assigned the task of organising a hamlet women “solidarity group”, to struggle against the enemy and to persuade their husbands and sons who had joined the South Vietnamese Army to leave. Tam, on the other hand, had dropped out of school to join the revolution in 1963/1964 and left her village to live in the revolutionary base in the jungle. Here she worked for a year or so as the secretary of the youth league. Dau's revolutionary activities had similarly involved youth work, although as one of my older interviewees, her career began earlier during the French resistance period. At the age of fifteen (in 1945), she became a team leader of the Vanguard Pioneers. In 1947, Dau was appointed as standing member of the women's national salvation group in Thanh Phu district and described her duties during the French period as involving mobilising women to join the militia and to carry out acts of sabotage, and persuading women to urge their husbands and sons to join the

⁵⁴Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 40, 38.

⁵⁵Ibid., 60.

⁵⁶Khanh, interview by author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

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revolutionary force. This, she said, involved visiting each individual family or setting up meetings; in occupied areas, such visits would have to be conducted secretly, usually at night. In 1955, Dau was appointed district party secretary and was active mobilising the masses to struggle for elections, as specified within the Geneva Accords of 1954, and the unification of Viet Nam; in 1960, she was moved to party secretary at commune (Bao Thanh) level and then promoted to provincial level a year later, working for the Ben Tre women’s organisation.⁵⁷ Following her arrest in 1956, she continued her proselytising in prison.

According to some of the interviewees, such work either had a “legal” or “illegal” status. Dau remarked that:

Illegal was that you wouldn’t have any contact with the enemy and they wouldn’t be aware of your existence. On the other hand, being legal, you acted as if you were an ordinary person, living with other people and living an ordinary life, so they wouldn’t know if you were revolutionary or not. To become legal, you needed to have proper documentation and documents, an ID card.⁵⁸

For Dau, her known participation in resistance activities against the French prior to the 1954 regrouping prevented her from acquiring a “legal” status. Tam’s activities on the other hand were “legal”:

I was mainly involved in overt activities like going around from one district to another, trying to mobilise and organise villagers and ordinary people, trying to turn them into our people, so that the revolutionary army soldiers would have a base within the people. It was legal work that I was doing. A lot of people who

⁵⁷Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

⁵⁸Ibid.

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were doing illegal work died because it was very dangerous. Legal work meant I had paperwork so I could move around easily, but if you moved around without paperwork they could stop you and kill you at any time. However, I myself was caught twice, however they only suspected me and couldn't investigate any further, plus I had the proper paperwork so they had to release me on both instances.⁵⁹

Similarly, Gom described her activities during the first phase of her revolutionary career (1954-1968) as “legal”, which meant that she stayed in her hamlet, pretending that she was an ordinary villager and participating in the struggle without the knowledge of the enemy. This changed upon her expulsion from the hamlet in 1969.

As individuals, members were to participate in a “three-pronged” attack.⁶⁰ The first prong was military support, for example, the provision of medical care or hideouts for soldiers, the collection of intelligence, and acting as liaison officers and recruiters for the NLF. Many of my interviewees had been involved in the transport of rice and salt, moving the wounded, and carrying ammunition. In Tien Giang, for example, some of the interviewees had been involved in digging shelters, tunnels and bunkers for their comrades to hide in; in the Vung Tau interview, Trinh told of how she had been involved in the smuggling of rice from the strategic hamlet.⁶¹ One Women's Union representative present at Tien Giang explicitly detailed how women actively worked against the enemy, building tunnels and defences to trap the soldiers:

Before the strategic hamlet was completed, the women dug tunnels in the village at night as well as dug

⁵⁹Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

⁶⁰Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 71-72.

⁶¹Trinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

“blind” ditches (where enemy soldiers might fall and be injured), dug tombnails (a pit with sharp spikes at the bottom), made angular spikes (booby trap spikes with three sharp points), etc. We planted them around the village but told our guerilla comrades where they were so they would not enter there. When the enemies entered, they were often wounded. Then, we would tell them, “Oh my God, this is deadly ground. Why did you go there and not read the signs? We wanted to go out there and cut bananas but we were afraid because this is dangerous ground.”⁶²

At Hoa Long, there were many bunkers and outposts with patrolling troops and it was hard to dig tunnels, unlike Long Phuoc. The women carried ammunition; Ms Dung carried a carbine; Madame Ba Trai helped relay grenades for comrades at Long Phuoc, Hoa Long. After the battle, Ms Dung carried a knife and a cord and pretended to be looking for a cow. But she was looking for discarded ammunition belt feeds for the weapon. She also carried the wounded comrades home and hid them, nursed them, and dressed their wounds, then returned them to their comrades.⁶³

According to this interviewee, women subverted their traditional domestic roles to disguise their revolutionary activities. However, as this testimony also revealed, women not only played out the traditional female role of carer/nurse to look after their own wounded; they also “cared” for the enemy, although with ulterior motives:

When the enemy soldiers were wounded, we put water in their wounds to give them infection so they die. We offered them water to drink because the wounded usually were very thirsty. We gave them a lot of water to cause infection. This was the women’s way to help in the struggle. Our task was never ended; we influenced the soldiers and made them afraid by infecting the wounded with poison, by making the spikes, and preparing our comrades for guerilla war.

⁶²Women’s Union Representative, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

⁶³Ibid.

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The women’s task was to make the enemy believe we were caring, and helping them.⁶⁴

This exploitation of traditional female roles in support of the resistance was also replicated in another element of the “first prong” of attack: liaison. Thao, Gom, Tam, Dau and Phuong had all, at some stage, been involved in liaison work or intelligence-gathering. For some of the women, this entailed keeping an eye on the enemy whilst maintaining the appearance of carrying on with life “as normal”. Gom described how, in her thirties and forties: “I would watch the enemy and if I saw them preparing to move [...] I would inform the cadre who lived in the hamlet and the whole network would be informed. It was the residing VC who was the link in the whole chain that the women informed about the movements of the enemy’s forces.” Gom’s activities were discovered in 1969 however and she was forced to flee her hamlet and go into hiding.⁶⁵ Phuong and Tam meanwhile became involved in intelligence gathering as school-girls. Tam described her tasks:

I was active together with my school fellows and the work we did basically involved protecting the revolutionary fighters, keeping secrets of their whereabouts, putting them in hiding place and also disseminating leaflets. Also, when they were having meetings, we were hanging about to watch, to ensure security for them in case the soldiers came round, then we would inform them straightaway so they could escape.⁶⁶

As school-girls “hanging out”, the interviewees were in a key and yet unsuspecting

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁶⁶Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

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position in which to monitor the activities of the enemy soldiers. However, as Thao described, her activities as a liaison officer also manipulated another stereotypically female environment: the market:

For years I was a liaison in charge of conveying letters and documents to different units and pick up documents elsewhere, sometimes quite a long way from Cu Chi. I always had to disguise as a fruit seller, hiding the documents among fruits and vegetables, and had always brought my son with me. It had always worked through a system of secret signs and signals between me and other liaison women, whom I handed documents to or received documents from. Normally I would hand the whole basket of vegetables and fruits [containing the Party's documents inside] to a woman who I recognised by her signs and signals, and then would walk off without knowing who she was, never to see her again.⁶⁷

As the above testimonies show, revolutionary women were able to provide military logistical support to the NLF through exploiting their conventional roles and environments. Similarly, the perception that women were less likely to be subjected to violent retaliation than men led to the second and third “prongs” of women’s duties, which involved face-to-face struggle against the enemy and propaganda amongst enemy troops.⁶⁸ These two prongs primarily consisted of nonmilitary protests intended to reduce ARVN morale and prompt desertion. For this work, revolutionary women became known as the “long-haired army”.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Thao, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁶⁸Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *The Vietnamese Women's Movement in Modern Times and the Significance of Women's Liberation in Vietnam* (Ha Noi: Foreign Languages, 1978), 13. Cited in Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 38.

⁶⁹As Taylor points out, the exact usage of this term has been disputed, for example, as to whether it just applied to the women involved in the Ben Tre uprising or included all NLF women, or whether it was applicable to women from all regions—southern, central and northern—of Viet Nam. Official Vietnamese histories apply the term only to women in the south. Ibid. 76.

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The “long-haired army” was a by-product of the *Dong Khoi* (Concerted Uprising), the first-wave of which originated in Ben Tre Province in January 1960. As a known Viet Minh stronghold during the French period, Ben Tre Province was targeted under Diem's *To Cong* (Denunciation of the Communists) campaign: part of its population were forced into the four agrovilles (*khu tru mat*) established in 1959 in the districts of Mo Cay, Ba Tri, Binh Dai and Chau Thanh; the mobile special military courts established by the 10/59 Decree furthered the repression of former Viet Minh cadres; and the landlords forced out of the Province by the Viet Minh seizure of control in 1945 returned both to reclaim their lands and demand retroactive rents from the peasants.⁷⁰

The uprising was scheduled for 17 to 25 January, 1960. Despite the shift in mid-1959 by the Southern revolutionary leadership to combine political with military action, there were no arms available or armed units in operation in Ben Tre; thus “rifles” for the uprising had to be made out of wood and coconut trunks to give the enemy the impression of armed strength. Although based in the three districts of Minh Tan, Mo Cay and Thanh Phu, the uprising soon spread to other districts, with the seizing of posts, the detention (and sometimes, execution) of local GVN officials and agents, the destruction of the Thanh Thoi agrovillage and the redistribution of land to the peasants. This first-wave of *Dong Khoi* was followed by a second across the whole southern region, in September 1960, with Ben Tre again serving as its centre.⁷¹

⁷⁰Mai Elliot, “Translator’s Introduction” in *No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh*, by Nguyen Thi Dinh (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Phu Nu, 1968); trans. Mai V. Elliot, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications Data Paper no. 102 (New York: Cornell University, 1976), 7.

⁷¹These two waves of *Dong Khoi* in Ben Tre Province resulted in the capture or evacuation of over one hundred posts and watch-towers, the liberation of seventy-two of its one hundred plus hamlets, the seizure of almost two thousand weapons and the redistribution of twenty-five thousand hectares of rice fields. Ta Xuan Linh, *Vietnam Courier*, 27 (August, 1974): 9;

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One woman recalled how the women in Vinh Kim had been motivated to demonstrate in an uprising: “We had to rise up! ... The Diem soldiers were arresting our women to be their prostitutes, our children to be their soldiers. They were poisoning us in prison. And the guillotine taking our leaders, head by head. Someone had to take responsibility, or we would all be killed.”⁷² A Vietnamese journal described the demonstrations and the roles of the women more generally:

The demonstrators marched to provincial capitals and district centres. Led by women, tens of thousands of people besieged administrative offices and military posts, demanding an end to bombardment and murder, and damages to the victims. They carried in their arms and the dead and wounded, victims of the raids, faced bayonets and guns, and were joined by the townsfolk. Some fell under bullets, others took their place and kept advancing. Soldiers and police levelled their guns at them: the women talked to them and tried to convince them. Some hesitated and stood back; others joined the demonstrators. [...] Some [of the women] lay on the ground in front of armoured vehicles to keep them from advancing. Others formed a barrier with their bodies to block the march of troops. Others still faced machine guns, holding children in their arms.⁷³

After a march through a district or provincial town, the women would present petitions to the GVN authorities, protesting military atrocities and local officials' corruption, or dressing in mourning clothes and demanding compensation for lost lives and destroyed property. Such protests were not restricted to the countryside, but also took place in the towns and cities. Two of my interviewees described their

Cited *ibid.*, 18, n.88.

⁷²“Second Harvest” in Lady Borton, *After Sorrow: An American Among the Vietnamese* (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 76.

⁷³Mai Thi Tu, “The Vietnamese Woman, Yesterday and Today”, *Vietnamese Studies* no. 10 (1966): 63-64.

involvement in such demonstrations. Thao told how:

Each time we were arrested and taken away, we tried to speak to the soldiers to make them realise what they were doing was wrong. We tried to tell them stories of families suffering from bombing and raids, that they were all civilians, and after each bomb there were more and more children becoming orphans. You know, stories like that so they were aware of their crimes to the people. [...] Very often, a whole lot of five or six women would gather to speak to the soldiers, telling them about our sufferings and loss, and ask them to stop shooting.⁷⁴

A Women's Union representative told of similar experiences in Tien Giang province:

At Long Phuoc, a man and a woman, My Tien and Ms Duong, were instantly killed by mortar rounds. I used their funeral to campaign for the struggle. The funeral trip was about one kilometer and I got about one thousand supporters who walked along the road following the funeral car from Long Phuoc, around Hoa Long, and return to Long Phuoc. The supporters marched through the streets demonstrating and accusing the enemy of committing atrocities. Bystanders along both sides of the road joined in, supporting the struggle by accusing the enemy of committing atrocities. [...] There were many demonstrations and they happened often. In two provinces of Hoa Long, Long Phuoc, as many as one thousand people presented themselves at City Hall every day.⁷⁵

From the testimonies mentioned above, it appears that my interviewees were actively involved in the *binh van* activities of the Women's Liberation Association, participating in demonstrations against the enemy as well as providing support and intelligence to their own soldiers. However, as also becomes evident from the

⁷⁴Thao, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁷⁵Women's Union Representative, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

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testimonies, although my interviewees were predominantly involved in the political struggle, many also participated in the military struggle.

Women’s Participation in the Armed Struggle

As Taylor points out, southern Vietnamese women did not generally become involved in the armed struggle (as opposed to the three pronged attack) until the establishment of the NLF and the Women’s Liberation Association in 1961 and the People’s Revolutionary Party (PRP) in January 1962.⁷⁶ However, from 1965, a shortage of male soldiers forced the NLF to mobilise women occasionally as fighters.⁷⁷ As a result, Communist women operated either as “legal” or “illegal” guerrillas, as guerrillas in paramilitary units, and as (often unarmed) village militia, assassination or sapper units.⁷⁸

As Thomas Perry Thornton has outlined, terror tactics are employed within internal conflicts to boost one’s side’s morale, to eliminate enemy forces, to broadcast the existence of the movement to the general population, to disorientate that population and to provoke the enemy to take such measures which both separate it from and undermine its support by the people.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 75.

⁷⁷Nancy Wiegertsma, *Vietnam: Peasant Land, Peasant Revolution: Patriarchy and Collectivity in the Rural Economy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), 209. Cited in Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*, 37.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁹Thomas Perry Thornton, “Terror as a Weapon of Political Agitation,” in *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, ed. Harry Eckstein (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964). Cited in Pike, *Viet Cong*, 249.

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The NLF employed terror tactics, through its armed force—the People’s Liberation Armed Force (PLAF)—to advertise its existence, to eliminate opposition and to immobilise enemy forces.⁸⁰ This was achieved through five different forms of violence. The first of these was the offensive or defensive “guerilla” military or paramilitary assault. The assault was carried out against defended hamlets, US military installations or during GVN military operations and were intended to capture weapons and supplies, to coerce villagers and reduce enemy soldier morale. The second type was the ambush. These were directed at military units or civilian officials. They were designed to inflict casualties, heighten tension and reduce the morale and efficiency of the ARVN troops, and to contain enemy troop movements and restrict military supplies. Next was the harassment of villages (principally of strategic hamlets and sporadically for weeks on end) through small-arms sniper fire and with threats and appeals at night in preparation for a full-scale attack with the aim of intimidating the inhabitants. The fourth type of violence employed by the NLF was the sabotage and subversion of roads, bridges, trains, and telephone equipment through the use of hand grenades, mines, booby traps, traps and spikes. The final category involved acts of kidnapping, assassination or execution of individuals, commonly of potential NLF opponents such as village leaders, religious figures, school teachers or elements of the GVN village apparatus.⁸¹ As Pike claims however, such violence was not pursued in a random or indiscriminate manner. Rather, the NLF considered the proper use of terror as “terror applied judiciously, selectively,

⁸⁰The PLAF, together with the People’s Army of North Viet Nam (PAVN) formed the total Communist fighting force in Viet Nam. The key period of PLAF involvement in the conflict was from 1963 to 1968. Prior to 1963, the armed struggle had been placed in a supportive but subordinate position to the political struggle, whilst after 1968, the majority of the battles were being fought by PAVN rather than NLF troops.

⁸¹Pike, *Viet Cong*, 240-252.

and sparingly.”⁸²

The most notable female figure involved in the military struggle was Nguyen Thi Dinh. Nguyen Thi Dinh was born in Ben Tre Province in 1920 and joined the anti-French revolutionary movement whilst still in her teens. In 1940, she was arrested and imprisoned in a detention centre for three years. She was involved in the 1945 insurrection which seized power of the Province, was elected to the Executive Committee of the province’s women’s association and was its representative in the Viet Minh Front Province Committee. In January 1960, Dinh led the Ben Tre uprising and following its success, was appointed to the Ben Tre Province’s NLF Leadership Committee. In 1964, she became a member of the Presidium of the NLF Central Committee and in 1965, was elected both Chair of the South Viet Nam Women’s Liberation Association and the Deputy Commander of the South Viet Nam Liberation Armed Forces.⁸³ Other celebrated female participants in the military struggle included Ta Thi Kieu, who became a heroine of the Liberation Army after allegedly leading one hundred and seven political struggles and participating in thirty-five combat operations, as well as the destruction of hundreds of strategic hamlets.⁸⁴ Another woman, Nguyen Thi Ut, a mother of six from Tam Ngai village, Tra Vinh Province, was also awarded the title of Heroine of the Liberation Army after her involvement in the seizure of numerous enemy posts and the destruction of the

⁸²Ibid., 250.

⁸³Nguyen Thi Dinh, *No Other Road to Take*; “Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh”, special edition, “Vietnamese Women,” *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966): 255-258.

⁸⁴“Ta Thi Kieu”, special edition, “Vietnamese Women” of *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966): 277-281. According to this portrait, Ta Thi Kieu was responsible for organising a demonstration in November 1961, against the killing of a twelve-year old boy in An Phong hamlet (where an enemy airbase had been set up); and with the support of guerilla units, was the first to tackle and seize three enemy posts, between August 1961 and March 1962.

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strategic hamlet in Chong No. She had also been an assistant-commander of the village guerrillas, organising a group of women partisans.⁸⁵

Phuong, Tam, Dau and Hong all mentioned that they had been involved in some form of military activity. Although she did not describe her own military activities in any detail, Phuong did remark that she had been a soldier when she married her husband and that she had spent half her life in the army—a progression from her school-girl intelligence-gathering activities. Similarly, Tam officially joined the army in 1965/66 when she was just twenty years old, and informed me that she went from being an ordinary soldier to a leading cadre, eventually spending just under twenty years of her life in the army. When Tam joined the army, she was sent from the revolutionary base in the jungle to the “battlefield” of Ben Tre: “It was much more dangerous up here because in the jungle you had places to hide whereas here, you didn't have anywhere to hide at all.”⁸⁶ Tam described one of the two times she was caught:

I was on my way moving from the district of Tham Phu Dong to the district of Mo Cay. At the time, there was a legion called 516—they are now given the status of heroic legion. At that time, I was a member soldier of this legion and they were very heroic but didn't have enough to eat, so I had to travel to provide them with money and their orders. I took with me a female child for this journey. We were on this one small boat crossing the water when the enemy discovered us and starting shooting. I and the girl had to row very quickly and try to get to the bank and run quickly. At that time, the girl was only around twelve or thirteen. She was

⁸⁵Nguyen Thi, “A Fighting Mother or the Story of Nguyen Thi Ut (Heroine of the South Vietnam Liberation Army), special edition, “Vietnamese Women,” *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966): 84-110. Both the biographies of Ta Thi Kieu and Nguyen Thi Ut are retold in glowing heroic, patriotic and nationalistic terms.

⁸⁶Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

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shot wounded and so was I in my leg, but it was fortunately not a serious wound.⁸⁷

Dau, in addition to her participation in the Women’s Association, was also active in the military struggle, having been a guerrilla, a participant in the self-defence force and a vice-commander of Thanh Phu district’s militia force during the resistance against the French. This experience resulted in her being moved from her position in the Ben Tre Women’s Association back into the military:

At first, our women’s organisation only took part in political struggle but then the enemy army was terrorising so much and so violent that we had to start organising forces to embark in armed struggle. And then the party realised that I was involved earlier in the Thanh Phu militia group so they proposed to take me out of the women’s organisation to return me back to the army.⁸⁸

From here, her military career escalated, encompassing the recruitment of women for operations within the strategic hamlet and research:

So I got involved with the army and started to mobilise women soldiers for the army. I was mainly in the less organised areas to build up the forces and I was building the women’s force inside the strategic hamlet to fight the enemy. We could kill so many soldiers without them being able to identify who conducted these operations. Cadres at provincial level were made known of these operations we conducted in the strategic hamlet so they asked me to prepare a report for the regional conference of guerrilla fighters. After the regional conference on guerrilla warfare was finished, in 1964, I was sent to the military special area no. 8, and worked for the commanding force of that area. I was working for the militia unit—the reason being that I had been active in paramilitary activities.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

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I was the assistant to the commanding unit. My task was to develop a local military force and to develop the activities of the guerilla fighters as well as militia movements. I was in charge of compiling reports and doing research in those aspects until the year of 1978. By 1978, I left the army.⁸⁹

Hong, on the other hand, had originally been a school teacher. In 1966, the revolutionary leaders decided that she should continue her education in order to join the teaching staff of the area. Hong continued her studies in the liberated area and was then sent to Ben Tre Province for further education. During her further education, the cadres decided to also train her to become an army member. But Hong was arrested and tortured for six days and upon her release decided to terminate her studies and join the military struggle of the revolutionary movement in 1967. Thus, she became a fighter in the special task force which operated in the outskirts of Ben Tre Province:

During the time from 1967 to 1969, I took part in eight battles in the outskirts of the province, sometimes fighting on my own, sometimes co-ordinating with other fellow fighters. We killed in total sixty-five enemy and injured twenty enemy and destroyed their equipment, including war weapons and vehicles.⁹⁰

After Hong's third arrest in 1969 and a year's imprisonment at Thu Duc prison, she returned to the task force unit. This time, she was appointed as politics officer with a resulting change in her activities: "I wasn't doing any overt activities as before. I went to the province only now and then when I needed to find out the situation there myself in order to understand the situation of local bases and to be able to assign

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Hong, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

accurate and specific tasks.”⁹¹ In recognition of her participation in the revolution, Hong was later recognised as a “Heroine of the People’s Liberation Armed Forces”.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief outline of my interviewees’ revolutionary participation in the American conflict. From the interviews, it was apparent that the women were motivated to join the revolution for a number of reasons. For many, the harsh, living realities of war—famine, social dislocation, the loss of loved ones—as well as the witnessing or personal experience of violence by enemy soldiers compelled the women to actively participate in the revolution.

Having joined the movement, the women took on political and/or military roles. As members of the Women’s Liberation Association, the women were actively involved in the political struggle against the GVN government, participating in demonstrations against enemy atrocities and trying to convince ARVN soldiers to desert the army. In addition to these *binh van* activities amongst enemy troops, the women also provided intelligence and medical and logistical support to their own soldiers, as well as participating in the construction of defences and traps in the strategic hamlets. As participants in the armed struggle, the interviewees would serve as guerrillas and in the militia, with those who excelled accorded the title of “Heroine of the Liberation Army”.

⁹¹Ibid.

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In the following chapter, I discuss the different forms of gender-based violence to which my interviewees were subjected. Although, as I stress at the beginning of this chapter, a woman’s nonparticipation in the revolution was not a protection against violation, undoubtedly, the involvement of my interviewees in the movement and the inherent risks of ambush and arrest by enemy soldiers placed women at risk from gender-based violence by enemy soldiers. Just how this occurred will be illustrated next.

Chapter Three

“I Still Wonder How Could We As Women Survive All That”¹: Testimonies of Violence

According to Vietnamese revolutionary documents, many thousands of women were victimised by enemy soldiers and officials between 1954 and 1975.² Although such documents may be dismissed by some as solely propaganda,³ this figure obviously contrasts sharply with the small number of men successfully prosecuted by the US military for sex-related crimes, as will be outlined in the following chapter. Extensive abuse or simply a handful of “indiscretions”—which view is closest to the perspectives of the women upon whom this violence was committed? Following on from the previous chapter where I detailed my interviewees’ wartime activities, in this chapter I examine my interviewees’ testimonies of sexual violence. As becomes apparent, southern Vietnamese revolutionary women were at risk of violence from many different perpetrators and in five key situations during the conflict: prostitution, forced marriages and sexual relationships, during military operations, interrogation, and imprisonment. As also becomes apparent, the consequences of this violence are still very much being endured, over twenty-five years later.

¹Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

²“*Crimes of the US-Diem Imperialists*”

³Women’s stories are not only manipulated for political purposes but when escalated and exaggerated, the horror runs the risk of making the women’s stories incredulous. Thomas and Ralph, “Rape in War,” 93. See also Durda Knezevic, “Abused and Misused: Women and Their Political Exploitation,” *Connexions* 42 (1993): 12-13, 37. For a recent example, see Human Rights Watch, “Indonesia: The Damaging Debate on Rapes of Ethnic Chinese Women,” *A Human Rights Watch Report*, 10, no. 5 (September 1998).

Prostitution and the Trafficking of Women

As has been seen historically, military prostitution exists in degrees of violence: from camp followers⁴ and “economic” prostitutes in military-related brothels,⁵ through to the forced sexual slavery of the “Comfort Women” in World War II⁶ and the rape camps⁷ witnessed during the wars in Bosnia. The extent to which prostitution may be defined as gender-based violence is subjective. For some, the prostitute in the

⁴As a report by African Rights shows, this role of camp follower is not always one of choice. For example, during the wars in Ethiopia and Eritrea, women often had no other choice than to become concubines or prostitutes in garrison towns; sometimes when the battalion left an area the soldiers would force local women to accompany them as “cooks” or “cleaners”. In northern Uganda, women had little choice but to attach themselves to garrisons, whilst in Mozambique women in controlled villages were regularly sent to combatant bases on demand. As a result of these interactions and rapes by soldiers, AIDS is spreading rapidly, with increasingly younger victims and prostituted girls. African Rights, “War, Women and Family Life in Africa: A Proposal for Research and Advocacy.” (London) Copy of proposal held by author.

⁵See for example in relation to World War II, Beth Bailey and David Farber, “Hotel Street: Prostitution and the Politics of War,” *Radical History Review* 52 (1992): 54-77. For an analysis of the contemporary relationship between the military and prostitution, see Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the US Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, 1992).

⁶See, for example, Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995); George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Sex Slaves of the Japanese Imperial Forces* (London: Souvenir Press, 1995); Ustinia Dolgopol, “Women’s Voices, Women’s Pain,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1995): 127-154; *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (Special Issue: The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex) 5, no. 1 (Spring 1997); David Boling, “Mass Rape, Enforced Prostitution, and the Japanese Imperial Army: Japan Eschews International Legal Responsibility?” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 32, no. 3 (1995): 533-590; Karen Parker and Jennifer F. Chew, “Compensation for Japan’s World War II War-Rape Victims,” *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 497-549; Dan P. Calica and Nelia Sancho, eds., *War Crimes on Asian Women: Military Sexual Slavery by Japan during World War II* (Manila: Task Force on Filipina Victims of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 1993); Nelia Sancho, “The ‘Comfort Women’ System during World War II: Asian Women as Targets of Mass Rape and Sexual Slavery by Japan,” in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed. Ronit Lentin (London: Zed Books, 1997), 144-154.

⁷Angela Robson, “Rape: Weapon of War,” *New Internationalist* 224, no. 1 (June 1993): 13-14; “A Pattern of Rape,” *Newsweek*, 11 January 1993: 26-30; Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, *Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia*, UN doc. E/CN.4/1993/50. 10 February, 1993, reprinted in *International Journal of Refugee Law* 5, no. 2 (1993): 327, 329-330; Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide: The First Inside Account of the Horrors of “Ethnic Cleansing” in Bosnia* (Dorset: Element Books, 1993), 64-76.

military brothel may be seen as governed by economic forces and thus prostitution perceived as a free and rational choice; for others, prostitution to whatever degree, is problematic. As Demleitner comments:

The question of a woman's free will is in part an issue of timing. Is a woman forced to prostitute herself only when she did not intend to sell her body at the time the procurer approached her? Should it matter that she is either psychologically or physically forced to stay at a brothel against her will and to “serve” customers there sexually although she had planned on working as a prostitute when she started?⁸

Goldstein has defined forced prostitution as a situation where the victim “cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation.”⁹ This approach is echoed by the Special Rapporteur on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others who states that “even when prostitution seems to have been chosen freely, it is actually the result of coercion” due to economics, familial circumstances, rape, or a procurer's “persuasion” whether through seduction or violence.¹⁰ In light of these approaches, I have taken the view that prostitution should at the very least be viewed

⁸Nora V. Demleitner, “Forced Prostitution: Naming an International Offense,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 18 (1994): 187.

⁹Anne Tierney Goldstein, *Recognizing Forced Impregnation as a War Crime Under International Law* (New York: Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, 1993), 13 n.2.

¹⁰UN Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, *Activities for the Advancement of Women: Equality, Development and Peace*, UN Doc. ST/ESA/174 (1985), 10. Cited in Demleitner, “Forced Prostitution,” 187. Kathleen Barry also denounces this “false distinction” between “free” and “forced” prostitution, arguing that such a distinction assumes prostitution is not damaging to women and therefore is not a form of sexual exploitation. Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 238-239. For an analysis of diverse approaches to prostitution see, for example, Belinda Cooper, “Prostitution: A Feminist Analysis,” *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 99-119.

as gender-based exploitation/abuse, and I have therefore included a discussion in this chapter.

Prostitution was rife inside in South Viet Nam during the conflict. As Brownmiller states, prostitution already had a history within Vietnamese society prior to the conflict and a tradition of military brothels had existed under the French who maintained the *Bordel Mobile Campagne*, a mobile field brothel supplied with Algerian women.¹¹ However the escalation of the American presence prompted a parallel escalation in military prostitution:

The streets in downtown Saigon, and those near US housing compounds and military bases in Cholon and scattered around the outskirts of the city, were thickly lined with bars. These bars catered almost exclusively to American males, and at any given time each bar would usually have on hand from five to twenty hostesses to make small talk with the customers and push drinks. There were similar clusters of bars in Bien Hoa, Vung Tau, Nha Trang and Da Nang, and they sprang upon a smaller scale wherever significant numbers of Americans were to be found.¹²

The “vitality” of such areas was remarked upon by one of my interviewees who remembered driving through the red-light district with her parents as a child:

There were a lot of nightclubs and bars along the street on both sides. My parents had a car and when we were with them in that car and passed by there were lots of lights! There were a lot of different lights [...] We really enjoyed passing [...] There were a lot of prostitutes with [short skirts] in front of the nightclubs waiting for clients [...] it was just when we were young, just

¹¹Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 93.

¹²Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 333. Quoted in Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, 133.

something we wanted to see. Different!¹³

At the beginning of American involvement in Viet Nam, servicemen entered into private arrangements for sex with their hootch maids. However, by 1966 the US Army had established official military brothels within their base camp perimeters at An Khe, Lai Khe and Pleiku.¹⁴ These establishments operated with the permission of the US military, for as Brownmiller points out, it required the cooperation of the division commander and a two-star general. As they were under the direct operation control of a brigade commander, it was possible to argue that brothels operated with the support of the Army Chief of Staff, the US Embassy in Saigon and the Pentagon.¹⁵ The brothels were intended to prevent servicemen from visiting potentially security-risk. off-limit brothels, and to prevent the spread of venereal disease.

The US military regulated the health and security features of the brothels but left the procurement of women and price arrangements up to the Vietnamese.¹⁶ Officially the South Vietnamese Government declared prostitution illegal and sanctions could be taken against it. Two examples of this occurred in Nha Trang: in 1966, South Vietnamese officials attempted to move prostitutes from the town to an island in the Bay of Nha Trang but failed; in 1967, the director of the Social Welfare Office in Nha Trang arrested more than three hundred girls and fifty pimps in a programme to

¹³Hoa, interview with author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 5 June, 1998. Interview conducted in English.

¹⁴Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 94.

¹⁵Ibid., 95.

¹⁶Ibid., 95.

scare the prostitutes away from the province.¹⁷

Unofficially however, brothels were also frequented by South Vietnamese soldiers¹⁸ and prostitution was a lucrative form of finance for the government, as one Saigon official suggested: “The Americans need girls; we need dollars. Why should we refrain from the exchange? It’s an inexhaustible source of US dollars for the State.”¹⁹ It was alleged that in the closed prostitution zones which developed outside of the military brothels and those which surrounded the bases, the South Vietnamese Government took thirty percent of the proceeds from prostitution. Involvement in prostitution also held out financial benefits for the South Vietnamese officials and army officers further down the ladder, as indicated by the guilty verdict against six policemen for the extortion of as much as fifty dollars a month from prostitutes in Nha Trang.²⁰

Women came to prostitution for a number of reasons. The forced relocation of rural populations through the strategic hamlets programme, defoliation (which made farming untenable), search-and-destroy missions and “free fire zones” resulted in the displacement of millions of peasants, many of whom fled to the capital, to the cities

¹⁷According to the *New York Times*, there were officially estimated to be one hundred brothels, fifty bars, one thousand prostitutes and four hundred bar girls serving approximately twenty thousand American, South Korean and South Vietnamese personnel in Nha Trang. *New York Times*, 28 April, 1967, 17.

¹⁸South Vietnamese and other Allied troops were charged on different rates however. According to a news article, American clients between three and five hundred piasters a time and the South Vietnamese clients two hundred piasters (five hundred piasters equivalent to approximately two dollars). *New York Times*, 28 April, 1967, 17.

¹⁹Quoted by Thanh Nam, “In the Shadow of the American Embassy in Saigon,” *South Vietnam in Struggle*, 164 (11 September, 1972): 2. Cited in Arlene Eisen Bergman, *Women of Vietnam* (San Francisco: People’s Press, 1974), 82.

²⁰*New York Times*, 28 April, 1967, 17.

and the areas surrounding the military bases. There they found “a series of packing case towns with exactly three kinds of industry: the taking of American laundry, the selling of American soft drinks to American soldiers and prostitution for the benefit of Americans.”²¹ Some prostitutes were war widows or had been abandoned by their husbands, others were single women or teenage refugees who constituted economic burdens on their families: prostitution enabled the women to support themselves and to send money back their families, or to provide the bribes to prevent the conscription of male relatives into the South Vietnamese army.²² Others turned to prostitution, however, after becoming victims of rape.²³ The shame and dishonour of rape compromised the victims’ eligibility for marriage, forcing the women to turn to the only economic option open to them: thus, as Le Ly Hayslip remarked, “[m]any of these girls were [...] rape victims like me who despaired of a proper marriage.”²⁴

This was reiterated in the Tien Giang interview:

Some women were prostitutes voluntarily because of their circumstances [...] There were a few women who came here from somewhere else. In some cases, they sold Coca-Cola, then were raped. Afterwards they were scolded and rejected by their families so they ran away

²¹FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 352-353. Testimony at Bertrand Russell’s International War Crimes Tribunal on these camps indicated that women and girls were often forced to turn to prostitution. Arlette El Kaim-Sartre, “A Summary of the Evidence and the Judgements: An Introduction,” introduction to *On Genocide* by Jean-Paul Sartre (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 47.

²²Suzan Ruth Travis-Robyns, “What is Winning Anyway? Redefining Veteran: A Vietnamese American Woman’s Experiences in War and Peace,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 18, no. 1 (1997): 152-153.

²³As Koss, Heise and Russo have pointed out, abuse at an early age may increase the risk of entering prostitution or high-risk sexual behaviour. Mary P. Koss, Lori Heise and Nancy Felipe Russo, “The Global Health Burden of Rape,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): 524-525.

²⁴Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: Part One* (London: Pan Books, 1994), 293.

and became prostitutes. Some women were married and their husbands drove them out of the house when they were raped, then they became prostitutes. [...] Half of the women were raped and then became prostitutes. Some lived in poverty and became prostitutes to survive. [...] They came from somewhere else [They weren't local women].²⁵

Prostitution itself took different forms. The most prevalent was the bar girl, masseur or prostitute who worked in the areas frequented by servicemen. An alternative to working in a bar or brothel was to become a “rented” wife or “key woman” (so called because the man had the key to where she lived). This arrangement entailed a woman living with a serviceman as his “wife” for a period of time—from one week to the length of his tour of duty—during which he would pay her rent and living costs.²⁶ Although an improvement upon working in a bar or brothel, this relationship was a hazardous arrangement, with some women subjected to violence, abuse and alcohol and/or drug-related problems. Furthermore the arrangement only lasted as long as the relationship did.²⁷ It was also alleged that nurses in the Chi Hoa prison infirmary would prostitute themselves to the richest prisoners, with the prison administration taking a cut of the nurses’ payment.²⁸

US involvement effectively divided prostitutes into those who worked in legal, US

²⁵Cuc, interview by author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

²⁶Saundra Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus. “Disparate Threads of the Whole: An Interpretive Essay,” in *Let The Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the US Military in Asia*, eds. Saundra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus. New York: New Press, 1992), 306.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Jean-Pierre Debris and Andre Menras, *We Accuse*, (npl: Indochina Mobile Education Project, 1973), 73. Cited in Bergman, *Women of Vietnam*, 85.

approved bars (approved as the women had to undergo periodic medical exams)²⁹ and those who worked on the street or in off-limit areas. This distinction was noted by Hayslip. On the one hand, there was the prostitute who worked in a brothel maintained by a madam; on the other, the woman who either rented a room (or bed)

²⁹In his testimony, one of the veterans at the Winter Soldier Investigation (Sgt. Michael Hunter, 1st Air Cavalry Division) spoke of the prostitution in Viet Nam. Having described “Sin City” at An Khe as the “world’s biggest whore house,” he then went on to tell how:

When they built it, they had medics standing up there. They would go by periodically and give shots, right? To the girls to make sure that they were kept clean, right? Okay. But the American public got wind of it somehow, and it came down that, not, this is an immoral thing to do. So they stopped giving shots to the girls, but they still let GIs go there.

Another participant (Capt. Joseph Grosso, MD, General Medical Officer, 173rd Airborne Brigade) described how in his brigade in Dak To:

[W]e used military personnel, military equipment, and military time to construct a large wooden framed restaurant which was staffed by Vietnamese girls. I believe there were at any time from 12 to 14, who provided services for an entire brigade of about 4,500 men on a volunteer basis, alphabetically. The charge was approximately \$2.50. It required a great deal of time, material, and manpower for the medical company to examine these women several times a week. So it was more or less command policy that prostitution be part of the military operation.

In the same panel as Grosso, one of the panellists described the situation in Da Nang:

At Da Nang the same situation existed everywhere. Outside of the military installations, you had houses of prostitution that were either built by the military or at least maintained by the 95th Evacuation Army Hospital at Da Nang. On the road leading to it were four houses, and the women, the prostitutes who worked there, received their treatment from sympathetic doctors and corpsmen who worked at the hospital—the Evacuation Hospital there. We had a very large number of Air Force personnel at our base. We had an immunisation clinic for the GIs and the longest lines for any of the immunisations were the penicillin lines for VD. If one of the Vietnamese women came in, whether she worked on the base or wherever she worked, claiming that she had caught VD or gonorrhoea or whatever from a GI, she was always refused treatment on the grounds that if you treat one, you have to treat them all.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*.

“I still wonder how”

in one of the cheaper brothels near the military bases—or “worked” “in the bushes, trucks, tanks, or alleys.”³⁰ At “Sin City” at Pleiku, women “worked” in a tent with fifteen to twenty beds; at Phu Loi, the brothel was only able to operate during the daytime as the NLF was active in the surrounding area at night.³¹ One of my interviewees, Phuong, described the conditions in a brothel as follows:

The women were selected through tests and trials, then were recruited by the Americans to serve in US Army camps. They worked daily shifts. Everyday, they were transported to military bases to have sex with American soldiers. They received monthly incomes based on the number of soldiers and the hours they served. Usually a woman worked in a room, which was divided into two parts: the outside, where there were drinks and a receipt book to record the number of hours that she had worked, and the inside, where there was a bed.³²

Not surprisingly, the women were at risk of contracting venereal diseases—although madams did carry out health checks—or violence from their “clients”. To protect themselves from the latter, women would sometimes take their boyfriends or male relatives (who also sometimes acted as the girl’s pimp) with them as pretend policemen to the base, whilst the madam, if well-connected, could enjoy police protection for her prostitutes.³³

For some women, prostitution could offer a means to an end. As Hayslip said of one

³⁰Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 293.

³¹Jonathan Schell, *The Village of Ben Suc* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 108-109.

³²When asked how she knew this, Phuong replied that although she was a student at the time, she was also a member of the Women’s Association for the Liberation of the South and working as an intelligence agent. In these capacities, she had contact with both female students and women and was able to collect such stories. Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June 1998.

³³Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 293-294.

time she was propositioned:

I stared at the cash the way a thirsty prisoner stares at water. Four hundred dollars would support my mother, me and Hung for over a year—a year I could use finding a better job and making connections or, as a last resort greasing palms for a paid escape. And to make it, I wouldn't even have to work up a sweat or risk going to jail or getting blown up by a mine or blown away in an ambush. I just lie down and let these two American boys be men. What could they do to me that hadn't been done already?³⁴

However, many women were unable to make such a “choice”. In 1965, a UN survey on slavery noted a considerable rise in the traffic of women with procurement spreading from South Viet Nam and Thailand to Laos.³⁵ Inside South Viet Nam, the trafficking of rural Vietnamese women also increased. Le Ly Hayslip described the process:

These girls weren't prostitutes but young women—some not even in puberty—who came into the city on buses to escape the war in the countryside. Like me, these girls were peasants, ignorant of anything but life on the farm, who had been sent by relatives to find a safer, better life in the city. When a refugee bus arrived, an older woman (accompanied by a couple of handsome young men) would ask if anyone aboard needed a job as housekeeper or nanny. Because these were jobs that girls had been told to look for, and because the young men paid attention to them, the winsome young girls quickly gathered around. The woman then promised them housemaid jobs with good families for good pay, and then took them to her home where they worked a few days “just to show what they could do”. ... [T]he woman would visit her contacts and describe the new “merchandise”— sometimes complete with Polaroid pictures she took after the girls had been cleaned up. Her customers were usually

³⁴Ibid., 336-337.

³⁵Mohamed Awad, *Report on Slavery* (New York: United Nations, 1966), 198.

corrupt officials or wealthy individuals with bizarre sexual tastes, although some of the customers export these girls to similar clientele in other countries: to Thailand, Singapore, and even as far away as Europe and the United States.³⁶

As Le Ly Hayslip remarks, “it wasn’t long, however, before the real purpose of her job was made clear.”³⁷ Yet, during the immediate weeks following her “sale” the girl risked being returned to the woman and “resold” whilst those who tried to escape would be tracked down by the procurer’s guards (and possibly put up for sale again). According to Hayslip, once a girl had been resold a number of times, Vietnamese buyers would no longer be interested; she would then be sold on to a foreigner.³⁸ One of my interviewees told of a similar incident:

There was a girl who was studying in the tenth grade in Saigon and her brother was a colonel in Hoc Mon. At the time, being in the tenth grade was quite [an] education already and you could get a job and start earning money but she kept from time to time coming back to her mother to ask for money. Her friend was asking her to move elsewhere and they were working as housemaids for some fellow so that they could do a typewriting course. One day the family lost a radio cassette and they accused this one girl of stealing it and called the police. She was taken away to the police station. As soon as she was put there another policeman came in and bailed her out. As soon as she was taken out the guy asked her to be his wife straightaway. The girl agreed to this because she was scared of going back to jail and also she was afraid that her family would hear about her being put in jail. So the guy took her home and used her for one night then sold her to an agency [that provided] girls for the American soldiers. And this girl was so despairing and cried because now she couldn’t get back into her

³⁶Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 291-292.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 292.

³⁸*Ibid.*

family anymore, and there were many cases like this—of women going into prostitution and being rejected by their family. This is to say that many girls went into prostitution against their will because of certain circumstances.³⁹

Such testimonies illustrate the vulnerability of women to prostitution and trafficking as a result of conflict, a reality reinforced by the estimation that there were five hundred thousand prostituted women in Southern Viet Nam by 1975.⁴⁰ As Kathleen Barry outlines, the response of the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was to consider the women victims of the previous regime and to attempt both to rehabilitate them and control the venereal diseases, from which it was estimated that up to fifty-four percent of the women suffered. Rural women were returned to their villages and urban women sent to Schools to Rehabilitate Women’s Dignity where they received training. However, whilst the programmes were successful, prostitution could not be eliminated completely and escalated following renovation or “Doi Moi” (the development of a free market economy), which began in 1986; meanwhile the trafficking of Vietnamese women to Thailand returned in 1991.⁴¹

Forced Marriages and Sexual Relationships

Women were also forced into marriage or into sexual relationships. This form of violence is a particularly subtle type of abuse as women may be accused of inviting,

³⁹Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

⁴⁰Ngo Vinh Long, “Prostitution in Vietnam,” draft manuscript, 1990, 16. Quoted in Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, “Disparate Threads of the Whole,” 306.

⁴¹Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, 135-138.

colluding in or agreeing to the relationship. In Rwanda, this type of abuse took the form of women being forced to cohabit with men, “agreeing” to sexual favours with guards if their husbands are in jail, or women being obliged to hand themselves over to soldiers so as not to be accused of collaboration with the deposed regime.⁴² Women were also forced into sexual slavery or marriage to members of the enemy militia and forcibly taken to neighbouring countries after the end of the genocide.⁴³ Such relationships further complicated the lives of the women: the men may have been responsible for the killing of the women’s family and guilty of their rape and torture, yet by taking them as “loot”, they conversely saved the women from the genocide. Having lost everything else to the war, staying with these men could be the only alternative available to the women to secure their economic and personal welfare, although such relationships also opened the women to suspicion from returnees who could accuse them of collaboration with the enemy.⁴⁴

In Viet Nam, under one of the terms of the Geneva Accords, 1954, troops of the Viet Minh were to regroup to the north of the 17th Parallel (which had been designated as a temporary line of division for the country) while French Union Troops were to withdraw south of the line. Following the regrouping, women whose husbands had gone to the North were forced, under the “Renunciation of Communists” campaign, to divorce their husbands and made to remarry within a set period of time to

⁴²Clotilde Twagiramariya and Meredith Turshen, “Favours’ to Give and ‘Consenting’ Victims. The Sexual Politics of Survival in Rwanda,” in *What Women do in Wartime*, eds. Meredith Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya (London: Zed Books, 1998), 108-109.

⁴³Human Rights Watch/ Africa and Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, *Shattered Lives*, 52-62.

⁴⁴Migirou, “The Genocide in Rwanda.” Human Rights Watch/ Africa and Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, *Shattered Lives*, 56-62. A similar situation was reported in El Salvador. Aron, Corne, Fursland and Zelwer, “The Gender-Specific Terror,” 40.

demonstrate the renunciation of their allegiance to the Viet Minh and to confirm their loyalty to the South Vietnamese Government.⁴⁵ This happened to Le Ly Hayslip's sister. After Ba Xuan's husband was sent north, she started to receive advances from her husband's cousin, a Common Guard (the local police force which supported the Army in the maintenance of order in the villages). After initially resisting his advances and intervention by her father, Ba and her father were arrested and taken to a temporary interrogation compound. Her release depended upon renouncing her marriage vows and marrying her husband's cousin; if she refused to do this, they would be handed over to the army as Viet Cong spies.⁴⁶

One of my Vung Tau interviewees talked of how the wives of revolutionaries would be harrassed and forced to marry ARVN soldiers.⁴⁷ Vinh, also at the Vung Tau interview commented that:

I was a cadre's wife. There was a South Vietnamese soldier, working with an American whom I knew had about three or five wives already. Each day, he tried to force me to be his fifth or maybe ninth wife, saying I would live well, or otherwise, my old mothers and I would be killed. I was extremely afraid and I hid out.⁴⁸

Another woman, at Cu Chi, also spoke of such “forced marriages” although she did so in a somewhat contradictory manner:

⁴⁵William Burchett, *Viet Nam Will Win* (New York: Guardian Books, 1970), 119-120. Cited in Bergman, *Women of Vietnam*, 93; Mai Thi Thu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Vietnam*, 176; Mai Thi Tu, “The Vietnamese Woman, Yesterday and Today,” *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966): 39.

⁴⁶Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 213.

⁴⁷Khanh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

⁴⁸Vinh, interview with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

Women living in the strategic hamlets had to contend with various difficulties [...] They were lonely, away from their loved ones, as most men were either taking part in the revolution or went to the army. Soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army were then encouraged to be with women of the strategic hamlet. There was even a prize of 50,000 dong for any soldier who managed to marry a woman there. Only those tough women could put up with the loneliness to resist the soldiers. Encouraging the Southern Army soldiers to marry local women, that was a unique multi-purpose way by the Americans to use women. First, it was to satisfy sex for the soldiers. Second, they could use women to be spies for them. Moreover, they could make sure that the women would not support the Communists.⁴⁹

Thao's comment was unusual amongst the testimonies of my interviewees as she was alone in hinting at a non-unified resistance against the ARVN: “Only those tough women could put up with the loneliness to resist the soldiers.” This implication of compliance by a Vietnamese woman in a sexual relationship with “the enemy” was replicated in another interviewee's testimony. Phuong recounted the story of a woman who had been coerced into a sexual relationship. According to Phuong, the wife of an ARVN officer was blackmailed into an on-going affair with an American advisor when he threatened to show an incriminating photograph of the couple having sex. Upon his return to America, the advisor allegedly told his replacement of this affair and on his arrival in Southern Viet Nam, the second man informed the woman that he knew of the relationship and demanded that she sleep with him. In the end, the woman contracted a venereal disease and had to leave her husband. As Phuong put it, “The story somehow got broken out and it became a very juicy gossip story in the 1960s.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹Thao, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁵⁰Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

Rape During Military Operations

The above-mentioned examples of gender-based exploitation and abuse occurred in circumstances which, although arising from situations created by conflict, were not directly speaking, military-related. In themselves, prostitution and forced marriages fulfil the “bounty” mentality of rape as a profit of war. In contrast, rape during military operations constitutes a weapon of war, directed at intimidating, harming and punishing the civilian population, or as seen in the Former Yugoslavia, the genocide of a community.⁵¹

As I have outlined in my introduction, I take the stance that Vietnamese women were not sexually abused for genocidal objectives; however, in line with Copelon’s argument, this stand is not intended to lessen the importance of abuse of Vietnamese women, nor make their abuse more tolerable.⁵² Two specific incidents involving the sexual abuse of Vietnamese women during military operations by American servicemen have been recorded in “popular” Western literature: the first relates to the mass rape of a number of women, the second, the group rape of an individual woman.

The first incident was the “My Lai Massacre”. On 16 March, 1968, Charlie Company, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry Brigade, Americal Division Combat Air entered Thuan Thao, or My Lai (4) (its American name), a subhamlet of the hamlet Tu Cung. In a matter of just a few hours, the three platoons of Charlie Company killed

⁵¹See, for example, Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, *The Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women’s Human Rights* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995).

⁵²See Rhonda Copelon, “Gendered War Crimes: Reconceptualizing Rape in Time of War,” in *Women’s Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper (New York: Routledge, 1995), 204.

approximately four hundred Vietnamese people in the hamlet.⁵³

According to army investigators of the Criminal Investigation Division, US Army (CID), twenty women were raped during the My Lai massacre, the majority of them in their teens or early twenties, and many were killed afterwards.⁵⁴ Many of the servicemen thus became “double veterans.”⁵⁵ Bilton and Sim describe the abuse. Numerous women in the subhamlets of Tu Cung and Binh Tay were raped (often by groups of men), either in public or after being dragged into the hootches; others were sodomized, forced to commit oral sex, mutilated or had their vaginas ripped open with knives or bayonets. One group of seven women, aged between eighteen and thirty-five, were separated out and forced to strip by one soldier who intended to rape all of them but on the group becoming hysterical, he shot them all. In another instance, a woman was killed when the muzzle of a rifle barrel was inserted into her vagina and the trigger pulled. Although the sexual violence in this massacre was extensive, as Bilton and Sim also report, rape was not an uncommon event within

⁵³In a simultaneous operation, Bravo Company entered the hamlet of Co Luy and killed ninety people. The Vietnamese figure for the number of people killed during the massacres five hundred and four. Two hundred and seventy-three of those killed were female. Of these, one hundred and four were twelve years old or younger and one hundred and sixty-nine were girls and women over the age of thirteen (twenty-seven of whom were sixty-five years or older). Two hundred and thirty one of the victims were male. Of these, one hundred and six were boys twelve years of age or younger; one hundred and twenty-five were over thirteen years of age (of which seventeen were sixty-five years of age or older). That three hundred and ninety-six of the victims were women, children and the elderly is not surprising, considering the adult males would have already left to farm the fields or had gone to market by the time the massacre began. A list of the names of those who died is presented in Trent Angers, *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story* (Lafayette, Louisiana: Acadian House, 1999), 223-226.

⁵⁴CID Deposition Files, My Lai Investigation, Vietnamese Statements, Rape Victims, US Army Crimes Records Center, Fort Belvoir, Virginia, 221-222. Cited in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 99-102.

⁵⁵This was the term given to a soldier who both raped and then murdered the woman. At least eight servicemen were witnessed sexually abusing women during this massacre. Although charges were brought against them, these were eventually dropped and no serviceman was convicted of committing a sex-related crime during this operation.

Charlie Company. 2nd Platoon was already particularly notorious for rape, with even the platoon’s commander guilty of participation.⁵⁶

The second incident involving the sexual abuse of a Vietnamese woman recorded in Western texts is that retold in Daniel Lang’s *Incident on Hill 192*. On 18 November, 1966, five soldiers of C Company, 2nd Battalion, (Airborne), 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Air) kidnapped a Vietnamese girl. The night before, the patrol leader openly proposed during briefing a plan to abduct a Vietnamese woman, “to have some fun” for “the morale of the squad”. They would then kill the woman before returning to camp. The next morning, the patrol entered the hamlet of Cat Tuong, in Phu My district and kidnapped a young woman. She was taken up a nearby mountain, known as Hill 192, where the day’s command post was established in an abandoned hootch. Here she was raped by four of the men. On 19 November, Viet Cong were observed in the valley beneath Hill 192. Fearing the woman would be seen by US helicopters overhead, she was first stabbed and then shot to death.⁵⁷

These two examples of abuse during military operations may be considered to be extremes. However, according to my interviewees, gender-based violence during military operations was extensive, with many of the women having experienced violence themselves or witnessed the abuse of relatives or friends. At the very least, it appears that the possibility of abuse arising from contact with enemy

⁵⁶Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours In My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 129-132.

⁵⁷This is recounted in Daniel Lang’s *Incident on Hill 192* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), having first appeared in *The New Yorker* on 18 October, 1969, under the title of “Casualties of War”. The incident has also been retold in Hollywood movie, also called “Casualties of War.” The courts-martial of the servicemen are: *US v. Thomas*, CM 416162, 38 CMR 655 (ABMR 1968); *US v. Gervase*, CM 416161; *US v. J.C. Garcia*, CM 416160; *US v. C. Garcia*, CM 416159, 38 CMR 625 (ABMR 1967).

soldiers—whether ARVN or US—was well-rumoured: in Richard Hammer’s *One Morning in the War*, one woman told how all the girls and young women in the area had been told to fear GIs on military operations.⁵⁸

Rape was the most frequently mentioned abuse in my testimonies. Lanh, in the Tien Giang interview, told how when she was about twenty years old, she had been raped by eighteen American soldiers in her in-law’s house. The soldiers had been searching for her husband for interrogation.⁵⁹ Gom described how she had been attacked:

Sometimes, they⁶⁰ were raiding the village, and they called me to come and they came very near you, and they had some money in their hand, and then suddenly, there you go, they thrust again and again and you are raped.⁶¹

Gom also told how she had been raped whilst trying to secure the release of her nephew:

Another time, a nephew of mine, a twelve year old, was taken away, so I had to go after them to get my nephew back, and on that time, I was raped again. That one time, because I saw they took my nephew, I didn’t think and just went after him and was raped.⁶²

Phuong recounted her own experiences of attempted rape during a raid. She had

⁵⁸Richard Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970: 129-130.

⁵⁹Lanh, interview by author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

⁶⁰It is not exactly clear which nationality—American or (Southern) Vietnamese—Gom is referring to here. As she prefaces the statement with a reference to the war with the Americans, it is possible that she is referring to the US troops, but it is not clear.

⁶¹Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁶²Ibid.

been returning to Saigon after a day’s work in a house in a subhamlet outside the city when a raid began. On seeing the buildup of troops, Phuong started to make her way back to the house but was stopped. Although she was involved in revolutionary activities, she was also a student and evaded questioning by showing her student card and pretending to be related to the house owners, a relative of whom was a colonel in the ARVN. Phuong was allowed to return to the house, but it was shortly raided by American soldiers. The only other people present in the house were a woman who had recently given birth and two children. At first, Phuong did not realise what was happening:

A black soldier came in and was pointing and speaking [at us]. At the time, I did learn some English but I didn’t know that word. But anyway I said to the black guy that I did understand but in fact I didn’t understand anything and the guy understood that I didn’t get it, so he was laughing and then he used body language to explain to me. At the time I was very young so I roughly understood what he meant. Also, because I was young I wasn’t aware of danger, so I only felt angry at what he said.⁶³

Realising however that the other woman was in danger, Phuong tried to defend her:

I stood up to angrily explain to him that firstly the Vietnamese women after giving birth “don’t do it” and secondly the fact that she was married and having children meant that she had to stay faithful to her husband. So he pointed at me and said that would mean I was the only woman who was left there so, they could do me if they wanted, but would leave the woman alone.⁶⁴

By defending the other woman, Phuong inadvertently placed herself at risk. Only by

⁶³Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

⁶⁴Ibid.

the two children clinging to her and by the fortuitous ending of the raid was she able to escape rape:

Then a group of soldiers came in and asked the guy what was going on and the black guy said that he was trying to convince me but there wouldn't be enough time for him, so he would have to do it straightaway. He dropped his pants straightaway and approached me. as soon as he did that, the two children saw it and jumped towards me and cried and screamed and hung on tight to me. The guy was put off by this. The group of soldiers standing by cheered and encouraged the guy to carry on, but at that time, there was a gunfire signalling for the soldiers to withdraw from the village. At that time, a gunfire means an order that they would have to obey straightaway, so the soldiers left.⁶⁵

Aside from their personal experiences, the interviewees also told of the rapes of other women. Gom told of two women who had been raped by soldiers and then killed afterwards. Their bodies had been stripped and dumped.⁶⁶ At the Tien Giang interview, Cuc told of one incident which had taken place near the military base:

I have many other stories I want to tell. This story I remember very well. This story is from Long Ding, north of Highway 1, adjacent to this base. There were two young ladies on their way to a wedding, dressed well, wearing very nice jewellery. American troops landed in the middle of a rice field near them and the young girls could not avoid them and the soldiers arrested them. According to people who lived nearby, the soldiers took them and the people heard the two girls cry out a lot. The people came to rescue them and found they were naked, raped, and shot to death. The date was December 9, 1968.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁶⁷Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

One of the Women’s Union Representatives at Gom’s interview also told of a woman from Dong Hoi hamlet who had been raped and had had a smashed bottle forced into her vagina.⁶⁸ In Tien Giang, two of the interviewees recalled an rape in Hoa Long, where a group of people participating in a family ceremony to honour an ancestor were attacked by Vietnamese soldiers. The soldiers threw the food for the ceremony off the table and then raped the women.⁶⁹ Tam also recounted the story of her friend who was attacked by a group of Korean soldiers:

She was the same age as me. [...] She didn’t dare to leave the village and participate in the revolutionary movement like myself, so she stayed on. She was scared of bombing and shooting and fighting, so she decided to stay on. In one of the landing operations of the American forces she was raped by six soldiers. These soldiers were Korean soldiers. At the time, she wasn’t married and she was very young.⁷⁰ She was quite a physically weak person, so her physique and health couldn’t stand it. Bear in mind that the foreigners were very strong. When the soldiers withdrew, people thought she was dead because there was blood all over her body. But she survived.⁷¹

⁶⁸Women’s Union Representative present at Gom’s interview, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998. Soldiers at the *Winter Soldier Investigation* also gave testimonies which supported the interviewees’ stories of forced objects and mutilation of women’s bodies, following rape. One participant (Sgt. Scott Camil, 1st Bn., 11th Marine Regiment) described one incident where a woman was shot by a sniper; on orders from a lieutenant to kill her, the woman’s breasts were both stabbed and an entrenching tool and then a tree limb were forced into vagina, after which she was shot. Another marine (Sgt. Joe Bangert, 1st Marine Division) described how a former major working for US AID sexually mutilated a woman detainee who had died from shot wounds; another (L/Cpl. David Bishop, 1st Marine Division) described how between ten and twenty ROK (Republic of Korea) marines tortured four NVA nurses arrested by US troops, slicing their breasts and forcing flares into their vaginas; another (Capt. John Mallory, 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment, 1st Air Cavalry Division) told how a NVA nurse was killed by 11th Armoured Cavalry troops and a grease gun was placed into her vagina. Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*. The mutilation of dead bodies was of particular significance in this conflict due to the Buddhist belief that an incomplete body would not go to heaven.

⁶⁹Ri and Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

⁷⁰Tam is perhaps implying that, by her age and single status, the woman was a virgin.

⁷¹Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

In addition to rape, women were also threatened with rape or abused in other ways.

Cuc told of an incident she had witnessed:

One night, I was at a house in the country, away from a village. A patrol passed by about one hundred metres away. One man from the patrol came to the house and took advantage of the fact that the house was crowded with young and old women. He broke into the house, forced the women to surround him, took off all his clothes, and bared himself in front of the women. He motioned one woman and another to come to him but the women were clinging tightly to each other. Then he grabbed me, held me close to him and kissed me. Then he grabbed an old woman and pulled her close to him. The old woman said, “I am too old for him; maybe he wants me to suck his penis.” Then he began to pull one woman after another close to his body. We had an empty metal pail and we beat it like a drum to attract the attention of the other troops of his patrol. Finally, the troops came and took the man away.⁷²

And Phuong told how she had witnessed a young woman who had been attacked by US soldiers travelling in an armoured vehicle on the road between Saigon and Cu Chi.⁷³

From these testimonies, it was apparent that civilian women were abused during military raids by soldiers of the different forces participating in the conflict. However, as transpired from the Tien Giang interview, economic necessity also forced women into situations where, as street sellers or hawkers, they were at risk from those with whom they traded. Cuc recalled:

There was a woman who sold Coca-Cola who was married and had a child. Her husband died and she went to the bunkers to sell Coca-Cola to the soldiers.

⁷²Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

⁷³Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

The bunkers were at the end of the bridge, about three or four hundred metres from the base. It was very rare for someone to go to these bunkers to sell Coca-Cola. The soldiers called her and she rowed the boat to the bunker. But the soldiers raped her until she lost consciousness. [...] Furthermore, about four or five months later, this woman brought her younger sister along who was about 15 or 16 years of age, skinny. On one of their trips to sell Coca-Cola, her young sister also was raped at the same area [...] She said about five to seven men raped her. She still was a young girl. After that, she was sent to the hospital.

Now, let me continue another story. A woman from Cai Lay came down to an American bar where the American troops were stationed. Many women there sold Coca-Cola and she heard they made good money. She just had a baby, about one month and ten days. She had three children and she was very poor. Her husband was a soldier in the 7th Division and his salary was not enough to support them. Her oldest son helped her carry the Coca-Cola. There was an agreement between her and the Americans but she did not understand the American language. Six or seven men raped her. She passed out, and haemorrhaged very heavily because she had just given birth to a baby. I took her to Vinh Kiem Hospital for treatment. [...] She told me, “I heard that I could make good money selling Coca Cola.” She was not aware of the danger of soldiers committing rape. After the rape, she disappeared and never returned here.⁷⁴

These anecdotes taken from the testimonies reveal how women were at risk in multiple situations. However other interviews revealed that many of the women had felt their older age (or youth) or state of pregnancy would protect them from abuse. Many expressed their shock that these elements had not protected them. Gom for example had commented that despite being in her forties, she still could not avoid being raped during the conflict;⁷⁵ Tam remarked how “even some pregnant women

⁷⁴Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

⁷⁵Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

“I still wonder how”

wouldn't be spared.”⁷⁶ The notion that pregnancy guarded individuals from attack can be found elsewhere. In Richard Hammer's book on the My Lai massacre, one woman told how her husband, an ARVN soldier, had told her to flee whenever US soldiers came on patrol as her non-pregnant status made her vulnerable. In response to being asked why she ran away from the American servicemen at the start of the raid which ended up in the massacre in Son My Village, she replied, “I was not pregnant at the time.” When asked to explain what she meant by this, the woman said:

I'm only a woman and so I feared GIs. Therefore I must escape the house, escape the area [...] Because my husband tells me that if GIs come to the area, I must run, escape. Otherwise, if I am not pregnant, they will do things to me. [...] All the young girls, all the women have heard that it is so.⁷⁷

From the testimonies, it appeared that the women employed different strategies to avoid rape by soldiers on patrol. With their menfolk either fighting or farming, the belief that there was safety in numbers led to groups of women living or gathering together:

In a crowded area, the soldiers would not do anything bad. For example, we gathered together in one house and the American would not rape or attack us. [...] Women were most often raped when they were alone, away from the village. The soldiers would not rape them when many other people were around them.⁷⁸

Tam said:

⁷⁶Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

⁷⁷Hammer, *One Morning in the War*, 129-130.

⁷⁸Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

In my home area as well as in the neighbouring villages, when the Americans came, all the women were very fearful. Usually, they were so scared that they would group together into a house. Usually, you would find five or six women living together in one house so that they could be together and protect each other.⁷⁹

In addition to living together, a second strategy was premised upon the belief that pretty rather than unattractive women were more likely to be abused. (This has also reported more recently, for example in Kosovo, where women would try to disguise their young daughters as old women, or would smear mud and dirt on their faces to make them unattractive.)⁸⁰ In her autobiography, Le Ly Hayslip commented that: “In Ky La, we girls were taught to hide our bodies and our feelings from men. We did nothing to make ourselves look prettier, for pretty in wartime meant danger.”⁸¹ Locating her reply within traditional Vietnamese society’s attitude to rape, Phuong remarked:

For the Vietnamese women, those things were most insulting and most harmful. Because we have a lot of morals and traditional values to respect so we were scared of being raped. A lot of us were often dressed down and made ourselves look very ugly and very old so that they would leave us alone. Many women may not be scared of going to the battlefield but they would dread the prospect of being raped.⁸²

Phuong also indicated that attractive-looking women were vulnerable if their husbands’ allied status was questioned:

⁷⁹Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

⁸⁰Human Rights Watch, *Kosovo*, 9.

⁸¹Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 146.

⁸²Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

Often every time when they searched your house where there were women among people in the family, they would ask what the husband of those women did. Usually they suspected that most husbands were VC and only a few good looking women had husbands working in the South Vietnamese Army.⁸³

As became apparent however, such strategies did not always succeed. For example, Tam remarked that regardless of how women tried to protect themselves, “it wouldn’t be of much use as such as the American soldiers wouldn’t leave them alone,”⁸⁴ and Phuong similarly commented that “at the time, the Americans raped women all the time, no matter whether that was a woman or a teenage girl, whether they were in a group together or alone.”⁸⁵

Political Repression⁸⁶

In the previous section, I outlined the circumstances in which civilian women were vulnerable to sexual abuse, whether through prostitution, forced marriages or military operations. The abuses described above occurred in circumstances where the women’s revolutionary activities were unknown and unsuspected and therefore, their participation in the revolution did not directly contribute to their violation. In the following section, I demonstrate how sexual violence played a significant part in

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

⁸⁵Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

⁸⁶This section also draws upon interviews carried out by the Women’s Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. I was given Vietnamese transcripts of these interviews by the museum, some of which have been translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

the arrest and imprisonment of my interviewees, regardless of whether the women were detained civilians, political prisoners, suspected of sympathising with the Viet Cong, or caught during revolutionary activities.

Gender-based violence was one of the outcomes of the political repression of successive South Viet Nam governments during the conflict. By the 1970s however, the issue of the repressive nature of the Thieu-Ky government—effectively, America’s ally in the conflict—had become a common feature in Congressional and Senate records following a visit by two American Congressmen to Con Dao prison in 1970.⁸⁷ Two issues in particular were at stake. The first was the concern that the maltreatment of South Vietnamese prisoners held potential repercussions for American prisoners of war being held by the North Vietnamese.⁸⁸ Secondly, the repression conducted by the Thieu-Ky government was made possible through the US assistance programme to Viet Nam; in the fiscal year prior to Congressmen Andersen and Hawkins’ visit to Con Dao alone, the United States had contributed \$442,000 to the Vietnamese penal system, primarily for the construction of new

⁸⁷On 2 July, 1970, Congressmen Hawkins and Andersen visited Con Dao, accompanied by Don Luce and Thomas R. Harkin, a congressional staff member, as part of a 12-man fact-finding trip to Southeast Asia by the House Select Committee on US Involvement in Southeast Asia. Their discovery and revelation of the Tiger Cages at Con Dao thwarted numerous attempts to obstruct and cover-up the findings by Vietnamese government officials, US State Department officials and AID officials. See for example, Hawkin’s submission and articles to *Congressional Record* on 28 July, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 26002-26020; For an extended statement by Don Luce of his visit with the Congressmen and Thomas Harkin, see Don Luce, “The Tiger Cages of Con Son” submitted by Congressman Hawkins to *Congressional Record* on 28 July, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 26006-26008. A discussion of Con Dao prison follows later in the chapter.

⁸⁸This point was raised, for example, in the speech by Senator Young of Ohio to the Senate, 10 July 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 23707.

facilities.⁸⁹

In 1967, Thieu won the Presidential election with only thirty-five percent of the votes cast. From mid-April 1970 onwards, a series of protests and demonstrations were held by students, disabled war veterans, Buddhist monks and lay people and Catholic priests calling for an end to the war, and reform. The government's response was repression: closing universities and high schools, closing newspaper offices or confiscating newspaper issues which dared to report such stories and imprisoning and torturing the demonstrators. After imposing martial law regulations in 1972, Thieu was effectively able to legislate by decree and bypass the National Assembly.⁹⁰ Thus, he was able to order “pre-emptive sweeps” to seek out Communist agents and sympathisers, increasing his police force from 122,000 to 300,000,⁹¹ so that in a matter of months at least fifteen thousand people were arrested, predominantly in the Mekong Delta area and the far north of South Viet Nam.⁹²

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Decrees cited by House Representative Harrington (Massachusetts) in article submitted to the *Congressional Record* on 2 April, 1973. *Congressional Record*, 3 January 1973-December 22, 1973, 10562.

⁹¹*Le Monde*. 8 September, 1972. Cited in Indochina Peace Campaign, “Saigon's Prisoners”, submitted by Robert F. Drinan (Massachusetts) to the *Congressional Record* on 27 March, 1973. *Congressional Record*, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, 3 January 1973- December 22, 1973, 9906

⁹²One of the major programmes by which the South Vietnam government's opposition was removed was through the Phoenix Programme, or “F-6”, which was largely staffed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Between January 1968 and May 1971, 20,587 South Vietnamese civilians had been killed and 46,695 people imprisoned under this programmed (figured quoted by Ambassador Colby's testimony before the Hearings on US Assistance, House Foreign Operations Subcommittee, July-August 1971). Ibid., 9907. Estimates of the number of political prisoners in South Viet Nam during the Thieu government ranged from 35,000 to 200-300 thousand people. Not surprisingly, the figure proffered by the GVN was significantly lower than those suggested by foreign sources, for example, *Time* magazine estimated in July 1972 that since April 1972, the rate of arrest of civilians in South Viet Nam had been 14,000 people per month; the Saigon Ministry of Information meanwhile reported that between 8-15 November, 1972, police conducted 7200 raids against political critics; whilst the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that 50,000 people had been arrested during

Six different agencies were involved in Saigon in the arrest of suspects⁹³: the Official Police Headquarters of Saigon, which consisted of one large centre and nine district branches; the Active Service Police;⁹⁴ the Bureau of Military Security;⁹⁵ the Central Intelligence Service;⁹⁶ the American Special Forces;⁹⁷ and the Secret Service.⁹⁸

Outside of Saigon, each province had a National Police Station, a Special Police

the first two months of the Spring Offensive. Sidney H. Schenberg, “Thieu’s Crackdown: He Calls It ‘Closing the Gates to Communism’”, *New York Times*, 13 August, 1972. Article submitted by Representative Henry Helstoski (New Jersey) to the *Congressional Record*, 16 April, 1972. *Congressional Record*, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, 18 January 1972- October 18, 1972. 28608; *Time* magazine, 10 July, 1972; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 July, 1972.

⁹³The information concerning the different agencies is drawn from Pham Tam, “Imprisonment and Torture in South Vietnam,” submitted by Congressman Hawkins to the *Congressional Record* on 28 July, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 26008-26015.

⁹⁴The Active Service Police had had eight stations in the Saigon-Gia Dinh area alone (two in Cholon, and one each in Binh Dong, Thi Nghe, Khanh Hoi, Phu Lam, Gia Dinh, and the Tan Son Nhut airport area), as well as stations in the towns of Nha Trang, Da Lat, Can Tho, Qui Nhon. Hue and Da Nang. This agency was charged with repressing popular movements and wiping out NLF bases in Saigon. The Active Service Police was part of the Special Police Force, which also operated the Central Bureau of Investigation, based at the National Police Force Headquarters. All political prisoners in Saigon as well as important provincial prisoners were passed through the Bureau and it was here that files were kept, further enquiries carried out and the future of the prisoner determined. The Bureau operated three detention centres and a communal prison. *Ibid.*, 26009.

⁹⁵The Bureau of Military Security was an instrument of the Army Chiefs of Staff and positioned secret agents within each army unit as well as having the authority to arrest civilians and search property in the vicinity of army installations. Military police also had the authority to arrest civilians who had written or spoken out against the army. Arrested soldiers and suspect civilian accomplices were sent directly to military tribunal whilst other detainees were handed over to the Secret Police Force at the Central Bureau of Investigation. *Ibid.*, 26009.

⁹⁶The Central Intelligence Service gave orders and supplied information to the Active Service Police, the Bureau of Military Security and the Army Intelligence Bureau, as well as being able to make arrests. *Ibid.*, 26009.

⁹⁷The American Special Forces was said to have a headquarters in Saigon. Many of the prisoners sent to the Central Investigation Bureau claimed that they had been arrested and interrogated by American Special Forces. *Ibid.*, 26009.

⁹⁸The Secret Service was charged with kidnapping or “eliminating” officers and politicians who opposed the government, and worked directly under the orders of Thieu. *Ibid.*, 26009.

Force—to whom detainees would be passed over—and, in the larger cities, an Active Service Police Station. In addition, there would be Military Security, and amongst other organisations, Army Special Forces and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units of the CIA, which were under the command of the American military forces. Special Police Forces tended not to enter rural areas: in the countryside, arrests could be carried out by ordinary soldiers, Civil Guards (under the authority of the Province Chief), village administrative bodies, Provincial Government Rural Reconstruction Program cadres, and members of the local militia.⁹⁹ Detainees would be handed over to Division or Corps level (if arrested by a soldier on the battlefield)¹⁰⁰ or to the National Police and from there, to the Security Police Bureau or the Active Service Police. After interrogation, a prisoner would be categorised as either a prisoner-of-war, civil defendant, defector or “innocent”¹⁰¹ and the prisoner’s record and confession would then be passed on to the provincial or Saigon supervisory bureau. The detainee would then be passed on to other agencies for interrogation until discovering, potentially many months later, whether she was going to be released, detained or eventually tried.¹⁰²

Significantly, only a minority of the thousands arrested were regular military

⁹⁹Ibid., 26009.

¹⁰⁰On 7 March, 1964, the Vietnamese High Command issued a directive to all Vietnamese forces which stated that the “mistreatment or killing of prisoners of war is forbidden. Each unit is responsible for the handling of its prisoners. Mistreatment, beating or killing of prisoners will be severely punished.” Cited in a letter from Defense Secretary, Robert S. McNamara to Senator Fulbright, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations, 13 June, 1964. Submitted to the *Congressional Record* by Senator Fulbright on 28 March, 1972. *Congressional Record*, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, 18 January 1972- October 18, 1972, 10476.

¹⁰¹Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1973), 12.

¹⁰²Pham Tam, “Imprisonment and Torture in South Vietnam,” 26010.

elements of the NLF. Rather, as Amnesty International reported, the majority were “political prisoners”, a category which consisted broadly of three main groups. The first group included the infrastructure of the NLF: NLF civil servants, tax collectors, village chiefs, medical personnel and members of the women’s and youth associations. The second group included those suspected of involvement with the NLF. Individuals would be arrested because members of their family had been involved with the NLF, they were former resisters to the French, sympathisers or suspected sympathisers of the NLF,¹⁰³ they were discovered in action or informed upon by interrogated cadres, they did not have the correct identity papers,¹⁰⁴ they had participated in or watched a peace demonstration out of curiosity,¹⁰⁵ they lived in an area known to be pro-NLF or had been caught up in a military operation, they had resisted a village relocation or evacuation or had been present in an unauthorised area. If the individual was a woman, she could be arrested for not being able to account for her husband’s whereabouts. (He would thereby be assumed to be a member of the NLF.)¹⁰⁶ The third group comprised “The Third Force”, neutralist non-Communist political opponents of the South Vietnamese Government who not only threatened the staunch anti-Communist stance of the government, but, according to the Paris Peace Agreement (signed 27 January, 1973), were to share the

¹⁰³El Kaim-Sartre, "A Summary of the Evidence," 41.

¹⁰⁴Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 5.

¹⁰⁵Cited in a letter to the President, submitted on 13 July, 1970 by Congressman Anderson (Tennessee) to the *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 23961.

¹⁰⁶Letter from Dr. Marjorie Nelson to Hon. William R. Andersen, 8 July, 1970. Submitted to the *Congressional Record* on 17 July, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 24921-24922. Dr. Marjorie Nelson was captured in Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968 by Liberation Army Forces, but released 59 days later without harm.

organisation of the National Council for National Reconciliation and Concord (designed to organise general elections throughout South Viet Nam) with the GVN and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG).¹⁰⁷ Despite the different circumstances in which my interviewees were arrested, they were held, not as military prisoners but as one of these three categories of political prisoner.¹⁰⁸

Under Article Six of the Paris Peace Agreement, the issue of such civilian detainees—those who “having in any way contributed to the political and armed struggle between the two parties, have been arrested for that reason and have been kept in detention by either party during the period of hostilities”¹⁰⁹—was to have been resolved within ninety days of the cease-fire coming into effect.¹¹⁰ By the end

¹⁰⁷Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 4, 5. The Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) was the governmental form of the NLF adopted in 1969.

¹⁰⁸Dau, Phuong, Tam, Gom, Thao, Anh, Ri, Bao, Khanh, Vinh, Na and Hong had all been arrested and detained for interrogation—from one to four times—during their participation in the revolutionary movement. The reasons for their arrests differed. For example, Gom was arrested in 1968 on suspicion of being a Viet Cong after being found in a bunker by American soldiers; Thao was caught while carrying out her liaison activities; Dau was first arrested in 1956 as a known activist and again in 1958 as suspected Viet Cong; and Hong was arrested four times, once as student hanging out with friends (she had at that time not yet joined the revolution), twice while carrying out her revolutionary activities (one of these times being captured by Americans), and once, in 1969, because another activist had confessed her name and involvement under interrogation. Anh was arrested twice, once for being in a building known to house revolutionaries, and the second time for not having her identification papers; Ri was arrested whilst working in a ricefield on suspicion of being a VC; Bao and Khanh were captured by Australian troops in an ambush and whilst constructing a secret tunnel, respectively; Vinh was arrested once as a member of the Communist Youth and a second time, after being “revealed” by another; and Na was arrested twice in 1967 and 1970 during her revolutionary activities in the Saigon-Cho Lon area.

¹⁰⁹Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 3.

¹¹⁰However, as was noted in the *Nation*, confusion existed as to actual release date of the political prisoners. Article 3 of the Ceasefire Agreement—which called for the release of “the parties” prisoners during US troops withdrawal—was understood by the North Vietnamese to include all military and civilian prisoners. As was reported in the *New York Times* on 30 October, 1972, North Viet Nam’s Deputy Minister, Nguyen Minh Vy, stated that military prisoners had to be released within the sixty-day troop withdrawal period whilst political prisoners were to be released during a ninety-day period. Dr Kissinger however stated that military prisoners would be released first, with the South Vietnamese and PR governments negotiating the release of Vietnamese civilian prisoners afterwards. “Saigon’s Prisoners,” The

of April however, the exchange of prisoners by the Government of Viet Nam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government ground to a halt, with only 5,081 “Communist civilian detainees” recognised by the GVN and only a matter of hundreds released.¹¹¹

Rather than release the political prisoners however, it was found that the GVN had instead, since late 1972, been reclassifying prisoners from political to criminal prisoner status.¹¹² the objective being to make the post-ceasefire survival of the Thieu government possible through the removal of all potential opposition. This was supported by the stories of two Frenchmen—Andre Menras and Jean Pierre Debris—who were arrested in Saigon in 1970, following a demonstration outside the National Assembly against the Thieu government, and imprisoned in Chi Hoa prison for two years. The two men reported that, in the last nine months of their detention, they witnessed a new type of prisoner being brought to Chi Hoa. Rather than the usual detention of NLF members, they witnessed increasing numbers of the “Third Force” arriving—lawyers, intellectuals, professors, students, Catholics, Buddhist monks. Moreover, they claimed that the government was falsifying records and changing the status of political prisoners to those of common criminals, so as to ensure their

Nation, 18 December, 1972. Article submitted by Bella S. Abzug (New York) to the *Congressional Record* on 3 April, 1973. *Congressional Record*, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, 10874.

¹¹¹Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 3.

¹¹²According to an Amnesty International report, political prisoners—in particular, those suspected or known to be involved in NLF activities—were now being reclassified under the common criminal prisoner category *Gian Nhan Hiep Dang* (“group of evildoers”), a category which had originally been used in the 1950s to refer to individuals involved in racketeering and secret society activities. *Ibid.*, 10.

continued detention after the signature of the ceasefire.¹¹³ The *Washington Post* also revealed that, post-Agreement, Thieu was unlikely to free many of the political prisoners for whom the Agreement provided release; rather, new arrests were to be charged with common rather than political crimes, so as not to fall under the category of political prisoner.¹¹⁴ This experience of “reclassification” was described by one of my interviewees:

They played a very terrifying game. They ordered us to have fingerprints and pictures taken. They beat us until we could not resist. They ordered us to sign this and that document. They told us that we were no longer political prisoners, instead we were classified as felons. They declared to the world that Con Dao was no longer a prison for political prisoners but was now a prison for felons. We strongly objected to the Saigon authorities, calling them cruel and barbaric. We wanted to be returned to the authority of the Provisional Government of the Republic of South Vietnam; we requested that Mr Thieu [the President] must release us and release us promptly. They told us to have fingerprints and pictures taken but we refused. They beat us until we were unconscious. We vomited blood, had broken legs, we were lying all over the place.

When we were unconscious, they fingerprinted us. The guards held our heads in place while they photographed us. We distorted our faces and cried out when they tried to take the pictures. The pictures were worthless for identification. They put into the newspapers that Con Dao was no longer a political prison.¹¹⁵

Thus it was that, while visiting the Vatican in April 1973, Thieu was able to state

¹¹³For the Frenchmen’s accounts, see the article submitted to the *Congressional Record* by the Honourable Parren J. Mitchell (Maryland) on 2 April, 1973 (entry to *Congressional Record* dated 3 April, 1973). *Congressional Record*, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, 3 January 1973-December 22, 1973, 10903-10906.

¹¹⁴*Washington Post*, 18 and 23 January, 1973

¹¹⁵Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

that: “there are only two kinds of prisoners—those of “common law,” who number some 21,000—and “communist criminals,” who number close to 6,000.”¹¹⁶ With such extensive repression, it was not surprisingly that so many of my interviewees themselves underwent arrest and detention.

Interrogation: Sexual Violence as Torture

Depending upon who arrested them, my interviewees had found themselves held, for example, in a detention centre in an American compound, the district police station, Ben Tre Province police station, the security office of the ARVN or in a marine unit base. As fitting their arrests, the majority of my interviewees had been interrogated by Southern Vietnamese soldiers or police, although Dau and Hong’s interrogations had included the presence of American advisors during questioning (the physical violence involved in their detentions was conducted by Southern Vietnamese) and both Hong and Gom were detained and interrogated by American troops, Hong for eight days and Gom, in 1968, for half a month. Not surprisingly, the interviewees were derogatory towards their Vietnamese interrogators, for example, Dau described those who had questioned her on the first day of her first detention as “mainly comprised of those young men, failed in their exams, who were then given training to become policemen.”¹¹⁷ Thao described her interrogators thus:

¹¹⁶Cited by Edward Kennedy, reporting findings from a study mission representing the Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees to the Senate. See the findings and additional articles submitted to the *Congressional Record*, 4 June, 1973. *Congressional Record*, 93rd Congress, 1st Session, 3 January 1973-December 22, 1973, 17838-17849, 17886-17894. Another move by the GVN to “remove” political opposition was to announce, in March 1973, that the 5081 “Communist civilian detainees” would be handed over directly to the PRG, the implication being that the detainees were NLF supporters rather than anti-GVN activists. Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 10.

¹¹⁷Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

[The torture] was done by the Vietnamese youngsters under order of the Americans. The Americans used orphan youngsters, fed them, give them hash to smoke, alcohol to drink, so these youngsters did whatever the American told them to do. I used to hate these orphans so much. They were all Vietnamese, of young age but they beat their own people and spoke to the elders in a terribly vulgar language.¹¹⁸

As became clear from the testimonies, sexual violence featured heavily in my interviewees' experiences of torture during detention. Contemporary definitions of torture have progressively moved away from the dominant view when the Geneva Conventions were drafted, of torture as a method to extract information,¹¹⁹ towards recognising torture as serving a much broader range of purposes: “[i]t is not primarily the victim’s information, but the victim, that torture needs to win—or reduce to powerlessness.”¹²⁰ Thus, under Article 1 of the Torture Convention, torture is currently defined as:

[A]ny act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with

¹¹⁸Thao, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

¹¹⁹This is outlined in the 1958 ICRC Commentary to the Fourth Geneva Conventions:

in view of the other expressions which follow (i.e. inhuman treatment ... and suffering, etc) it seems that [torture] must be given here its, so to speak, legal meaning—i.e., the infliction of suffering on a person to obtain from that person, or from another person, confessions or information.

Cited in Copelon, “Surfacing Gender,” 250-251, n. 30.

¹²⁰Edward Peters, *Torture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 164.

the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.¹²¹

A violent act becomes an act of torture when pain is intentionally inflicted against the will of the victim, and with a purpose.¹²² Yet, evident within the above definition is the prevailing view that torture is an act committed *by the State*: a “torment inflicted by a public authority for ostensibly public purposes ... Torture is thus something that a public authority does or condones.”¹²³

As has been outlined by human rights organisations, sexual violence is a frequent component of political repression, with perpetrators including members of the military and security forces, paramilitaries, police and security officials, and prison

¹²¹Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, U.N. Doc A/RES/39/46 (10 Dec. 1984). Reprinted in Gandhi, *International Human Rights Documents*, 93-102.

¹²²As has been outlined, torture has many manifestations: beating; beating of the soles of the feet; finger torture; suspensions; cold torture; heat torture; irritant torture; forced walking or sitting on sharp objects; dental torture; ear torture; hair torture; scratching with a knife; being tied down; forced positions; clamping of the legs using sticks or similar objects; the twisting of body parts; poking; electrical torture; suffocation; sham execution; enforced physical exhaustion; forced labour; simultaneous beating over the ears; mutilation; disfigurement; sensory deprivation; perceptual deprivation; social deprivation; deprivation of basic needs; forced impossible choices; incongruent actions; threats and humiliation; misinformation; conditioning techniques; double-binding treatment (where torture follows seemingly sympathetic treatment); the continuation of torture despite submitting to the torturer's demands (reverse-effect techniques); pharmacological torture; sexual torture including the use of instruments and animals. Dr Nirakar Man Shrestha and Dr Bhogendra Sharma, *Torture and Torture Victims: A Manual for Medical Professionals* (Nepal: Centre for Victims of Torture, 1995). Cited in Lisa M. Kois, “Dance, Sister, Dance!” in *An End to Torture: Strategies for its Eradication*, ed. Bertil Duner (London: Zed Books, 1998), n.11.

¹²³Peters, *Torture*, 3.

guards.¹²⁴ The aim of sexual torture¹²⁵ is not primarily to force the victim to confess or give information. Rather, the objective of sexual torture is to destroy the prisoner's identity and the prisoner's sexuality, in effect, neutralising the enemy without having to kill the prisoner, as well as the more general aims of terrorising the population and preventive punishment of “subversive” elements.¹²⁶ In this light, the use of sexual violence and rape by State-sanctioned or public officials should be recognised as a method of torture,¹²⁷ an approach which has been strengthened by the recent recognition of rape as torture when committed in detention or under the custody of a government official.¹²⁸

As Ximena Bunster-Burrotto has described, politically and socially active women are often raped during situations of conflict both as punishment for their past activities

¹²⁴See, for example, Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, *Human Rights Watch Global Report*; Amnesty International, *Women in the Front Line: Human Rights Violations Against Women* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1991).

¹²⁵Sexual methods of torture can consists of: hetero- or homosexual rape; the rape of women by the use of specially trained dogs; the use of electric currents upon the sexual organs; mechanical stimulation of the erogenous zones; manual stimulation of the erogenous zones; the insertion of penis-shaped objects into the body-openings; the forced witnessing of “unnatural” sexual relations; forced masturbation or to be masturbated by others; fellatio and oral coitus; a general atmosphere of sexual aggression which arises from being molested, from nakedness, from lewd remarks and threats of sexual aggression made to the prisoner and her family and threats of the loss of ability of reproduction and sexual enjoyment in the future. E. Lira and E. Weinstein, “La Tortura Sexual (Sexual Torture).” Paper presented at the Seminario Internacional: Consecuencias de la represion en el Cono Sur. Sus efectos medicos, psicologicos y sociales. Montevideo. Cited in Inger Agger, “Sexual Torture of Political Prisoners: An Overview,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2, no. 3 (1989): 308.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 307.

¹²⁷Blatt, “Recognizing Rape,” 821-865.

¹²⁸Beth Stephens, “The Civil Lawsuit as a Remedy for International Human Rights Violations Against Women,” *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 156-157, nn.54-5; Amnesty International, *Women in the Front Line* (1990).

“I still wonder how”

and as discouragement of their future ones.¹²⁹ Such violence is as a form of social control directed at both politically active and non-active women to compel them to fulfil the traditional role of wife and mother and retreat back into the home.¹³⁰

It is not surprising that many of my interviewees, as suspected revolutionaries, were subjected to various forms of torture during interrogation, with the worst often taking place in police centres before transferral to prison.¹³¹ This was in spite of Article 7 of South Viet Nam's Constitution which specifically prohibited the use of torture or of confessions obtained by torture, threat or force.¹³² Methods used included beatings (with canes and whips), electric shock (where wires were attached to the detainee's ears, nipples or genitalia), forcible drinking of powdered lime solutions or other harmful substances, and being tied and suspended upside down from the ceiling (the “plane trip”). As the following two quotes illustrate, the violence experienced during by my interviewees was often overtly sexual in form and gendered in intent, directed at the women's reproductive roles. Na was interrogated in Saigon:

¹²⁹Ximena Bunster-Burotto, “Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America,” in *Women and Change in Latin America*, eds. June Nash and Helen Safa (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1986), 298.

¹³⁰Ibid., 306-307. The methods of torture used are often gendered in their nature and application. For example, not one of the ten forms of torture reserved exclusively for men by the El Salvadorean Security Police related to the victim's sexuality, whereas two of the five techniques—forced nudity and rape—applied exclusively to women were directly connected. OCISAM, *El Salvador, los efectores de la torture* (El Salvador, the effects of torture.) Cited in Aron, Corne, Fursland and Zelwer, “Gender-Specific Terror,” 38.

¹³¹One American doctor reported that the injuries she witnessed in her patients were received during interrogation rather than in the (Quang Ngai) prison in which she worked. “Letter from Dr. Marjorie Nelson to Hon. William R. Andersen,” 24922.

¹³²Signed statements obtained under duress were used extensively however in the trials of political prisoners. Don Luce, “Torture in Saigon”. Article entered into *Congressional Record* by Donald M. Fraser (Minnesota) in the House of Representatives, 8 June, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 18820.

I was there two long months for interrogation. [...] They interrogated me in terrible ways, with many techniques [...] When they interrogated me, they had no mercy. They said they would beat me until not even the dogs would look at me, let alone a man[...]. For the activity inside the city, they interrogated in many ways. They exploited me. Can you imagine? They put earth worms in my pants, in my vagina, even lizards, finally eels; electricity, water, *any* form, we suffered all these things. We tried to endure, determined to die rather than confess.¹³³

For Anh:

The majority of Americans were very brutal in beating up villagers. For example, they took small pins and stuck them through women's fingers and slammed their hands against a wall. They used electric shock, attaching instruments to women's nipples and vulva. This is why I said Americans are very cruel. Once, Americans arrested me when I was in an area where they were stationed. I did not have my identity papers and I told them I could go home and get them but they would not let me go. The soldiers hit me very hard; I was seven months pregnant and I thought I would miscarry.¹³⁴

Of my interviewees, however, it was Dau and Hong who described most explicitly the violence they experienced under arrest. Dau was detained and arrested twice, in 1956 and 1958. During her first detention, she was held for six days and her testimony revealed a progression in terms of the violence used against her during interrogation. On the first day of arrest, she was beaten for two hours. The next day, she was subjected to water torture which entailed a rubber hose leading from a bucket being forced down her nose, filling Dau's stomach with water:

¹³³Na, interview with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

¹³⁴Anh, interview with author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

They were mixing some water with limestone. I had long hair and they used my hair to tie me to the legs of the seat. They undressed me, but I was struggling, trying to stop them from undressing me. They kicked me several times until I was unconscious, so that they could pour water, and that was water mixed with limestone powder and fish sauce. They forced water into my mouth and then after, climbed onto my stomach and kicked and stamped on my stomach so that all the water was forced out again, with blood. I just vomited all the water out together with blood. Of all forms of torture and beating, I wasn't scared of anything except this form of torture as it was designed to kill you. Even if you vomited all the water out, you would still die later on.¹³⁵

On the third day, having failed to force Dau to confess to being a member of the Communist Party, the soldiers turned to electric shock:

At first, they had electric currents into my ears and also live wires tied to my two thumbs and two big toes. Worst of all was that they forced you to bite the live wire. And into your eyes and your vagina. I was tortured from ten o'clock in the morning through to twelve o'clock, and the whole group of soldiers was tired of me because they had to skip lunch because I didn't admit or confess anything. [...] they would give you an electric shock so that you became unconscious, and then when you came round, they would do it again. If you had died, they wouldn't know.¹³⁶

On the fourth day, they tried a new approach:

And another time, they also tied me up onto the ceiling with my feet hanging down, a metre high away from the floor. They kept asking questions repeatedly like, “What did you do?” “Who was your boss?” “Who was your commander?” “What was your position?” They just kept asking questions repeatedly. And then three guys would stand in the room holding different types

¹³⁵Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

¹³⁶Ibid.

of whip. One was a large wooden stick, another was a rattan stick, and another kind of stick and they would just keep beating me. At one point, I saw the head of their group standing against the wall and asking questions. I was able to use all my force to kick on to this guy's face, banging his head onto the wall. It hurt him very much. The next thing I knew was that I was beaten up very fiercely until I was unconscious and then they untied me.¹³⁷

Hong experienced similar treatment—beatings on the kneecaps, broken teeth, electric shock—on the four occasions when she was arrested and interrogated.¹³⁸ Yet, in the course of their detentions, both Dau and Hong experienced a shift to a different, psychological tactic. Hong said of the fourth day of her third arrest in 1969:

They took me to the interrogation room. [I'm] calling it the interrogation room but in fact it was similar to an administration office where they would sweet talk you into revealing information. In that room, there were the Vice-Director of the [Ben Tre] police station, an American advisor and several other people. The Vice-Director of the police station started first by telling me to tell them of the number of battles that I had participated in and of the secret bases of the Viet Cong. And he said if I informed them, he would sponsor and bail me out because I had a long future ahead of me, therefore I shouldn't listen to the Communists—"They might give you a vision of ten or twenty years ahead, but don't believe them. The current situation is that the Communists are failing everywhere, you've been kept here the last couple of days and didn't know that out there the army of the Republic of Viet Nam has been defeating the Communist forces." Then the American guy brought me some soft drinks and sweets and invited me to eat but I said no thank you. At the time, my hair was long, down to my back, but it was tangled after days of being in detention. The American guy took out from his pocket a small comb and started to comb my hair. All they wanted to do was to persuade me but I could see their intentions. I had heard before

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Hong, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

and listen to radios about their psychological warfare,
so I was aware of it.¹³⁹

For Dau, this change in tactic came on the fifth day of her first detention. She said:

There were some policemen from Saigon who came round to try and talk politics to me. This guy was telling me, “Oh my little sister, you are so young and you waste your life like this. If you admit what you have done, I will take you as my wife, take care of your son and you.” So, he untied me, he dressed me and put on my clothes for me and combed my hair. And he was talking really sweet to me, to talk me into admitting things so that he would marry me.¹⁴⁰

In the cases of both women, their refusal to reveal information was met with violent sexual abuse. Dau was stabbed repeatedly in her vagina by a ten centimetre-blade knife by the Saigon policeman. This was despite pleas from Dau and comments made by a policeman Dau had known when they were both revolutionaries against the French, not to rape her as there were many other younger and more beautiful out there for him, and that Dau was married and already had a child.¹⁴¹ Hong was raped during her fourth arrest and detention by three men, two of whom who had been interrogating her. She was a virgin at the time. The injuries Hong sustained were so severe that she was taken to the prisoners’ unit of the hospital where she would have died had she not had a blood transfusion.¹⁴²

The women’s testimonies reveal the often overtly sexual and gendered nature of

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Hong, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

women's experiences of violence during arrest and interrogation: the targeting of women's sexual organs, the use of the women's long hair to tie them down or the combing of their hair as a psychological tactic, and the offers of marriage. But, Dau's testimony in particular is significant in view of its illustration of how women's gendered and cultural roles were further manipulated against them. Paralleling comments made in relation to rape during military operations, interviewees' testimonies revealed that the women also believed that their age and marital status increased or diminished the possibility of abuse within the interrogation or imprisonment process. Dau, upon her first arrest and detention in 1956, believed that she had been at risk due to her young age, saying: “at that time, there were widespread rapes. I was twenty-four and twenty-five and still looked ok.”¹⁴³ In addition, she witnessed how:

The other women in my group were kept separately and the younger ones were raped. [...] They came to interrogate the women. They all looked very young, very good looking and they all raped the young women. They all undressed the women and poured water. They were smoking cigarettes and used them to burn the women. These women were all crying and the younger ones were raped.¹⁴⁴

Secondly, as has been recognised in recent literature on gender-based violence in war, female roles are often manipulated during interrogation for maximum effect against the victims. The sexual torture of women therefore uses cultural norms about femininity and takes advantage of shame and guilt in connection with an active,

¹⁴³Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

feminine sexuality.¹⁴⁵ Thus:

The ideology behind sexual torture of men can be said to be an abolition of political power/potency by the induction of sexual *passivity*, whereas the ideology behind sexual torture of women is rather the abolition of political power/potency by the *activation* of sexuality. The aim is to induce shame and guilt in the woman for being a “whore” because in this way, the authorities seek to identify political activity with sexual activity. Hence, sexual torture seeks to reverse culturally defined gender roles.¹⁴⁶

The first of these female roles is that of the wife or girlfriend, where the woman is abused as either punishment because of her connection to a particular “enemy” male or in order to extract information from her partner, relative or friend. One such example of the latter was reported in *Congressional Record*. In this particular instance, a highschool philosophy teacher was not only completely undressed and beaten in front of several whisky-drinking policemen, but also in front of her fiancé, in an attempt to force him to sign confession papers.¹⁴⁷ Dau was not tortured in front of a male relative or colleague, however, her abuse was similarly manipulated to compel others to confess. As Dau commented, women would be beaten in front of other female detainees to convey a specific message: “I was unconscious, but they made me regain consciousness. They called in other women detainees. That was common practice: when they tortured one person, they would call in other detainees to watch the scene, in order to scare the women who hadn’t been tortured.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵Agger, “Sexual Torture of Political Prisoners,” 313.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 313-314.

¹⁴⁷Don Luce, “Torture in Saigon,” 18820.

¹⁴⁸Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

Dau's experiences similarly reflected the manipulation of another female role, that of mother, during interrogation. The arrest of a woman during this conflict with her child was problematic. If the mother was arrested quickly she would be unable to find a carer for her child, who would then be imprisoned along with her mother. As Dau's testimony shows, some women believed that motherhood could protect them against abuse during interrogation. When Dau's son was only one year old, she was detained (in 1956), following the Diem government's policy of arrest and detention of ex-revolutionaries and anti-government activities. She said:

I was arrested at the time and I brought my son with me [...] at the beginning, they kept everybody together but later on, they found out that I was an activist from the French time so they kept me separate. At the time, my son was still breastfeeding so I had to protest so that I could take my son with me. There were also two [other] reasons for me to take my son with me. Firstly, that it helped to protect against being raped; and secondly, it would make me look like I wasn't active in the revolution because usually common sense would have it that with a small child, you wouldn't be involved in all these activities.¹⁴⁹

However, as Dau's testimony shows, her son would then be used against her as the enemy tried to prise out information. As Dau commented on the third day of her first detention: “Each time I was tortured, they kept my son separate, leaving him in the yard, to beat me up. But one time, I struggled to keep my son in my arms and they had wires in my ears, and they switched the current on and it went through my son.”¹⁵⁰ During the six days of this particular interrogation, Dau also remembered:

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

[T]hey knew they couldn't extract anything from me, so they started to maintain this routine beating. They kept in the cell but they everyday took me out to beat me. At this time, my son was thirteen months old and could start to cry "mama". So every time he saw me being beaten, he would cry for me and then later on, they started beating my son, banging his head. Also, they put my son into a fire ant nest so that he would be bitten. That time, I could see my son was swollen everywhere with bite marks, and over night to the next morning, his whole body was swollen badly and he had a fever and couldn't sleep. He was crying all night through. They were trying to make me feel bad and sorry and making me state the fact that I was the secretary of the Communist party cell in the district. Then another night they undressed me and tied my legs and arms apart and just left me there. They took my son away. I didn't know where they took him. He was so scared, he started to cry but was so scared that he didn't make any noise. I could see his nose was running and the tears running down his face but he couldn't make a noise. I could see him cry but he couldn't make a noise because he was so scared. I could see that but I couldn't reach out to wipe the tears from him.¹⁵¹

Dau did not reveal in her testimony whether or not she had confessed as a result of this treatment, nor did she describe what happened to her child afterwards. Undoubtedly though, the manipulation of the maternal role was an incredibly powerful weapon during interrogation and detention.

Imprisonment

For some of the interviewees, arrest and detention was later followed by imprisonment. Thao was jailed for several years and released in 1972, Hong was held in Thu Duc prison for one year whilst Dau was jailed twice, each time for eight months. Political prisoners could be tried by two courts which existed under the

¹⁵¹Ibid.

auspices of the Department of National Defence and were staffed predominantly by members of the military. The first was the Ordinary Military Court, based in Saigon, which tried army law violations and civilian political crimes. This Court dealt with approximately eighty percent of the political cases. The second court to try political prisoners was the Field Military Court for which there was no appeal except to President Thieu.¹⁵² In such cases where there was insufficient evidence to secure a conviction, the suspect would be brought before district security committees which only required grounds to believe an individual guilty of supporting the Viet Cong to send him or her to Con Dao prison or another detention centre for six months. Following an administrative decree in 1968 by the South Vietnamese Government known as “An Tri”, citizens could be held for periods of six months to two years without trial, with provision made for renewal of pre-trial confinement.¹⁵³

Political prisoners could therefore be held without either trial or sentencing; not surprisingly this system also lent itself to prisoners being held long after their release dates had expired. One of my interviewees described how: “At first, the sentence was two years, but the time they had to serve was extended. If other women made bad statements against them, the women’s time was increased to four years.”¹⁵⁴ Another commented that:

¹⁵²Field Military Courts were originally established under President Diem under the Decree Law 11-62 and were similar to the Special Military Tribunal—including a “mobile” guillotine—established by Ngo Dinh Diem in 1959 to suppress political opposition. Pham Tam, “Imprisonment and Torture in South Vietnam”, 26009. Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 18.

¹⁵³As referred to in the “Concurrent Resolution Relating to Treatment and Exchange of Military and Civilian Prisoners in Vietnam” submitted by Congressman Andersen (of Tennessee) on 13 July, 1970, to the *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 23960-23961.

¹⁵⁴Anh, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

The fact is, if they carried out my sentence in a right way, I would go from prison to prison, then return after five years. But, no! Five years became ten years, then I was sent to Con Dao prison three times, until the Revolution Day, finally. They said, “Never return the tiger to the jungle!” When I was released, I was very unhappy and miserable. [...] Our release was very arbitrary. The authorities did not know our records so they released people randomly. Lucky or unlucky to be on the release lists.¹⁵⁵

The issue of imprisonment either without sentencing or post-release date was revealed in a May 1971 report, submitted to the *Congressional Record* the following year. The report listed seventy-eight high school students, teachers and journalists who had been arrested by the Southern Vietnamese Government; thirteen were women. The women were held at four different prisons and had been arrested between 1967 and 1970. Yet, of these thirteen, no judgement or charge had been brought for seven, two had been sentenced only to surveillance and four had been given prison sentences ranging from two to ten years (averaging at five and a half years). Despite this, the average sentence served by twelve¹⁵⁶ of the women was approximately two and a third years, with ten of them already having exceeded the sentence (if any) handed down to them by the time of the report.¹⁵⁷

South Viet Nam’s “official” prisons were supervised by the Ministry of Interior’s Department of General Administration of Rehabilitation Centres. In total, there were

¹⁵⁵Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁵⁶The date of arrest and length of sentence served for one of the women was not given in the table.

¹⁵⁷“Women Prisoners who are Seriously Ill Mentally for whom there is no Adequate Care” and “List of Students, Teachers, Journalists Arrested by the South Vietnamese Government”, May 1971. Submitted by Representative Dow (New York) to the *Congressional Record* on 17 April, 1972. *Congressional Record*, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, 18 January 1972-October 18 1972, 13075-76.

sixty-four “official” prisons. There were the five national prisons run by ARVN officers—Chi Hoa (in Saigon), Tan Hiep (Vung Tau province), Thu Duc (Gia Dinh Province), Phu Quoc (Phu Quoc island) and Con Dao (on Con Son Island)—and a hospital prison at Cho Quan hospital. Of these, Chi Hoa, Con Dao and Cho Quan hospital prison held political, military and ordinary criminal prisoners, Phu Quoc, prisoners-of-war captured by American or Southern Vietnamese soldiers during military operations, and Tien Hiep, untried, political detainees or prisoners who had served their sentence but had not yet been released. Thu Duc was a women-only prison for women arrested in the Saigon, Cholon or surrounding areas, female prisoners with heavy sentences, or those awaiting trial.¹⁵⁸

The remaining fifty-eight prisons were provincial prisons, supervised by the Province Chiefs which held on average five hundred to one thousand prisoners, although there were exceptions such as the prisons in Gia Dinh, Ben Tre, My Tho, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, Da Nang, Hoi An and Hue which could hold as many as one to two and a half thousand prisoners. Some of these provincial prisons only held detainees, or political prisoners awaiting trial; others temporarily held prisoners en route to other prisons, or an indiscriminate mix of military, political and criminal prisoners.¹⁵⁹ “Hard-core”

¹⁵⁸Pham Tam, “Imprisonment and Torture in South Vietnam,” 26011-26013. In addition to these were the secret or semi-official prisons. In Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh area, these included two prisons in the general headquarters of the National Police Force (one being the detention centre located within the Central Bureau of Investigation), the eight prisons of the Active Service Police, the nine prisons of the District Police Headquarters, the prison of the Official Police Headquarters, the prison of the Bureau of Military Security, the prison of the Secret Service of the Army headquarters and the Central Intelligence Service’s prison. In the provinces, the National Police, the Special Police, the Active Service Police, the Military Security Forces, the Local Army Forces each operated a prison, as did each American and Allied Forces’ military barrack. At district level, one prison would operate to contain those arrested by the Security District Branch of the Special Police, the Civil Guards, the Cadres of the Provincial Government Rural Reconstruction Programme and the district chief. *Ibid.*, 26012.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 26012.

or long-term prisoners tended to be held at the prime centres; the remainder were held at local interrogation or correctional detention centres throughout South Viet Nam, of which there were around five hundred.¹⁶⁰

Of the all the prisons however, the most notorious was the aforementioned South Vietnamese National Prison of Con Dao on Con Son Island,¹⁶¹ first established in 1862 by the French as a penal colony. Con Dao was Viet Nam’s largest correctional institution. A detailed news report of the conditions within Con Dao prison first came to light in the US in the *Appleton, Wisconsin Post-Crescent*, on 27 July, 1969.

In this article, the author estimated that, as of 1 March, 1969, there were in excess of

¹⁶⁰The five hundred or so detention centres comprised of: interrogation centres attached to the provincial prisons; between one hundred and fifty and two hundred district prisons; detention houses attached to each district’s police post; a detention centre at each of the forty-nine police prefectures in South Viet Nam, and the military detention centres at Go Vap in Saigon and the forty-four military sectors. The police organisations in Saigon also operated detention and interrogation centres. Amnesty International, *Political Prisoners in South Viet Nam*, 6-7.

¹⁶¹Con Dao prison is situated on Con Son Island, 140 miles from Saigon, off the south-east coast of Viet Nam in the South China Sea. The terms “Con Dao” and “Con Son” and its French name, Polo Condor are often used interchangeably as the name for the prison. Prisoners held at Con Dao were considered civilian prisoners and not prisoners-of-war, who were held at the island prison of Phu Quoc. In the cover-up over the tiger cages at Con Dao, the American Embassy spokesman in Saigon insisted in July 1970 that there were no prisoners-of-war held at Con Dao. However, Congressman Andersen disagreed, reporting that officials for the Agency for International Development had informed him that approximately 35 former POWs were kept there, who had committed crimes since their capture. This was reiterated by Representatives Moss and Reid who—involved in the investigation of South Vietnamese penal system by the House Foreign Operations and Government Information Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations—reported the International Red Cross’ findings that prisoners-of-war were being treated in violation of the Geneva Conventions, for example, imprisonment and in shackles, and the inadequate provision of food and water. Whilst it was difficult to ascertain whether or not there were prisoners-of-war being held in civilian prisons and in similar conditions to those in Con Dao, there was concern that reports of maltreatment of South Vietnamese would affect the treatment and release of American prisoners-of-war being held in Ha Noi. “Joint Statement by Representative John E. Moss, Chairman, and Representative Ogden R. Reid”, submitted by Congressman Hawkins on 28 July, 1970 to the *Congressional Record*. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 26004; see also the statement by Senator Fulbright and the various articles submitted with it to the *Congressional Record* on 15 July, 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 24359-24364.

nine thousand prisoners held at Con Son Island. Of these, approximately two thousand were convicted Viet Cong, political, religious, criminal and Southern Vietnamese military prisoners; the remaining seven thousand prisoners were detainees—individuals suspected of being Viet Cong supporters or sympathisers but as yet not tried or convicted. Approximately two thousand of the inmates were trustees who had housing outside of the seven camps.¹⁶²

Con Dao prison was divided into camps: numbers one through to five housed convicted prisoners, numbers six and seven holding the detainees. The prison was infamous however for its “tiger cages,” contained in two buildings (one for men, one for women) holding sixty to seventy compartments each. Five students imprisoned in Con Dao with hard labour described a tiger cage as:

a room, or more correctly a small cage about 3 meters (10 feet) long and 1½ meters (5 feet) wide, in an area separated from the other cages by many walls and totally isolated from all life outside. They threw 5 people into this narrow cage. On average, each person had only about 2 hand breadths of space in which to lie and lives. The legs were shackled and held high day and night—even while eating, sleeping, washing—fastened to a metal rod about 4 or 5 meters (14 to 17 feet) long. They forced us to lie in silence; we couldn't sit or stir in this hot, narrow, dark cage. The cages are separated by stone walls more than a meter thick. A small door is kept tightly shut all day except for a few minutes when it is opened and reclosed during meals. Above it are metal bars running

¹⁶²Mark Oliva, “Detention Based on Suspicion: Vietnam Concentration Camp Operates with US Approval,” *Appleton, Wisconsin Post-Crescent*, 27 July, 1969. Submitted jointly by the Honourable William A. Steiger and Honourable John W. Byrnes (both of Wisconsin) on 14 July, 1970 to the *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 24240-24241. (Also recorded in the *Congressional Record* on 21 July 1970. *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 25212-25214. Mark E. Oliva had spent four years in service with the US Army, the last two years assigned to the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) as an advisor to South Viet Nam's General Political Warfare Department. He Con Dao Island twice as part of the MACV psychological operations study groups.

horizontally lengthwise, with a small space or passageway left for the orderlies who make regular checks. We had to lie there all day. Sitting or standing (during the first months) was not allowed. [...] Even when the latrine barrel was open and leaking all over so the floor had a pasty covering, we still had to lie quietly and endure it. The tile roof had leaked for years and never been repaired, and during the rains the water poured down into the cage, not to mention the sand pebbles, and blinding dust that came in on windy days. The ground where we lay was uneven, rough, bumpy with sand, pebbles and dirt since it was many years since the last time it had been cleaned.¹⁶³

Living conditions within Con Dao prison were harsh with prisoners frequently maltreated. Prisoners were only allowed one set of clothing, no blankets or sheets for warmth or to protect from the heat, and only one sleeping mat per five individuals in a cell. Prisoners had to remain shackled to the metal bar, inducing paralysis.¹⁶⁴

According to one Con Dao survivor, cell walls would be painted one metre high from the floor with tar; when it was hot, the tar would melt and stick to the women if they touched it.¹⁶⁵

Prisoners were fed twice a day with only dried fish, fish sauce and rice or gruel to

¹⁶³“Report of five students released from Con Son Island May 1970.” Submitted on 7 July, 1970 to *Congressional Record*, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, January 1970-January 1971, 23048-23052. The students also described the “Cow Cage” which was built by the government in 1970. 17 people were kept in these cages.

¹⁶⁴Prisoners were restrained using two different kinds of shackles. The first kind was round and smooth and belonged to the French period. The second kind of shackle was made from F-8 iron, provided by US aide for the construction of houses, and contained “teeth” to cause wounding upon movement. *Ibid.*, 23051.

¹⁶⁵Bui Thi Luu, interview with unknown interviewer, 12 June, 1992. Copy of interview transcript held by Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

eat, and various means were employed to hinder a prisoner’s food intake.¹⁶⁶ To supplement this diet, prisoners would search for dry grass, leaves, insects, crickets, beetles and lizards. Vinh described the food she was given in Con Dao whilst imprisoned in a Tiger Cage:

The food was kept a long time and tasted bitter; the salty fish was old and had become green with worms inside the fish. When they poured the salty fish in a big wok with cold water, long worms crawled out. [...]

In the rice was sand, mouse and roach droppings, and rice shells. Normally that’s how they fed us. In this three long months, if we refused to confess, they would not feed us salty fish any more.¹⁶⁷

Women prisoners also had their water rationed to their two meals—a small condensed milk can one-third filled with water. One woman told how they feared dying from thirst through the water being reduced in order to make the women confess.¹⁶⁸ When the water did not suffice, inmates were forced to drink their own urine or the water left over from rinsing out the latrine barrel.¹⁶⁹ This lack of water made hygiene impossible, especially during menstruation. During the hot months of April, May, June and July, washing was restricted to once a week, teeth brushing was forbidden, those carrying out the waste bucket (toilet) were not given water to wash

¹⁶⁶The five students claimed that three methods were employed to prevent inmates eating adequately: they were ordered to eat quickly (with those in the tiger cages only given three minutes); the rice was cooked into a liquidly paste which succeeded in immediately making the prisoner feel too full to eat more but left the inmate hungry one or two hours later; and mixing the rice with sand and pebbles. “Report of five students,” 23049.

¹⁶⁷Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹“Report of five students,” 23049.

with if their hands got dirty,¹⁷⁰ and prisoners were forced to use a scrap of cloth torn from shirts or pockets as toilet paper, the strip to be washed out with urine afterwards for reuse.¹⁷¹ As Vinh described:

In 1969, each person had one pair of black pajamas, pants and shirt. Gradually, we tore off the sleeves, then other parts of the shirt, until we were naked from the waist up. Then, we tore up the pants until they were short. And then, there was nothing left except to cover the private place down below.¹⁷²

As a consequence of the living conditions and maltreatment, prisoners often suffered many physical ailments, for example, chronic dysentery, diarrhoea and stomach disorders, tuberculosis, gangrene and physical exhaustion. Medical care was limited and packages sent by families containing medicine would sometimes not make it through to the prisoner. Vinh described how women's health deteriorated in prison:

At that time, our faces, our legs and arms were swollen. Imagine: if you pricked us with a pin, the water would pop out. [...] First, the legs became swollen, then our faces. Our faces were swollen so we couldn't see. We laid in the same place and didn't move. [...] The guards delivered food and we ate but we could not sit up. Arms and legs were very weak. We couldn't see anymore.¹⁷³

In addition to the material deprivations of the prison system, women were also affected by psychological and physical controls imposed upon them. Again, as seen during interrogation, one control was the manipulation of maternal and/or familial

¹⁷⁰Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁷¹"Report of five students," 23050.

¹⁷²Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁷³Ibid.

ties. One of the women in the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum interviews described her experiences of giving birth whilst in prison. Six months pregnant, Nguyet was arrested in Nha Be, a sub-division of the Saigon-Gia Dinh area. During detention, she was tied up, had lights shone in her face for hours at a time, nails hammered through her fingers and part of a smashed glass bottle forced into her vagina, for which she spent fourteen days in hospital. After this, and after refusing to sign a document classifying her as a VC prisoner, Nguyet was imprisoned, only to give birth in Bien Hoa prison:

My child did not have any clothing at all. They left my child and me hungry for three days and nights. I had to ask a guard to do me a favour and collect rain water so I could feed my child with rain water instead of milk [...] The enemy gave me three options: sign the statement [declaring I would leave the revolution] and both of us would be freed; do not sign the statement and the child would be separated from me to be put in an orphanage; or if not the orphanage, the child would be sent back to [my]family.

Nguyet refused to sign the statement but was determined to keep her child with her:

They brought me and my child to Qui Nhon hospital. I collected robes and strings from visitors to the prison so I could tie my child to myself. I also asked the security guard to go and buy twelve needles for me so I could pin my child’s clothes to my own clothes [...]

I had to struggle to keep my child from birth until she¹⁷⁴ was thirteen months [old]. It was painful to see the child grow bigger everyday in such a condition but I had no other choice. As long as I was in prison I would keep my child with me to the day of my release. Everyday I felt my child, every single detail in order to

¹⁷⁴The interviewee did not specify whether the child was a boy or a girl and due to the use of the gender-neutral pronoun “em ay” (s/he), it is not possible to determine the sex of the child from the written text.

remember everything in case she was separated from me and I would have to go look for her later.¹⁷⁵

In the end, Nguyet gave up her child to a friend and the child was passed on to relatives who raised the child until Nguyet was released.

Another woman prisoner from Con Dao also described how women’s marital status would be used against them:

As we were married with husbands, they tortured both ourselves and our husbands. I had a younger brother who was also arrested. Hence, apart from being tortured physically, we also suffered each time we heard the screams of our loved relatives, who were also being tortured by them. [...] Each time the “brothers” [i.e. the male prisoners] protested, we were worried not only for the brothers but also very much worried for our own husbands.¹⁷⁶

Familial ties were also manipulated in another manner. Prisoners often served their sentences being moved between different prisons; for example, the aforementioned May 1971 report highlighted the case studies of six seriously mentally ill female prisoners (out of the total of eighty-three women then held) at Chi Hoa prison. Of these women, many had been held at different prisons—An-Giang, Chi Hoa, Phu Loi, Go Cong, Thu Duc, Con Dao and Gia Dinh—during their ten-year plus sentences. As the report also highlighted, prisoners were often held in prisons far away from their hometowns, which when combined with the frequent movement of the prisoners

¹⁷⁵Dang Thi Nguyet, interviewer unknown, 5 December, 1992. Copy of interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City and on file with author; translation by Nguyen An Phuong.

¹⁷⁶Le Thi My Nhan, unknown interviewer, 12 June, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy held by author; translation by Nguyen An Phuong.

from facility to facility could make familial visits a near impossibility.¹⁷⁷ As the following three quotes show however, even when such visits did take place, they would be used by prison guards to punish the women prisoners:

When the enemy could not “break” these women, they brought in their families to visit the women prisoners to convince them to surrender. But the women refused to meet their families. The families cried and returned home.¹⁷⁸

When I was in prison, I was visited by my family in Qui-Nhon, but I did not accept their gifts. [...] My father came to see me and talked to me about giving up. I told my father to go home and not to come back here again. The reason they allowed the prisoners to have visitors was so the visitors would carry out the policy of appealing to us to rally to the South Vietnamese side, taking advantage of family sentiment to persuade me. Visits by families only created problems for me and for others as well. I knew that when I said for the family to go away, the enemy would hit us. They beat me and I was badly injured and the other women carried me on a stretcher. The women asked the jailors why they allowed visitors and then they beat the prisoners. [...] Four more women were knocked down and the supervisor told eight prisoners to carry the four injured women, two on one stretcher. My family’s visit caused bloodshed for more than ten women. Since then, my family stopped visiting me. They forced my family to try to persuade me to return home. [...] The unfortunate women whose families visited them, they were beaten and others were beaten, too, because of the visits.¹⁷⁹

For fourteen years I was in prison and I never had anyone to visit me, never. My old mother and younger sisters were at home when I was captured. Each day, they came to hit my mother and they arrested her, so

¹⁷⁷“Women Prisoners who are Seriously Ill Mentally,” 13074-13076.

¹⁷⁸Khanh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁷⁹Bao, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

who [was] going to visit me during those fourteen years?¹⁸⁰

In addition to these family visits, other tactics would be employed to encourage women to defect to the republic. One tactic was cajolment, with the women offered special favours or treatment in return for leaving the revolution and saluting the flag.

As one woman told:

For a whole month, they [tried to] convince and change us. We took that chance to eat better food and drinks so that we could improve our health and carry on our struggles against them. After one month, they asked if we agreed to break away. We all said no. Then they brought us to An Hai Pass for a day out and tried to convince us but they did not succeed either.¹⁸¹

Similar tactics were used to alienate the women from each other, for example, by giving one group food and preferential treatment over another: “they [would] split us and divide us, so that we started to suspect each other’s activities and they could take advantage of every individual.”¹⁸² One of the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum interviewees, Nguyen Thi Anh, described the situation in Qui Nhon prison:

I was arrested in 1970, put in Qui Nhon prison, straight to camp one. In camp one there were several sisters who were protesting and opposing them but also there were people who confessed and collaborated with them. There were three hundred of such collaborators who were in charge of keeping order, then the number was increased to six hundred. In every room there

¹⁸⁰Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁸¹An unidentified woman, unknown interviewer, 12 June, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

¹⁸²Hong Nhat, unknown interviewer, 12 November, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

were several tens of collaborators. It would be necessary to say that not all collaborators were bitches but the fact was some of them was forced to collaborate due to their family and children situations. The collaborators had to watch the sisters day and night to make sure that we were not talking to one another [...] At night, collaborators and security guards wearing their hair in buns, rolling up their sleeves, stood outside the rooms to guard. They used big canes of two metres long and took every woman out of the room to cane. [...] Our ability to resist was very weak due to the fact that our force was very thin; in each room there were sixty collaborators and security guards while we would have only about ten people.¹⁸³

Prisoners' demands for improvement were labelled as “revolts”, “Communist rebel struggle” or “violating internal regulations” and women's refusal to salute the flag could be met with heavy punishment, including beatings and the application of lime powder:¹⁸⁴ “Normally, seven days and nights a week, we were never left alone. One day, they poured lime on us; the next day, they opened the door and beat us.”¹⁸⁵ Vinh also told how:

On each cage, they put a box of lime in the middle and the guards threw lime on us if we talked to others. We were not allowed to bathe but, if we moved, they threw down lime and then sprinkled water on us. The lime was absorbed by our skin, thick like a paste, burning our flesh. Our hair fell out and, when we put our hands through our hair, the skin came out, too. We had suffered for three long months and now we thought we were going to die.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³Nguyen Thi Anh, unknown interviewer, 5 December, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women's Museum. Copy held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

¹⁸⁴“Report of five students,” 23050, 23051.

¹⁸⁵Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

Due to Thieu’s repressive and reclassification policies, prisoners from various categories—military prisoners, political prisoners, general security prisoners, female prisoners (and children) and common criminals—were all kept indiscriminately mixed, to the extent that the population of one prison (Chi Hoa) was described as containing “everything from former presidential candidates, Buddhist monks, women and children who have never committed any offense, to the most hardened criminals and drug addicts.”¹⁸⁷ One consequence of this was that common criminals convicted of robbery, murder and rape and sentenced to hard labour or the death penalty were often used to guard the other prisoners, with the prospect of their sentences being reduced.¹⁸⁸

According to the women’s testimonies, these guards were violent in their treatment of the prisoners. According to Phuong, the torture women received while detained at the police station was continued periodically in prison, with beatings escalating whenever the South Vietnamese were attacked or lost a battle.¹⁸⁹ Bao, held at Qui Nhon prison commented on how:

The enemy continually harassed and terrorized us. The enemy used returnee henchmen to beat and mistreat us every day, every hour, every night. I remember the supervisor said, “Any day I don’t see your blood, I can’t eat!”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷Press Conference, 2 January, 1973. Cited in Indochina Peace Campaign, “Saigon’s Prisoners,” 9906.

¹⁸⁸“Report of five students,” 23051.

¹⁸⁹Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

¹⁹⁰Bao, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

Yet, sometimes this abuse could take on sexual overtones:

It was very brutal. First of all, if the female prisoners were still virgins then definitely they would be raped. Secondly, in torturing the soldiers would beat the women in their vaginas or force things into it, for example, broken bottlenecks [...] would be forced into the vagina. Their intention had always been to torture the women in a way that upon release she wouldn't be able to conceive and be pregnant anymore. [...] [E]ach time a woman was arrested and was put into jail, then you were one hundred percent certain that you would be subjected to barbaric torture methods.¹⁹¹

Similarly, Vinh told of her own experiences:

I was in prisons for fourteen years. I met this type of men ten or twenty times; men who were incorrigible, men who killed many political prisoners. They were given amnesty to be free. Incorrigible, they raped women, they stole, I don't know how many times I have met this type of men. So I told the guards, “When you deliver the food, you must knock on the door.” Above were steel bars, and here were the solid walls. We stood back-to-back and held each other closely chest-to-chest, exposing our bare backs. The only part that was covered was the private place. They looked at us with lust, eager with lust. We lived in the tiger cage, our bodies were thin like bean sprouts, pale with a blue-green, sickly pallor. Those men who have lived here more than twenty years without wives don't know what women are like, they lust very much.¹⁹²

Generally, the prisons had barbarous torture of the women prisoners. [...] When I fell into the enemy's hands, I thought there was no way to escape, whether you were beautiful or ugly. If you were beautiful, you were taken by the higher officers; if you were not, you

¹⁹¹Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

¹⁹²Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

belonged to the soldiers. There was no one who could escape this horrible situation.¹⁹³

In such circumstances, Vinh explained, often the only choice available was for the women to try and protect each other:

For the guards to open the door and take one of us was not easy. At that time, I was very weak and I laid at one place. The rest of the women who could walk or stand formed a circle around the weaker ones. Women who were not so strong formed the second circle. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder and circled around so the guards could not hit one person repeatedly. We continued to move like that until we passed out. Or if they threw tear gas on us, we would writhe in our pain until we passed out. Then they did whatever they wanted with us. Ordinarily, when they came into our cage to get Madame A or Madame B, it was not easy for them until we passed out. Then they do anything they want. That was the strength of our unity.¹⁹⁴

The women also employed other strategies of resistance with the prison. Firstly, on an individual level, they would offer one another support sharing the few commodities they had. For example, Anh told how:

My child was born in the jail and I was miserable in the jail. In the dry season, each woman was given only one bucket of water per day for bathing. While I was pregnant, I often felt very hot. Five of the women loved me and gave me their buckets of water. We put the water in one large container and I was allowed to bathe first. Then we all undressed and bathed together for a longer time. My experience in American jail was the hardest thing in the war.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

¹⁹⁵Anh, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

“I still wonder how”

Vinh told how “the women always protected, cared for, and helped each other, giving up their medicine for one who was sick. To receive a Vitamin C was a very precious thing for a seriously ill person. We gave our pills to only the very weak ones.”¹⁹⁶ Vinh also told of a specific incident when the women in her cage were suffering from malnutrition:

We called the authorities for help. They came down and saw all of us collapsed in the cage. Madame Huong, who was a physician before imprisonment, said we were gradually dying from lack of salt. The authorities saw that Madame Huong, who laid near the door, could not talk very much. They carried her out first. She was there for three days at a resting station. [...] In the resting station, they fed her soup with rock salt in it. She had a very quick mind and she asked for a plastic bottle of water. Then, she put the rock salt in the bottle and mixed them together. After three days, she asked to return to the cage. [...] Two supervisors escorted her back to the four of us remaining in the cage. [...] We looked around to see if any guards were close. We anxiously searched Madame Uc Huong’s pockets and took out the bottle of salt water. [...] In the nearly three months, we had been listless in receiving our food, but this time, we were anxious for the meal time, now that Madame Huong had brought saltwater for us.¹⁹⁷

On a group level, the women kept active in an effort to keep their spirits up. As displayed at the Women’s Museum in Ha Noi, women made fans, glasses and rings (made out of coconut shells) and embroidery filled with symbols—doves, women dancing, chains breaking—or slogans.¹⁹⁸ The women would also teach each other

¹⁹⁶Bao, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁹⁷Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

¹⁹⁸For example, on display in the Women’s Museum, Ha Noi, (as of my visit to the museum on 2 April, 1998) is a piece of embroidery produced by a woman held in a Con Dao Tiger Cage in 1970. According to the museum’s translation, the slogan on the embroidery reads: “Even held in Tiger Cages, we always have pure souls. Thinking of beloved, respected Mother, we pledge to remain firm and loyal.” According to Enloe, such displays of

literacy and numeracy, history and geography and would exchange cooking tips.¹⁹⁹

One woman at Phu Tai prison described how:

The teachers were chosen among those of higher education [...] some of them had been to the seventh or even eighth grade. The earth floor was at the same time the “desk” for the teacher, the “blackboard” and “copybook” for the students. By turn we kept vigilance while the others studied [...] literature, history and mathematics. [...] We collected small pieces of paper from cement bags, boxes of sweets cigarette packets thrown away by guards. As pencils, we used small sticks of bamboo; as for ink, we used soot mixed with water. The paper thus gathered was used for those of lower educational level. Most of the others used the floor. [...] It’s not easy to describe fully the beatings and torture we were subjected to when small pieces of paper bearing the dates of May 19 [Ho Chi Minh’s birthday] and September 2 (Independence Day) were discovered.²⁰⁰

As communication between prisoners was often restricted, prisoners would have to wait instead until non-Party members or collaborators in their cell fell asleep before they could start any meetings.²⁰¹ Despite these restrictions and the threat of

embroidery have a hidden subtext, intended to show that:

The Vietnamese women who participated in the resistance and liberation movements never surrendered their femininity. ... [T]he wartime embroidery [was] evidence that a woman who engaged in anticolonial politics was a feminine woman all the while.

Enloe, “Women After Wars,” 302.

¹⁹⁹Nguyen Thi Thanh Quyen, unknown interviewer, 12 November, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy of transcript held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²⁰⁰Indochina Peace Campaign, *Women Under Torture* (Santa Monica, 1973), 22-24. Cited in Bergman, *Women of Vietnam*, 107.

²⁰¹Hoang Thi Hanh, unknown interviewer, no date. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy of transcript held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

punishment prison could prove a fertile ground for recruiting new revolutionaries. Dau, for example, told how she had continued her proselytising even after her imprisonment:

Even inside the prison, during the time I was captured, I carried on being active in building the force amongst the women. I carried out struggles against the prison management, protesting against the way they treated the women, as well as consoling the other women prisoners and aiming to indoctrinate them so that on release, they would be committed to the revolution and take part in the revolution.²⁰²

Through such activism inside the prison, the demonstration or strike became a key form of resistance and protest. The issue of bathing could become a focus point, its denial a punishment by the guards, its refusal a point of protest for the women. Phuong had been imprisoned in Con Dao for seven years, following the Mau Than offensive in 1968 and was a prisoner during one of the visits by an American delegation to the prison. As Phuong said of her experience in Con Dao:

There were periods when they wouldn't let you have a shower for seven weeks. At one time, we didn't take a shower for seven weeks at our own will, to protest. They wanted us to listen to them and be submissive otherwise they wouldn't let us have a shower, but we said that we would be fine not having a shower, so it went on like that for seven weeks because we wouldn't be submissive. [...] it was very difficult, especially women when we had our periods.²⁰³

One common method was the hunger strike. In Qui Nhon prison, the women went on a hunger strike in 1971 to demand news of a fellow woman prisoner who had

²⁰²Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

²⁰³Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

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been taken to hospital after falling unconscious following a beating from the prison supervisor.²⁰⁴ One of my interviewees, Khanh, told how when she was in prison, the women went on hunger strike to protest against being refused permission to go outside:

We decided to continue the struggle by going on a hunger strike for 10 days. We hid dried rice by burying it underground and we dug it out of the ground when we were ready to eat. At night, each person was given one handful of dried rice. When the enemy entered the camp, if they saw the dried rice, they would beat us. [...] After a heavy rain, we dug out dried rice and salt that we hid away to eat. If the guards had seen the rice, they would hit us. We ate rice with salt and drank rainwater to ease our hunger and thirst. We suffered like that through 10 days.²⁰⁵

Another form of protest revolved around the prison yard and the saluting the RVN flag. For example, in March 1971, in Qui Nhon prison, the women refused to go back into their rooms after roll call but stayed in the yard, demanding to see the commander; in an incident in Con Dao prison, prison guards attempted to trick the women into saluting the flag by allowing the women to leave their cells to go to a counter where they could buy milk, sugar, needles and threads at just the time when they rang the bell for the saluting the flag ceremony. The women sat on the ground, determined not to obey the bell with the result that after the ceremony, the women were beaten and forced back into their camp. They were then transferred to Phu Loi

²⁰⁴Le Thi Thu Ha, unknown interviewer. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women's Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy of transcript held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²⁰⁵Khanh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

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prison in time for the afternoon salute of the flag but the women still refused.²⁰⁶ And, as another incident also in Con Dao prison shows, guards would attempt to “trick” prisoners into revealing their revolutionary status:

I couldn't really remember the year but I remember that they had kept the sisters for quite a while. That day they forced us out to the yard. The colonel drew a line to divide two sides, one of the communist and one of the republic. Those who followed the republic should step to the republic side and those who followed Viet Cong should step into the Communist side. Their soldiers were standing right in front of us with guns in arms. While we all were hesitating and trying to think of a way to handle the situation, sister Lanh proudly stepped to the Communist side. Immediately all of us followed her to that one side. I found that the most profound, bravest and most splendid act.²⁰⁷

Such demonstrations almost invariably evoked beatings but on occasion, they could elicit change within the prison system. For example, on 22 August, 1970, a demonstration took place in Thu Duc prison on the anniversary of the deaths of three women prisoners under the oppressive regime of Duong Ngoc Minh. The demonstration originated in the security camp of the jail which had held ten women (including the three who had been killed) and began with a funeral ceremony, joss sticks and lamps and a congregation of women. However, the ceremony turned into a fight after a group tried to force themselves through a wire fence to get to the altar and were met by prison guards. The fight which followed then spread to the rest of the camp and lasted for two months, only ending after a representative team for the

²⁰⁶Vo Minh Trong, unknown interviewer, 12 June, 1992. Interview transcript held at the Southern Vietnamese Women's Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Copy of transcript held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

women met with an official for the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Following negotiation, the women had a number of their demands met, including the right not to salute the flag, the immediate release of prisoners who had served or overserved their prison sentence, the release of women brought from Con Dao, permission to read newspapers, the provision of medical care for ill women and children who did not have enough milk and the provision of meals according to the recommended daily allowance.²⁰⁸

Social, Physical and Psychological Consequences of the Violence

As I have outlined so far in this chapter, southern Vietnamese were subjected to multiple forms of violence in multiple situations during the American conflict. What were the consequences of this abuse for the women? As Amy Ray points out, war rape victims tend to be objectified solely as rape victims instead of multifaceted women who experience multiple forms of injury.²⁰⁹ As became evident in the previous chapter, women’s experiences of war rape are lived within the context of other traumas—the loss of their family and loved ones, displacement, injury—and thus it is not always possible to determine which of the women’s symptoms may be attributed to their sexual abuse alone. However, as is recognised, women suffer many different consequences of rape—familial and social, physical and

²⁰⁸Ba Tot, Tran Thi Dao, Hoang Thi Hanh, Nguyen Thi Bay, unknown interviewer, no date. Interview transcripts held at the Southern Vietnamese Women’s Museum, Ho Chi Minh City. Interview transcripts held by author; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

²⁰⁹Ray, “The Shame of It,” 796.

psychological²¹⁰—which are exaggerated by existing cultural taboos surrounding the act and the fear of blame, shame and stigma. This in turn impacts upon women victims’ willingness to come forward to testify to their experiences²¹¹ or to seek medical help.²¹²

Individual, social and global costs of war sexual violence are high.²¹³ As Lori Heise *et al.* have documented, the effects of rape can be devastating, with women who have been victimised more likely to be diagnosed as having mental health problems, including depression and drug or alcohol abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder and intrusive memories.²¹⁴ In addition, there a number of somatic effects including

²¹⁰Kozaric-Kovacic, Folnegovic-Smalc, Skrinjaric, Szajnberg, Marusic, “Rape, Torture, and Traumatization.” 428-433.

²¹¹Human Rights Watch, *Kosovo*, 24. As Swiss and Giller remark, a reluctance to testify or report war abuse is not only initiated by the shame and stigma attached to rape but also by the fear of retaliation either against the individual or her family, and the lack of existing support systems. Swiss Giller, “Rape as a Crime of War,” 613.

²¹²Human Rights Watch/ Africa and Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, *Shattered Lives*. 72-73. As the Human Rights Watch report shows, many rape victims in Rwanda will not seek medical help in part due to the cost and inaccessibility of medical care, but also because they fear they will be judged by the declaration of being a rape victim. Even when women do seek medical treatment, they will often not disclose they have been raped but will talk, for example, of having had sex with a stranger. *Ibid.* As Swiss and Giller remark, healthcare workers therefore play an essential role in the documentation of incidents of rape in war and the treatment of survivors, in recognising the physical signs of violence and torture of those women who do come forward for medical care but do not disclose their rape. Swiss and Giller, “Rape as a Crime of War,” 613.

²¹³Lori L. Heise, Alanagh Raikes, Charlotte H. Watts and Anthony B. Zwi, “Violence Against Women: A Neglected Public Health Issue in Less Developed Countries,” *Social Science and Medicine* 39, no. 9 (1994): 1165-1179; Koss, Heise and Russo, “The Global Health Burden of Rape,” 509-537; Charlotte Bunch and Roxanna Carrillo, *Gender Violence. A Development and Human Rights Issue* (Rutgers: Center for Women’s Global Leadership, 1991), 19-41.

²¹⁴Heise, Raikes, Watts and Zwi, “Violence Against Women,” 1169. However, as Koss, Heise and Russo point out, the PTSD conceptualisation has been criticised for its strict medical roots which ignore the gendered, structural and social elements of male violence against women and for failing to address how the cultural context either forms or hinders a woman’s response to her abuse. Koss, Heise and Russo, “The Global Health Burden of Rape,” 521; see also Derek Summerfield, “War and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The Question of Social Context,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (August 1993): 522. In addition, Bracken and Giller remind us that the concept of PTSD has been developed in a Western context and

chronic pelvic pain disorders, premenstrual disorders, headaches, arthritis, sexually transmitted diseases, genital trauma, mutilation, the consequences of a botched abortion, psychological trauma, damage preventing a normal sex life or the bearing of children at a later stage.²¹⁵ More recently, women's lives may be destroyed, not by being killed after they have been raped but through the transferral of sexually-transmitted diseases; for example, in Rwanda, many women were intentionally infected with AIDS and allowed to live after the rape, in order that they pass on the disease to their communities.²¹⁶

Not surprisingly, my interviewees reported numerous physical and psychological effects resulting from their war experiences. Although none of the women told of personally becoming pregnant through their abuse, pregnancy is undoubtedly a great

as such, we must be cautious as to what extent this conceptualisation of trauma can be applied to those in the Third World whose perceptions of the illness, the individual, and the individual's place in society differ from those in the West. Patrick J. Bracken and Joan E. Giller, "Response to Trauma. Do Current Concepts Betray an Ethnocentric Bias?" Copy of paper held by author.

²¹⁵Koss, Heise and Russo, "The Global Health Burden of Rape," 521-523.

Swiss and Giller remind us that it is essential that any psychological sequelae is described within the woman's cultural context and to recognise that a woman's distress may not necessarily be voiced in psychological terms but present itself in physical symptoms. Swiss and Giller, "Rape as a Crime of War," 614.

²¹⁶Migirou, "The Genocide in Rwanda." The sheer scale of physical, psychological, emotional and social repercussions of rape and sexual assault in war, even after several years since the attack, is evident, for example, in Uganda, where Giller, Bracken and Kabaganda found that twenty-seven out of thirty-five women they interviewed in a pilot study were still experiencing gynaecological problems e.g. vaginal discharge, pelvic pain, HIV; many of the women still suffered psychological sequelae e.g. nightmares, fear, distance from people, lack of interest, difficulties in concentration, shame; twenty-five percent of the women no longer had relationships with men since the rape due to the feelings towards men it had provoked, fifty percent had not told their partner of the rape, and sixty-six percent were no longer able to enjoy sex. Joan E. Giller, Patrick J. Bracken, Stella Kabaganda, "Uganda: War, Women and Rape," *Lancet* 337 (9 March 1991): 604. See also, Joan Giller and Stella Kabaganda, "Women and Rape in a War-Torn Country," (1990) (Copy of paper held by author); Patrick J. Bracken, Joan E. Giller and Stella Kabaganda, "Helping Victims of Violence in Uganda," *Medicine and War* 8, no. 3 (1992): 155-163.

fear for women victims of war rape²¹⁷ and for many leads to self-induced abortion (if abortion is illegal) and infanticide.²¹⁸ One of the most frequently mentioned consequences of the violence, however, was the transmittal of venereal disease and subsequent infertility. Of her friend who had been raped by Korean soldiers, Tam remarked:

Now she is married and has a husband, but has no children as she contracted some form of disease from then. There was some time when she was even sent to Ha Noi to get some treatment but they couldn't treat her, so she never recovered and couldn't have children.²¹⁹

Similarly, one of the women present at Gom's interview in Cu Chi commented that:

Another woman we knew had been raped and survived until after Liberation, but had some disease or effects from it and died shortly after. The effects were that she had disease and illness all the time. This woman was in Dong Hoi hamlet. They²²⁰ raped her and then smashed a bottle and cut her vagina so she had all these illnesses since.²²¹

Due to the value placed upon a Vietnamese woman's reproductive ability and fertility, not just in terms of manpower or care for elderly parents, but also due to son

²¹⁷As has been noted, initial humanitarian aid to the Former Yugoslavia failed to take into account the dire need for contraception. L Stegall and S. Camp, *Emergency Reproductive Health Services to the Victims of Sexual Violence in the Former Yugoslavia*. A Report to the Compton Foundation. (Washington: Compton Foundation, 1993). Cited in B. Rojnik, L. Andolsek-Jeras and D. Obersnel-Kveder, "Women in Difficult Circumstances: War Victims and Refugees," *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 48 (1995): 314.

²¹⁸Migirou, "The Genocide in Rwanda."

²¹⁹Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

²²⁰It was not clear from the transcript to which enemy soldiers e.g. American or ARVN the speaker was referring.

²²¹Woman present at interview with Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

preference, as only a male child can practice ancestor worship and ensure continuation of the bloodline,²²² a woman’s infertility induced by such violence could be devastating.²²³

Some of the interviewees also commented about the physical and psychological consequences of the violence which had been inflicted upon them during detention and imprisonment—many of the symptoms indicative of rape trauma syndrome or post-traumatic stress disorder. Sexual torture can result in physical and psychological consequences over and above those of rape. Physical consequences include immediate injury to the genitals or body following blows, electric shock, rape, venereal infection, and vaginal bleeding, miscarriage or severe complications if the woman is pregnant, or pregnancy itself; later, vaginal scarring and injury to the uterus may prevent full-term pregnancy, menstrual disorders and infertility, damage to breast tissue may prevent a woman from breastfeeding her infant.²²⁴ Psychological consequences of sexual torture are determined by the cultural, social, and familial background of the victim but may lead to symptoms such as trigger memories and flashbacks, reduced self-esteem, lack of concentration, nightmares, memory disorder, suspicions, a rejection or disgust by the survivor of her own body, anxiety over

²²²Mai Huy Bich, “A Distinctive Feature of the Traditional Family’s Structure and Function in the Red River Delta”, in Tuong Lai, Tran Dinh Huou, Tu Chi, Do Thai Dong, Mai Huy Bich, “Vietnamese Traditional Family and Confucianism”, *Vietnam Social Sciences* 3 (1992): 74-76. In ancient Vietnamese society, a woman’s barrenness and failure to produce a son was one of the “seven outs” (that xuất) through which a husband was able to repudiate his wife. *Ibid.*, 77, n.1.

²²³A woman’s infertility and the threat it held for the continuation of the lineage could lead to the taking of a second-rank wife by the husband, or the adoption of children, both options—particularly adoption—potentially undermining the status of the first-rank wife. *Ibid.* 77.

²²⁴Inge Lunde and Jorgen Ortmann, “Sexual Torture and the Treatment of its Consequences,” in *Torture and Its Consequences: Current Treatment Approaches*, ed., Metin Basoglu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 313-314.

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sexual involvement, reduced desire for, or aversion, to sex, and issues over sexual identity and preferences. Comments made by the torturers that the victim will not be able to have children later on, or that any children will be deformed, may create deep-seated fears of sterility or of giving birth to a disabled child.²²⁵ Sexual torture can also lead to sexual dysfunction and cross-generational transference.²²⁶

Such consequences were found in the testimonies of the women who had experienced abuse during interrogation and imprisonment. Phuong remarked on how, as a result of their beatings, many women would be left handicapped and unable to have children.²²⁷ She, however, considered herself lucky for, unlike other women, she was only tortured with canes and electric shock. Hong described how, after being arrested and tortured for six days, “I got ill and also each time when it was raining and lightening, my body shook as a result of the electric shock.”²²⁸ Gom, Dau, Thao, and Phuong also described symptoms caused by their treatment during arrest or imprisonment. Gom commented:

When I was younger, it wasn't that much of a problem, all the effects of these tortures were not too much of a problem to my health and did not affect so much my daily life. But now that I'm old and can feel their effects, so frequently when there is a change in the weather, my back is so painful and achy that when I'm sleeping, out of the blue I feel such pain. Sometimes in the middle of the night I have to get up because it is so painful and so lose sleep and can't do anything to

²²⁵Lunde and Ortmann, “Sexual Torture,” 314-315. Mia Groenenberg, “Female Victims”, in *Counselling and Therapy with Refugees: Psychological Problems of Victims of War, Torture and Repression*, ed. Guus Van der Veer (New York: Wiley Publishers, 1992): 232-233.

²²⁶Lunde and Ortmann, “Sexual Torture,” 315, 316.

²²⁷Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

²²⁸Hong, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

subdue the pain and find myself crawling on the floor.
Nothing reduces the pain at all.²²⁹

Dau described similar physical ailments as a response to her beatings and torture during her two detentions:

My arm was also broken. Until now, my arms are still deformed and my skull is missing a piece of bone. [...] Today if I go any short distance, I'm ok, but if I walk anywhere far or have to have a long journey in the car, I have to wear a foam jacket to support and protect my my spine. I can't control my arms and hands properly. One of my hands doesn't open properly.²³⁰

Similarly, Thao recalled how:

After being released from prison, I was seen by a doctor from Ha Noi who said that I suffered from nervous breakdown and a reduction in blood cells. He then dug a hole about fifty centimetres into the ground, put something in there and asked me to step in. He said that was to reduce the level of electricity in my body. I was also treated with acupuncture. However, all these treatments did not cure anything. I have still suffered from terrible headaches, body aches and bad memory. It's funny though. There were things I could remember so well, but sometimes I forget so easily.²³¹

Phuong described how she still suffered from both physical and psychological consequences of her experiences and how visual images could trigger flashbacks:

At present, I am suffering from chronic nervous problems because when I was in prison, often they banged my head against the wall. Also, I suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Sometimes, I still have

²²⁹Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

²³⁰Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

²³¹Thao, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

nightmares of the time I was kept in prison and still have flashbacks at what happened to me at the time. Also, it affected my emotions in a way that each time I heard about the war, I felt terrible and scared. Sometimes, if I watched some documentary or films about wartime on TV I would lose sleep that night because [what] I saw was what I actually experienced, so I couldn't sleep at all if I watched things like that.²³²

Lanh, who had been raped by numerous soldiers, similarly reported her continued ill-health as a result of the violence she had endured. Although she had been able to have three children after the attack, she had suffered illnesses since then. But the most stark consequence was the effect the abuse had had upon Lanh's mental health. One of the Women's Union representatives present at the Tien Giang interview remarked that: “Long ago, [Lanh] was not confused like this. After she was raped, she became insane, absent-minded. Before, she was not like that. She was a self-possessed woman who was married with children.”²³³

In addition to the physical and psychological consequences of their experiences, the women also had to contend with the social repercussions. In the context of Viet Nam, recent literature has shown that although premarital sex is not prohibited,²³⁴ as Goodstein points out, Vietnamese women are still expected to be virginal for

²³²Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

²³³Tien Giang Province Women's Union representative, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

²³⁴Stephen O'Harrow wrote in 1995 that whilst premarital sexual intercourse was common in Vietnamese villages, the onus was still upon the man to marry the woman. Stephen O'Harrow, “Vietnamese Women and Confucianism: Creating Spaces in Patriarchy” in *Male and Female in Developing Southeast Asia*, ed. Wazir Jahan Karim (Oxford/Washington D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995), 175, 180 n.28. Gerald Cannon Hickey found similar evidence of this in his anthropological study (first published in 1964) of Khanh Hau Village, in the Mekong Delta, fifty-five kilometres from Saigon. In this village, Hickey found that although it was desirable for the woman to be a virgin upon marriage, it was not obligatory as long as she was “not known as a woman of easy virtue.” Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964; reprint, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), 100 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

marriage and any sexual victimisation not only brings shame upon the woman but may also seriously affect her marriage prospects. Thus, a woman is likely to conceal the abuse rather than face the social consequences following its revelation.²³⁵

In a society influenced by remnants of Confucianism and familial feudalism, where traditional attitudes promoted chastity—defined in terms of the defence of virginity before marriage, absolute faithfulness towards one’s husband, and a purity of spirit—as the prime female virtue²³⁶ (immortalised in the Vietnamese literary classic, *The Tale of Kieu*²³⁷) and where women were expected to conform to the “Three Submissions” (father, husband and son) and to the “Four Virtues” (labour, physical appearance, appropriate speech and proper behaviour),²³⁸ it is not surprising many women feared being “soiled” by sexual victimisation. For example, Le Ly Hayslip wrote of the time she was raped as a thirteen year-old girl by two fellow villagers after alleged complicity with US forces, “my whole life now seemed burdened with time: time I would not spend with a husband for whom I had been ruined; time free

²³⁵Lynne Goodstein, “Sexual Assault in the United States and Vietnam: Some Thoughts and Questions,” in *Vietnam’s Women in Transition*, ed. Kathleen Barry (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 284.

²³⁶Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 192; Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Representing Reconciliation: Le Ly Hayslip and the Victimised Body,” *Positions* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 630.

²³⁷In this early nineteenth century poem of duty and sacrifice, a young woman, Kieu, forfeits her lover and agrees to a marriage of convenience to save her father from a false accusation. The marriage however is but a ploy by the marriage arranger to enter Kieu into a brothel. Kieu eventually escapes and finds her way back to her family and lover but only after becoming the lover of three different men. Although reunited with her lover, the reunion remains platonic, so as to repay her penance for her loss of virtue. Nguyen Du. *Kim Van Kieu*, trans. Le Xuan Thuy (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoc, n.d); Nguyen, “Representing Reconciliation,” 630.

²³⁸Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet, *Women in Viet Nam*, 43; Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 192.

of happy children that I would never bear.”²³⁹ In his memoir, an Army defence lawyer recounted one case he came across of a Vietnamese woman who had been gang-raped by two US soldiers, but who asked the lawyer for a “certificate of honorability” as her husband would refuse to sleep with her again unless she had a document showing that the rape had not been her fault.²⁴⁰ In one General Court-Martial, a rape victim, on cross-examination, told how after the assault, she had heard her husband calling for her and knew that he would beat her, and her family

²³⁹Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 122. This could have serious implications for the women in terms of her marriageability. In discussing how prospective daughters-in-law were chosen by Vietnamese families (in Viet Nam), Tran Dinh Huou writes:

One had to take into consideration her honour, her property, her beauty but all those things were not so important as the “blessing” she had and her moral virtues. This supposed that she belonged to a good family, that her ancestors were not dishonest and did not commit crimes, because it was believed that honesty generated blessings, while wickedness ended in crimes, and blessings or crimes were transmitted to descendants ... A daughter-in-law was to give birth to children and to continue the family line. Therefore she had a decisive influence on shapping [sic] the family’s future—in a good or bad sense.

Tran Dinh Huou, “Political and Moral Impact of Confucianism on the Vietnamese Families,” in Tuong Lai, Tran Dinh Huou, Tu Chi, Do Thai Dong, Mai Huy Bich, “Vietnamese Traditional Family and Confucianism,” *Vietnam Social Sciences* 3 (1992): 65. As, in the traditional Vietnamese family:

The individual is not an independent entity; there is no free individual; every facet of his life is bound up with the family; he owes complete complete allegiance to the family. While the *raison d’etre* of the western family is to support the individual, whose maturity will signal the attenment (sic) of its objective, in the Vietnamese family the *raison d’etre* of each individual is to continue, maintain, and serve the family.

Mai Huy Bich, “Distinctive Feature,” 74. In this light, I would speculate that a woman’s potential exclusion from the family unit—whether through her inability to marry, produce children, or be unable to talk about her abuse—and hence potential exclusion from the familial support network could be devastating.

²⁴⁰John Stevens Berry, *Those Gallant Men: On Trial in Vietnam* (Novato, Ca: Presido Press, 1984), 5.

deny her, if they knew what happened.²⁴¹ And one woman who had been raped by a black GI who used to give her lifts to her work on an army base remarked:

Rape is a terrible shame for a girl in Vietnam. I couldn't tell anyone what happened, not even my mother. Finally, when she saw that I was pregnant, I told her what happened. She was furious, she blamed me. She beat me and sent me away to church in Saigon where they took care of me. [...] After my baby was born, I was moved back to my village in Phuoc Vinh, but people there looked at me bad because I had been with a foreign man. [...] My mother took care of Linh, my Amerasian daughter. I didn't tell my husband that she was my child. A Vietnamese man doesn't want a woman who has an American baby.²⁴²

This potential for rejection by the victim's husband was reiterated elsewhere:

Some women [had been] raped. It was a big problem: if a husband knew his wife had been raped he would be ready to divorce her, and raped women were afraid of being laughed at, so it was necessary to help them, [and] encourage the husbands to treat them well.²⁴³

Fortunately, this had not been Lanh's family's reaction to her mass-rape: “The whole family knew. But the family is very good to her and they support her.”²⁴⁴ However, on the whole, it was difficult for me to determine the social consequences that the women's experiences of abuse had had upon them. Considering that my interviewees were chosen for me and were prepared to talk about their experiences, and taking

²⁴¹Summary of the Evidence for the Defense. Summarised in the "Review of the Staff Judge Advocate", 9 March, 1967. *US v. Roeder* CM 415611. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

²⁴²Anh, cited in Steven DeBonis, *Children of the Enemy. Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1995), 258.

²⁴³An, quoted in Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley, Kitty Warnock, eds., *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict* (London: Panos, 1995): 166.

²⁴⁴Tien Giang Province Women's Union representative, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

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into account the different cultural response I felt existed in relation to the way in which the women talked about their lives, I would not have expected them to “victimise” their experiences; rather, they tended to portray their experiences in a heroic light. Thus, I tended to be reliant upon third-person references to the social repercussions of the violence rather than the interviewees’ personal experiences, for example how, due to traditional morals and values, women would be more scared of being raped than of going to the battlefield, of how some women could not talk of their experiences or attempted to deny them—“That woman is now living in this hamlet. She is ashamed, embarrassed, and does not want to talk about it. [...] This lady hides the story that she was revived at Madame[...]’s house”²⁴⁵—or Phuong’s mention of the stigma accorded to Vietnamese women who fraternized with enemy soldiers:

A lot of my fellow girl students were lured into this kind of prostitution “business” to earn some supplement to their income. Prostitution was a practice that was open and normal to American soldiers, but it was the Vietnamese women who were subject to social judgement, prejudice of the people. Because prostitution was a way of making money that goes against the Vietnamese traditional values. Hence those girls/women were subject to a lot of popular contempt. Whenever a Vietnamese girl walking hand-in-hand with an American saw other Vietnamese people, she immediately distanced herself from the man and walked separately [...] At the time, all women seen in association with the Americans or who got married to Americans were very badly looked down upon. I think nationalism was then a very important virtue among the people.²⁴⁶

A similar remark by Dau hinted at the consequences of gender-based violation: “I felt

²⁴⁵Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

²⁴⁶Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June 1998.

sorry for all these young women who were still virgins and still single who had been tortured.”²⁴⁷ Cuc, in the Tien Giang interview, told of the consequences for one woman of her rape by American soldiers:

Another story at Phuoc Hanh City, that borders the base: A young girl whose name is Be Tu, very beautiful, petite, just turned 15 years old. Her family was very poor and she sold Coca-Cola. She was raped by four or five American soldiers. After that, she became pregnant. She talked to me about it and cried a lot. Her father hit her many times and asked her who made her pregnant. I had to go to him and explain that she was raped and she was embarrassed and felt very bad about it. She gave birth to a son, a white American. Later, she went to America with her son in the immigration program for women with children from American fathers.²⁴⁸

How did the women deal with these consequences? Factors influencing how a woman overcomes her experiences of violence include the woman’s own personal history and ways of coping, whether she considered herself to be politically active and was aware of the risks of her activities or not, and the way in which she was socialised as a woman and how she experienced her own sexuality.²⁴⁹ As Truong Thi Dieu De’s work with five Vietnamese women refugees in the Netherlands reveals, women who had been abused either by pirates or in refugee camps reacted to their abuse in different ways. One response was to try to rationalise their experiences in fatalistic terms, that they had been abused because of their bad karma or “soul debts”. The other response was to feel shame and stigma as, according to Vietnamese

²⁴⁷Dau, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

²⁴⁸Cuc, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

²⁴⁹Groenenberg, “Female Victims,” 233.

social norms, a raped woman was devalued and compared to a “wilting flower.”²⁵⁰

Another factor is the degree of support which women received. As already outlined, women abused in this conflict were not always able to turn to family or friends for help due to the risk of rejection or exclusion. When asked if women received any support during the war period and if so, from whom, Gom answered that support took three forms: individual, village-level, and organisational. Not surprisingly, assistance was limited with all resources being directed to the Liberation movement, and that which existed was not specifically directed towards victims of gender-based violence: “At that time, everyone was in the same situation. We all lived in poverty, miserable in wartime. We took care of ourselves and neighbours cared enough to visit. A revolutionary was poor, and nobody could give help. Visiting you was all they could do.”²⁵¹ Of the help she received from her fellow villagers, Gom said:

Yes, you did get support from other people and these people were usually just ordinary women in the village—they were not Viet Cong or members of any political organisations. But, just by the fact that you were arrested, the women outside got together and wanted to give you support and expressed their sympathy for you and wanted the enemy to free the detainee. In my case, when I was arrested, I had children living in the village and I wasn't there to take care of the children, and they were fed and cared for by the neighbours. House assistance included if one of my young children was hungry, they'd breastfeed him or give food to him, and household tasks were done by

²⁵⁰Truong Thi Dieu De, “Vietnamese Women and Sexual Violence” (Rijswijk: Refugee Health Care Centre, 1989, photocopied), 4. Copy held at the British Refugee Council Resource Centre, London. For other literature on the effects of rape upon Vietnamese women boat people see, for example, Dao Tu Khuong, “Victims of Violence in the South China Sea,” in *Refugees. The Trauma of Exile. The Humanitarian Role of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent*, ed. Diana Miserez (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 18-38; Uyen Carrington, “Counselling Indochinese Refugee Women Rape Survivors,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5 (January 1992): 85-94.

²⁵¹Anh, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998.

the neighbours because the children were too young to take care of everything. And all that assistance came just from ordinary villagers and they didn't belong to any organisations at all.²⁵²

Yet, such community did not exist for everyone. For Tam, for example, her family's suspected NLF sympathies/involvement led to isolation:

Every night we noticed that there were spies watching on us. These were Vietnamese spies who hung around watching our family closely to see if there were any outsiders coming in—whether we provided shelter to any outsiders who could be Viet Cong coming in, looking for a place to stay or exchanging information with us—to such a point that sometimes when we wanted to go away at nighttime, we didn't dare to go out. Also, we had to limit our association. We didn't have any close friends to the family because if we had any close friends, these close friends would be automatically suspected of being revolutionary associates, as Viet Cong, and that would endanger their lives. So even the relatives and neighbours, they were sympathetic with us, but they themselves wouldn't dare to have any contact with us.²⁵³

Vinh, an interviewee in Vung Tau, had a similar experience:

After the French withdrew their troops, then the Americans entered and my country was in a violent war, in 1954, 1955, and 1956. In 1957, I fled this locality because I was a cadre's wife whose husband had been regrouped to the North. By day and night, my family consisted of only two old women and a very young sister. They hung a light and a sign on the gate of our house that read: “Do not enter. This family is a Communist family.” But my husband was a regrouped cadre and I was a regrouped cadre's wife. No one dared to visit us if we were sick or if someone died. They [the

²⁵²Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

²⁵³Tam, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998.

enemy] forbid other people to visit us unless one of them escorted the visitor into our house.²⁵⁴

Organisational help too was limited. As Phuong remarked, the Women’s Association for the Liberation of the South Viet Nam tried to offer assistance :

[B]ut not an awful lot due to various difficulties of the war time. Since its foundation in 1960, the association had given guidance to women to carry out protests against violence. Protests here were usually in the form of organised demonstrations. But we were unable to give any material support to them. We could only mobilise the neighbourhood to provide some meagre support to women who were victims of violence.²⁵⁵

Gom remarked:

There was a revolutionary organisation who organised appeals to attain my release and when I was in detention, the detainees organised some organisation amongst themselves. The people in the organisation also organised appeals for the detainees to be released and visits to give you food and presents. The outside organisations comprised people who held legal papers so they could actually visit the detention centres to visit us legally, but they belonged to these revolutionary organisations. They were Viet Cong as well and they got information back from the detainees to give back to the network, for example, how you were beaten, what sort of torture you had. These organisations also had orders from higher levels to organise demonstrations and protests outside of the detention centres in order to ask the soldiers to release ordinary villagers who were arrested, asking for them to be released so that they could resume their normal farming life. And that movement by the women was pretty widespread and strong and they also had protests to request that those innocent women who did have legal papers, who did not have any weapons in their possession not to be arrested. All this was mental

²⁵⁴Vinh, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998.

²⁵⁵Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

rather than material support. They didn't give you anything in the detention centre. It was only material support in the sense that when your children were hungry outside, they would give orders to the lower level to mobilise ordinary villagers to help your children. Otherwise, the revolutionary command of the organisation was poor and couldn't help you with any money or material things.²⁵⁶

From the above, it is evident that support was limited—whether through the unavoidable material restrictions created by the conflict, or through fear that any help would prompt retaliation by Southern Vietnamese soldiers. Such help as there was however was not directed specifically towards the women's experiences of sexual violence; thus, it is possible to speculate that, in conjunction with the stigma attached to rape, many of the victims were left to suffer alone.

Conclusion

To conclude, despite the fact that my interviewees were “selected” for me, it would appear from my testimonies that sexual violence was indeed extensive during the American-Viet Nam conflict. As became apparent, sexual violence was not just a negative element of Vietnamese-American/Australian contact—during military operations or with street hawkers—but also featured in Vietnamese-Vietnamese contact, whether the women were prostitutes or detainees. Although the majority of my interviewees were involved in the revolutionary movement, the prevalence of abuse in so many different contexts and the often repressive programmes of successive governments would therefore indicate that a woman's non-revolutionary background did not guarantee her protection from violation. That sexual abuse has

²⁵⁶Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June 1998.

“I still wonder how”

a pervasive effect upon its victims is evident from the fact that even more than twenty years on from the end of the conflict, many of my interviewees were still suffering the consequences of their experiences.

Chapter Four

“Who Knows Such a Law, Who’d be Aware of Such a Law?”¹ Prosecution of Rape in the American-Viet Nam War

A discrepancy exists in relation to the perpetration of gender-based violence by American soldiers in the American-Viet Nam war. Whilst US veterans’ oral histories have frequently described the sexual abuse of Vietnamese women during the conflict as a common occurrence, amounting to “Standard Operating Procedure”, and my Vietnamese testimonies claimed gender-based violence to be extensive during the conflict, the US Army and Marine Corps have only acknowledged approximately fifty and thirty-five court-martial convictions respectively, for sex-related charges against Vietnamese civilians between 1965 and 1973.² Given that the total number of American military personnel estimated to have served in South Viet Nam is 2,594,000,³ it would seem improbable that less than ninety instances of sexual violence occurred during this conflict or that less than ninety men committed acts of sexual abuse.

Does this low level of prosecution for sex-related charges against Vietnamese

¹Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

²The Army courts-martial will be discussed later in the chapter.

³This statistic is for the period 1 January 1965 to 28 March 1973. The levels of American troops in Viet Nam peaked between 1966-1970, when the yearly figures reached 385,300; 485,600; 536,100; 475,200; and 334,600, for each respective year. The peak troop strength in Viet Nam was 542,482, on 30 April 1969. “Vietnam Warriors: A Statistical Profile”, *VFW Magazine*, January 1998; available from <http://web.meganet/kman/nfv6.html>; Internet; accessed 29 July 1999; “Vietnam War Allied Troop Levels, 1960-1973”; available from <http://members.aol.com/warlibrary/vwat1.html>; accessed 29 July 1999.

nationals matter? It can be argued that it does. As has been suggested, judicial redress for war crimes can play an important role in the recovery of a country from war or oppression. War crimes trials serve multiple purposes, including the public demonstration of justice, retribution (against the defeated enemy), deterrence and the exposition of moral and political outrage necessary to facilitate a return to order.⁵ As Richard Goldstone has commented in relation to the national or truth commissions seen in Europe, Latin America and Africa, victims need public acknowledgment of their abuse and the exposure of those responsible for the crimes, in order to be able to move on with their lives.⁶ Furthermore, trials are effective both for ensuring against future repression and for enforcing the authority of the law itself.⁷

In this chapter, I begin my conclusion to this thesis by looking at the prosecution of gender-based violence in the American-Viet Nam conflict. Prior to the 1990s, the few war crimes trials which have taken place for different conflicts across the globe have occurred under national rather than international law, and prosecutions for war rape have been tried, almost without exception, by national, civil or military systems. This was certainly true of the prosecution of war sexual abuse in the American conflict in Viet Nam where sexual violence was tried as a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. In the first section of this chapter, I outline the court-martial process

⁵Simon Chesterman, “Never Again ... and Again: Law, Order, and the Gender of War Crimes in Bosnia and Beyond,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 311-317.

⁶Richard Goldstone, “Exposing Human Rights Abuses—A Help or Hindrance to Reconciliation,” *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1995): 615.

⁷Orentlicher also recognises that for fragile, new democracies, trials may prove destabilising or provoke civil unrest which may undermine the civilian government. If unable to support prosecutions, the successive government should still work towards an official acknowledgment of the previous regime’s violations through an official account, a move which may alleviate the perceived need for prosecutions. 2542. Diane F. Orentlicher, “Settling Accounts: The Duty to Prosecute Human Rights Violations of Prior Regime,” *The Yale Law Journal* 100, no. 8 (June 1991): 2542, 2544-2545.

within the US military and the legal basis for prosecuting rape in the American conflict as a violation of military law rather than an international war crime. Following this, I draw upon records provided by the US Army Judiciary to briefly discuss the courts-martial where at least one conviction was secured for a sex-related crime. As will be illustrated by my interviewees’ testimonies, such prosecution and punishment were deemed rare and as such, offered little judicial compensation for the victims of sexual violence in this conflict.

Regulating the American War

The conduct of US military personnel⁸ in armed hostilities on land, as regulated by

⁸The discussion in this chapter again reflects the US-centric position which I have had to take in relation to my discussion of the military in this conflict. Although I did find one newspaper report pertaining to the execution of a South Vietnamese soldier for the rape and murder of a nineteen year old girl during a military sweep fifteen miles north of Saigon (*New York Times*, 3 April, 1968, 13), it was not logistically possible for me to extend my investigation into the military judicial systems of the different forces involved in the conflict.

In addition to limiting my discussion solely to the US, my focus is restricted to the US Army. I contacted both the Navy-Marine Corps Appellate, Department of the Navy, and the Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary, requesting information concerning sex-related charges against Vietnamese nationals by US military personnel during the conflict. Whilst the Army was able to give me a list of general and special courts-martial convictions (but not the complete figure for all charges brought), the Navy-Marine Corps was unable to furnish me with such a list. It was only through surveying the journal of *Court-Martial Reports* for the whole conflict period that I was able to discover approximately thirteen cases involving Marines in Viet Nam; however as not all courts-martial and reviews are published in the journal, this list was incomplete. Due to the duplication/photocopying costs, the charge for review (the process of redacting any privacy information) and the cost of international postage, I was also unable to obtain the full, complete records of the Army court-martial trials. Instead, I was able to obtain from the Deputy of the Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary, copies of the Staff Judge Advocate reviews, convening authority action, summary of evidence and brief summaries of any subsequent Board of Review/Court of Military Review, Court of Military Appeal and Secretary of the Army orders for the period 1965-1973. Although these are not complete records, they do provide enough information to determine the nature of sex-related charges where successful convictions were made, and subsequent sentencing. However, as the Deputy of the Clerk of Court pointed out via an e-mail communication, the list of general and special courts-martial would have been drawn upon previously on request but as the reason for this was unknown, it could not be guaranteed that the list was one hundred percent correct or complete. The Marine courts-martial which I requested finally

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the law of land warfare, was outlined in the US Army’s Field Manual 27-10, *The Law of Land Warfare* of 1956.⁹ As specified in the manual’s introductory chapter, the law of war was derived from two principal sources—law-making treaties and conventions, and customary law.¹⁰ By extension, US military personnel were therefore subject to the restrictions pertaining to war sexual abuse present within international law, as existing during this period. Paragraphs 380 and 480 of the Field Manual contained Article 26 of the Annex to the Hague Convention (IV) of 1907 relating to the respect of family honour; paragraph 11 contained Article 3 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, specifying fundamental guarantee; paragraphs 266 and 379 incorporated Article 27 of the Convention which ensured respect for an individual’s honour, humane treatment and the protection of women from rape, enforced prostitution or indecent assault; and paragraph 271 contained Article 32 which prohibited the physical suffering and torture of protected persons. Women prisoners of war were also protected by the inclusion, in paragraphs 89 and 90, of Articles 13 and 14 of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 Relating to Prisoners of War which demanded that prisoners of war must be humanely treated and protected against acts of violence and insults, and women treated with all regard due to their sex.¹¹

However, whilst *The Law of Land Warfare* manual defined the limitations placed

arrived one and a half years after my initial request and too late to be included in the chapter.

⁹Department of the Army, *Field Manual 27-10, The Law of Land Warfare*, [book-on-line] (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 18 July 1956, accessed 12 June 1999) paragraph 2; available from <http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu/~nstanton/Ch.1.htm>; Internet.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, para. 5.

¹¹*Ibid.*, chapters 3, 5, 6.

upon US military personnel in the conduct of the war, it also ensured the inapplicability of international law prohibitions on gender-based violence in the context of the American-Viet Nam war.

Firstly, the manual defined war as a legal condition of armed hostility between States, usually accompanied by a declaration of war. However, the application of customary law was reliant upon the armed conflict being of an *international* nature, applicable as it was to “all cases of declared war or any other conflict which may arise between the United States and other nations ... [and] to all cases of occupation of foreign territory by the exercise of armed force, even if the occupation meets with no armed resistance.”¹² Treaties governing land warfare were applicable in conflicts as provided by their terms.¹³

Was the conflict in Viet Nam internal or international in nature? Neither the United States nor North Viet Nam issued a declaration of war, although South Viet Nam did declare a state of emergency in 1964 and a state of war in 1965 in an attempt to bolster its own internal powers.¹⁴ Whilst the United States recognised the sovereignty of South Viet Nam, it did not accord full diplomatic recognition to North Viet Nam (although it did acknowledge North Viet Nam’s agreement to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and treated North Viet Nam as a separate state in the context of Article 12 of the Geneva Prisoner of War Conventions). In addition, the North Vietnamese government refrained from admitting involvement in South Viet Nam,

¹²Ibid., para. 8b.

¹³Ibid., para. 8c.

¹⁴Major General George S. Prugh, *Law at War: Vietnam 1964-1973* [book on-line] (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975, accessed 26 May 1999) 62; available from <http://www2.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/Vietnam/law-war/law-04.html>; Internet.

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or from accepting Viet Nam as divided country, whilst the South Vietnamese government refused to accord the Viet Cong any degree of legitimacy, either as a separate political entity or as an agent of Ha Noi.¹⁵ In these circumstances, the applicability of international law was limited. Although paragraph 11b of the Field Manual contained Article 3, common to all the Geneva Conventions, which decreed the minimum protection to be applied in conflicts, not of an international nature, occurring in the territory of one of the Conventions' High Contracting Parties,¹⁶ under paragraph 11a it was stated that customary law only became applicable upon the recognition of the rebels as belligerents.¹⁷

Although the North Vietnamese government maintained that the conflict was essentially an internal domestic struggle, by 1965 the United States, and (eventually) the South Vietnamese government took the official position that the situation constituted an armed international conflict. North Viet Nam was thus recognised as a belligerent (and the Viet Cong, agents) and the Geneva Conventions deemed fully applicable. However, whilst the official US position was significant in relation to concern over prisoners of war and those missing in action, the ambiguity offered little solace to South Vietnamese civilians, who were regarded not as enemies protected under the Geneva Conventions, but as citizens of an allied nation. Under the definition outlined in the Fourth Geneva Convention and reiterated in paragraph

¹⁵Ibid., 61-62

¹⁶The minimum protections for those not taking an active part in the hostilities ensured they were to be treated humanely without distinction due to race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, and which prohibited violence to life and person, in particular murder, mutilation and cruel treatment and torture, and outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment. Department of the Army, *The Law of Land Warfare*, para. 11b.

¹⁷Ibid., para. 11a.

247 of the Field Manual, protected persons were:

those who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals.

Nationals of a State which is not bound by the Convention are not protected by it. Nationals of a neutral State who find themselves in the territory of a belligerent State, and nationals of a co-belligerent State, shall not be regarded as protected persons while the State of which they are nationals has normal diplomatic representation in the State in whose hands they are.¹⁸

Under such a definition, Southern Vietnamese civilians did not qualify for protection, living as they were in the territory and as nationals of one of the belligerents;¹⁹ furthermore, the South Vietnamese government insisted that civilians detained on security or political grounds were outside the scope of the Geneva Conventions, and refused the ICRC's argument that such persons were protected by Article 5 of the Fourth Convention, if not by the Third Convention.²⁰ As such, civilians were reliant upon the protection of Vietnamese law.²¹

¹⁸Ibid., para. 247.

¹⁹This point however has been frequently debated. For example, Prugh argues that although the My Lai Massacre of 1968 is popularly described as a “war crime”, technically, such a term is incorrect precisely because of the allied nation status of the civilians, and because the perpetrators were US soldiers governed by the US Uniform Code of Military Justice. Prugh, *Law at War*, 102. Also see, for example: Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Alfred P. Rubin, “Legal Aspects of the My Lai Incident,” *Oregon Law Review* 49 (1970): 260-272; Jordan J. Paust, “Legal Aspects of the My Lai Incident: A Response to Professor Rubin,” *Oregon Law Review* 50 (1971): 138-152; Matthew Lippman, “War Crimes: The My Lai Massacre and the Vietnam War,” *San Diego Justice Journal* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 294-364.

²⁰Geoffrey Best, *War and Law Since 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 363.

²¹Prugh, *Law at War*, 102.

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As indicated in my interviewees’ testimonies, many of the abuses suffered by women were at the hands of officials of the South Vietnamese government and therefore legal protection and redress were problematic. Vietnamese law also afforded little judicial redress for crimes committed by US military personnel against Vietnamese nationals. As outlined within the Field Manual, a “war crime” was “the technical expression for a violation of the law of war by any person or persons, military or civilian,” “where every violation of the law of war [was] a war crime.”²² Paragraph 502 defined the “grave breaches” of the 1949 Conventions as constituting war crimes, as were fourteen other acts under Paragraph 504²³ of the Manual. (These were reiterated under the updated MACV²⁴ Directive 20-4 of 27 April 1967.²⁵) As rape did not constitute a “grave breach” of the Geneva Conventions, as outlined in the Introduction, it did not fall into the “war crime” category.

However, the prosecution of “war crimes” themselves was problematic, as outlined within the Field Manual. Whilst “grave breaches” of the Geneva Conventions of 1949

²²Department of the Army, *The Law of Land Warfare*, paragraph 499.

²³These acts were: making use of poisoned or otherwise forbidden arms or ammunition; treacherous request for quarter; maltreatment of dead bodies; firing on localities which are undefended and without military significance; abuse of or firing on the flag of truce; misuse of the Red Cross emblem; use of civilian clothing by troops to conceal their military character during battle; improper use of privileged buildings for military purposes; poisoning of wells or streams; pillage or purposeless destruction; compelling prisoners of war to perform prohibited labour; killing without trial spies or other persons who have committed hostile acts; compelling civilians to perform prohibited labour; and violation of surrender terms. *Ibid.*, para. 504.

²⁴The US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam was created on 8 February 1962. Consisting of military personnel from each branch of the armed services—US Army, Viet Nam, US Naval Forces, Viet Nam, the III Marine Amphibious Force, and the 7th Air Force—the MACV was directly responsible for the command, control and logistical support of the US military advisers, technicians and staff personnel assigned to Viet Nam, and served as the allied and operational headquarters for combat operations. Prugh, *Law at War*, 3.

²⁵MACV Directive 20-4 (updated 27 April 1967), paragraph 3a. Lt. Gen. William Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), 261-262.

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and other war crimes committed by enemy personnel or associates were to be tried and punished by US tribunals as violations of international law²⁶ (a jurisdiction available to offences committed against US nationals as well as nationals of allied, cobelligerents and stateless people²⁷), this was not true for offences committed by someone subject to US military law. Whilst the United States would punish war crimes as war crimes if they were committed by enemy nationals or those serving the interests of the enemy State, when such acts were committed by an individual subject to US military law the act would constitute a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and so would be prosecuted under the Code.²⁸

This retention of legal jurisdiction over US military personnel was further enforced through the signing in Saigon of the Mutual Defence Assistance in Indochina Agreement (better known as the Pentilateral Agreement) on 23 December 1950. Under Annex B to the international agreement signed between the United States, France, Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam, US personnel entering Viet Nam were divided into three categories which enjoyed varying levels of diplomatic privilege and immunity from Vietnamese civil and criminal jurisdiction. They were also granted the same legal status vis-a-vis the host country as members of the diplomatic mission of corresponding rank.²⁹ In 1958, the government of Viet Nam was informed that US military commanders, officers and warrant officers and enlisted men qualified for these categories. Thus, military personnel were assured of their

²⁶Department of the Army, *The Law of Land Warfare*, para. 506c.

²⁷Ibid., para. 507a.

²⁸Ibid., para. 507b.

²⁹Prugh, *Law at War*, 88.

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immunity from the Vietnamese legal process.³⁰ Then, as outlined in the MACV directive “Legal Services and Legal Obligations in Vietnam” (16 June 1965), US personnel were informed that, whilst they were to comply with Vietnamese laws, Vietnamese police and courts did not exercise civil or criminal jurisdiction over US military personnel or Department of Defence civilians. Instead, US troops were under the jurisdiction of the US Uniform Code of Military Justice.³¹ Thus it was that “serious incidents” not directly connected with military operations in the field, such as rape, assault and murder by US military personnel against Vietnamese nationals, were treated as violations of the Military Code of Justice, and trial and punishment remained in American rather than Vietnamese hands.

The US Army Court-Martial System

The US military justice system³² was governed by two forces: the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), passed in 1950 (enacted in 1951) by Congress to provide the basis for the court-martial structure and procedure and the statutes of offences for all US military services; and Army regulations, which, along with some post or base directives, held the force of law.³³ The US military justice system during the

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 90-91. The situation was not so clear cut with US civilians, who did not fall under the terms of the Pentilateral Agreement.

³²In the context of the US-Viet Nam conflict, this discussion relates to the period following the implementation in 1951 of Uniform Code of Military Justice, and includes the Military Justice Act of 1968.

³³Lawrence B. Radine, *The Taming of the Troops: Social Control of the United States Army* (Westpoint, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 185.

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American-Viet Nam war period comprised the two components (carried out by separate structures) of trial and review, with the rules of evidence and of procedure outlined within the *Manual for Courts-Martial* (MCM).³⁴

Allegations of war crimes by Army personnel were initially followed by an investigation by the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the Office of the Provost Marshal General. The CID was authorised to gather sworn statements from both alleged participants and witnesses of offences, although it was not a prosecutorial body itself.³⁵ If sufficient information was collected indicating an offence had occurred, the CID would pass the material over to the proper authority for court-martial; alternatively, if the suspect had left military service, the CID would turn the information over to federal authorities for prosecution through civilian courts.³⁶

Subject to the maximum sentence that could be adjudged, the rank of the convening authority, and the rights accorded the accused, an individual still in service could be tried at four different levels of increasing severity: non-judicial punishment;³⁷

³⁴*Manual for Courts-Martial, United States* 1951 (Washington D.C., 1951). The Manual was revised in 1969 but my references here relate to the 1951 version as I was unable to get a later copy.

³⁵Lt. Gen. William Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), 19.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Non-judicial punishments for minor offences were carried out under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and took nine forms: reprimand; restrictions to post; extra duties; reduction in grade; forfeiture of pay; arrest in quarters; correctional custody; confinement on reduced rations or bread and water; and detention of pay. The accused soldier could accept and receive punishment without having his guilt established in court and without the offence appearing on the accused's record on leaving the military. Clifton D. Bryant, *Khaki-Collar Crime: Deviant Behaviour in the Military Context* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 3; Radine, *The Taming of the Troops*, 186.

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summary court-martial,³⁸ special court-martial,³⁹ and general court-martial. It was under the general court-martial that sex-related charges were tried in the American conflict, with thirteen headquarters of the US Army in Viet Nam exercising general court-martial jurisdiction.⁴⁰ Typically convened by the post commander,⁴¹ general courts-martial had the authority to try offences and crimes against the law of war and against the law of a territory occupied as a consequence of war or belligerency, where the local civil authority was replaced, to whatever degree, by the military authority of the occupying power.⁴² The court consisted either solely of a military judge (if requested by the accused)⁴³ or a military judge and five or more members⁴⁴ who, in

³⁸The summary court-martial could be convened by the commanding officer of a company, and was intended only for enlisted men, with a single commissioned officer serving simultaneously as judge, jury, prosecutor and defence council. Maximum punishments could result in either individually or as a combination, one month's confinement, hard labour for forty-five days, restriction to specified limits, limited reduction in grade and the forfeiture of two-thirds of a month's pay. A summary court-martial conviction was a federal conviction and as such would stay with the offender in civilian life. *Ibid.*, 188-189, 211.

³⁹The special court-martial could be convened by the commanding officer of a brigade, regiment or detached battalion and usually comprised of a military judge or a military judge and three members (all officers) whose duties resembled those of jurors in civilian courts, appointed by the convening authority. The special court-martial could administer up to six months' confinement, three months' hard labour, forfeiture of pay for six months, and a bad-conduct discharge. *Ibid.*, 189-191.

⁴⁰Crouchet, *Vietnam Stories*, 215.

⁴¹Only the President, the Secretary of a military Department, a general or commander of a large unit was empowered to convene a general court-martial. Radine, *The Taming of the Troops*, 191-192.

⁴²Bryant, *Khaki-Collar Crime*, 30.

⁴³The option to be tried by Military Judge alone was introduced in the 1968 Military Justice Act. Perceived as curtailing the convening authority's influence over jury selection, the 1968 Act led to the majority of courts-martial from that date being tried by Military Judges. Joseph W. Bishop, *Justice Under Fire: A Study of Military Law* (New York: Charterhouse, 1974), 32.

⁴⁴Radine, *The Taming of the Troops*, 189-191. When members of the court were appointed, it was they, rather than the military judge, who decided upon the suitable punishment for the accused, if found guilty. In courts-martial where the Military Judge sat alone as both judge and jury, he was entitled to determine punishment but could only try crimes which warranted the death penalty if the convening authority had directed it be tried as a non-

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addition to the prosecution and defence counsel (both of whom had to be lawyers) and reporters, were assigned by the convening authority.⁴⁵

General courts-martial could try any offence punishable under the Code. Unlike the other levels of trial, the severity of the sentences that could be meted out by the general court-martial were limited only by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and a (non-binding) pretrial investigation of all general courts-martial was required, under Article 32 of the UCMJ.⁴⁶

General courts-martial trials were recorded verbatim and passed on for review by the convening authority who had the power to return a case or reduce the sentence. If the case was to be returned, the second level of review was carried out by the staff judge advocate (SJA), the commanding general’s legal adviser.⁴⁷ Upon the SJA’s advice, the convening authority would then authorise the case to be returned to the Army’s highest appellate body, the Court of Military Review, based in Washington.⁴⁸ Comprising a panel of three military judges, the court was responsible for the automatic review of all courts-martial resulting in sentences of death, dishonourable discharge, bad-conduct discharge, dismissal of a commissioned officer or confinement for one or more years.⁴⁹ Counsel was also provided for the accused at the Court of Military Review. The final and highest level of appeal within the court-

capital case. Bishop, *Justice Under Fire*, 32.

⁴⁵Radine, *The Taming of the Troops*, 192.

⁴⁶Ibid., 191, 192.

⁴⁷Ibid., 193.

⁴⁸Prior to the 1968 Military Justice Act, this was known as the Board of Military Review.

⁴⁹Ibid., 194.

martial system was the Court of Military Appeal. This court consisted of three civilian judges appointed by the President, and was obliged to review courts-martial where a general officer or death sentence was involved, when the Judge Advocate General ordered a review, or upon a petition for review from the accused.⁵⁰

Army Courts-Martial for Sex-Related Crimes against Vietnamese Nationals in the American-Viet Nam Conflict

As I outlined earlier, my analysis of the court-martial system has been limited to those trials held by the American Army. Statistics for the number of successful convictions for sex-related offences committed by US Army personnel during the American-Viet Nam conflict vary considerably.⁵¹ However, it would appear that forty-five individuals were charged by General Court-Martial for fifty-eight sex-related charges relating to eleven different types of offence⁵² (where at least one

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹For example, according to statistics given to Susan Brownmiller, a total of eighty-six US Army soldiers were tried in Viet Nam on rape and related charges from 1965-1971, fifty of whom were convicted (see Table 3) whilst, according to Major W. Hays Parks, forty-six Army personnel were convicted during the same period for either rape or assault with intent to commit murder, rape or indecent assault. Meanwhile, figures provided to Guenter Lewy indicated that war crimes allegations, aside from the My Lai Massacre, against US Army Personnel resulted in three convictions for rape. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 98-99; Maj. W. Hays Parks, “Crimes in Hostilities: Part One,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (August 1976): 18; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 348.

⁵²These offences were: carnal knowledge, indecent liberties with a female under sixteen years of age, indecent liberties with a male under sixteen years of age, indecent acts with a child, indecent assault, assault with intent to commit sodomy, sodomy, assault with intent to commit rape, attempted rape, rape, and procuring sex for hire. My categories differ from those cited by Brownmiller who categorises the charges as: rape, rape and assault (combined charge), assault with intent to commit rape, attempted rape, sodomy, attempted sodomy, and carnal knowledge (statutory rape). I can only assume that the differences in our statistics and the categories used are to do with the different forms, times and the means by which we received our information. See Table 3 for a comparison of Brownmiller’s figures with my

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Charge	Number Tried	Number Convicted
Rape	38	24
Rape and Assault (combined charge)	5	3
Assault with intent to commit rape	8	4
Attempted rape	18	10
Sodomy	11	5
Attempted sodomy	5	3
Carnal knowledge (statutory rape)	1	1
Total	86	50 (58% conviction rate)

US Army court-martial statistics for rape and related charges in Viet Nam from January 1, 1965 to January 31, 1973. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 98-99.

Offence	Number Convicted
carnal knowledge	1
indecent liberties with female under 16 years	3
indecent liberties with male under 16 years	2
indecent acts with a child	1
indecent assault	4
rape	17
attempted rape	4
assault with intent to commit rape	7
sodomy	4
procuring sex for hire	1
Total	44

Sex-related charges of offences against Vietnamese in which at least one conviction was brought in a General Court-martial, 1965-1971 (following review and appeal processes). Source: US Department of the Army

Table 3: Varying Courts-martial Statistics of Sex-Related Charges Against Vietnamese Nationals for the US Army During the American War

own: Table 4 shows the number of convictions upheld after the review and appeal processes (drawing upon figures given to me by the Army Judiciary); and Table 5 provides a breakdown of the figures provided to me by the Army by the nature of the sex crime and year.

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Sex-related offences against Vietnamese nationals	Charges brought for sex-related charges in General Courts-martial where at least one conviction made	Convictions	After Review and Appeal Processes
carnal knowledge	1	1	1
indecent liberties with a female under 16 years of age	2	2	3
indecent liberties with a male under 16 years of age	2	2	2
indecent acts with a child	0	1 ⁵³	1
indecent assault	3	4 ⁵⁴	4
assault with intent to commit sodomy	2	0 ⁵⁵	0
sodomy	5	4 ⁵⁶	4
assault with intent to commit rape	7	7	7
attempted rape	5	4 ⁵⁷	4
rape	30	26 ⁵⁸	17
procuring sex for hire	1	1	1
Total	58	52	44

Table 4: US Army Courts-Martial for Sex-Related Crimes Against Vietnamese Nationals, 1965-1971. Source: US Department of the Army.

⁵³Reduction of assault with intent to commit sodomy charge to one of indecent acts with a child.

⁵⁴Reduction of one indecent assault charge to assault and battery; reduction of one rape charge to indecent assault; and reduction of one attempted rape charge to that of indecent assault.

⁵⁵One charge of assault with intent to commit sodomy found not guilty; reduction of one charge of assault with intent to commit sodomy reduced to that of indecent acts with a child.

⁵⁶One charge of sodomy found not guilty.

⁵⁷One charge of attempted rape reduced to indecent assault.

⁵⁸Three charges of rape found not guilty; one charge of rape reduced to indecent assault; six charges dismissed at CMR; one charge modified at CMR; one charge dismissed at CM rehearing; one charge set aside on appeal.

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	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	Total
carnal knowledge	1 (1) (1)							1 (1) (1)
indecent liberties with a female under 16 years		2 (2) (2)	(1)					2 (2) (3)
indecent liberties with a male under 16 years					2 (2) (2)			2 (2) (2)
indecent acts with a child					0 (1) (1)			0 (1) (1)
indecent assault			1 (0)			2 (4) (4)		3 (4) (4)
assault with the intent to commit sodomy				1 (0)	1 (0)			2 (0) (0)
sodomy		1 (1) (1)		3 (2) (2)	1 (1) (1)			5 (4) (4)
assault with the intent to commit rape		1 (1) (1)		1 (1) (1)	4 (4) (4)	1 (1) (1)		7 (7) (7)
attempted rape		3 (3) (3)			1 (1) (1)	1 (0)		5 (4) (4)
rape		4 (4) (4)	11 (10) (2)	4 (2) (2)	5 (5) (5)	6 (5) (4)		30 (26) (17)
procuring sex for hire							1 (1) (1)	1 (1) (1)
Total	1 (1) (1)	11 (11) (11)	12 (10) (3)	9 (5) (5)	14 (14) (14)	10 (10) (9)	1 (1) (1)	58 (52) (44)

Table 5: US Army General Courts-Martial Charges and Convictions (in Viet Nam) by year and type, where at least one conviction secured. (Charges brought; Convictions; Number upheld after review and appeal.) Source: US Department of the Army.

conviction was subsequently made). Of the fifty-eight charges, fifty-two convictions were made, with forty-four upheld after the review and appeal processes. The average defendant was 21 years old⁵⁹ and had a GT score of ninety-five⁶⁰ From my information, the eleven different offences (and fifty-eight charges) were tried as violations of four articles of the Uniform Code of Military Justice:⁶¹

- Article 134 (general article): a “catch-all” article which included most non-capital offences if they were deemed to be prejudicial to the good order and discipline of the armed forces and were of a nature likely to bring discredit

⁵⁹This was the average calculated from forty-four men as the age of one of the defendants was not specified.

⁶⁰One of the defences put forward as to why war crimes were committed during this conflict was the “calibre” of the soldier fighting the war. In 1966, the Department of Defense initiated Project 100,000. Growing military demand for men could not be met by the falling numbers of suitable draftees and enlistees. As addressing the avoidance of the draft by more privileged groups such as college students could be too hot a political potato, one other means of boosting numbers was to reduce the minimum requirements for military service entry, so making it possible to accept previously rejected men. Previous to “Project 100,000”, men were assessed by the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), the minimum required score being thirty. and/or the General Classification Test (GCT), the average being one hundred and a score of 120 required by officer candidates. As Solis points out, all military volunteers and draftees were obliged to take the Armed Forces Qualification Test with the scores classifying the men into five intelligence categories, with category I the highest. Those who fell into groups I-III were automatically accepted into the military whilst those in Category V were rejected. With regards to Category IV however, in October 1966, the Secretary of Defense stipulated that the small number of Category IV’s accepted into the services had to be increased: 40,000 during 1967 and 100,000 men per year from 1968 onwards. As a result, the Armed Forces Qualification Test minimum score was lowered from thirty to ten. Lieutenant Colonel Gary D. Solis, *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam: Trial by Fire* (Washington DC: US Marine Corps/US Government Printing Office, 1989), 73.

The average GCT score I present above, for the sex-related crimes against Vietnamese nationals, was calculated from those of forty-four men as the GCT score for one of the men was not specified. The AFQT scores for only twenty-one men were noted, the average for these being thirty-nine. From these figures, it is evident that those charged and convicted (initially) of at least one sex-related offence, on average fell just below the average of the General Classification Test but were above the initial minimum Armed Forces Qualification Test score of thirty. In this light, the argument that war crimes were committed by soldiers of a lower than average intelligence is debatable.

⁶¹The following discussion has drawn upon the 1951 Manual for Courts-Martial, United States. The Manual was amended in 1969; I was unable however to find a copy of this amended version.

upon the armed forces.⁶² Within this article fell offences of civil nature including assault with intent to commit rape,⁶³ assault with attempt to commit sodomy,⁶⁴ indecent assault,⁶⁵ and indecent acts with a child under the age of sixteen years.⁶⁶ The maximum punishments for these specific offences all included dishonourable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and confinement at hard labour for twenty, ten, five and seven years

⁶²Article 134, *The Uniform Code of Military Justice* (book on-line); available from http://www.Military-network.com/main_ucmj/SUBCHAPTERX.html (Information originally taken from gopher:'wiretap.Spie.COM:70/11/Gov.UCMJ); Internet; accessed 12 June 1999; *MCM*, 1951 para. 213, Art. 134.

⁶³

This is an assault accompanied by an intent to have unlawful sexual intercourse with a woman by force and without her consent. The accused must have intended to overcome any resistance by force, actual or constructive, and to penetrate the woman's person. Any less intent will not suffice ... No actual touching is necessary. ... Lesser offenses that may be included in a charge of assault with intent to rape are indecent assault and assault.

MCM, 1951 para. 213, Art. 134(1c).

⁶⁴

The assault must be against a human being and must be with the intent to commit sodomy. Any less intent, or different intent, will not suffice.

Ibid., para. 213, Art. 134(1d).

⁶⁵

An indecent assault is the taking by a man of indecent, lewd, or lascivious liberties with the person of a female, without her consent and against her will, with the intent to gratify his lust of sexual desires. In a proper case indecent assault may be a lesser included offense of assault with intent to commit rape.

Ibid., para. 213, Art. 134(2).

⁶⁶

This offense consists of taking any immoral, improper, or indecent liberties with, or the commission of any lewd or lascivious act upon or with the body of, any child of either sex under the age of 16 years with the intent of arousing, appealing to, or gratifying the lust or passions or sexual desires, either of the person committing the act, or of the child, or of both. Consent by a child to any such act or conduct is not a defense.

Ibid., para. 213, Art. 134 (3).

respectively.⁶⁷

- Article 80 (attempts): an act or acts done with the specific intent to commit the particular offense which, except for the interference of some cause preventing the carrying out of the intent, apparently would result in the actual commission of the offense.⁶⁸ Under the 1951 *Manual for Court-Martial*, the maximum punishment for an attempt was the same as the maximum punishment authorised for the commission of the offence attempted although confinement could not exceed 20 years.⁶⁹
- Article 125 (sodomy): an unnatural carnal copulation, with either another person of the same or opposite sex, or an animal. Any penetration, however slight, was sufficient to complete the offense and emission is not necessary.⁷⁰ The maximum punishment for sodomy was dishonourable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and confinement at hard labour for five years.⁷¹
- Article 120 (rape and carnal knowledge): rape was defined as an act of sexual intercourse by a man with a female not his wife and of any age, by force and without her consent;⁷² carnal knowledge, defined as the commission of an act of sexual intercourse under circumstances not amounting to rape, by a person with a female not his wife who has not attained the age of sixteen years.⁷³ For both offences, any penetration was sufficient to complete the offence. Whilst rape was punishable by death or such other punishment as a court-martial directed, the maximum punishment for wrongful carnal knowledge of a female under sixteen years of age was dishonourable discharge, forfeiture of

⁶⁵“Table of Maximum Punishments.” Ibid., para. 127c.

⁶⁸Ibid., para. 159, Art. 80.

⁶⁹“Table of Maximum Punishments.” Ibid., para. 127c.

⁷⁰Ibid., para. 204, Art. 125

⁷¹“Table of Maximum Punishments” Ibid., para. 127c.

⁷²Ibid., para. 199a, Art. 120.

⁷³Ibid.

all pay and allowances and fifteen years of confinement at hard labour.⁷⁴

As outlined in Tables 3 and 4, seventeen charges were brought against fifteen Army personnel under Article 134 for six different types of offence.⁷⁵ Five individuals were charged with attempted rape and five soldiers with sodomy, in courts-martial where at least one conviction was secured. One individual was tried for the offence of carnal knowledge. As would perhaps be expected, rape was the most frequently charged sex-related crime, with twenty-eight soldiers charged with thirty offences. These thirty offences resulted in twenty-six convictions, of which seventeen were upheld. Rape was also the offence most likely to be committed in conjunction with other crimes (both sex- and non-sex crimes, for example, housebreaking, burglary, murder) and by groups of men rather than by individuals; of the twenty-eight men charged with at least one offence of rape, twenty-two were involved in group incidents (involving various offences) of between two and five men.

Both reflecting and supporting my interviewees’ testimonies, certain courts-martial were sought following the abuse of women during operation-related activities, such as reconnaissance raids, establishing listening posts, or combat patrols. In addition to the “Incident on Hill 192” mentioned in the previous chapter, other courts-martial for abuses during military activities included the following:

- According to the Prosecution, in 1967 a six-man squad left the landing zone with instructions to establish a listening post outside the perimeter. After

⁷⁴“Table of Maximum Punishments.” Ibid., para. 127c.

⁷⁵These six types of offence were: assault with attempt to commit rape, assault with intent to commit sodomy, indecent liberties with a female under sixteen years of age, indecent liberties with a male under sixteen years of age, indecent assault and the procurement of sex.

setting up the listening post, the squad moved towards a nearby hamlet. While two of the men stood guard, three of the soldiers raped a woman inhabitant of one of the houses in the hamlet. In addition to being found guilty of the other charges of robbery, larceny and endangering the safety of command, all five men were found guilty of rape. Although the two men who had stood guard had not committed rape themselves, they were also recognised as guilty as their actions actively encouraged and assisted the actual perpetrators.⁷⁶ Although the men received sentences of dishonourable discharge, reduction in grade, total forfeiture of pay and allowances and confinement at hard labour, ranging from fifteen to twenty-five years, the charges were eventually dismissed by the Court of Military Review.

- In 1968, two individuals were on combat patrol. On seeing two Vietnamese women, the men ordered the women to stop and took them into a house. Both men raped one of the women and the other woman was subjected to sodomy and attempted rape. One of the men was found guilty of rape, sodomy and assault with intent to commit rape. He was originally sentenced to dishonourable discharge, total forfeiture, reduction in grade and confinement at hard labour for five years. The confinement sentence was later reduced to three years by the convening authority, however, the unexecuted sentence was remitted in 1970 by the Secretary of the Army and the accused was returned to service.⁷⁷ The other accused was found guilty of rape and assault with intent to commit rape. He was sentenced to dishonourable discharge, total forfeiture, reduction in grade and confinement at hard labour for three years but this sentence was remitted by the Secretary of the Army and the accused was restored to service.⁷⁸

Other courts-martial were brought following the abuse of female detainees. For

⁷⁶Summary of the Evidence. “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 7 November 1967, *US v. Holiman, US v. Danford, US v. L. Ward, US v. T. Ward, US v. Smith* CM 417084. Documents supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court US Army Judiciary.

⁷⁷“Review of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 14 March 1969, *US v. Lund* CM 420181. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

⁷⁸“Review of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 14 March 1969, *US v. Francis* CM 420181. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

example:

- In 1967, the accused, an interrogator, was told to collect information from three female detainees for use in an imminent operation. According to the prosecution, the accused took one of the detainees from her cage to the interrogation hut and physically assaulted her. The detainee was then returned to her cage. The accused next asked the desk sergeant to bring the second detainee, a fourteen year old girl, to one of the huts for questioning. There, he hit her in the eye and then dozed off to sleep whilst holding onto the detainee. When he awoke, it was alleged he removed her clothing and raped her.⁷⁹
- According to the prosecution, in 1968 approximately twenty Viet Cong or NVA suspects were detained, including two girls—seventeen and fourteen years old—who were Viet Cong nurses. The two girls were interrogated with another male suspect, by Vietnamese interpreters. All three were beaten, with the accused participating in pushing the girls. When the interrogation ended, the two girls were taken by the accused and another serviceman⁸⁰ to the first platoon area, as directed by the company’s commander, instead of a small compound where the others would be held. During that night, the two girls were subject to multiple rapes and sodomy by a number of the company; the next morning, one of the two girls was killed. The accused was found guilty

⁷⁹Summary of the evidence for the Prosecution. Summarised in the “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 28 December, 1967. *US v. Szlosowski* CM 417312. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary. The accused was found guilty of rape and assault and battery. However, the charge of assault and battery was later set aside by the Board of Military Review (12 August, 1968) and the charge of rape modified to indecent liberties with a female under sixteen years of age, therefore, a violation of Article 134. The accused’s sentence was modified accordingly, reduced from the original sentence of dishonourable discharge, confinement at hard labour for twenty years, and total forfeiture of pay and allowances, to dishonourable discharge, total forfeiture and confinement at hard labour for five years, and finally to confinement at hard labour for one year and partial forfeiture for twelve months; he was released and returned to duty in 1968.

⁸⁰This individual received immunity from the government in return for testifying.

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of one (of two) charges of rape.⁸¹ He was sentenced to partial forfeiture of pay and allowances at seventy-five dollars for twenty-four months, reduction in grade and confinement at hard labour for two years. The unexecuted portion of the confinement was remitted by the Secretary of the Army in 1969 and the accused was released and returned to duty.

- In 1970, a Vietnamese girl tending water buffalo was taken into custody by two American soldiers on day guard and taken to a bunker by the two servicemen, one of whom made a call to the command post. The accused appeared and took the girl into his custody. After taking custody of the girl, the accused took her to command post #4, tied her hands and ankles, gagged her and then forced her to have sexual intercourse. The accused was found guilty of rape⁸² and sentenced to dishonourable discharge, reduction in grade, total forfeiture of pay and allowances and confinement at hard labour for four year.

However, from the courts-martial it became evident that women were also abused outside the immediate “arena” of the military raid, for example, whilst in their homes or gardens—in front of (male) family members—and as employees and detainees.

Courts-martial trials included the following:

- In 1970, three soldiers left the Americal Combat Centre at around 9pm to

⁸¹Summary of the Evidence for the Prosecution. Summarised in the “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 18 December, 1968. *US v. Guthmiller* CM 419649. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary. This incident is also significant for the court-martial of the company commander for, amongst other charges, dereliction of duty by failing to enforce adequate safeguards to protect the two female detainees from physical mistreatment by the members of his unit. Having been found guilty of this charge, and of failing to report the non-battle death of a female detainee killed whilst in the custody of his unit, the company commander was reprimanded and fined \$2,500, which was later reduced to \$1,200. “Advice of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 10 August, 1966; “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate,” 21 March, 1969; “United States Army Court of Military Review,” 5 August, 1971. *US v. Goldman* CM 420332. Document supposed to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

⁸²Prosecution Exhibit #2. Summary of the Evidence for the Prosecution. Summarised in the “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 21 January, 1971. *US v. Rasak* CM 425133. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

drive the victim to the MP gate. According to the prosecution, the accused sat in the back of the jeep with the victim, talked to her about “boom-boom” and then with one of the other soldiers holding her legs, raped her. According to the victim’s testimony, she was raped by these two soldiers.⁸³ The accused was found guilty of indecent assault instead of rape. He was sentenced to a bad conduct discharge, total forfeiture of pay and allowances and confinement at hard labour for three years. The sentence was remitted however in 1971 and the accused was restored to duty.

- According to the prosecution in a joint court-martial, the victim was a fourth-floor maid at a hotel in Saigon. In 1970, she was cleaning one room when the door opened and the two accused, who had been staying on the same floor, entered. One grabbed the victim around the neck; upon a signal from the first soldier, the second hit the victim on the cheek and she passed out. When she regained consciousness approximately twenty minutes later, she found herself sitting by the bed, naked from the waist down and covered with blood from her stomach down to her legs. She also saw a Cognac bottle with blood on it.⁸⁴ The two accused were found to have inserted the bottle into the victim’s vagina, causing haemorrhaging. They were found guilty of indecent assault with intent to satisfy sexual desires. After review and appeal, the two accused were both finally sentenced to bad conduct discharges, reduction in grade, total forfeiture of pay and allowances and two years and one year⁸⁵ confinement at hard labour respectively.
- In 1968, two soldiers in Phu Le approached a Vietnamese woman working in her garden with her two children. The soldiers had been on “stand down”

⁸³Summary of the Evidence for the Prosecution. Summarised in “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 5 September, 1970. *US v. Stepp* CM 424028. The second soldier with whom the accused was co-court-martialed was found not guilty of rape.

⁸⁴Summary of the Evidence for the Prosecution. Summarised in the “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 17 June, 1970. *US v. Mallory* and *US v. Hall* CM 423622. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

⁸⁵“Opinion of the Court,” United States Army Court of Military Review, 25 May 1971. *US v. Hall and Mallory* CM 423622. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

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and had been drinking and were “quite high”; they entered the village after gaining permission to get more beer.⁸⁶ It had been rumoured that there were prostitutes near the bridge and they had apparently been told that they could find some “free tail” down the road.⁸⁷ According to the testimony of the victim, both men raped her and then, in a nearby temple, she was forced to perform oral sex on both men. This attack took place three hundred metres away from an ARVN camp and about two hundred metres away from the soldiers’ own camp.⁸⁸ One soldier was found guilty of rape and the other found guilty of sodomy. After review and appeals, both soldiers were eventually sentenced to bad conduct discharges, total forfeiture of pay and allowances and one year’s confinement at hard labour.

The courts-martial I have cited are just a small sample of the types of crimes brought before the US Army’s judicial system. Even from such a limited illustration, it is clear that there was no one typical scenario in which women were vulnerable. As supported by my interviewees’ testimonies, women were abused as detainees or US employees, or during military, reconnaissance raids. However, there were similarities between the different cases brought before the judges. The majority of the crimes involved multiple perpetrators and multiple charges. Not surprisingly, the incidents often took place, broadly-speaking, in public; that is to say, there would be witnesses either present at the abuse or immediately on the scene after the event. It can

⁸⁶Testimony of the accused, summarised in “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 19 February, 1969. *US v. Cornier* CM 420110. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

⁸⁷Testimony of the accused, summarised in “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 27 February, 1969. *US v. Payne* CM 420103. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary. Testimony of the accused, summarised in “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 19 February, 1969. *US v. Cornier* CM 420110. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

⁸⁸Summary of the Evidence for the Defense, summarised in “Review of the Staff Judge Advocate”, 19 February, 1969. *US v. Cornier* CM 420110. Document supplied to me by the Deputy Clerk of Court, US Army Judiciary.

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therefore be suggested that this may have contributed to the cases being brought forward in the first place. Also significant was the degree to which convictions were either dismissed or punishment reduced. As I outlined earlier, there were three stages in the review process. Of the courts-martial details I received, ten of the forty-five courts-martial had their sentences altered at the review of the convening authority stage; approximately half (twenty-three) of the courts-martial had their charges dismissed or sentences reduced by the Court of Military Review; and four cases had their judgements altered by the Court of Military Appeal. In addition, at this level, the unexecuted portions of six individuals' sentences were remitted by the Secretary of Army, often with the soldiers returning to duty. Bearing in mind that, as I have shown in Tables 3-5, of the fifty-eight initial convictions secured for sex-related offences, fourteen were eventually dismissed after the review and repeal processes, the degree to which convictions were dismissed or sentences reduced arguably failed to act as a deterrent against the perpetration of war sexual abuse.

From the above, it is clear that incidents of abuse could be tried, even if charges against the accused were later dismissed or the sentence reduced. Undoubtedly, the reality of the war and problems inherent to the judicial and war crimes reporting procedures hindered their prosecution. From March 1966, all war crimes, whether carried out by or against US personnel, were to be reported to the higher authorities, up to and including the Military Assistance Command in Viet Nam. However, it was not until 1970 that the provision existed for the possibility that a commander could be involved in the war crimes (and would hence have to report either his own violation or ineffective leadership); no independent checks existed, and the Inspector General system, designed to investigate implementation and compliance with MACV

directives, could only do so at the request and direction of the commander.⁸⁹

There was also the question of when offences had been committed. Offences constituting war crimes were not subject to the statute of limitations, provided the accused was still in military service. However, following the 1955 decision of *Toth v. Quarles*, the US was legally unable to bring to trial, by court-martial or in a federal non-military court, Americans accused of grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions once they had returned to civilian life, unless the violations had occurred inside the maritime or territorial jurisdiction of the US. This condition could not be applied to South Viet Nam. The situation was confirmed in April 1971 when the US government confirmed that it would not seek to prosecute US ex-servicemen who had violated international law in Viet Nam.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, crimes defined as military offences e.g. negligence, dereliction of duty, failure to report, and false reporting were subject to a statute of limitations of two years. If charges failed to be filed against a suspect within two years of the date on which the offence was alleged to have been committed, they could not be filed at a later date.⁹¹

In addition, there were practical issues to be dealt with. As an *ad hoc* tribunal convened (and hence controlled) by a military commander, a court-martial could be used to try those in his command whom *he* believed to be guilty of UCMJ violations.⁹² Collecting witnesses could also be problematic. American witnesses

⁸⁹Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 343-349.

⁹⁰Jordan J. Paust, “After My Lai: The Case for War Crimes Jurisdiction Over Civilians in Federal District Courts,” *Texas Law Review* 50 (December 1971): 6.

⁹¹Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry*, 50.

⁹²Bishop, *Justice Under Fire*, 27.

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could be called back from combat, held in Viet Nam past their scheduled dates to return home or returned from the United States.⁹³ When the witness was Vietnamese, the problems of the language barrier and of using an interpreter would arise.

That judicial redress was an unlikely option for victims of war rape during this conflict was supported by a handful of comments made by my interviewees. Phuong, for example, did not believe that any laws existed for the protection of women during this time:

We were not quite sure if they had any such law in place. But the reality is that we don't see any of the soldiers having been brought to justice. What I could see was that the soldiers, they could go attacking and raping at any time, without being punished. Who knows such a law, who'd be aware of such a law, but we'd be attacked. A court-martial is only used to try the soldiers within their own organisations. But not to try soldiers who committed anything outside the organisation, committed crimes against the people.⁹⁴

A remark by Gom supported this. When asked if she had heard of any courts-martial

⁹³Crouchet, *Vietnam Stories*, 218.

⁹⁴Phuong potentially contradicted herself in the interview however. When asked if the women victims of violence wanted to sue or prosecute, she replied:

Sure, everybody wanted to, but they were scared to death. So we really had to judge the then situation. If the situation was rather relaxed then we would sue the perpetrators and sometimes you'd win. And if the situation was very tense then you wouldn't dare to sue them because if you did so, they would go on and kill you. For example, sometimes if the situation was tense and you brought the dead bodies to their station to protest, they might just shoot the whole crowd and kill even more people.

It seems possible here that Phuong misunderstood what I meant by the terms “sue” or “prosecute”. Whereas I meant remedy through the legal system, she may have understood this to mean protest, the demonstration being one of the few tools available to women to protest against the conduct and nature of the war. Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

punishing acts of sexual violence, she replied:

This was war time, you didn't really know anything and you didn't hear anything like that at all. There was too much fighting so you didn't hear anything like that. Even if you did hear of that you didn't dare to say anything. It's not like present time.⁹⁵

And as implied by a Women's Union representative present at Gom's interview, even if legal redress had been available, it would only have been available to a certain “type” of woman, for:

If the women stayed in the strategic hamlet they were ok. but most of the cases where women got raped were when they strayed out of the strategic hamlet. So, they couldn't really say they were out of the hamlet, and therefore VC, and had been raped. So, if you sued them for raping, you would be revealed as a VC and your life would be even more endangered. Therefore you wouldn't want to press charges or do anything similar.⁹⁶

With so many obstacles and the fear of further danger, it is not surprising that so few women were able to receive judicial redress for their experiences.

Conclusion

One way in which women survivors of violence can evade victimisation is through the validation of their experiences and the punishment of the perpetrator. A survey of the courts-martial statistics for the American conflict reveals that, for many

⁹⁵Gom, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

⁹⁶Representative of the Cu Chi Province Women's Union, present at Gom's interview. Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998.

“Who knows such a law?”

women, judicial redress for abuse suffered at the hands of military personnel was limited. Undoubtedly, Southern Vietnamese women were in a precarious position in relation to the degree to which they were protected from war sexual abuse. Firstly, as I have outlined, many of the prohibitions inherent within international law at the time were not applicable to this conflict due to the allied-nation status of South Viet Nam. Secondly, reliant upon the US Army’s self-regulation and, in effect, self-prosecution, of violations of the Uniform Code of Justice, it was perhaps inevitable that convictions for sex-related crimes would be small in number; after all, the conditions of war must only exaggerate the already low prosecution rates for sexual violence during peace time. And thirdly, as shown by the comments made by my interviewees, survivors of war rape did not necessarily know of the judicial options available to them; and even when they had been aware, their VC/enemy status automatically precluded them from the possibility of legal redress for their experiences. Lessons must surely be learnt from this in relation to future prosecutions of sexual violence in war.

Conclusion

I always find it difficult to conclude when talking about my research; it is now recognised that sexual violence occurs in war at the hands of multiple and varied perpetrators and this has been borne out in my interviewees' testimonies. As such, I have no hypothesis to prove or disprove within this thesis. Yet to finish simply with "we know this happens and it happened in Viet Nam" leaves me feeling hopeless and powerless, as though things will never change.

But, things have started to change. Over the five years during which I have conducted the research for both my Masters and PhD dissertations, a number of pivotal events in relation to gender-based violence as a war crime and the American-Viet Nam conflict have taken place. In 1998, the Congressional medal of honour was awarded to Hugh Thompson for his acts to save Vietnamese civilians during the 1968 My Lai Massacre; and in the same year, the International Criminal Court was established (although this success has been marred by the reluctance of the United States to sign/ratify the agreement). Similarly, the first prosecutions for war sexual abuse have taken place within the International War Crimes Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The development of human rights and humanitarian law and of the women's movement has meant that the issue of rape, more generally, and its prosecution in international law in particular has moved on from where it was thirty years ago. There is hope for change.

However, there is also much to be wary of. In writing this conclusion, I am aware that it is problematic to uncritically contrast the conflict in Viet Nam and the prosecution of crimes committed therein with the more recent conflicts seen, for example, in Bosnia and Rwanda. As I argued in the introduction, I do not consider

Conclusion

the war sexual abuse carried out in Viet Nam to have been genocidal in nature; in contrast, the genocidal intention between the extensive rapes of women in the aforementioned conflicts is vital to the nature of the prosecution for this crime in the International Tribunals. Although the Tribunals are a significant step forward in terms of the prosecution of war rape, the emphasis upon the prosecution of rape in a genocidal context and upon the chain of command means that, realistically, the majority of the men responsible for war rape will go unpunished and therefore, undoubtedly, the vast majority of war rape victims will fail to see judicial redress for their experiences.

This has a number of consequences. Firstly, as I have shown, in the American-Viet Nam conflict, the number of successful courts-martial for sex-related crimes against Vietnamese nationals was extremely low. If American veteran and my interviewees' claims of extensive violence are deemed credible, it can be argued that the low risk of punishment and the atmosphere of impunity which it may have bred within the American military system was insufficient to deter soldiers from committing rape during the conflict. Similarly, if the War Crimes Tribunals fail to secure the arrest and punishment of more than a handful of war rapists, what effect will this have for the perpetration of sexual violence in future conflicts?

Secondly, what happens if women are unable to seek judicial redress for their experiences? Is judicial redress the only way for women to get recognition for their experiences? If not, what other forms exist? From my interviewees' testimonies, it appears that redress can and must take other forms, notably, historical recognition of "ordinary" women's stories as opposed to purely those of selected national "heroines", and financial assistance. On the one hand, these desires may be universal

Conclusion

for all women survivors of war rape. However, on the other hand, my interviewees were only a small group of women and thus their experiences do not necessarily represent either those of other Vietnamese women, let alone those of women in other conflicts. As a result, the needs expressed by my interviewees may differ from those of other women.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that my interviewees' need for recognition is applicable to all war rape survivors. In this, I am reminded of the claim that in Bosnia, journalists would enter camps asking "Anyone here been raped?", the women's stories being exploited for the purposes of a "good story" without regard for the emotional, psychological or safety consequences such attention may have had for the women.¹ We would do well to remember that whilst women's war stories need to be known, it is not singlehandedly up to us to decide that the women's stories *must* be told and that they *must* tell *us* their stories. We must respect the women's right to privacy, recognise that such narratives are difficult to tell and allow the women to decide how, when and to whom they tell their stories.

One of my hopes for this thesis was that the testimonies would present my interviewees as more than just victims of the conflict. Although I am not critical of those women who choose not to define themselves in this manner, the women's strength offered me, at least, something positive to hold on to amongst all the distressing narratives. Whilst I recognise that the label of victim may have strengths

¹Centre for Women War Victims, "Statement to the Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights," World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 16 June, 1993. Cited in Women Living Under Muslim Laws, eds. *Compilation of Informations on Crimes Against Women in Ex-Yugoslavia - Actions and Initiatives in Their Defence* 3 (1994): 310-311; Knezevic, "Abused and Misused," 12-13, 37.

Conclusion

for those who chose to take it,² as is evident from the testimonies, the women's experiences of the conflict were multifaceted, and whilst we in the West may still perceive them solely in terms of their victimised status, this was not a view the women presented of themselves. Rather, they identified themselves as active agents in the conflict and as heroines; although their experiences of violence were significant, they were not the sole defining elements of the women or their identities.

Conversely, it is the women's experiences of victimisation combined with their agency in the conflict which has, in effect, prompted the antagonism I have encountered in relation to the subject matter of this thesis. As I have discovered, researching the issue of sexual violence in this conflict can elicit enormous emotional responses, even from those for whom the war played no part either in their own personal or nation's backgrounds, who were too young to remember the war or not yet born, or who have never studied the conflict. The American conflict in Vietnam has the ability to evoke strong opinions, but these opinions often prioritise the anguish of the male American veteran over the suffering endured by the Vietnamese population, or may be dismissive of claims of war crimes against civilians as propaganda or minimise the US military involvement because the Viet Cong were "worse".

In some respects, such negative reactions make research into the Vietnamese perspective of the conflict all the more vital, as they compound the silence surrounding women's experiences of war. However, are there implications to be drawn from this in relation to the rape of women in other conflicts? Although the United States was effectively the "loser" of this conflict, America's global dominance,

²Minow, "Surviving Victim Talk," 1413-1415.

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the dismissal of allegations of crimes against the Vietnamese as “Communist propaganda”, and the desire of contemporary Viet Nam not to dwell on the past has, in effect, ensured a “winner’s justice” or at least a situation where in an effort to move on the experiences of civilians, and especially women, are subordinated to more pressing economic and political concerns. This has already been seen in other contexts, for example, the dismissal of the rapes of Serbian women in the Bosnian conflict as propaganda, and the Japanese government’s response to the “Comfort Women’s” claims for compensation. What does this mean for survivors of other conflicts? Will the experiences of certain women in certain conflicts always be overlooked depending upon who else is abused or who the perpetrator is? Will rape in particular conflicts always be given preferential attention over the sexual abuse of women in others? And will the resumption of “peace” always mean that women’s experiences and needs are overlooked?

Another of my intentions in this work was to present the voices of the interviewees. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, as I have said, there is a tendency for the American conflict in Viet Nam still to predominantly be presented through American veteran accounts rather than Vietnamese. This is especially true in relation to the issue of sexual violence during the conflict. Secondly, I wanted to present the women’s stories through their own words rather than through my interpretation of their experiences. Although I am aware of the dangers of presenting accounts of sexual violence,³ I have quoted extensively from the interviews, often perhaps to

³As Beverly Allen writes:

A repetitive serial form may easily hook even a reader disgusted by the events the text relates into wondering at least what comes next. This scene was so horrible, can the next one possibly be worse? And so the reader may keep turning the pages, caught in spite of her or his revulsion in

Conclusion

what could be argued the detriment of an analysis of their stories. In Chapter One, I acknowledged that the testimonies of my interviewees will never solely be the voices of the women interviewees and I accept that, unwittingly or otherwise, my interpretation, framework and presentation of the testimonies will, in turn, influence how the stories are interpreted by the reader. As I discussed in my research methodology chapter, I did have qualms throughout my research as to the “truth” of testimonies I was able to collect. To what degree were the women’s stories fabricated or elaborated upon, or the result of hearsay and propaganda? To what degree do the women’s testimonies reflect the prevalence of rape in this conflict? Undoubtedly, the picture will never be clear. The testimonies presented here are those of just a handful of women and as such, could never be seen as representative of the experiences of all Southern Vietnamese women; the comments made by non-revolutionary women as to the “lies” told in my interviews illustrate how erroneous such an assumption would be. However, I would repeat the importance and necessity of respecting these testimonies as the “true” stories of the women, as they saw their experiences. After all, who am I really to judge otherwise?

the formal pleasure of repetitive linear narrative. Such narrative irrevocably places the reader in the position of voyeur. ...

Although the representation of genocidal rape by storytelling, or linear narrative, does not inflict permanent physical trauma or enforce pregnancy or kill its consumers, it does nonetheless reinstitute the power dynamics that obtains in the act of rape itself and in the act of observation or rape. ... Often, accounts of atrocities written by such professionals bear all the earmarks of the well-wrought article, with quotable phrases, easily pulled-out headlines, and so on. Readers who enter such realms of representation are warned to be on the lookout for their own complicity in another’s dire suffering.

Allen, *Rape Warfare*, 32, 33.

Conclusion

Regardless of *the* “truth” as such of the testimonies, I believe there is a real need to hear the actual words of women war survivors. As has been noted elsewhere, there is a tendency in the theorising on war sexual violence for the reality of the experiences for the women to be lost.⁴ I feel, moreover, that amidst all the theorising and analysing there is a tendency for the *words* of the women to be lost. Contemporary academic literature has theorised and analysed why rape happens in war: courtesy of women’s and human rights organisations, we now have the testimonies of the women who suffer in this way during conflict. I believe we must now take the theories and the testimonies and do something “more” with them, in order to develop our understanding of war sexual abuse. I just don’t know what that next step is or how to get there.

Hopefully my research will contribute in some way to this development, whatever it is. As one of my interviewees said:

There is much suffering during war, not only physical but also psychological suffering. When I think back now, I still wonder how could we as women survive all that and could go through all that. I can’t imagine doing it now, it must have been some miracle.⁵

The American-Viet Nam conflict ended twenty-five years ago and the consequences of the violence inflicted are still very much felt today. But these women did survive and “go through all that.” The least academics can do at present is record their experiences.

⁴Chinkin, “Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women,” 329 n.22.

⁵Phuong, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

Appendix A

Chronology (1945-1975)

- 1945 Ho Chi Minh declares Viet Nam independent and founds Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV)
- 1946 Ho Chi Minh calls for resistance to France and the French Viet Nam war begins
- 1950 US sending direct economic and military aid grants to French in Indochina
- 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu ends in French defeat and ensures French withdrawal from Indochina
- Geneva Conference on Indochina provides for the cessation of hostilities, provisional demarcation line at the 17th parallel with political settlement to be achieved through nationwide elections
- Ngo Dinh Diem is appointed premier in the South
- 1955 US Aid to Diem's government begins, including training of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN)
- Ngo Dinh Diem refuses to participate in nationwide elections; declares the "Republic of Viet Nam" with himself as president, October 26.
- 1956 Ordinance 6 issued in RVN permitting arrest and detention of any deemed dangerous to security
- 1959 Law 10/59 is passed creating special tribunals for prison and execution of those endangering security
- 1960 The National Liberation Front of South Viet Nam is established; build up US military personnel in Viet Nam
- 1961 US expands military aid and advisers in RVN
- 1962 US advisory group reorganised as "Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam"; strategic hamlet programme begun

Chronology

- 1963 Martial Law proclaimed in RVN; military coup kills Diem and his brother; continued build up of US military personnel
- 1964 Series of military coups
- 1965 US begins bombing of DRV; March, the first American combat troops arrive in Da Nang; June, regime led by Nguyen Cao Ky emerges; by the end of December, US military personnel numbers 184,300
- 1966 Buddhist and student protests in Hue and Dan Nang begin; US military personnel reaches 385,300
- 1967 September, Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky take over presidency and vice-presidency of the Republic of Viet Nam
- 1968 January: Tet Offensive begins; March, My Lai Massacre; May, Paris Peace Conference begins; US halts bombing of North Viet Nam
- 1969 US military personnel in South Viet Nam peaks at 542,400; first withdrawal of US troops; Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) formed by the NLF and others; massive anti-war demonstrations throughout the US
- 1970 US resumes bombing of DRV; hundreds of university anti-war protests throughout the US; US military personnel down to 335,800 by the end of the year
- 1971 Thieu “reelected” as head of RVN in uncontested presidency race; US personnel in South Viet Nam down to 184,000
- 1972 US authorises bombing of Ha Noi-Haiphong area; bombing halted and US announces resumption of peace negotiations
- 1973 Initial peace agreement signed; Ceasefire Agreement formally signed in Paris, 27 January; last US troops leave South Viet Nam
- 1975 Viet Nam begins to fall to PAVN; 30 April, last Americans leave Saigon as the city falls

Taken from: Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New Press, 1994) and Stanley Karnow,

Vietnam: A History (Penguin Books, 1984)

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. How old are you?
2. Have you always lived in this area?
3. Could you tell me about your family?
4. What impact did the war have upon the area in which you lived?
5. Were you involved in any activities directly connected with the war?
6. What reputations did soldiers of different nationalities have?
7. Did these reputations affect how you felt about the soldiers?
8. In what ways did women have contact with enemy soldiers in this area?
9. Did you have contact with soldiers yourself?
10. What problems did your experiences cause?
11. Did you need medical treatment?
12. Do your experiences during the war affect you today?
13. What things made it easy or difficult for you to cope with your experiences?
14. Were you given any emotional help or support because of your experiences, then or now?
15. Were you given any financial help, because of your experiences, then or now?
16. How did your family react to your experiences?
17. How did your community react to your experiences?
18. Was an official complaint or report ever made of your experiences?
19. If yes, what did this involve?
20. If not, why not?
21. What helped you decide to report, or not to report your experiences?
22. Have your experiences been recorded in any other way?
23. Would you have wanted your experiences to be recorded?

Interview Guide

24. Do you think or talk about your experiences nowadays? If so, to whom?
25. Do you feel your experiences and those of other women have been recognised?
26. Is recognition important to you?
27. How would you like your experiences recognised?

Appendix C

Biographies of Interviewees Cited

Cu Chi

Interviews with author, tape recording, Cu Chi, Viet Nam, 25 June, 1998. Interviews conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

Thao

Thao is 70 years old. She first became involved in revolutionary activities in 1954 as a liaison, conveying letters and documents to and from different units in the Cu Chi area. In 1956, when she was pregnant with her first child, her husband was arrested during a raid. He was released in 1959 but did not return to live with her as he was assigned to security maintenance for a central revolutionary unit in the South. Thao lived in the strategic hamlet in Cu Chi. She was arrested twice and jailed for several years, finally being released in 1972.

Gom

Gom was born in 1921. She joined the revolution in 1954. Between 1954 and 1968, she worked “legally”. This work involved the collection of intelligence and the establishment of a women’s organisation within her hamlet, charged with trying to persuade Vietnamese soldiers to desert the ARVN. In 1968, she was arrested by American soldiers and detained in a detention centre within an American compound in the Chu Chi area for half a month. During this period, Gom was interrogated and tortured with beatings and electric shock. In 1969, her revolutionary role was discovered and she was forced to flee the hamlet and go into hiding. Gom was also raped by soldiers on at least two different occasions (although it was not clear in the interview transcript whether by American or Southern Vietnamese soldiers) during the American conflict.

Gom was granted the status of “heroic mother”, due to the deaths of her husband

and three of her children (one daughter and two sons) as war heroes.

Ben Tre

Interviews with author, tape recording, Ben Tre, Viet Nam, 14 July, 1998. Interviews conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

Tam

Tam was born in 1945 in Da Thanh commune (a coastal area) and became active in the revolutionary movement while still a fifteen year-old school girl after witnessing the arrest and torture of her father. In 1963/64, Tam dropped out of school to go to the jungle to become more active in the Viet Cong/revolution. She was the secretary of the youth league until 1966, when she officially joined the army and was sent from the jungle to the Ben Tre area. She was in the army until 1987 after which she joined the Women's Union. During her participation in the revolutionary movement, she was involved with "legal" work: her duties mainly involved travelling from one district to another to try and mobilise support amongst villagers in order to create bases for the revolutionary army soldiers within the people. Tam was arrested twice but released shortly afterwards on both occasions.

Dau

Dau was born in 1929 in Hoi Dong Nhan, a poor rural area to which a number of revolutionary activists (Viet Minh) fled during the 1930s and 1940s. She started her revolutionary career as the team leader of the Vanguard Pioneers at the age of fifteen. Later, she became a guerrilla, a participant in the self-defence force, was assigned to be a standing member of the women's national salvation group in the Thanh Phu district in 1947, and then later became the vice-commander of the Thanh Phu district's militia force. Her work involved mobilising people to take part in the militia, and to mobilise women to carry out sabotage activities and to persuade their husbands and sons to become part of the revolutionary force in order to build up the

district's guerrilla and provincial army forces. In July 1954, her husband was sent north. Dau was pregnant and did not go with him.

Up until this time, Dau had been involved in illegal revolutionary activities, but in 1955 was made the legal party secretary for the district, and charged with mobilising the masses to struggle for the unification of the country, in line with the Geneva Accords. In February 1956, Dau was arrested for six days, during which she suffered numerous forms of torture during interrogation: beatings, electric shock, being forced to drink water mixed with limestone, and attempted rape. A week after her release, she was taken to the district prison and held for eight months. In 1958, she was caught a second time and was taken to Ben Tre police station. She was jailed for another 8 months.

After her second release, Dau was appointed Bao Thanh commune party secretary and then moved up to district level. She was then promoted to provincial level, working in the Ben Tre women's organisation. On the party realising her involvement with the Thanh Phu militia group, she was returned back to the Army where she was mainly involved in mobilising women within the strategic hamlet to fight the enemy. In 1964, after a regional conference on guerrilla warfare,¹ she was sent to military special area no. 8 as an assistant to the commanding unit, charged with developing a local military force and the activities of the guerrilla as well as militia movements. Dau was responsible for compiling reports and conducting research in these aspects until 1978 when she left the army.

¹The Second Armed Forces and Guerrilla Forces Conference was held in June 1964 "somewhere in the liberated area" and was attended by representatives of the armed struggle as well as:

[M]any South Vietnamese women [who] are very active and determined in their mission to destroy strategic hamlets and counter mopping-up operations and who have succeeded in killing a great number of aggressors and in protecting their native hamlets ...

... Many children work closely with their fathers and brothers in annihilating the enemy, seizing enemy weapons, and assisting our troops intelligently and bravely ... the masses have found ways and means to kill the enemy.

Radio Liberation cited Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong*, 242.

Hong

Hong is 48 years old and was born in Cam Son Commune, Mo Cay District, Ben Tre Province. In 1966, Hong was arrested for the first time, despite not yet being involved in revolutionary activities. She was held for 6 days. After her release, she decided to drop out of her studies and participate in the revolutionary movement, and joined the special task force, eventually becoming a fighter with the task force, in 1967. Between 1967 and 1969, Hong participated in eight battles on the outskirts of Ben Tre Province, either as an individual or with other fellow fighters, killing sixty five and injuring twenty enemy personnel, and destroying their equipment, including weaponry and vehicles.

Hong was arrested a further four times. On the second and third of these occasions, Americans were involved in her interrogation; the third arrest in 1969 resulted in her imprisonment in Thu Duc for a year. On her fourth arrest, Hong was brought to an ARVN security office for interrogation. There, on the fourth day, after been beaten and given electric shocks, she was raped by three men.

Following her war experiences, Hong was recognised as a Heroine of the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF).

Ho Chi Minh City

Phuong

Interview with author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23 June, 1998.

Interview conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Nguyen An Phuong.

Phuong is 54 years old. Whilst a student², she worked as an intelligence agent and

²It was not clear from the interview transcript if Phuong meant student or schoolgirl. Assuming that the information given was correct (and due to the language barrier and use of interpreter, I was unable to cross-examine the information given), Phuong was born in 1944. Therefore, as the raids and arrests she referred to involved American soldiers, she must have been referring to post-1965, and would have been in her twenties. I am therefore not sure whether there were discrepancies or not in this interview transcript.

Interviewees' biographies

was a member of the Women's Association for the Liberation of the South. She experienced an attempted rape during an American raid on a village and was arrested a couple of times by the Americans but managed to escape each time. She was also imprisoned for seven years, in 1968, in the notorious Con Dao prison, where she was kept in a tiger cage.

Mai

Interview with author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 28 May, 1998. Interview conducted in English.

Mai was born in 1952 in Ho Chi Minh City. She was not involved in revolutionary activities.

Hoa

Interview with author, tape recording, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 5 June, 1998. Interview conducted in English.

Hoa was born in 1956 near Cho Lon, Ho Chi Minh City. She was a school girl during the war and was not involved in any revolutionary activities.

Tien Giang

Interviews with author, tape recording, Tien Giang, Viet Nam, 10 July, 1998. Interviews conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

Anh

Anh is sixty-two years old. She was arrested and interrogated by American soldiers after being caught going past a house known to house revolutionaries, but was released; on another occasion, she was arrested by American soldiers and imprisoned in My Tho for six months for not having her identity papers.

Ri

Interviewees' biographies

Ri is sixty-one years old. Ri was arrested while working in a rice field on suspicion of being involved in the revolution. She was interrogated at an American base and then sent to My Tho, where she served four years imprisonment.

Cuc

Cuc is fifty-eight years old. She works for the Tien Giang Women's Union. Cuc had not herself suffered abuse but recounted stories of women's experiences during the conflict in the area.

Lanh

Lanh is fifty-two years old. She was raped by a group of soldiers when she was approximately twenty years old, at her father-in-law's home.

Vung Tau

Interviews with author, tape recording, Vung Tau, Viet Nam, 11 August, 1998. Interviews conducted in Vietnamese through Truong Thi Kim Chuyen; translated by Mrs Hieu Smith.

Bao

Bao was born in 1949. She joined the liberation movement in 1968 transporting food for cadres, but was captured in an ambush by Australian troops, taken prisoner by ARVN soldiers in 1969, and held in Qui Nhon prison until her release in a prisoner exchange on 15 February, 1973.

Trinh

Trinh is the President of the Vung Tau-Ba Ria Women's Union. She participated in the interview by providing background details and stories of the impact of the war on this area as well as on her own home village. Trinh was raped by Southern Vietnamese Rangers.

Khanh

Khanh was initially involved in propaganda work for the revolution. In 1970, she was given the task of constructing secret tunnels but was captured by Australian troops. She was held first in a barbed-wire enclosure and then transferred with forty-five other women to a prison camp. (She did not specify whom it was run by.) There she was beaten and kept in solitary confinement for a few days.

Vinh

In 1953, at the age of 18 or 19, Vinh married but her husband was ordered to the North following the 1954 regrouping; as a result, she was harassed by an ARVN soldier who tried to persuade Vinh to marry him. Vinh was arrested and beaten as a member of the Communist Youth. In 1957, she decided to leave her home village of Quang Ngai for Saigon. There Vinh found work as a servant in the house of a South Vietnamese pilot, whilst simultaneously engaging in revolutionary activities as a member of the youth group against the forced recruitment of soldiers, for the release of prisoners detained either without reason or for revolutionary activities. She was ambushed in 1961 however when she was exposed by a returnee who "caught fish with two hands" i.e. was working for both the revolution and the South Vietnamese. She was imprisoned for fourteen years, moved between each of the large southern prisons and sent to Con Dao for three years.

Na

Na (her name is Phuong but Na was the name she used upon capture and until her release) was born in Binh Duong in 1947 and joined the revolution, at the age of

Interviewees' biographies

seventeen becoming involved in street activities in Saigon-Cho Lon area. In 1967 she was captured and held as a political prisoner for almost a year. She returned to her activities but was again arrested in 1970 and interrogated in Saigon for two months. She was released in 1973.

Ly

Ly was born in a village near Saigon and was only a month old when her father regrouped to the North. Ly joined the revolution at the age of thirteen. At the start, her duties were restricted to couriering letters and documents. When she was sixteen or seventeen years old, she was sent to work in production—cutting down trees in order to be able to cultivate the land. She was later transferred to the task of motivating outsiders to join the revolution. In 1969, Ly was ambushed and shot in the legs. Ly had to have both legs amputated and was sent from hospital to hospital.

Than

Than joined the revolution in 1960 when she was about twenty years old. At first, she was sent to be a rubber plantation worker, living in a strategic hamlet, but was also involved with the soldiers in the Thanh My area when she was discovered. She escaped the hamlet with the help of her fellow comrades. Than was sent to Ba Ria-Vung Tau province. After a few months, she was trained as a nurse and then worked both in a hospital and in combat. Than was badly injured during one patrol.

Southern Vietnamese Women's Museum (Ho Chi Minh City)

Interviews

Thu Duc prisoners

Unknown interviewer, no date; translated by Nguyen An Phuong

Ba Tot

Hoang Thi Hang

Nguyen Thi Bay

Tran Thi Dao

Con Dao prisoners

Unknown interviewer, 12 November, 1992; translated by Nguyen An Phuong

Hong Nhat

Nguyen Thi Thanh Quyen

Unknown interviewer, 12 June, 1992; translated by Nguyen An Phuong

Bui Thi Luu

Le Thi My Nhan

Vo Minh Trong

Qui Nhon prisoners

Unknown interviewer, 5 December, 1992; translated by Nguyen An Phuong

Dang Thi Nguyet

Le Thi Thu Ha

Nguyen Thi Anh

List of Abbreviations

AFQT	Armed Forces Qualification Test
ARVN	Army of South Viet Nam
CID	Criminal Investigation Division
COMR	Court of Military Review
DRV	Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (North)
GCT	General Classification Test
GVN	Government of Viet Nam (Saigon)
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam
MCM	Manual for Court-Martial
NLF	National Liberation Front
PAVN	People's Army of Viet Nam (North)
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
PRP	People's Revolutionary Party of South Viet Nam
SJA	Staff Judge Advocate
UCMJ	Uniform Code of Military Justice
VC	Viet Cong
VVAW	Viet Nam Veterans Against the War
WU	Women's Union

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