

*Peace House Shelter:*  
**SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING  
IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

# PEACE HOUSE SHELTER

Recognizing the importance of safe shelters for the process of recovery and reintegration of victims of human trafficking, The Centre for Women and Development (CWD), with funding from the Spanish Government, has implemented the Peace House Shelter Project (PHSP) to provide support and assistance to women and children survivors of human trafficking in Vietnam.

The project opened its doors in 2007 and has since provided assistance to more than 260 survivors of human trafficking, with over 3000 cases being handled and referred by its counseling room.

The comprehensive needs-based support package offered by PHSP includes safe accommodation, medical and psychological care, legal aid, education, entertainment activities, life skills training, vocational training, job placement, and reintegration support. The approach in place ensures that appropriate assistance is provided and that the re-victimization of victims is prevented by empowering them through life and vocational skills to be their own agents of change. For that purpose, the Peace House Shelter offers an empathetic, non-judgmental and confidential environment to facilitate successful recovery and reintegration of women and child victims.

With support from the Spanish Agency for International Development and Co-operation (AECID), the Peace House Shelter Project has over the past 6 years not only given direct assistance to victims in its shelter, but also organized numerous activities in coordination with other agencies on prevention and raising awareness, as well as strengthening the referral network for a better and joint provision of services. The project has also successfully advocated for and assisted in the drafting of the Anti- Trafficking Law issued in April 2011.

The current phase of the project focuses on the consolidation of the model and its services; the strengthening of coordination with the national referral and support system; the development of communication activities to foster prevention of new human trafficking cases; and the design of sustainability strategies for the future.

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*Peace House Shelter:*  
**SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING  
IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

This book is dedicated to all victims of trafficking, both the survivors  
and those who have yet to find their way home.

“ ***Life will not take everything from you.  
What we can get back is much more than  
what we have lost.*** ”

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# FOREWORD

Although human trafficking has existed for centuries, the uneven effects of globalization have, in recent years, contributed to its emergence as a profitable and generally low-risk criminal business. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation primarily victimizes women and girls, reminding us in the most tragic way of the inequality faced by women throughout the world, and the persistence of gender-based violence, in its most heinous expression.

Spain is firmly committed to the fight against human trafficking, its underlying causes and consequences. The Spanish Comprehensive Plan against Trafficking in Persons, in force since 2009, put in place social and legislative measures, as well as relevant programs, to ensure an effective response to this crime. As a part of the approach, Spain works closely with the countries of origin, transit and reception of victims, and contributes to many initiatives against human trafficking with our main partners in Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam among them.

In 2007, The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), recognizing the importance of comprehensive approaches to the recovery and reintegration of survivors of human trafficking, supported the Centre for Women and Development (CWD) in setting up and operating the Peace House Shelter in Hanoi.

Six years later, with ongoing Spanish support, and with a great deal of experience acquired, the shelter continues to provide comprehensive support tailored to each individual's experience and to their needs and wishes. The goal is to help trafficking survivors regain self-esteem and confidence, giving them the means to ensure their swift reintegration into society.

This book gathers extremely moving testimonies from victims who have found shelter at Peace House, and shows us the obstacles of various natures they face in their quest to start life afresh. It also proves how, with enough determination and support, victims can overcome so many hurdles on their path to recovery of the dignity and hope to which every human being is entitled.

I would like to praise CWD and all the staff for their commitment to improving the lives of women, girls and families, and encourage the Peace House Shelter Project to keep fulfilling their unique mission. This would be impossible without the courage and resilience of Peace House survivors, and I want to thank them not only for sharing their painful memories with us, but also their hopes.

Their testimony touches our minds and our hearts, reminding us that life is neither fair nor safe for children and women in poverty, who are among the most vulnerable sectors of the population. By giving hope and relief to these women, we aim to ensure that our children may live in a better world.

**Alfonso Tena García**  
*Ambassador of Spain to Vietnam*



# INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Centre for Women and Development (CWD), in conjunction with the Spanish Agency for International Development and Cooperation (AECID) created Peace House Shelter to provide comprehensive support to trafficked women and children in Vietnam. Our residents receive safe accommodation; health and psychological care; legal aid and protection; career orientation and training; life skills; work placements and re-integration support to build a new life. Peace House Shelter has been widely hailed as a model of support services for trafficked women and children, highly rated by national and international agencies, and acknowledged as an important intervention in the fight against gender-based violence in Vietnam.

The shelter has thus far welcomed 260 women and children, coming from 15 minorities and 43 provinces throughout the country. 260 women and children in the Peace House Shelter represent 260 different stories and circumstances, but they are all survivors of human trafficking. Not only do these survivors receive wide-ranging practical support, but they also enjoy the indispensable empathy and emotional backing of the staff and other returned sisters, together entering a new life in peace and safety.

The true testimonies gathered in this book are just a small selection from all the lives and hopes that the shelter has hosted over the past 6 years. The residents

were invited to share their stories as part of their recovery process, allowing them to speak for themselves, rather than through outsiders or “experts”, to describe their experiences in their own way. The stories have been carefully edited to change names, dates and places, preserving the survivors’ identities and ensuring their security. All the authors have given their consent to publishing this book, and hope it will be a powerful tool to raise awareness and protect others from similar suffering.

Indeed, these stories help us to have a more comprehensive overview of human trafficking: the social context of this phenomenon, the particular gender vulnerabilities of women and girls, the tricks of traffickers; and the dreadful consequences that human trafficking has for individuals, the community and society. We believe that this clearer understanding will better guide our efforts against human trafficking, an outcome all the more important because we can see success will require the involvement of our entire society.

The Centre for Women and Development would like to thank the Spanish government for its strong commitment and support, and AECID for their help over the years as we have implemented the project, making Peace House a unique place providing critical support to survivors of human trafficking. Through this project, we hope to bring a better life and brighter future to women and children, and also provide a more comprehensive shelter model to support survivors of human trafficking in Vietnam. Thereby we might make a contribution to the fight against human trafficking, both in this country and around the world.

**Cao Thi Hong Van**

*Director of the Centre for Women and Development  
Director of the Peace House Shelter Project*



## Some figures on human trafficking in the world and Southeast Asia

Of 12.3 million forced labour victims worldwide, around 2.4 million have been trafficked. The figures present a conservative estimate of actual victims at any given point in time, estimated over a period of ten years.<sup>1</sup>

32% of all trafficking victims have been forced into labour exploitation, 43% procured for sexual exploitation and 25% for a mixture of both.<sup>2</sup>

Women and girls account for 75% of all trafficking victims detected globally.<sup>3</sup>

Women and girls constitute 55% of all victims of forced labour and 98% of all victims of sexual exploitation.<sup>4</sup>

The trafficking flow originating in East Asia remains the most prominent transnational flow globally.<sup>5</sup>

The criminal justice response to trafficking in persons offences is weak compared to the scale of the problem. The conviction rates for this crime remain at extremely low levels.<sup>6</sup>

# BORDER LINES

*‘I thought I could never escape from this prison, but I promised myself I would never give up.’*

My parents divorced when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, because my mother couldn't bear a husband who drank and hit her all the time. After the divorce, I lived with my mother, and my little sister lived with my father. My mother left all property and houses to my father. She only took a field, and moved back to my grandparents' house. We encountered many difficulties living there. My uncle and cousin were also living at our grandparents' place, and we struggled to get on, partly because my grandparents' family is also very poor. My uncle scolded us all the time, and finally asked us to leave the house. Although my grandparents loved us so much, they could only give my mother and me a small ragged cottage.

As for my little sister, she could only stand living with my father for a few

days before she left to find my mother. She cried so much that her eyes turned red and swollen. She said: "Dad drank and hit me, forced me to leave school. He sold everything in the house." When I saw her, my heart fell to pieces. She was dressed thinly and inadequately, and wore no shoes. She had walked five kilometres to find a warm place and escape from our crazy father. My mother looked exhausted and pale. But she said: "My dear girl, I can only take care of your older sister. Look at my run-down house! And I have no money!" My little sister burst into tears. I held her in my arms and begged my mother to let her stay: "I'll share my food with her, Mum. If you let her go back to live with father, he will surely hit her again". My mother wept with us and agreed.



One more body in the house, one more burden for my mother. My mother had a job in a tea factory, and to earn more money, she worked overtime every day. I went to school for half the day, then returned home to help my grandparents with chores such as feeding the buffalo, cutting the grass for fish food, or selling things at the market to earn money for books and pencils. My little sister and I shared all the work.

A year later, my mother remarried. That was a turning point for my little sister and me. Some months after that, my biological father died. I felt nothing. I didn't cry, because my memories of my father were only of frightening moments when he was drunk and beat us. When my father died, my little sister went back to live with my grandmother on my father's side. They lived in the house where my parents used to live, which was empty because my father had sold everything for alcohol.

My step-father had a daughter three years older than me. She was spoiled, knew nothing of work, and had no wish to study. My step-father also drank all the time and hit me. I was just a thorn in his side. In Vietnam, traditionally, when you get married, you have to follow your husband wherever he goes, and take care of him with all your heart. As a result, when my mother tried to fulfil her duty as a wife, she seemed to forget all about us: all her love was devoted to my step father. I was a teenager at that time, going through physical and spiritual changes. I had so many questions, but dared not ask my mother for

advice. I became fed up with everything, and my studies in 9th grade consequently suffered.

On one particular occasion, my step-father hit me, but my mother kept quiet, making me feel angry and disappointed. I decided to leave home without anything in my pockets. I wandered to an internet cafe to play games; but eventually my mother found and took me back home. She said nothing, and my step-father also admitted his fault. I thought that everything would be fine after that. I was wrong.

Some days later, my step-father punched and insulted me. It was the last straw: I gathered up all my clothes and left the house. I went to an internet cafe where I knew my mother would not find me again, and stayed there playing games for several days. When I grew tired of playing, I realized that I had no money left to pay. I went to a chat room and got to know a girl named Thu who had nearly the same situation as me, and was one year older. At that time, she was working in Hanoi. She told me to wait for her in Tuyen Quang and that she would come to help me.

I waited for her, and several days afterwards, she messaged me to say she was in Tuyen Quang. I asked her to come to the internet shop I was sitting in. At that time, Thu didn't have enough money to pay for me. I searched in chat rooms and found another girl in Tuyen Quang named Oanh, and asked her to take Thu and me to her house. Oanh came with a man of around twenty years old to pick us

up. After that, she told me she would take me back to my house, but I refused because I was afraid of my step father. She said: "So do you want a job? It's no good wandering around and playing all day!" I accepted her offer and agreed to meet Oanh's sister, who, as it turned out, was a pimp.

Oanh's sister was very fat, so people called her Fatty Nga. She said to me: "You'll work as a shop assistant in Lao Cai. It's nearly Lunar New Year. You can work till New Year's Eve, and they will pay you 1 million VND". Thu and I agreed to go with her. At 9 that night, they called a taxi, and Cuong – the name of the man with Fatty Nga – took us to Lao Cai. I was a little suspicious and asked: "Why do we have to go at night?" but she replied: "You'll be there tomorrow morning to start your job". I agreed to get in the taxi with Cuong.

I slept from 9 pm till the car stopped at 4 am. I could only see a sign: "Lao Cai border gate". They hired a motorbike to take Thu and me to the port of a river. Ten minutes later, we were on the other side. A Chinese man who spoke Vietnamese picked us up by car and he took us to a market with three floors. Later, I found out this was "Bird's Nest Market". Up on the second floor, they led us to a small room that looked like a store. I asked Cuong if I would work there, and he nodded. The Chinese man gave Cuong a set of 500,000 VND notes. I looked at Cuong in surprise, but he just told me it was the taxi fare and went back to the waiting car. After that, Thu and I went to sleep in the room.



***“ I had no time to put my clothes on. I was always naked, because the moment one guest left, another came in...I used to think of suicide because living like this was so shameful. But then I thought, if I died, the traffickers would never be caught and punished. My family, my mother would never see me again. I could not die in such a strange place...”***

At 2 pm, the Chinese man and his wife woke us up and took us for lunch, then to buy clothes and go to a hairdresser. I was surprised and asked: “If I’m only going to be a shop assistant why do I need new clothes? I have no money to pay for them”. He replied: “You don’t have to pay. It will be taken from your salary later”. This startled me, and I asked him to explain again. He replied angrily: “I brought you here to work as a prostitute, not a shop assistant!” Terrified, I burst into tears. Then his wife, who was Vietnamese, said: “I bought you two at a price of 20 million VND each. If you want to go home, you have to pay me 20 million VND. If not, you have to work off the debt”. I pleaded with her to call my parents to bring money but they refused.

Thu and I planned to flee, but the couple kept us under strict control. I couldn’t make any phone calls to Vietnam, because the sim card in the phone they had given me was a Chinese one. I cried and fell into panic. At that time of year, most Vietnamese were with their families preparing for the Tet Festival, but I was here crying all day. Two days later, the Chinese man and his wife hired some people to take us to the city. It took us three days and two nights. It was the 27th of December by the lunar calendar. A Chinese man of about twenty years old picked me up, and another took Thu away. We lost touch with each other from that moment on.

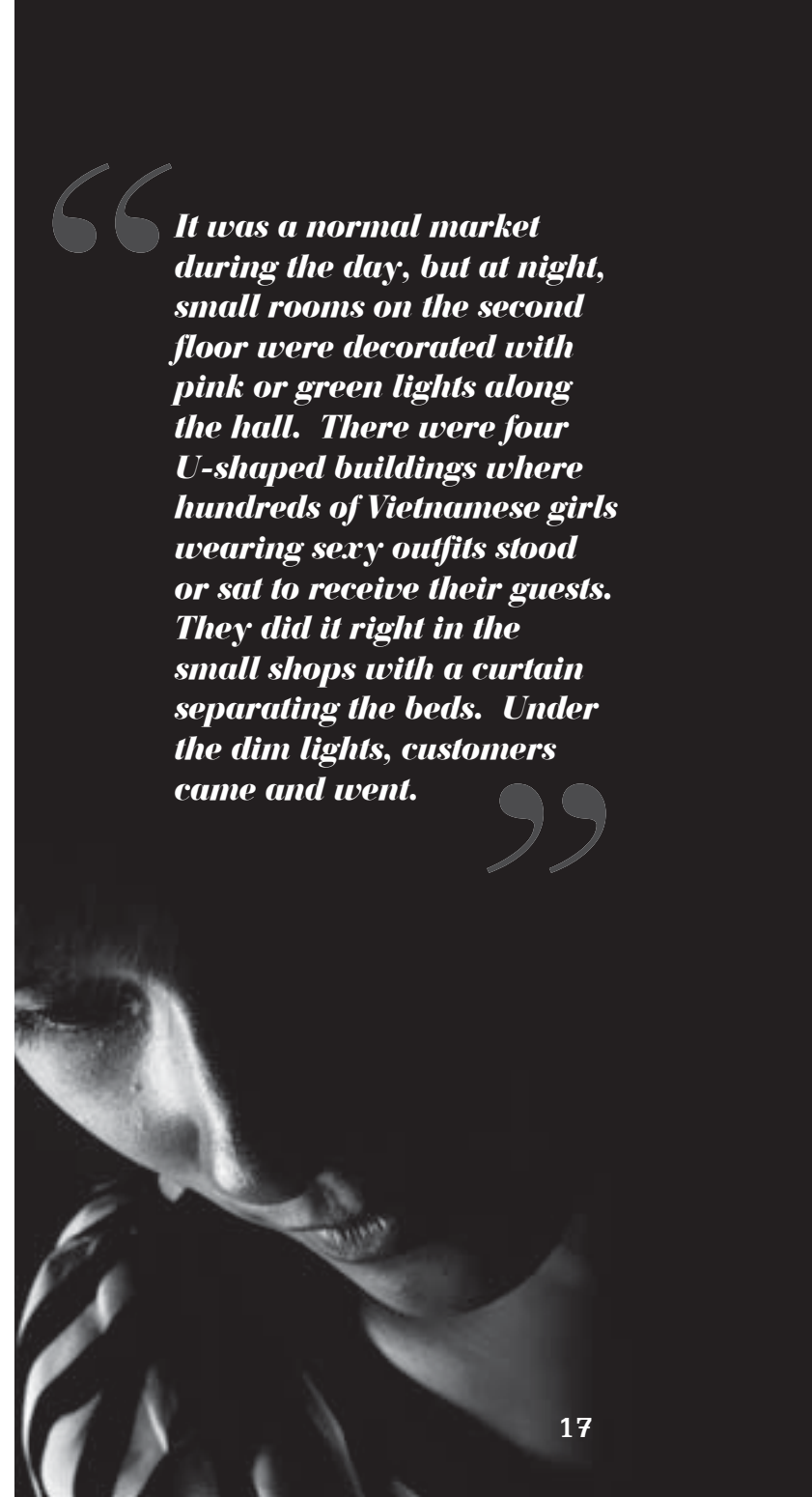
The traffickers took me to a luxurious ten-storey hotel, where I would be forced to work as a prostitute. During Tet, a great number of customers came. Even on my menstruating days, they forced me to stop the blood with a

cotton rag and serve those crazy guests. I was so frightened that I had to follow their orders. Ten to fifteen customers a day for a nearly 16-year-old girl was an unbelievable story. I felt pain in my body and in my heart. I grew thinner and thinner; pale, resentful and regretful. Now I realized the worth of what my mother had said to me, and thought about my family, my little sister. While other people were out shopping for Tet, I was in a strange country being physically and spiritually tortured.

On New Year’s Eve, so many customers came that I had no time to put my clothes on. I was always naked, because the moment one guest left, another came in. They provided me with food once a day; but even then much of it was inedible. I used to think of suicide because living like this was so shameful. But then I thought, if I died, the traffickers would never be caught and punished. My family, my mother would never see me again. I couldn’t die in such a strange place. Though I was afraid that I could never escape from this prison, I promised myself I would never give up, and hoped that someday I would get back to my hometown.

For three long months, day after day, I was forced to serve ten to fifteen men. Many of them did not use a condom or were very dirty, which made me get myometritis. When that happened, I couldn’t do my job anymore, so they sent me back to Fatty Nga in Ha Khau, China. I was taken to Bird’s Nest market. Lao Cai is just across a small river from this market, and I thought it could be my chance to escape. But after

***“ It was a normal market during the day, but at night, small rooms on the second floor were decorated with pink or green lights along the hall. There were four U-shaped buildings where hundreds of Vietnamese girls wearing sexy outfits stood or sat to receive their guests. They did it right in the small shops with a curtain separating the beds. Under the dim lights, customers came and went. ”***



***The feeling of returning to my own house after nearly half a year in brothels was so special. I thought that I had really been rescued from an evil world. However, at the time I came home, I felt that everyone was keeping their distance from me... (My step-father) scolded and insulted me every day, making me cry. I wanted to disappear from this world as soon as possible.***



they took me to the hospital to cure my illness, they sent me back to the city. One afternoon, I escaped and ran to the port but they caught and beat me terribly. They were going to cut my legs off, but then they said that if I had no legs, how could I make money for them?

Eventually, they forced me to work as a prostitute at Bird's Nest market. This market was also called "Vietnam market". It was a normal market during the day, but at night, small rooms on the second floor were decorated with pink or green lights along the hall. There were four U-shaped buildings where hundreds of Vietnamese girls wearing sexy outfits stood or sat to receive their guests. They did it right in the small shops with a curtain separating the beds. Under the dim lights, customers came and went.

I was forced to solicit people on the street, no matter the weather. Many Vietnamese girls like me wore scanty clothes and stood along the crowded pavements. There were lots of scams. One woman would solicit a customer, agree to provide him with a prostitute, take the money and disappear. The prostitute would then follow the customer, walking behind him. When she saw a "xe om", she would jump on the motorbike to escape as fast as possible so the guy couldn't catch them. The "xe om" in fact worked for the pimp. They took the prostitute back to the house to change clothes and hairstyle, then back to the street to find more 'customers'.

I often gazed at my motherland on the far bank of the river and dreamed of going home.

Sometimes, the customers tipped me money, and I managed to buy a sim card to make phone calls to Vietnam. I tried hard to contact my family. Over time, I got acquainted with a Vietnamese woman who had a shop on the first floor. She helped me to contact the Lao Cai Border Guard and ask them to get me back to Vietnam.

I will never forget the day I finally left Bird's Nest market. Escaping that place, I was so happy that I wept and wondered whether it was a dream. The police reassured me and said: "This is real. Your dark days are behind you. Never make this mistake again!" I replied: "Thank you! I feel so sorry now".

Lao Cai police contacted the authorities in Tuyen Quang and asked them to take me back to my hometown. When I arrived there, I was thrilled to see my mother and my little sister. But at the same time, I was afraid to face my family, neighbours and friends. Because the pimps and their lackeys hadn't been caught, my safety wasn't assured at all. Therefore, the Social Welfare Center, Department of Labour – Invalids and Social Affairs supported me with temporary accommodation, finance and hospitalization. I stayed there for twenty days before my mother asked them to let me come home.

The feeling of returning to my own house after nearly half a year in brothels was so special. I thought that I had really been rescued from an evil world. However, at the time I came home, I felt that everyone was keeping their distance from me, even my step-father. He scolded and insulted me every day,

making me cry. I wanted to disappear from this world as soon as possible. My mother always encouraged me to forget all about the past and start a new life. I asked her if I could continue 10th grade at school, and she agreed, but my step-father was not very happy about that. I wanted to apply to a high school because my results over nine years had been good. However, in the end, I applied to a vocational training course.

I dared not ask my mother to pay my fees. All the money came from my grandmother, a poor farmer. My grandmother sold some rice, then gave me 300,000 VND to pay the fee. I pledged to myself that I would study hard to make her proud and happy. I went to school in the morning and stayed at home to help my Mum with her work in the afternoon.

One day, Tuyen Quang Police and the Social Welfare Center called me and said that in Hanoi, there was a program funded by the Center for Women and Development to provide vocational training courses for trafficking victims in difficult situations. They explained that it was a special program and advised me to take part in a course in the program in Hanoi. My mother also told me: "I am very poor and if you finish high school, I have no money for you to continue going to college or vocational schools. And will you have the patience to study for three years at high school? I'm afraid you'll return like the girl before. You need a job. Go with them and find a trade". After sleeping on it, I decided to go with the police to Hanoi.

On the way to the capital, I was very worried and curious because I knew nothing about the Centre. Would they let me take part in a vocational training course, or just put me in a rehabilitation centre? However, on my arrival, I felt completely reassured. The staff there were very happy to take us to Peace House. The name of the place at first sounded strange to me, but when I arrived I understood. I was so happy to be in such a beautiful and comfortable house. The building had five floors, and was painted yellow. To be honest, Peace House was nicer than my own home. I met other girls living there who shared my situation. They were very friendly to each other and lived like sisters. I was shy at first, but eventually I got on well with the other girls in the house.

We were provided with personal accommodation, healthcare, monthly pocket money, legal assistance, and vocational training courses. Peace House also organized entertainment activities, such as visits to Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. We could participate in aerobics exercises, yoga, short training courses about strengthening the power of women, and have birthday parties in the house. We were even given money to visit our hometown each month. Participating in training courses helped me realize how important and complicated living skills are. There is so much to learn at Peace House, depending on your ability, demands and health.



I would like to convey my sincere thanks to Peace House for all its support, especially trusting in me when I stumbled and fell. Gratitude also goes to my dear Mum, who gives me faith in life. Now I know that my Mum is the one who loves me most. I'm sorry I was so horrible to her. I have promised myself that I will try my hardest to make her happy. My thanks go to all my dear friends and sisters living in Peace House who have helped me a lot when I am down.

I am still obsessed by what happened in the past, even in my dreams. I worry about other victims of trafficking, and the life they must lead in shameful conditions. I hope they can have the same luck as me, and a chance to return to their families and hometowns and start a new life. I want my story to warn people who might fall into a trap and sell their soul to the devil. Do not trust strangers so easily, because they may want to take advantage of you. You are the one to decide your own destiny!

## Profile of Peace House Shelter residents

Peace House residents are true survivors, women and girls who are in the process of recovery, building new hopes and capabilities with the aim of a fresh start.

Since 2007, Peace House has welcomed 260 residents. Nearly 40% of arrivals have been under 18 years old, with increasing numbers of newcomers younger than 16. 10 % have been illiterate, with 60% having secondary or high school level.

Most residents have come from provinces in northern Vietnam, with 40% of ethnic minority origin; significantly, people from such minorities only make up around 13% of the national population.

60 % of those who have lived at Peace House were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Forced marriage and labour exploitation were the other main purposes.

Nearly half of all residents quote family problems such as domestic violence, broken relationships, substance abuse and neglect as factors contributing to their vulnerability to trafficking. The remainder mostly state poverty, and their search for better economic conditions as the primary vulnerabilities.<sup>7</sup>



## ONE FALSE STEP

*‘Living in Peace House, I felt that I had changed and escaped my miserable life.’*

When I first came to Peace House, I had no career orientation. At the age of 16, while other girls were still at school, I’d been out of education since 5th grade. I’d followed my sister to the South to work as a tailor. At Peace House, I again had the chance to pursue that line of work. At first, I was afraid; I still remembered the huge garment factories full of workers. My body had often trembled with fear when the forewomen shouted at us because they were dissatisfied with something. I’d never been trained with basic tailoring knowledge, so I often made mistakes

that I would have to spend time fixing later.

However, I can now confidently use the sewing machine to make scarves and clothes for my friends at Peace House. I have finished Elementary and Secondary fashion tailoring. Currently, I’m attending an advanced tailoring course: “Ao Dai tailoring”. I am always very happy to wear my handiwork. My friends at Peace House always encourage me, and I give them the clothes I have made as gifts. One of my first products is displayed at the shelter, which makes me very proud.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was born and grew up in Bac Giang province, and my family was one of the poorest in my village. When my father left for the South to find work and lost contact with us, my sister and I were only around five years old. That left my mother to both put money on the table and deal with all the housework. Naturally, one working person could barely feed three mouths, so we lived in desperate poverty. Despite that, after a difficult day, the three of us always gathered to talk and share smiles every night before bed.

Time slowly went by until the day an aunt of mine came back from China. She expressed sympathy for our family's poverty and wanted to help us escape it. She started to take care of my mother, my sister and me. One night, she told my mother: "If you only count on these small rice fields, when will you be able to improve your life? We must make a change!" She continued: "I know about a sugar factory in China that needs workers – you should go with me. I'll help you find work there to get out of your miserable existence." My mother was touched, and agreed without hesitation.

At that time, I was five years old, and my elder sister was in the 2nd grade. My aunt told my mother "I can look after the little girl, but the older one should stay at home with her grandmother". So, the following day, she came to my house at 3 or 4 am, when we were sleeping. My mother carried me on her back, and we left when my sister was soundly sleeping. We took a motorbike taxi and got

on a bus to Tan Thanh Border gate and then walked to my aunt's house. We bathed, rested and had a meal.

We stayed at the house for a few days but my aunt said nothing about work. When my mother asked, she replied: "That promise was only an excuse. In fact, I brought you and your daughter here to sell to men who are old but don't have any wife and child". On realizing that we'd been cheated, my mother got very nervous and begged her to let us return home, but she just said in a cold voice: "You're already here, so there's nothing to do but become a concubine. You can't go back." My mother was totally shocked. She cursed herself for believing my aunt's 'honeyed words'. At that time, we neither had money nor knew the local language, so my mother had to go along with the arrangement and wait for an opportunity to escape.

We were soon sold to a Chinese man. Staying with that man, my mother had to wake up early every morning and cook a full pot of congee for the whole day. Then after cleaning the house, she had to work in the field while I played nearby. At lunch, we went home and ate congee, to which we could add sugar if we wanted. At dinner, we also had congee. Day after day, we always had the same three meals of congee. My mother couldn't bear it, so she cooked a small pot of rice, but the man forbade us from eating it. All he ever wanted to eat was congee, and we had to follow suit.

We missed home so badly. I still remember exactly what I told my mother: "Mum, I wish there were an airplane taking us home to meet everyone!" Listening to such an innocent wish from a little girl, she just forced a smile and cried alone later. Whenever I saw her crying like that, I felt helpless because I was so young.

My mother and I had stayed with that Chinese man for more than one year when we met Ms. Ly from Hai Duong. She talked with my mother and found out that we'd been cheated. Ms. Ly told my mother "You should try to save money; I will ask my friend to help you return to Vietnam". My mother was delighted, and she decided to raise more pigs and ducks to sell to get more money. The Chinese man suspected nothing because we'd stayed there for such a long time already.

When my mother had enough money, she asked Ms. Ly to introduce her to the friend whom Ms. Ly had mentioned. Ms. Ly said that she would arrange an appointment at her house. A few days later, Ms. Ly invited Ms. Lien to talk with my mother. Ms. Lien said, "I will help you and your daughter go back to Vietnam on the condition that you pay me the service and bus fee." My mother agreed and everything was fixed. A few days later, we successfully escaped. Ms. Lien took us to get on a bus to go back to Vietnam. We stayed one night at the border gate, before getting on





the train to Kep station in Bac Giang province. The next morning, after over a year away, we eventually reached home.

On coming home, my mother and I were very happy to meet our relatives after two years, but we were still worried what people would think of us. However, we forgot it all as we reached the door and my mother asked me to shout my sister's name. She opened the door. Everyone was surprised and could barely believe that we had come back. They kept asking what on earth had happened to us.

We'd spent all our savings, so we had to ask my grandmother to share the house. At first, my grandmother still behaved well towards us; but later, when my father did not return, she started saying that he had taken another wife. When my grandmother found out that my mother had become a Chinese man's concubine, she became contemptuous. Sometimes, she grumbled about things that didn't concern her. My mother couldn't stand it anymore, so we had to move to another place.

Our circumstances were so difficult that my older sister decided to start work after she finished 6th grade. A garment factory owner in Bac Ninh came to find workers to go to the South and my sister applied. After one year, the boss came to my house and told me that I could work there too, although I'd only just finished 5th grade. He said "You can just go there for a trial. If you can work, stay; if not, I will give you money to return to

your hometown". I was young and preferred pleasure, so I ignored my mother's warnings.

In the South, I worked as a tailor and helped with other hard jobs. In the morning, we had to wake up at 6 o'clock to have a wash, brush our teeth and get ready for work. We would be lucky to have fried rice for breakfast; if there was no rice left from the previous dinner, we had to work on an empty stomach until 12 o'clock. Then we had to carry on from one-thirty to six pm, and from seven pm to midnight. I had to quit after a half year because I couldn't bear it any more. I escaped from that factory, and a neighbour helped me get a new job. One Sunday, that neighbour was waiting for me at the doorway, and I left the factory without anything. Some months later, I ran into my former boss, and he forced me to pay him my bus fare, advance salary and an early termination fee.

When I returned to my hometown, officers at the Department of the Prevention of Social Evils helped us with money to overcome our difficulties. We were extremely happy that there was an organization sincerely concerned about us. I was introduced to Peace House by the Department of the Prevention of Social Evils.

Living at Peace House, I felt that I'd changed and escaped my miserable life; it became my second home, where my heart always felt warm. The aunts and sisters there

always cared for me whenever I was sick or tired. I was small and weak, and whenever the weather changed, I got a skin rash, with itching and swelling. I spent many sleepless nights. The sisters always took me for examinations and treatment, with both traditional and modern medicine.

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After I finished my vocational training courses, I started to work at a garment company on Quan Su Street, Hanoi with a salary of 2 million VND per month. As a newly-graduated tailor, this is a serious amount of money to me. Besides that, I take on part-time jobs to earn more for my upkeep, and to help my parents.

Now that I've left Peace House, I really miss everybody. Peace House is not only my moral support, where I can share happiness and sadness, but it has also brought me occupational opportunities and knowledge about life. At the moment, I still have the burden of my family: my father is neurasthenic and my mother is often sick. I hope that I will be strong enough to work and help my family.

I would like to say thank you to the aunts and sisters at Peace House, who helped me change my life; the hearts of gold who helped me start all over again. And I would also like to advise everybody to be cautious of temptations and not to fall into such circumstances as I have described.

***We missed home so badly. I still remember exactly what I told my mother: "Mum, I wish there were an airplane taking us home to meet everyone!" Listening to such an innocent wish from a little girl, she just forced a smile and cried alone later. Whenever I saw her crying like that, I felt helpless because I was so young.***



## Gendered vulnerabilities to trafficking

As a result of gender inequality and social and economic power imbalance, women and girls are more vulnerable to trafficking than men. Unfair access and opportunities marginalize women from education and work, increasing gender inequality and feminizing poverty. Gender discrimination and violence in families and communities also create emotionally and economically vulnerable women and children, on whom traffickers prey as they try to escape oppressive situations. Meanwhile, discriminatory socio-cultural practices in some countries, such as son preference, are reducing the number of women, thus increasing gender-based violence and demand for “wives” from abroad.<sup>8</sup>

## LIFE LESSON

*‘My life was sunk in sorrows: a quiet sad shadow at daytime and a tearful weak girl at night.’*

Everyone wishes to be with the ones they love, but not all of us can have such good fortune. Whoever we are, hardship and challenges always confront us. It takes hope, trust in life, patience and endurance to reach a better future.

It’s one year since I came back to Vietnam, but I have rarely visited my hometown

and my parents. People’s nosiness and discrimination scare me. If I return to my hometown, I only stay for a few hours or a day, and then hurry back to Hanoi. At home, I don’t dare to go out and see any other people. When my neighbour saw me once, she called to her grandchildren: “Come along home! Otherwise you’ll be trafficked to China!”

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“ ***It's one year since I came back to Vietnam, but I have rarely visited my hometown and my parents. People's nosiness and discrimination scare me. If I return to my hometown, I only stay for a few hours or a day, and then hurry back to Hanoi.*** ”

I was born in a poor rural family living just outside Hanoi, where farmers toil for their living. Poverty goes hand-in-hand with outdated feudal customs and sexist discrimination. Men are held in high esteem, women oppressed. This can make the lives of women in rural areas unbearable. My mother is a typical example.

I have six sisters. Nearly ten people in my family depend on the income from just a few rice fields, making life very difficult. Three of my sisters had to leave school early to help my parents work in the fields. My father and grandmother, in turn, cursed my mother for having only daughters. They scolded and pressured the poor woman, sometimes even flogging her. Consequently, my mother

became quieter and quieter. I was often startled and scared to hear her bitter cries in the silence of night. She had thoughts of giving up her life. I could do nothing but hug her, sobbing and begging her not to do anything foolish and to stay with us. Her unconditional love for her daughters saved her from despair. She toiled day and night, with faith in our growth and future.

Time quietly went by, and eventually I left high school and passed the entrance exam to a university in Hanoi. My parents said that studying in the big city would be very costly and they tried to put me off going. But I managed to persuade them to let me go to the city with the hope of finding a decent job and a better life.

As a young high-school leaver exploring the city for the first time, everything was strange to me. When my first year started, some student friends and I rented a room and quickly arranged our lives. Every day, I worked part-time in the morning and attended classes in the afternoon. However, the hours I put in for the part-time job made me sleepy later on, and my study results got worse and worse. Sometimes I contemplated leaving university to work, but I couldn't bring myself to throw away all the years I'd studied so hard.

One summer, two years after I'd arrived in Hanoi, I got the idea of using a month in my summer holiday to earn money for the new university year. I could not imagine that this would be the turning point that transformed my life into tearful and resentful days.

I had a close friend named Hien, who'd studied with me in the 9th grade, and was now living in Hanoi. In our spare time, or when she and her husband had quarrelled, Hien would come to talk with me. At that time, she was working for a recruitment company. She knew that I needed a part-time job that summer and promised to find me something suitable. One day, she called and said, "Ms. Linh's family in Hanoi is looking for a person to can fruits in other provinces and bring them back to sell in the city." She added, "Her family is very rich and kind to workers: they pay 50,000 VND at the end of each working day." I had no hesitation in asking Hien to contact Ms. Linh as soon as possible.

One early morning, a woman called me and said that her name was Linh. She'd been told about me and knew that I needed a job. Linh asked me to meet her at Long Bien market and said that if I agreed, she would give me the job there and then. At about 9 that morning, I met Linh at the market. She explained the work to me, which was exactly as Hien had said. Then she offered me a one-day trial, and I accepted.

We went to Dong Xuan market to buy sunhats for workers; then Linh told me she was thirsty and invited me to go for a drink. She led me to a small tea stall under Chuong Duong Bridge. While she was ordering drinks, I went to find a public telephone box to call my sister and tell her I wouldn't be home for lunch. However, I



could not get through to her and returned to the stall. When we'd finished our fruit juices, at about 11 o'clock in the morning, Linh called a taxi. I remember clearly that it was a green car with the registration number 29X-9265. Although I had a bad feeling about the situation, I jumped into the taxi and went with her.

At 4 pm that day, I woke to find myself in Lang Son, not Bac Giang, as Linh had promised. I realized that I was being cheated, but it was far too late. Now Linh and her accomplices observed all my moves, and I couldn't escape. At nightfall, they led me across the border to China and onto a bus, which some hours later, stopped at a big hotel in Ling Shan. A Chinese man and a Vietnamese woman arrived on motorbikes. The man gave a lift to Linh, and the woman took me to their house.

Arriving at the house, Linh told me to stay there with the woman, Yen. Linh went with the Chinese man to buy some food for supper, saying she would be right back. I waited and waited, but Linh failed to reappear. In that strange house with the strange woman, I was scared to death. My heart was thumping in my chest, but I tried to hide those feelings from my face. In my head, I could do nothing but pray to God that what terrified me would never happen. However, the truth was so ruthless.

At 3 am, the Chinese man came back with two other Vietnamese girls. Yen then read the

"order" to us: "Linh sold you to us at a price of 30 million VND. From now on, you have to work as call girls to earn money for me. If you don't, I will send you to remote forests to serve old men, and you will have no chance to return to your parents." Despite my tears, my begging for a chance to call my parents to bring money and redeem the debt, Yen was unmoved. She locked me in a room and kept watch on me day and night.

More than a week later, Yen forced me to start work as a prostitute. Day after day, I had to serve customers from early morning to late at night. Those were long days, and time seemed to stop to witness my tearful sorrow. Every night, I dreamed of returning to my house, but no-one opened the door for me. I tried to cry out, screaming at the top of my voice, but no-one could hear me... Then I would suddenly wake up, tears soaking my pillow. My life was sunk in sorrows: a quiet sad shadow at daytime and a tearful weak girl at night. Why was God treating me so unfairly? I asked. Had I done something wrong to others in the past, so that now I had to pay the price, to suffer those pains and losses? Why hadn't I asked for more information about Linh and the job I would have to do? Now I could only blame myself for my blind trust. Still, I resented those who had lied to me and promised I would one day take revenge on them.

When you read this, I'm sure you'll ask: "Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you ask for help from the police?" The money from work,

“ ***When you read this, I'm sure you'll ask: Why didn't you escape? Why didn't you ask for help from the police? The money from work, I had to hand to our owner. I had no cash of my own. I knew not a single Chinese word. If there had been an opportunity for me to escape, how could I ask for help?*** ”



I had to hand to our owner. I had no cash of my own. I knew not a single Chinese word. If there had been an opportunity for me to escape, how could I ask for help? Sometimes I thought of trying to get close to a customer and escaping with him. However, the customers all just considered us as their toys; they only paid us to have fun, or to relieve their anger when they lost money gambling. Who could I trust? Who could help those like us, lost in a strange country, with such people around us? I thought long and hard about making a run for it. But ultimately I had no will to take a chance on my life. I knew I had to return home to meet my parents and sisters at least once. I couldn't give up here.

The brothel owners, I found out, had once shared the same fate as us. When they were young, they'd been trafficked and forced to work as prostitutes too. But later, they became wicked. They cheated other women and forced them to earn money for them. I felt resentment and hatred for them and those Chinese men. It was in this place that I'd lost my virginity, the place where my life suffered tears and shame, where I could only resign myself to death.

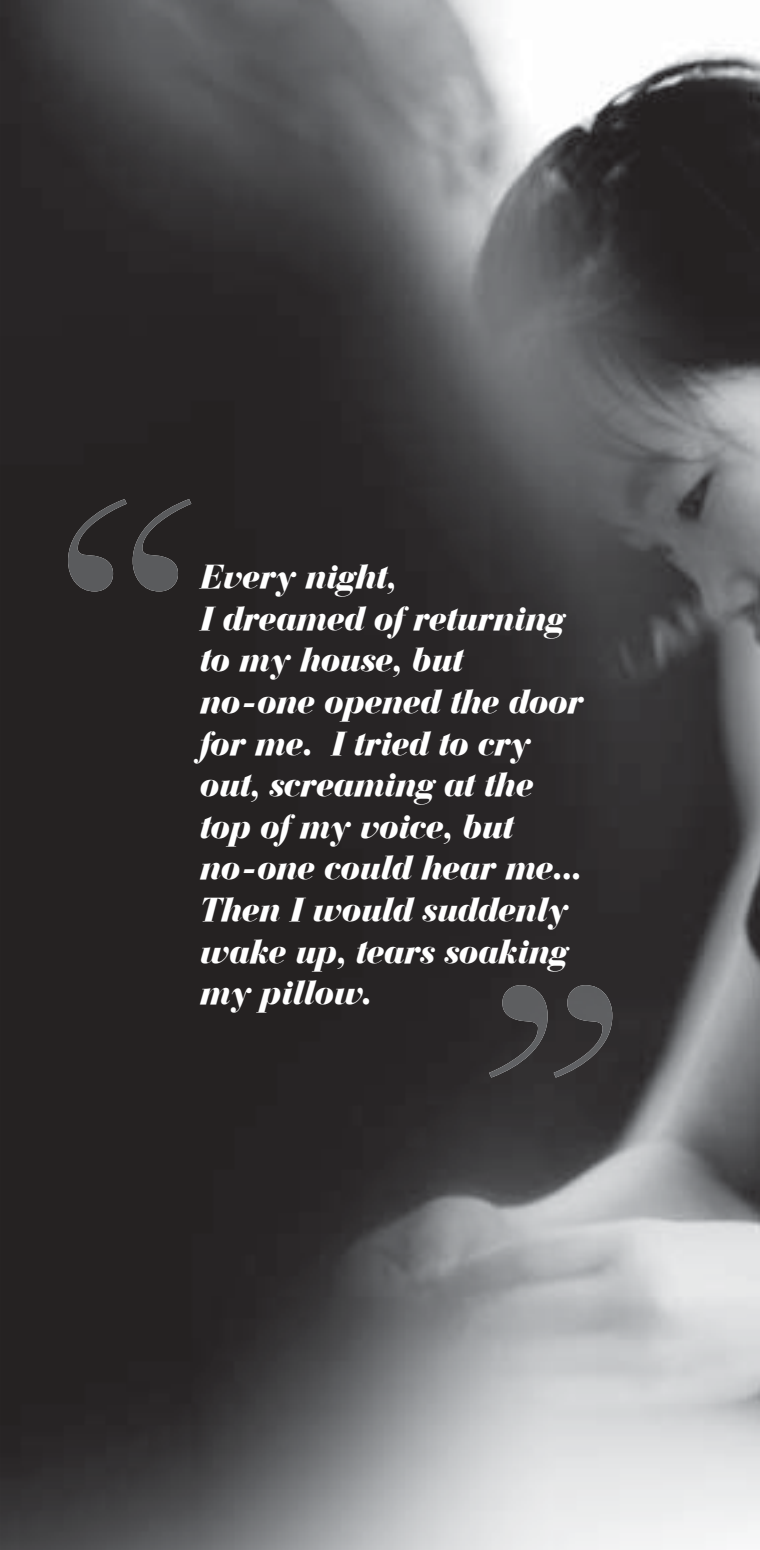
That year, Chinese public security officers in Ling Shan province tightened their security inspection. At the same time, commission for pimps was very high; bloody fights between brothel owners and pimps raged every night. Yen led us to many different places, sometimes luxurious hotels, at others forests and remote mountains without electricity.

After months of sneaking around, Yen took us to a village 400 kilometres from Ling Shan. When we saw that it was a small place, with very few people and mountains all around, we thought we would have little work to do. However, our happiness was short-lived: to our surprise, the number of customers coming doubled.

At the beginning of March, Yen and her husband bought two more young girls from Vietnam. It seemed that the more we earned, the greedier they got. Yen even bought a girl of about thirteen years old named Phuong, and forced her to work as a prostitute right away.

About one month after that, Yen, her husband and Phuong were in a car on the way to his house when police stopped them because they were driving over the speed limit. Taking her chance, Phuong screamed out for help and the police took them to the police station. When asked, Phuong said that there were four other girls in the village. At about seven that evening, the public security officers rushed to the village to rescue us. They took us to Lieu Zhou police station. After two months of temporary prison, Lieu Zhou public security officers took us to Ping Xiang; and the next morning, Ping Xiang police took us to the border.

Suddenly, we stood on the China - Vietnam border. Ahead of us ran a small path surrounded by bushes and mountains. There were many porters working there, and from a



***“Every night, I dreamed of returning to my house, but no-one opened the door for me. I tried to cry out, screaming at the top of my voice, but no-one could hear me... Then I would suddenly wake up, tears soaking my pillow.”***

distance, they called to us: “Come, come, call some more girls, we are waiting for you here...”. Meanwhile, the Ping Xiang police officers said: “We can only take you this far. Go straight ahead, and when you see a big, tall tree, the Vietnamese police will meet you.” We knew nothing at that time and were all shaking with fear. We had no clue how we could get to the “big, tall tree”, or how long it would take. Out in that no-man’s-land, the porters ogled us as if they were going to take us back to China again. We all fell to our knees and cried, begging the police officers to take us to the Vietnamese police station; but they hit us with tree branches and ordered us to go by ourselves. We could understand them, but they knew not a word of Vietnamese. We girls agreed with each other that we would not go down through the mountains, and instead follow the police wherever they went.

In the end, the officers took us back to their car and drove to another border gate. There were two paths at that gate. Some people told us to take the right-hand path; others directed us down the one on the left. We were so confused. In the end, I followed an old woman’s direction: “The right path will take you home. Do not listen to these people, they are cheating you”. Following that path, we ran as fast as we could. We did not know whether the old woman was playing a trick on us, whether that path would in fact take us back to Vietnam.

After a long time running, we were stopped by a group of rough-looking people to pay the road fee. At first, we claimed to have no money and begged them to let us go through; but they refused, warning us that if we did not hand over the fee, we would never get down the mountain. Each of us gave them 20 RMB – the money we had saved to go home – and they allowed us to pass.

We caught a bus from Luc Binh to Lang Son. I only had 5,000 VND, so I looked for a Post Office to call my sister and asked her to call me back. That same day, my father, my sister and her husband drove to Lang Son to pick me up and take me home. That was a long, exhausting day for everyone. But finally I was safe back in Hanoi.

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Some months later, when I saw an MTV Exit program on VTV6, I called their hotline to ask about the trafficking of women and children. The program introduced me to the Center for Women and Development, and now I'm a resident at Peace House. In this place, I can talk about and share everything deep in my heart, my loneliness, shyness and sadness. All the residents of Peace House are supported equally. We live in peace and fairness, with our own voices. We can talk and share with others, staying in free accommodation. We can attend the class "Empowering Women",

and participate in vocational training courses that help us to prepare for our future.

I recently finished a vocational training course in Hoa Sua School, and was invited to work in a big restaurant in Hanoi. I work as a waitress, and my salary is enough to cover my frugal life. Soon after starting this job, I decided to leave Peace House to live independently. After many difficulties at first, now I am used to managing my own life. I am eager to make my own decisions. While working as a waitress, I have been attending a foreign language class to improve my skills. My dream is to find a stable job, and a partner who can understand and sympathize with me so that I can have a happy family like others.

My experience can serve as a lesson to you about the tricks used to traffic people. I hope others will be careful and search for more information about 'opportunities' such as studying abroad, easy jobs with a high salary and overseas labour. Life has both good people and bad. Blurred by money, your friends and relatives can become the bad people in these cases. You have to learn to be aware of the dangers around you. For people in the same situation as me, I want to send you a message: All the difficult, shameful time is behind you. Now you are lucky to be home, so don't look back to your tearful years. Don't go forsaking yourself - be strong!





## Domestic violence and human trafficking

Human trafficking and domestic abuse often occur on a continuum of violence, and the dynamics involved in human trafficking are frequently connected to those of domestic violence. Traffickers exploit the already damaged self-esteem of people who have experienced abusive family lives. At the same time, trafficking survivors are extremely vulnerable to domestic violence upon their return home.<sup>9</sup>

# FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

*‘Now that I’m not living at Peace House anymore, I will tell you something I have hidden for a long time.’*

My father died when I was a toddler, and my mother worked far away from home, so a couple adopted me. My little brother lived with my uncle. Because I wasn’t their biological child, my adoptive parents scolded and hit me whenever they were unhappy about something. Despite my pain and tears, I dreamed of a brighter future for my little brother and me, who were all alone in this world.

I often cried and wondered why we couldn’t have parents like other children. Why did my little brother have to take care of cows and buffalo instead of going to school? Sometimes the buffalo got lost and my brother dared not go home. I was very sad at that time, so when I

heard an older girl in the village ask, “Why stay here and suffer from pain and sadness?” I took an immediate interest.

The girl said that she wanted to help me and my little brother. She asked me to meet her in the afternoon at the gate to our village. At one o’clock that afternoon, I went to meet her. When I arrived, she asked me where my belongings were, and I replied that I had nothing. I asked her about the job she had for me, but she only ordered me to follow her. I refused, saying, “If you don’t tell me about the job, I won’t go with you”. She resorted to saying: “You will be a model for a photographer in Hanoi”.

She told me to go first and said she would follow. I walked for about 1 kilometre, then another woman picked me up by motorbike. I went with that woman to a river, then she told me to go on a small ferry. I asked: "Where are we going?", and she replied: "Didn't that girl tell you? This is the Chinese border". I refused to follow her, but she warned me that I couldn't go back now, because if I did, I would be beaten.

I went with her to a place called Bird's Nest Market. On the second floor, we met Linh, who was 26 and from Vinh Phuc. The woman told me to stay with Linh for a month then she would come back. She told me to follow all of Linh's orders, otherwise, I would be taken to the city centre and there would be no chance for me to go home. Linh took me to buy clothes and cosmetics in the market. After that, she told me to have a bath and put on my new clothes.

Linh took me to a nearby hotel. There was a man waiting there, but I refused to serve him and bit his hand. I was slapped on my cheek. Linh took me back and imprisoned me in a room. I had to serve guests in that room. Six days later, she let me out and warned me that she would sell me to dirty workers if I behaved as I had at the hotel again. I was so afraid that I had to follow her orders. For a month after that, I suffered what I had never undergone in my life.

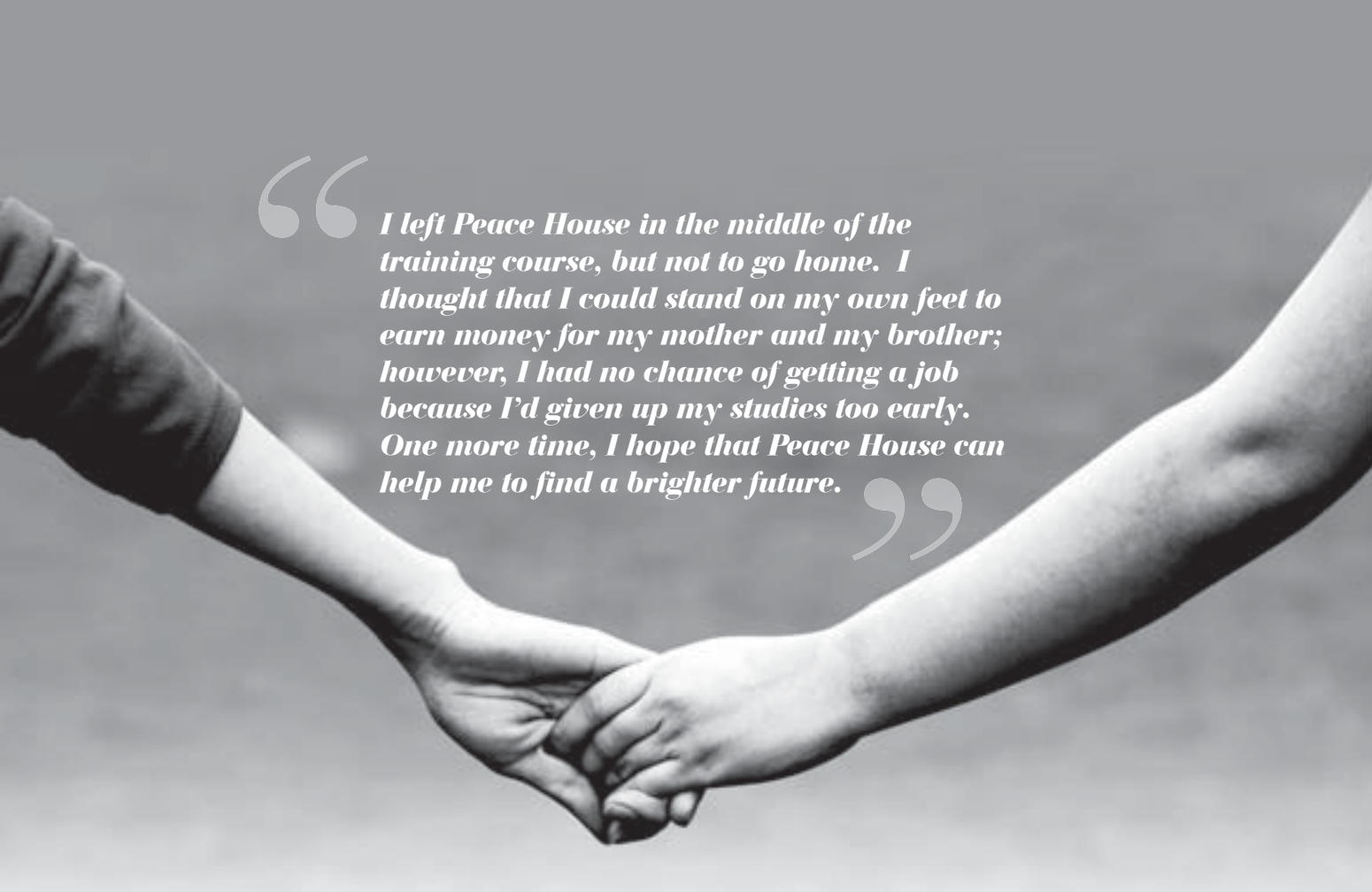
One day, Linh's husband had to go back to his hometown. There was no-one taking care of the prostitutes, so Linh allowed me to go to the hotel alone. When she was on her way to

pick me up, I decided to make a run for it. I escaped by the stairs of the hotel while Linh was using the lift. Outside, I headed south and asked for directions to the police station. A Chinese woman told me to go to the right side of the bridge, where I found the station.

The Chinese police took me to a bridge connecting China and Lao Cai province, then Lao Cai border guard forces led me to Vietnam. They took me to the Social Welfare Center of the province. Soon afterwards, I was introduced to Peace House.

During my stay at Peace House, I took part in vocational training courses, and was provided with healthcare, free accommodation, personal necessities and 100,000 VND per month. I also attended a field trip once a month. The courses in Life Skills have helped me to understand that I must be responsible for myself, and try my best to get a good job for a brighter future for me and for my brother. I can accept any difficulty and hardship in the future, provided that my brother and I are able to live together.

Now that I am not living at Peace House anymore, I will tell you something I have hidden for a long time. Due to personal reasons, my mother is in prison. One day I missed her so much that I told the truth to all the aunts in Peace House. Social Welfare officers took me to visit my mother. They also sent presents to her to encourage her to take care of herself and come back to us. When she found out I was living at Peace House and was being helped to take part in vocational training courses, she was delighted. That was the first



***“ I left Peace House in the middle of the training course, but not to go home. I thought that I could stand on my own feet to earn money for my mother and my brother; however, I had no chance of getting a job because I'd given up my studies too early. One more time, I hope that Peace House can help me to find a brighter future. ”***

time I'd been to visit my mother, making it six or seven years since our last meeting.

The second time I visited my mother was when I had left Peace House. I dared not tell her that I had given up the training course and had already left the shelter. I lied to her, saying that I was working in a restaurant in Hoa Binh province. I gave her one million VND. Last time I saw my mother, I could only give her some presents and personal necessities from the money I had received at Peace House. She looked

unhappy. Was it because of my dyed blonde hair and the thick make-up I'd put on my face? My friends now often said that I was not as lovely as before.

I left Peace House in the middle of the training course, but not to go home. I thought that I could stand on my own feet to earn money for my mother and my brother; however, I had no chance of getting a job because I'd given up my studies too early. One more time, I hope that Peace House can help me to find a brighter future.





## Poverty and trafficking

Poverty is a key driver of the human trafficking industry. Those trapped in poverty are desperate to obtain a better life for themselves and their families, and they are preyed upon by unscrupulous people offering employment, training, opportunities, remuneration and a better standard of living.<sup>10</sup>

## A LEAP IN THE DARK

*'I thought: I have to survive. I have to find a way back to my hometown.'*

Sapa is famous for its fantastic and unforgettable beauty; but no one in my family seems to notice it. My parents are poor, with five children. I'm the youngest; the other four are married. Life has been so difficult for us in all respects, especially money. I will never forget the sad expressions on my parents' faces, nor my sisters' love and protection.

I gave up my studies after graduating from high school, and started working in Lao Cai as a cook for a group of more than twenty builders under my uncle's management. It was a hard job, but I worked there for nearly one year. During this time, through a friend's introduction, I got acquainted with a guy named Quang. I knew little about his

family and occupation; we just talked on the phone and then made a date. He told me that he wanted to meet as soon as possible so that we could learn more about each other. I knew next to nothing about the voice on the other end of the line, but longed to see him, to see his face. And it made me happy to know that I was on the point of meeting him.

Around two months later, we met in Lao Cai. After seeing and talking to each other face-to-face, we fell in love. He was handsome, with a sweet voice that made my heart stir. At first, I just thought I had a boyfriend who would take care of me and share happiness and sadness; but unpredictably this relationship soured quickly.

One night, Quang called and invited me out for a coffee near my work, but I refused as I was a little tired. However, right after that, my close girl friends called and asked me to hang out with them. Because we had not met for quite a long time, I agreed. Then Quang called and asked if I had gone to bed yet. It was noisy, as I was in the café with my friends, so Quang realized that I was not at home. I told him truthfully that I was in "Nang" Café. Quang knew this place. Fifteen minutes later, he showed up at the cafe and called me outside to reproach and insult me. After arguing for a while, I sent him away and threatened to call my friends in the café if he didn't go. He was afraid and went away. Several days later, we made up with each other.



One day, he invited me out to an internet cafe but I turned him down because I had so many things to do. He continued to talk sweetly to persuade me. He asked me "Have you ever been to China?" "No", I answered. He said he wanted me to go with him to Ha Khau, which lies just across the border from Lao Cai, to help his aunt look after her two children for a week. After some time pondering Quang's offer, I finally decided to go with him. I had never crossed the border and just thought it would be fine for a short trip. I also told the manager of the construction site that I had some business to do for a week. Quang prepared the travel documents for me, and I got ready to go.

One morning, Quang and his aunt took me with them on a bus. But, instead of stopping in Ha Khau, we kept going and going, heading for who knew where. After travelling for about 40 – 50 kilometres, I realized that I'd fallen into their trap. I did nothing but cry, fall silent and curse my naivety in being cheated by him – who was two years my junior. At that time, I didn't know who to ask for help, or how to escape. And once we got there, it didn't matter what I thought - I couldn't go back.

Quang stayed with me for a week and tried to force me to prostitute myself for money, but I refused, so we fought. And then he went back to Vietnam, leaving me all alone. I was beaten ruthlessly in that place, threatened and forced to have sex with whore-mongers. I denied them, so the Madam beat me mercilessly. They always pressured and

“ ***They threatened me, and treated me like a toy they had paid for, and which they had the right to torment and abuse. They also threatened to kill me if I did not obey. ...I thought: I have to survive. I have to find a way back to my hometown. So I leapt in the dark to obey them.*** ”

threatened me, treated me like a toy they had paid for, and thus had the right to torment and abuse. They also threatened to kill me if I didn't obey. I had no choice at such a dead end: I had no money or relatives there; nor did I know the way in a foreign country. I thought: I have to survive. I have to find a way back to my hometown. So I leapt in the dark to obey them.

There were many kinds of whore-mongers, some of whom were even older than my parents. Suffering, shame, and hatred filled up inside me. I cut myself; smashed my head against the wall many times. My tears fell again and again. I wanted to die so that I did not have to do such a filthy job. The more I mistreated myself, the more pain I felt. And

“ ***Suffering, shame, and hatred filled up inside me. I cut myself; smashed my head against the wall many times... The more I mistreated myself, the more pain I felt*** ”



finally, I decided to accept my fate and the abuse of the whore-mongers, thinking only of making my way back to Vietnam and to my family as soon as possible.

After those suffering days in the hands of criminals in China, I was eventually rescued and brought back to Vietnam. It was the Madam who released me from my pledge, sympathized and understood my circumstances. She brought me back to Lao Cai border gate.

Although I was happy to reach home, I was discriminated against and isolated. I felt as if I'd lost every single thing and had no hope of making a new start in life. The police sent me to Lao Cai social welfare center for more

than one week. There, I was examined and helped to restore my health and sanity. The officers paved the way for me to stay in Peace House, learn a trade and prepare for my future.

Living in Peace House, I felt relieved and secure, because I knew for sure I had escaped from the nest of the traffickers. In Peace House, I met Mr. Đoàn Minh, Ms. Tường Vy, and many other social workers. They are like our mothers and sisters, who give us strength with their love and consolation. I also met many friends who shared the same situation as me. I love them so much. They are beautiful, lovely, and joyous people. I am really moved by what everyone in Peace House has done for me.

Now I'm happy that I can learn to become a photographer, my dream since childhood. Soon I will take many photographs of the beautiful landscapes in my hometown. Nothing can scare me or make me sad. I am gradually forgetting the sorrowful past and starting a new life. I'll try to capture the beauty of Sapa, and the development of the country, and hopefully I will have a chance to participate in photo exhibitions.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Center for Women and Development and Peace House, where I received so much help and a chance to learn a profession and control my own destiny.



## Blame and stigma

Life can be even worse for a trafficking victim when they return home, due to community stigma, depression, lack of self-esteem or increases in anxiety and fear. Such feelings can make it difficult to reassimilate, and increase the risk of being trafficked again, especially within the first two years of the original trafficking incident.<sup>11</sup>



## SUMMER OF SORROW

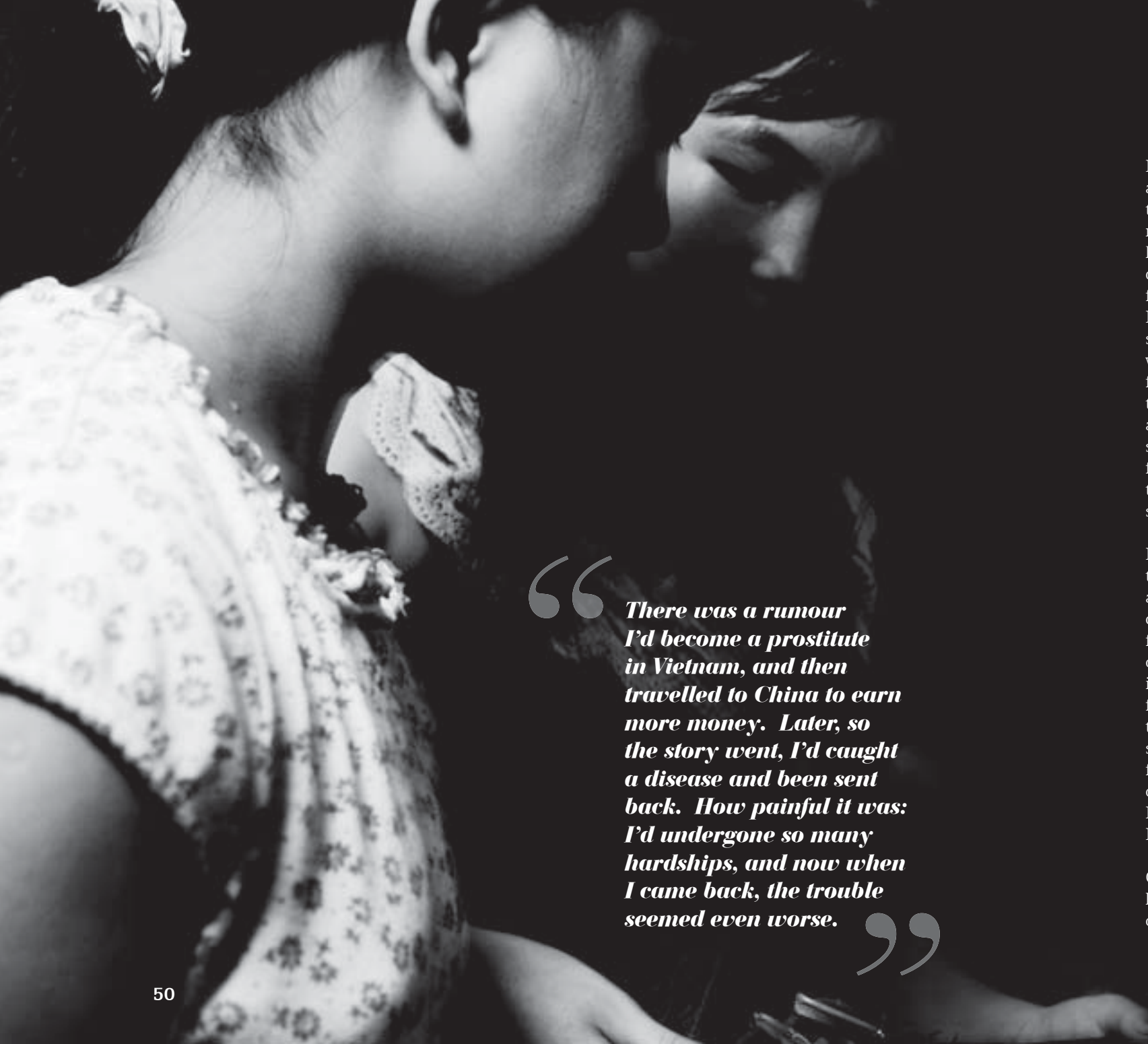
*'I was so frightened that I kept crying while I was working, just wishing that I could be turned into tears and flow away.'*

When my Dad arrived at the bus station, and I saw his gaunt figure helplessly looking for me, I nearly collapsed with grief. I held my tears and called 'Dad!' in a loud voice, but he seemed not to recognize me. I'd changed too much: my hair cut short from prison, my features no longer those of a little girl. He gave me money to pay for the internet, but in his rush he had forgotten to bring an extra helmet, so I had to wait for my mother to come. I felt so eager to see my mother, who I wanted to apologize to the most. As soon as she arrived, I ran to hug her tightly in tears. How happy I was then! My mother did not cry, but I knew she was just holding back. Her eyes were red and filled with sorrow: she'd run out of tears crying for me.

On the way home, I excitedly told her all of my stories, and she just nodded her

head. She worried about how I could go on with my life and studies. How would people gossip about my disappearance for nearly one year? She said there was a rumour I'd become a prostitute in Vietnam, and then travelled to China to earn more money. Later, so the story went, I'd caught a disease and been sent back. How painful it was: I'd undergone so many hardships, and now when I came back, the trouble seemed even worse.

The first meal with my family after nearly one year of drifting was simple, but so meaningful. My father chided me and gave me advice, but sensitively enough so that he wouldn't hurt my feelings. My close friends came and hugged me tight. One asked: "Are you a ghost or real?" when she spotted my picture on the altar. I told her the whole story.



**“ There was a rumour I’d become a prostitute in Vietnam, and then travelled to China to earn more money. Later, so the story went, I’d caught a disease and been sent back. How painful it was: I’d undergone so many hardships, and now when I came back, the trouble seemed even worse. ”**

I was born and grew up in a poor family in a small district of Hai Phong. When I was twelve, my mum gave birth to another child, meaning I received less attention. My parents had to focus on making ends meet. But that didn’t make me lazy. On the contrary, in the first two years after my mum had the child, I always tried my best to achieve excellent school results, as well as help my parents with housework. However, at the age of fifteen, I became spoilt. I was tempted into the virtual world by my friends, and spent day after day at internet cafes, leading to poor scores at school. My parents scolded me more frequently, until finally I became so resentful that I decided to run away with nothing but a set of clothes.

In the outside world, I had no idea who to trust or how to make living. The day I ran away from home, I just wandered and played computer games before I thought of two friends I’d randomly met on the internet. I’d often chatted to them, as we shared common interests and had become close; so I asked for their help. In the beginning, I lived with them. The three of us considered each other sisters of the same family and had so much fun. They confided their stories in me. One of them, a seventeen-year-old girl named Phuong Anh, had no parents, and the other, Loan, was twenty-two, and also a runaway.

One day, Loan and Phuong Anh told me their boyfriends had invited them to their home and offered to support them. I was invited too, as

they had promised not to leave me behind. That very afternoon, a guy named Tung, who was the brother-in-law of Loan’s boyfriend, picked up the three of us and explained that the other two guys were too busy to come. We travelled by taxi to a rather luxurious building, where I met Loan and Phuong Anh’s boyfriends, their parents and a Mrs. Tuyen. For several days, I led such a carefree life with them. We were taken to the beach, played games, ate delicious meals... Life was a bed of roses, and I suspected nothing.

Finally the day of reckoning came: I was deceived by those I thought to be the kindest. They told me that we were about to go on a trip, and they wanted to know whether I preferred to go to Ha Long or Lang Son. Upon being asked, I was slightly startled with the intuition that something bad was going to happen: my heart had a burning sensation. There were many places of interest in Hai Phong, so why did we have to travel as far as Ha Long or Lang Son? At first I had no wish to go, but my foolish trust in them misled me.

We started at 1 pm. Having slept on the way, I can recall almost nothing of the roads. I just remember that at lunchtime we travelled along a zigzag mountainous road with hardly any sign of people. At some point in the evening, we got on a boat for a river crossing. Little did I know that this was a turning point in my life: I was entering a hell of misery and shame. After about five minutes sailing, we reached the bank and stepped on Chinese

land. Of course, I thought it was odd that we had to stay silent and sneak from one place to another, and insisted on going back; but it was too late. That evening, we rested in a hotel in Dong Hung, China, where we met a woman, who I later learned was the head of a trafficking ring. She talked to us very sincerely and expressed sympathy for our lives. Afterwards, I was so exhausted that I slept like a log until 9 am.

When I woke up, they told me we were continuing the trip, and I just naively followed. We spent a whole day on a sleeper bus to Fujian province. I caught a fever of 40oC, and had mumps due to my exhaustion and unfamiliarity with the climate in China. They took good care of me, bought me milk and medicine, gave me blankets and comforted me. I had no idea all of it was just a trick.

One day after we arrived in Fujian, they told me to go with a woman named Huong for treatment. They would wait to take me back to Vietnam. I went with Ms. Huong to a mountainous area. Feeling a little scared, I asked her why we had to go to such a remote place for treatment. She explained: "There is a very good doctor here, able to cure mumps completely within a day". An hour later, we arrived at a house owned by two women. Huong left, with the excuse that she was busy, and said these two women would take me to the doctor.

After eating lunch, I was taken to a market, bought some new clothes and given an injection. Then, when we got home and I had taken a bath, the women informed me that I'd been sold to them for 5,000 RMB. I had to become either a prostitute or a wife. Terrified, I burst into tears. I was just fifteen, an age of naivety and dreaming, but now I was being forced to become a wife or a prostitute. At that moment, I thought of my parents and family, and wanted to be by their side. I had ruined my life. I just sat there crying when she asked me the question again. Then I gathered all of my courage and shouted: "I don't choose to become anything; I want to go back to Vietnam!" One of the women hit me with an electric rod and pressed a burning stick onto my leg. Overwhelmed with pain, I resigned myself to becoming a wife. I thought if I chose to be a prostitute there would be no hope of escaping. What's more, the women said a prostitute had to serve tens of clients per day and would be thrown off the mountain if she caught a disease.

The next day, I was transferred to a woman named Linh, who was the matchmaker. Linh took me to a bungalow with hardly any furniture. After some negotiation and a payment, I officially became the owner's wife. How unfair! I had to become a wife, with no wedding, no procedure, and no party. Tears rolled down my face. I missed my parents, grandparents and sisters so badly.

If only I hadn't listened to my friends, if only I'd been obedient, if only I'd been careful, I could have avoided this situation. But it was too late to say "if only". I just sat there and cried till my tears ran dry and my eyes swelled up.

That night, the whole village came to see me, as I was the first Vietnamese who had been there. Some nodded, others shook their head; and they all spoke in a language I'd never heard before. I was forced to make tea, to kneel down and serve them with both hands, just like a servant to her master. Not until midnight could I take a little rest, but even then I was disturbed. It was like the end of my life, and there was nothing I could do.

The next day, as usual, I slept until 8 am, so they complained and called the matchmaker, telling her that I was lazy and useless. She threatened to beat me ruthlessly and force me to become a prostitute. I was so frightened that I kept crying while I was working, just wishing that I could be turned into tears and flow away. Since childhood, I'd always been pampered by my parents; at fifteen years old, I only had to sweep, wash dishes and prepare vegetables. Now I was forced to cook, wash clothes, chop wood and work like a slave.

Everything about that family was abnormal: the father was dead; the mother had an illness that meant she always urinated on her stomach, releasing a bad smell; the brother had a neurological disorder; and the sister in law was lame. I felt terrible having to live with such people; those horribly filthy individuals neither brushed their teeth nor washed themselves.





The man who had bought me was cleaner than the others, but worked far away, and came home just a couple of times each month. He didn't treat me so badly; sometimes he bought me food, and he rarely scolded and never beat me. But I always had to stand his brother's fits of madness. He would go crazy at my tiniest mistake, call me a stupid Vietnamese and beat me, cut me with a knife, throw bricks, hit me over the head with a wooden chair. At those moments, I really broke down spiritually. I didn't deserve to be treated like an animal.

The more I thought, the more I grieved and cried. Just one light-hearted moment of indulgence, and I'd been trapped in such a miserable situation. I craved my parents' love, a simple Vietnamese meal. I could hardly eat the food there, just forest vegetables and congee every day. I was allergic to congee, and they beat me while I cooked. Looking back, I realized there was no better place than home. My parents had never beaten me so much. How foolish I had been to run away. If only I could see them again to say I was sorry. I went on living and suffering. I thought of suicide, but lacked the will to do it. A fire of hope always burned in my heart that I would get back to Vietnam.

And finally the day came when I met my saviour – a neighbour. On noticing me crying the whole time, he asked about my situation. As I knew no Chinese, we spoke in English. I learned that he was studying at

“ ***He would go crazy at my tiniest mistake, call me a stupid Vietnamese and beat me, cut me with a knife, throw bricks, hit me over the head with a wooden chair. At those moments, I really broke down spiritually. I didn't deserve to be treated like an animal.*** ”

university. When he understood my predicament, he promised to help me. He lent me his phone to contact my family via yahoo chat. I sent an email home, but my family had no idea what to do. I chatted a lot with my brother, and learned that my parents had cried every day; they kept looking for me all the time, and had mistaken me for a dead person on the TV news. They had even prayed for me at the family shrine as if I had passed away. My heart shattered when I heard that.

I insisted that my neighbour help me escape, but he could do nothing immediately, as he was a relative of the family that I was living with. If we contacted the police right away, they would know about his involvement. So he told me to wait ten more days: when he went back to university





he would call the police to come and free me. This set my mind temporarily at rest. I secretly felt happy, thinking that I was about to escape.

However things didn't go that smoothly. The family noticed that I'd become attached to the neighbour, and used his cell phone so often that they suspected and finally discovered what was happening. The crazy brother swore and beat me even more ruthlessly. They made a phone call to the matchmaker to inform her that I'd tried to escape, threatening to return me at the price of 25,000 RMB. I felt so scared that I cried and knelt, and begged them to keep me – I knew if they returned me I would be forced into prostitution. But they didn't care; they just

swore and cursed at me. And the neighbour was rebuked and forbidden to help me. My life had reached a dead end. There was no one that could help any more. Faced with imminent death, I fell weeping to my knees.

I then found out that the matchmaker was waiting at the border so she couldn't make it back immediately. Seeing that opportunity, I ran to the kitchen, grabbed the biggest chopping knife I could find and pointed it at everyone. I threatened to kill them if they didn't let me go. Tears kept streaming down my cheeks. Perhaps for fear that his family members might get hurt, or because he had feelings for me, the neighbour picked up his phone and dialled 110, calling for the police to come. He told me not to worry, and to drop the knife, as he had called the police. I was deeply touched when he forgot everything to save me. I listened to him, threw down the knife and ran to his house. The family that had bought me knew the police were coming, so they dared not do anything else. Ten minutes later the police arrived. They asked my name and address, and told me to write down my family's phone number. They talked to the neighbour for a while and told me to get in their car; they would help me get in touch with my parents.

I felt so glad and thanked my neighbour profusely, hugged him, asked for his address and got in the car with my eyes casting back at him, trying to engrave his face into my mind. As we drove away, I kept looking back until he could no longer be seen, and felt

guilty; I blamed myself for having put him to so much trouble. Would he be punished? It struck me that life was still smiling on me. I was so fortunate to meet such a kind person: if not for him, I would have never made it back. I fell asleep along the way to the police station, where there were friendly and warm-hearted people, though it was still in the forest.

The police let me use their computer to get in touch with my family; they offered me food, TV and newspapers without asking me to do anything in return. I recovered spiritually

and just waited for the day I could leave. However, on the fifth day, they told me that they were only low-level communal police, without sufficient authority to decide my fate. I had to be transferred to the district police station. I then spent the whole day signing papers and pressing my fingerprint. The state considered me an illegal immigrant, but it was a special case so I only had to serve one month in jail. Although I felt frustrated, as I had thought I would get back home immediately, I accepted it all. I stayed in a locked cell and made fake flowers with the other prisoners.







During my first days there, I cried a lot because I was forced to work from 6 am till 9 pm, with no nap at midday. I was only allowed to eat congee with a certain vegetable, an inedible stem of beet that tasted both bittersweet and hot. I became as thin as a rake. Most of the prisoners were kind, comforting me when I cried, and also teaching me to speak and write Chinese. Some shared the food their relatives had brought for them. When they realized I couldn't eat congee, they offered me noodles. Their kindness cheered me, but I still suffered from terrible homesickness all the time. The desire to return to my family burned in my heart.

When a month had passed, I asked if I could go, but the officials refused. I lost faith,

thinking that I would never see home again. However, the next day, two provincial level police came and informed me that they were getting in touch with the Vietnamese police, and that I would have to wait two more months. My imprisonment was over, and I was no longer forced to make fake flowers; but I still had to stay in the camp.

The cook took a liking to me, so sometimes he saved me some rice and pork. Many people left their belongings for me when they had done their time. At the end of my stay, I had seventeen tubes of toothpaste and ten mugs, as well as dozens of packs of noodles. They even gave me a phone card so I could call home. There were freezing days when it was just 5°C, and the female police and

warden gave me clothes to keep warm. Of those who left, some even came back to the camp to visit me. I realized that there were still many kind people who cared for me.

Finally, the day I had been longing for arrived. I'd overcome three challenging months thanks to the support, protection and love of people around me. The wardens notified me two days in advance so I could prepare. I was to be taken to the airport to board a plane back to Vietnam. I felt so thrilled that I hardly slept at all, just wishing for time to fly by as fast as possible. The day came; I got up at 4 am, took a thorough bath, selected my best set of clothes, and waited. The flight was in the afternoon, but I spent the whole morning pacing to and fro, feeling excited with tears of happiness. At lunchtime I was allowed to have rice – the food that I craved the most during my time in China – with loads of meat. The cook caressed my head, smiled gently and told me to eat plenty before leaving. I nodded, and smiled back to thank him for his support.

Then the moment came: at 1 pm, the provincial police summoned me to write confirmation documents and prepare to go to the airport at two. Just wishing for that door to open, I ran down from the third floor and hurriedly wrote the verification papers. The police woman, the warden and the cook gave me a smile of congratulation. The police woman hugged me, told me to be nice, study hard and not let myself be tempted again. I

agreed, got in the car, and turned back to wave everyone goodbye. Three policemen accompanied me to the airport. The boarding process took a little while, as I had no identification, but finally at 2 pm, I got on the plane. I could hardly sit still with excitement, as this was the first time I had flown. Far above the earth, I watched clouds floating past the window.

We landed at 8 pm, and a car was waiting outside the airport for us. I was starving, but that did not matter; when I got back home I would eat plenty to make up for all the hungry days I had suffered. After about two hours driving, I was taken to Dong Hung station, from where the police would take me home. Even though it was already 11 pm, they continued talking so I had to urge them to go. We reached the borderline, and they told me they had fulfilled their responsibility. Now I had to make the rest of the trip on my own with the 40 RMB they gave me. Tears began to run down my face when I got on the ferry-boat because I feared that it would take me somewhere terrible again. How fortunate the ferrywoman was kind. She took me to the destination safely and changed my 40 RMB into 100,000 VND for me. For the first time in months, I set my foot on the ground of my motherland.

Unfortunately, it was past midnight, and I only had enough money for the bus back to Hai Phong. I sat in a dark corner near the border post, shivering fearfully in the cold. Clutching

my jacket close, I told myself to be strong: only the next morning I would be back with my parents. Waiting for dawn, I spotted many people crossing the border by ferryboat; they all cast sorry glances at the foolish little girl.

The first ray of sunshine sent me down the road into Vietnam, where I came across a Mong Cai – Hai Phong bus charging 100.000 VND. I frantically waved and climbed aboard, feeling so happy to see Vietnamese letters written on the side of the bus. I rubbed my eyes to look at the line “Mong Cai – Hai Phong” and make sure I wasn’t dreaming. As we headed South, I tried to read all the signboards and advertisements along the roadside, all my old feelings returning like a dream. It felt like years since I had been here, my childhood home. Exhausted and hungry, I kept dropping off to sleep.

I woke up in Hai Phong: it was just a short distance to home now. My hunger and tiredness gave way to excitement. I’d been holding on to see this day, to meet my family again. The bus stopped at An Duong bus station, where I’d arranged to meet them, but when I got off the bus, there was no sign. I waited and waited, then wandered around the station looking for my family. I went into an internet cafe to get in touch, and all of them were waiting online. My cousin lectured me on the mistakes that I had made in the past, and forced me to promise I’d behave before calling my Dad to come and pick me up.

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Life went back to normal again for me. Although it was a shame what had happened, nothing mattered as long as I was home. One sad thing was that my younger sister didn’t recognize me. She kept asking me who I was, and when I said “I’m your sister Tam”, she replied “It’s not true, my sister Tam is dead”. I was speechless: I’d been away for so long that people thought I had died. Desperate to pray for me, to put my memory to rest, my parents had spent a lot of money bringing home a body they believed to be mine. I used to think that they didn’t love me, that I was just there to vent their anger every time they quarrelled, but I had been wrong. They’d scolded me because of my mistakes; if I’d been obedient and studied hard, it would have been different. From the moment I got back, I just stayed in the house, more reserved now, doing whatever my mother asked.

After the Lunar New Year, I applied to go back to school, but the headmistress refused as she had gained such a poor impression of me in the past. In any case, I had no desire to

“**Desperate to pray for me, to put my memory to rest, my parents had spent a lot of money bringing home a body they believed to be mine.**”

continue in that school, so my studies came to a standstill. I tried to go to work, but then quit because people kept gossiping about me. I had to wait for another opportunity to return to school. By chance one day, Mr Ton, whose daughter had also been a trafficking victim, dropped by my house. When he understood my situation, he offered to take me to the Centre for Women and Development in Hanoi, where his daughter used to study. My parents advised me to go too.

After two days of consideration, I decided to go with Mr Ton to the Centre, where I met Ms Bich in the Counselling Office. She asked about my circumstances and expectations, then contacted Peace House. Mrs. Minh and Mrs. Hoang took me to Peace House, where I received love and care from everyone, as

they considered me the youngest member of the family. The social workers provided me with psychological advice and supported my application to participate in school. On the sixteenth day there, I enlisted in Dong Thai Secondary school. Now I am in 8th grade.

I like staying at Peace House, because there are many girls there in a similar situation to me. And I know there are people who are much more miserable. Sometimes there are disagreements between us, but they always get resolved. At Peace House, I receive health checks, safe accommodation and food. And the best thing is that I can go back to school: what I have been dreaming of all this time. I feel so fortunate now. I will try my best to achieve good results and live up to everyone’s expectations.





## Trauma

In addition to experiencing terrorizing physical and sexual violence, HT survivors often experience multiple layers of trauma including psychological damage from captivity and fear of reprisals if escape is contemplated, brainwashing, and for some, a long history of family, community, or national violence.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of repeated abuse, the trafficking survivor's self-esteem collapses, and they come to believe that there are no "better" alternatives to the abusive situation. This explains why so many survivors appear numb, passive and doubtful, and incapable of fighting the terrible situation in which they have ended up. All too often people blame or criticize the victims for this passivity, instead of understanding it as one of the outcomes of the criminal treatment these people have been forced to endure.<sup>13</sup>



## SOURCE OF PAIN

*'Late in the afternoon we pretend to go to work and successfully make our escape.'*

The police asked my mother to pick me up from Mong Cai border post, and, upon seeing each other, we both broke into tears. My mother wanted to take my friend with us but it was impossible, so we said goodbye there. We stayed in a small hotel nearby, waiting to go back to Vinh Phuc at 11 am. It had been a long time since I'd last heard a Vietnamese voice or seen Vietnamese handwriting, and it made me happy, but a little scared.

I had no idea how my father and sister would react to me. We got home at 5 am, and they were both still sleeping. Exhausted, I fell asleep until noon. Lying in my old bed, I'd never known such a warm feeling before. When I woke up, my father said not a word to me, and I knew he was still very angry. It was my fault, so I kept quiet.

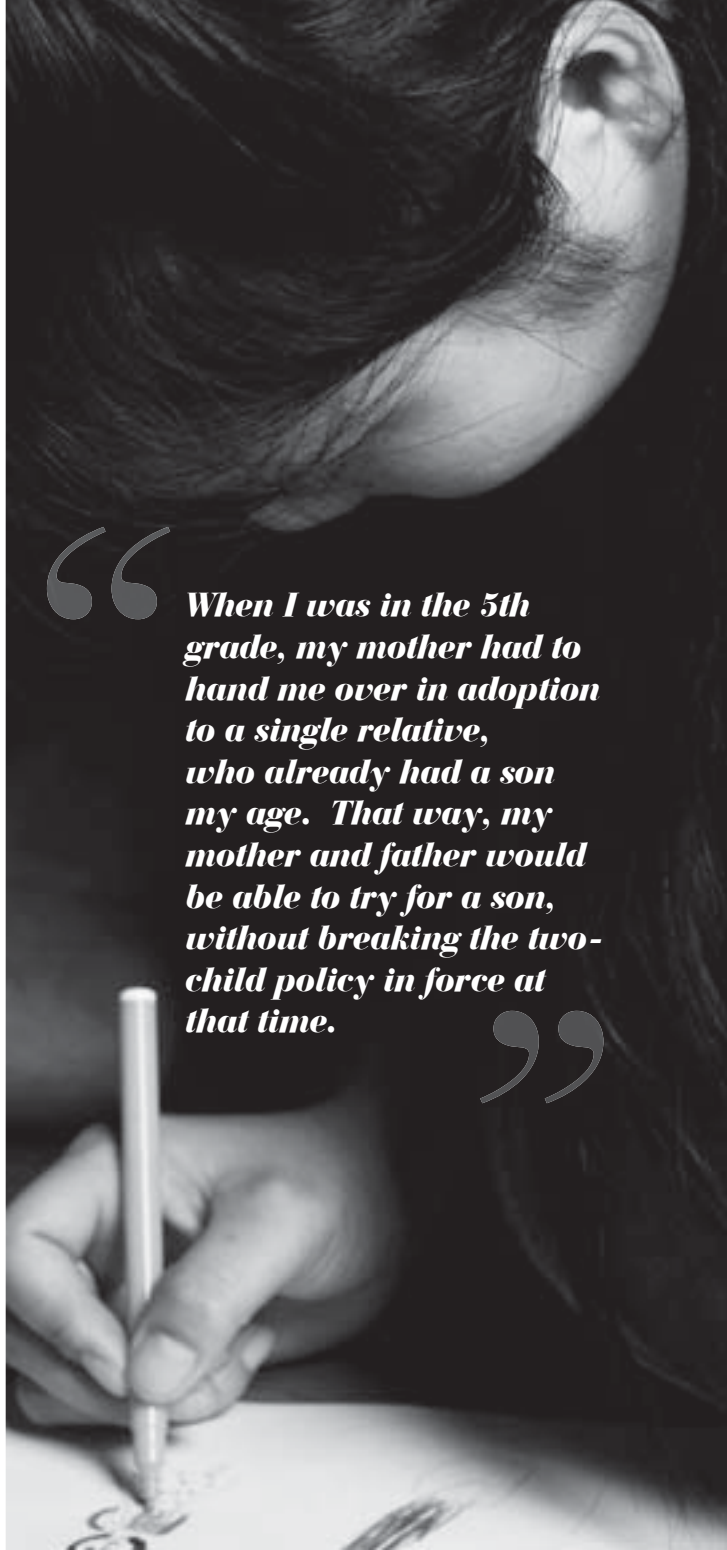
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Most of my friends succeeded at school. My family is normal, my mother a teacher, and my father an electrician, but he has been unemployed for two years. My father was the first-born child, so he desperately wanted a son to maintain the continuity of the family. However, my mother only gave birth to two girls. Without a son, father neglected my family, leaving my mother both to look after us and earn a living.

I loved my mother, and tried to be obedient and perform well at school. However, when I was in the 5th grade, because of the strict feudal mentality of my father and grandfather, my mother had to hand me over in adoption to a single relative, who already had a son my age. That way, my mother and father would be able to try for a son, without breaking the two-child policy in force at that time.

A rickety cottage and two old beds were all my foster-mother owned. Although I was her adopted child on paper, I lived in my hometown, at my grandmother's house. My grandmother loved me and gave me a lot of sympathy, but it was hard for a little schoolgirl to live so far from her parents. I felt abandoned, and cried every night because I missed my family and my mother so much.

I was in a gifted class at school, but it was hard for me to keep up with the other pupils, who took private classes during summer. I started slacking off in my studies, often played truant to go out with the boys in higher classes. When I was in the 12th grade, I



***“When I was in the 5th grade, my mother had to hand me over in adoption to a single relative, who already had a son my age. That way, my mother and father would be able to try for a son, without breaking the two-child policy in force at that time.”***

became obsessed with hanging out in internet cafes; some days I stayed out playing until 6 pm. When my father asked, I told him that I was taking private lessons. Of course, he soon found out the truth, and scolded me, driving me away from home.

At that moment, I wasn't too worried: I just ran away to an internet cafe to kill time and forget about my parents at home. A boy in a higher class came to take me out for dinner and then wander around town. At midnight, I asked him to take me to my friend's rented house, but he led me to another place; then we stopped in a dark corner to talk. I was so vulnerable and naïve that I let him take away my virginity that night. From then on, I felt disappointed with myself and often skipped school, or ran away from home with other wayward friends.

I graduated from high school with an average degree, then failed the university entrance exam and went to a vocational school near my house. It came as the first shock to me and my family. I felt ashamed of myself. My mother lived in misery because she had to pay my debts and look for me in internet cafes all the time. I lived a life of gross self-indulgence. At the end of 2000, Mum took me to my aunt's house in the south of Vietnam. I had been living there for two months when I met and fell in love with a guy who was three years younger than me. Again, I ran away with him. Later on, afraid of being scolded by my aunt, I did not return home but stayed in internet cafes playing games, forgetting all about the real world.

Then I met a guy called Nguyen Minh Quang from Quang Tri province. He was studying in Binh Duong with a friend of mine called Cong. Quang called me his 'sister' and paid for my accommodation. After two weeks he told me: "One of my friends living in China wants you to go there to help him in his internet shop, and he will pay you six million VND per month." Quang really touched my weak point. At that moment, I just thought it would be perfect to have money and play games all day. I was so naïve that I believed him. Later, Quang and his girlfriend Ha came to take me and another girl away. We spent four days and three nights to get to Dong Xing, China.

Quang and Cong intended to traffic us to a group of Chinese but they rejected us because our skin was too dark. The next day, Cong's mother, Ms Thuy, took me to her house in Bei Hai. I ran out of money after one week staying there. Then Cong gave me two choices: prostitute myself or get married. I resigned myself to marriage, though I was so scared and worried. They sold me for 5,000 RMB and my friend for 4,800. One week later, I went with my husband to Guang Dong. Never had I felt so frightened; everything was unfamiliar to me. After one week, I decided to run away to Bei Hai, to Ms Thuy and my friend, but I was caught and brought back because I did not know the way or language.

Eventually, under the orders of Ms Thuy, I was forced to prostitute myself. My friend and I worked in a bar owned by a Chinese woman with all Chinese girls. Every day, we worked twelve hours, from 6pm to 6am. We




entertain more than ten guests each night. It took thirty minutes a guest and we were paid 70 Chinese dong; we kept 50 dong and gave the rest to the owner. We weren't beaten, but always tortured spiritually. I cried so many nights, missing my family and hometown, and often dreamed that I was with them. My friend missed her child at home. The owner warned us not to go to the Chinese police, because they would just take us to Mong Cai, and we would be caught, returned and treated much worse. We were so fearful that we followed her every order.

The traffickers exploited innocent girls like me, who had fallen out with their family or

were unemployed. The boss promised to release us when we'd settled our debt and made enough interest for her; but no matter how much money we earned, she never let us go. She even threatened to traffic us to worse brothels, so we resigned ourselves to staying with her. After living there for two months, I ran away to Ha Phu with one of the other girls. However, only several days later, we had to return to our boss because we could not look after ourselves.

With the little I'd saved from tips, I then bought a mobile phone and contacted my family. I was about to escape, when the owners found out my intention. It was my friend who told the Chinese owner, because she still wanted to stay for the money. The next morning, we were sent to a Ms. Khanh's place. My friend was allowed to continue working, and I stayed with Ms. Khanh. This Ms. Khanh promised to ask a smuggler to take me back to Vietnam, but I was still worried whether or not I would get home. Unexpectedly, she called some men over that night. From what I could understand of their conversation, I discovered that she was intending to sell me to them. I was scared to death. I spoke to her calmly: "Please can you ask Ms. Thuy to send me back. When I go back to Vietnam, I will send you more girls. We will go half and half." Her greed pressed her to call Thuy.

Thuy came the next day, only to insult and beat me. She took my phone, calling my mother and telling her that I had escaped and was now doing the washing-up; that I would



“ *The boss promised to release us when we'd settled our debt and made enough interest for her; but no matter how much money we earned, she never let us go. She even threatened to traffic us to worse brothels, so we resigned ourselves to staying with her.* ”



return home when there was someone to accompany me. My mother believed Thuy, who set her mind at peace. She said: "Rather do the washing-up than be a harlot." Her words tormented me.

Thuy brought me back to Bei Hai that very night. It was winter, with biting cold. As a northerner, I was used to the weather, but my friend from the South of Vietnam could not stand it. The owner told Thuy to buy clothes for us, but she only got thin, autumn fabrics. We got ill all the time, which angered Thuy because of the lost profits. One day, she called one of her friends in Linh Son and we discovered that she was going to traffic us to somebody. Late in the afternoon, we pretended to go to work and successfully made our escape.

My friend had a little money, and 30 dong borrowed from the Chinese owner: we had 60 dong in total. We spent two hungry days wandering and sleeping on the freezing streets. Then we found a job in a massage parlour, where we would be paid 50 dong a shift each. However, the next day, the massage parlour boss discovered that we had run away from a nearby brothel and threw us out. We had to move to a cheap hotel where identification cards were not required.

The following day, my friend from Bei Hai came and gave us all the money she had, and helped us to contact our families. I called my mother and gave her the address of the hotel we were staying at, and then we met online. She gave me the number of a Chinese policeman, who we called using my friend's mobile. At about 1 pm, Bei Hai police came to rescue us. Thuy was arrested and taken into custody. The next morning, we were taken to Dong Xing to do the final procedures, and reached Mong Cai at 2 pm the same day.

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I'd stayed at home for several days when the police introduced me to Peace House. My first impression there was of how friendly everyone was, all these people sharing the same plight. I received a lot of help, especially from the social workers. Although there are sometimes disagreements and arguments between the residents, we soon make up with each other. I'm a lucky woman to have found Peace House. The only thing that makes me sad is my father's scorn for

me. I know that I was wrong, so I will never say anything against him. However, one day I will be able to say sorry to him, when I have succeeded in my studies and career.

I have recently finished a course at the College of Art and Culture in Vinh Phuc province, and will go back to Peace House during the summer holidays to continue the course in Life Skills and get psychological support. More than anything, I want to be a better woman in other people's eyes, and prove myself a useful person to society.

“***I'd stayed at home for several days when the police introduced me to Peace House. My first impression there was of how friendly everyone was, all these people sharing the same plight.***”

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## Human Trafficking in Vietnam

Human trafficking affects women, men and children in Vietnam through diverse patterns. It can be both internal and cross-border, highly organized and small-scale, involving sex, labour and marriage, through both formal and informal mechanisms.

Women and children are trafficked internally from rural to urban areas for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Poverty and indebtedness, lack of awareness/education, family breakdown and problems are frequently cited as vulnerability factors.

Regarding cross border trafficking, Vietnam is a major source country for victims. Trafficking is carried out along various routes; trafficking of girls and women into sexual and labour exploitation has China, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand as main destinations. Vietnamese women are also trafficked from the Mekong Delta region to Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia for marriage to men from these countries.

Trafficking in newborn babies, foetuses and viscera, and a trade in counterfeit adoption documents for the sale of children has also been identified

Vietnam is furthermore a destination for child sex tourism, with perpetrators coming from various countries.<sup>14</sup>

## THE ROAD HOME

*'I had enough bravery to denounce and attend the trial for the criminal who had trafficked me to China.'*

Have you ever felt lonely, hopeless, surrounded by darkness and fear? Have you ever tried to run, but the road ahead just seems to lead nowhere? A 17 year-old girl like me should have lived for her innocent dreams, but I have had a bitter and tearful childhood. The day I was imprisoned in a room on foreign soil, I felt my life had been ruined. All of my beautiful dreams had vanished. Now, whenever I recall the experience, even in my waking hours I still shudder. I would like to share my story and hope that no one will fall into a similar situation.

I am a Hmong girl, born into a family in rural Tuyen Quang Province. My

family was so poor that we had no well, meaning I often had to walk to my uncle's house to fetch water. It was very far and my legs and shoulders ached. But it was the feeling of walking alone along a deserted road that really exhausted me. Now I am away from home, but that lonely feeling still hurts like yesterday. Sometimes, I just died for a call from my mother: "Sweetie, come home with me". That hope gave me strength to walk faster. I wished that my mother would take me in her arms, pat gently on my swollen shoulders, caress my hair; that I could lean on her and sleep in her lap to forget my hunger.

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Childhood memories still haunt my dreams. There was no electricity in my village, so when the evening came and sunset faded, darkness covered everything. I went to school every day, and only returned home when the sun had fallen behind the mountains, just hoping that my parents were not arguing. I dedicated myself to studying; only books and my teacher's lectures interested me and helped me to forget my parents' arguments. I tried to be the best student in my class, even though I had to finish my homework by oil lamp. I wanted to study hard so that my parents could feel proud of me. However, when I was at school, I often felt ashamed of my ramshackle home and bickering parents.



Poverty dogged my family. My father didn't even try to earn money, instead drinking wine, gambling and beating my mother all the time. I still remember the night my mother left home after being beaten. I hugged her tight, and didn't know what to do to make her stay. I'd studied so hard and always tried to get good marks just to please her. So I asked "I have been good, why are you still leaving?" My mother just hugged me and cried.

Because my parents got married without registration, it was easy for them to separate. My mother left when I was in 1st grade and my younger brother was still at nursery school. And when she remarried, my father also got a new wife.

I was the only one in class with an unhappy family. My friends often sneered at me, "Your mother left home to elope with another guy!". Tears overflowed my eyes and I was left speechless. I thought I still had to study hard despite my miserable situation; then I would have a chance to reunite with my mother. I always believed that my mother could feel my love even though she lived far away. I studied harder than anyone else in class, and received awards and certificates of merit. I remember being taught that "when you close your eyes and make a wish, you might see angels ...". Time after time, I closed my swollen eyes just so I could see my mother and hug her; but when I opened them again it was just me alone in the house.

My mother had to go to faraway Dac Nong, where we had no relatives or friends. She

lived with my step-father, and was beaten by both him and his mother. I felt really sorry for her, and last year, I went to Dac Nong with her. But my step-father had his own intentions towards me, and sent text messages to seduce me. I told my mother, but she did nothing. I just felt sorry for her because she always had to live with such terrible men. Finally, I told my step-father's family about what he had done and left for the North. But my life was no better than in the South. I felt discouraged and sorry for myself. With my parents so far apart, I had no one to trust.

Living with my step-mother, I really understood the old saying: *When will rice cake contain bone? When will a step-mother love her husband's children?* My step-mother frequently thrashed my younger brother and I. When I was a little girl, I was obedient and contented, but once I grew up and could think independently, I couldn't stand her attitude towards us. She told me "You will eventually become a person like your mother!" When I heard that, I burst into tears and thought "What's wrong with being like my mother? Is she guilty? She had to leave because of my father. You are not perfect either, so why do you want to break a child's heart?" I couldn't bear it when she said, "Like father like son, you will also become a ...". However, my father just beat me when I told him that. It hurt a lot more when I was beaten by him. He never understood me; he only loved his child by my step-mother.



“One day in winter, I ran away. I thought I was just like ‘the little match girl’ in the fairytale...”





“***One cold winter’s day, the boss captured a girl who had refused to serve customers and run away. The boss forced her to take off her clothes and get down on her knees; then he strapped her arms to the window. Strong men used electric rods to beat her, and bloody marks appeared on her body. My roommate and I had to go out to witness that.***”

One day in winter, I ran away. I thought I was just like ‘the little match girl’ in the fairytale. I wandered the streets until the gloomy afternoon ended a boring day. Starving, I cast my eyes to small houses cheered by fire. How warm it was in a house full of laughter! I sat on a street corner looking at people going by, wishing that I could have a real family where there were no quarrels between my parents, where we would be together for dinner after a hard day, where I could sleep in my mother’s warmth and where my father never got drunk. But I knew those were just dreams. Back in reality, I wandered back to the terrible house where my father and step-mother were waiting, rod in hand.

Later, I thought: “I will have no future even if I go to school. Mother left us. My father and step-mother scold and hit me all day. I do not need anything from them.” So I quit school and fled to Hanoi to find a job.

In the capital, whenever I finished work, I went to an internet shop to play games and forget my dull and pointless days. I found nothing interesting or meaningful in real life, but I could chat to friends who understood me on the internet. I got to know a girl named Duong who came from the same province. We chatted like sisters with each other, even though we’d never met.

At the same time, I met a guy through the game ‘Audition’ and we started chatting. I thought he understood my situation and I

then fell in love with him. I loved him with all my heart, and lived with him without marrying because I was under the legal marriage age. We lived happily together for a short time and separated only three months later. I thought he understood me and that was enough. However, he told me: “I’ve never loved you; I lived with you just because I felt like it. That’s all”. He took me back to my father and step-mother, my heart broken. I fell to my knees many times to beg him to let me stay with his family even if he didn’t love me, but he refused.

I was sunk in misery, feeling I had lost everything. I was following my mother’s ruthless fate. I blamed myself and cried at nights, “Why is life so unfair to me?” I wasn’t so ambitious. I only dreamed of a husband who loved and cared for me because I had little love and understanding from my parents. But the person I believed in had also left me. I tried to kill myself once, but failed. I became crazy and extravagant. I feared nothing because there was nothing important to me in this life.

I loved my mother so much, and didn’t want my neighbours to know my situation, so I left home again. In Tuyen Quang town, I went to an internet shop, where I met my old friend Duong, for the first time in real life. We played at the internet shop till we had no money left to pay. Duong called her friend, Oanh, whom she knew from the Internet, to help us. This Oanh came with a man named

Cuong to cover the cost for us, and then they took us out to have a meal. There we met a fat woman named Nga who was actually a pimp. That night, Cuong took Duong and me to China. Cuong lied to us, saying: "You are going to Lao Cai to work in a clothes shop for my sister. Tet is coming so she needs more shop assistants." We believed his lie and agreed to go.

Now my life turned to its darkest chapter. I had to work as a prostitute all day. The Chinese men were like wild animals who mistreated and hit me just because I had no idea how to comfort them and wanted to escape. I was afraid that I would catch sexually transmitted diseases. Those were my shameful days. I missed my family and my boyfriend too. The more I missed him, the more I hated him, because it was he who had pushed me into that miserable situation.

Before New Year, Duong was taken away, leaving me alone at Bird's nest Market. On New Year's Eve, when people gathered with their families to welcome a new year with brilliant fireworks, I just cried all night, feeling homesick and alone. In that strange place – just across the river from my homeland – I felt such pain when I couldn't return.

The brothel owners gave us mushy cooked rice like gruel to eat, which made us hungry straight afterwards. They also gave us pork, which had been kept for months and hardened like stone. It was like food for dogs. I kept

having agonizing stomach-aches, so I dared not eat. I had to buy snacks to eat with cooked rice, and became thin, a walking skeleton.

I was imprisoned like an animal. When I had my menstrual periods, they forced me to use a big piece of cotton, so that I would still be able to serve customers. After that, I couldn't take out all of the cotton, which hurt terribly. Every day, I had to serve at least fifteen customers, day and night. The youngest was a 15-year old boy who just came out of curiosity. There were also very old men, around my grandfather's age. Some used a condom, but many refused, or broke it, or took it off. A number of men had sex with me for up to two hours, causing me to bleed painfully. Even when I was sick and had fever, I still had to serve them. Some felt sorry for me and gave me money; but others were so cruel. One terrible man hit me with an electric rod. He hit me until I fainted with pain, then took my money. When I returned, the pimp scolded me for being late. I writhed, but didn't dare speak and just hid in a corner to cry by myself. The boss sent people to find me and then thrashed me again.

I once saw a woman trying to run away to Vietnam but she couldn't make it. She was beaten, and then killed with a long knife. Another woman and I were in the same situation: we just cried together all the time. She was full of hatred because she could not escape, so she used hot cigarette embers to burn a tattoo in her arm saying "Hate This Life".

One cold winter's day, the boss captured a girl who had refused to serve customers and run away. The boss forced her to take off her clothes and get down on her knees; then he strapped her arms to the window. Strong men used electric rods to beat her, and bloody marks appeared on her body. My roommate and I had to go out to witness that. I still often wake with a start from nightmares that I am being beaten, my legs and arms cut to pieces.

After that, I started to suffer from a disease that is very difficult to treat. I lied to my boss, telling him that I had several friends in my hometown who wanted to come and work for him. Believing me, he arranged transport to Vietnam, and then I got a bus on my own from Lao Cai. When I arrived in Tuyen Quang, I looked for and found Duong. Fearing for our lives should the traffickers discover us, we went to the Social Protection Centre of Tuyen Quang province. The staff there introduced us to Peace House.

I was welcomed like a relative at Peace House, and provided with safe accommodation, clothes, and other necessities by the social workers. We also received a health examination and treatment, psychological assistance, and vocational advice. I felt safer and had no more worries about diseases. My happiness was double when I saw the friendly smiles of the other girls in Peace



House. The most important thing that Peace House has brought me is the feeling of friendliness and sharing in a family, which I have never known before. The social workers are like my parents and sisters, who give me so much help, advice, and encouragement.

Previously, living far from my mother, I used to be a clumsy girl who had no idea how to care for myself or do housework. My step-mother always considered me a thorn in her side and never taught me to do anything. Now, I have become more self-aware. Every morning when I wake up, I tidy up the house; and after class on cold winter days, I enjoy helping the others to prepare dinner. I never knew there was such a wonderful place as Peace House.

I now feel as peaceful as a lake after the storms of life. I am planning my future, with mature thoughts of training for a job so that I can be fully confident to face the tough life ahead. I believe I can overcome the difficulties, as there are always friends and sisters by my side. I have been attending the course in "Empowering Women", during which I have been taught self-defence. Thanks to the encouragement of the social workers, I had enough bravery to denounce and attend the trial for the criminal who had trafficked me to China. I had not thought I could do this before, such was my fear of retribution. Looking back, I feel very lucky, relieved, and confident.

I hope I can become a skilful make-up artist, and do the make-up for unfortunate women to make them more beautiful. I will try my best to study hard in order to make that dream come true. What worries me most is that many Vietnamese women are still being trafficked to China. Will they be lucky like me? I really hope that they find their way home without any mishaps.

I am so thankful to Peace House for helping me. I would also like to warn others: beware the lies and seduction of a highly-paid job without hard work. And if you are cheated, you should report the criminal to the police.

***I now feel as peaceful as a lake after the storms of life. I am planning my future, with mature thoughts of training for a job so that I can be fully confident to face the tough life ahead. I believe I can overcome the difficulties, as there are always friends and sisters by my side.***

***What worries me most is that many Vietnamese women are still being trafficked to China. Will they be lucky like me? I really hope that they find their way home without any mishaps.***



## Vietnam's Response to Human Trafficking

The government of Vietnam is responding to human trafficking through a variety of measures, including the country's first counter human trafficking law, and the National Plan of Action for 2011-2015.

Due to the nature of human trafficking as a transnational crime, Vietnam has signed a number of cooperation bilateral agreements with Thailand (2008), Lao PDR (2010), Cambodia (2005, 2009) and China (2010)

Vietnam is also active in multilateral treaties and initiatives, including the ASEAN Declaration against Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children (2004); the COMMIT MOU on Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (2005) and ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2007).<sup>15</sup>

Despite this progress, Vietnam's fight against trafficking still suffers from a lack of financial resources and trained personnel, as well as poorly coordinated enforcement. A lack of guidance and procedures on implementation of the law also remains a significant obstacle to greater progress in the country's anti-trafficking efforts.<sup>16</sup>

## BEWARE SWEET WORDS

*'What we can get back is much more than what we have lost.'*

I was born and grew up in unusual circumstances, without love from my parents. But I received a lot of affection and care from my grandparents, to whom I am very grateful. Unfortunately, my grandmother died when I was twelve years old, and after her death, my grandfather fell into a deep depression. I also had to leave home to look for a job. Finally I found work as a nanny and cleaner for a relative, but they only abused me, making me very disheartened. My mother married a man who was traumatized by the war, so her life was miserable as well. Pitying my mother, I went to stay with her and help with the baby. However, I was beaten ruthlessly by my step-father. One day, I met a girl who worked at the same place as me. My plight was miserable, but hers was even more so. Since we had similar problems, we really took care of each other and shared everything.

Soon after we met, my friend asked me to visit Hanoi with her. Next to Hoan Kiem Lake, by chance, we met a thirty-year-old lady. My friend told me that she and the woman were very close, *chi em ket nghia*: sisters by oath. At first, I disliked this woman, but she knew so much about my family that I started to talk with her. A month previously, my mother had given birth, so my family was in a difficult situation, and I really needed help. The woman asked me to travel with her to Bac Ninh to get leaves. She said "We'll be back tomorrow morning and I will pay you 50 000 VNĐ". I'd never been far from home in my life, and I worried that my mother would have no-one to help her cook and wash the clothes. Moreover, I suspected that we were being cheated. I asked my friend to go home with me, but she refused.

We got on the bus in Hang Manh Street. I asked the conductor, "Where is this bus going?", and he said, "Lang Son". I tried to convince my friend to return home with me again. While we were talking, an old man appeared, who the woman claimed was her adoptive father. I heard him tell her, "Today, you take these girls, there will be others tomorrow ..."

It was dark when the bus set off, every house along the road lit up. I felt homesick and cried with fear. My friend fell asleep; only I stayed awake, rattled by nerves. I told the woman, "I think you are cheating us", and she replied, "I never cheat anybody. You shouldn't say anything on the bus; there are many bad men here." I nudged my friend and warned her that we were being cheated, but she said "Just pay attention to where the bus is going", and carried on sleeping. I cried for a long time. The woman stayed very close to us when the bus passed Dong Mo, and then it stopped in Dong Dang, on the Chinese border. She told us "We have come here to get clothes to sell during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and then we'll go to Bac Ninh".

When we got off the bus, she took us to a house in the mountains outside town, where we would have to sleep. At first, I felt so worried that I couldn't drift off, but eventually tiredness overcame me. In my dream, my grandmother told me, "You shouldn't go with that woman: if you do, you will never return home". I suddenly woke and couldn't sleep again. The woman realized that I was awake, so she also kept her eyes open.

Morning came, and the woman asked my friend and I to accompany some people to get phones to sell. They took us to a rice storehouse, and there we were sold to two Chinese people from Guangdong Province. When I realized what was happening, I could only cry and implore God for help. Those people forced us to prostitute ourselves for over a year long. I thought that miserable and shameful life would never end.

One day, a woman working at the same place as me could not stand it anymore and successfully escaped from that hell. She then reported to the Chinese police to rescue all of us. She came with Chinese policemen, pretending to be a whoremaster in order to pass the guards. After they found evidence to prove that Vietnamese were being prostituted there, more than ten policemen came to arrest everyone, but the pimp ran away; only some guards were caught. The Chinese police rescued nearly thirty Vietnamese girls, and we were sent to Guangdong Province's detention center to be re-educated. In the detention center, we had a tiny food allowance, and were forced to work, gardening, and making plastic toys to sell. Some people despaired, and attempted suicide; but policemen intervened. Finally, the police finished the procedure to help us get back to Vietnam.

A woman who shared my situation took me to Peace House, where I was provided with accommodation, a health examination, psychological treatment, and vocational training – all for free. Currently, I am working as a house-keeping attendant in a three-star hotel in Hanoi. I've grown used to working,

and receiving a stable salary to afford my daily life and activities. And I've been very lucky to meet my soul mate, who I would like to live with for the rest of my life. One of my colleagues introduced me to him. He is six years older than me, and we have known each other for three years. He comes from Thanh Hoa province, which is several hundred kilometres away from my home. Once we had known each other for some time, I told him about my situation; he understood and sympathized with me.

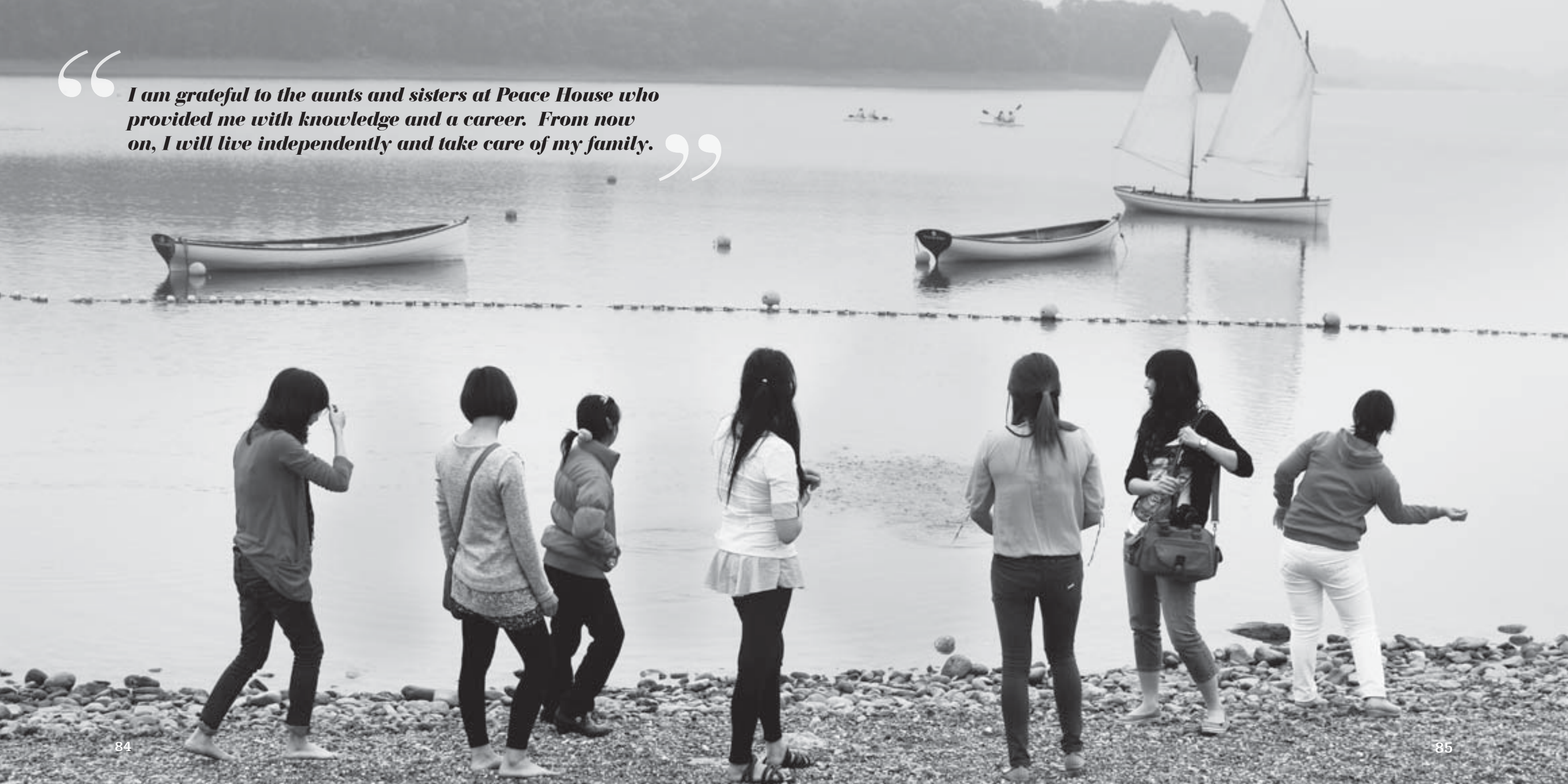
Eventually the day came that we decided to get married. I'd only ever dreamed that I would wear a white wedding dress and have happy feelings like other girls. Now that dream has come true. Of course we have our own difficulties in life, but we still visit our parents and sometimes give support money to

my sisters. My mother is also pleased to know that I now have my own happy family, and she doesn't need to worry about me as before. I am grateful to the aunts and sisters at Peace House who provided me with knowledge and a career. From now on, I will live independently and take care of my family, and I hope that we will have a beautiful and gentle daughter.

I am telling my story with the hope that young people who read it will not trust in those they are not sure about, or else they may be tricked into prostitution like me. However, you should also know that life will not take everything from you. If you believe in yourself and try your best, you will be happy and successful. What we can get back is much more than what we have lost. Believe this, because my experience and achievement prove it.



*“ I am grateful to the aunts and sisters at Peace House who provided me with knowledge and a career. From now on, I will live independently and take care of my family. ”*



# AFTERWORD

I started working at Peace House on 1st November, 2009. My first impression then was of a pretty house located in a narrow, quiet alley. It still often seems that the noise and hurry of the outside city have no influence on this place. My work station is near the window on the second floor, through which the sun darts its beams at dusk. I prefer this spot to any other in the room, for the sole reason that it is near the window and the corner of our neighbour's yard, where a tall magnolia grows. I do not know when was it planted, but it reaches the 4th floor of Peace House and sprawls over quite a space. Its pure white flowers scent the room I work in every morning. Sparrows flutter around from time to time, close friends of the tree, arousing memories of the countryside...

There are about ten people living temporarily in Peace House now. Looking at the peaceful faces of the girls, and experiencing the warm atmosphere of the house, I know that the social workers, housekeepers, and security guards doing their silent jobs have helped the girls overcome their problems and the prejudices they face, allowing them to find themselves again. I also feel great admiration for our predecessors, who coped with numerous challenges to build a house whose name is now so well-known. It is not easy to find a more significant and dearer name to many than Peace House.

The majority of those living in Peace House are under twenty-two years old; some are under sixteen. The oldest resident is just 33. Each person has their own sad story, making anyone who hears it feel greatly for them. I would like to talk now about some little girls who were the victims of their own families. Their families had to struggle with difficulties and violence, even with tragedy, before the girls themselves came to harm outside. In other words, these unlucky girls have been victims twice.

There are some similarities between two fates in particular. Two girls, Duong and Thu (whose stories, 'Border Lines' and 'The Road Home', are included in this book) were brought to Peace House when they were at the most beautiful age of their lives.

Duong's father, who was an alcoholic, always beat her mother ruthlessly and sold all the property in their house to serve his addiction. Having no choice, her mother finally decided to divorce her father, and brought Duong to ask for her grandmother's help. Because Duong's mother was young, she got married again, hoping to find new happiness and a real family for her own child. Unfortunately, the stepfather was also an alcoholic; he always scolded, insulted and reviled Duong because she was not his own child. Duong's mother lived in dependence on her new husband, so she could not protect her own daughter. Feeling extremely lonely and sad, Duong's performance in class gradually declined, and she finally ended up leaving school, running away from home to live in the illusory world of online games. After her stepfather found her, she was beaten violently again. Duong decided to sell her bicycle to get money for food and to pay for games in the internet cafe. When she ran out of that money, she met Thu.

Thu shared the same plight as Duong. Her father spent the whole day drinking alcohol, gambling and beating her mother. Thu's mother had to run away from home, leaving her two little children. Living with the stepmother, Thu and her sister were scolded, insulted and beaten mercilessly every day. When she grew older, Thu quit her studies to find her mother; however, her stepfather did not accept her and told her to go away. Thu felt hopeless, desperate and believed in nothing. She started to spend all her time in internet cafes, just to forget reality. When Duong and Thu were out of money, an "internet saviour" appeared,



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*Every so often  
in our work at  
Peace House, we  
encounter tales  
of extraordinary  
courage...*  
”

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*With all her love and energy, Binh’s mother made her way  
to China on her own to find her child. This is a true story.  
I myself could not believe that a woman, who herself had  
never been to China before, was able to find her daughter in  
such large country - twenty-nine times the size of Vietnam.  
It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, with only  
information via mobile phone. But Binh’s mother, a true  
heroine, was able to achieve such an extraordinary feat. A  
simple rice-farmer, she had to sell her fields and borrow 350  
million VND to go to China. And, thanks to her boundless  
love and belief, she was not disappointed.*  
”



cheated the two little girls easily, and took them to China, subsequently pushing them into hell on earth. Those two little girls then lived through days of being confined and treated like animals by the traffickers. Their bodies were covered with wounds inflicted by whoremongers of all kinds, from teenagers to middle-aged men, and even people of their grandparents' age.

There are many similar fates. Take Trang, a fifteen-year-old girl, as an example. Due to her parents' violence, she had to leave her family. After she was trafficked to China, she was given 'the choice' of becoming a wife or a prostitute. She resigned herself to getting married, even though the concept of 'a wife' for a fifteen-year-old girl is ridiculously vague.

In contrast to Duong, Thu and Trang, there was no violence in Hoa's family; however, poverty pursued them relentlessly. As the eldest child, Hoa felt sorry for her mother, who had to work hard all day to support the family. Worrying that her sisters and brothers would have to quit their studies, Hoa agreed to go with a woman she had just met to offer herself as a prospective bride for a Korean man. Hoa was selected easily after the first round, and the wedding party was held several days later, with the blessing and hope of her family. In addition to the wedding fee that the intermediary kept, Hoa's family had to borrow 30 million VND to pay the woman for overseas marriage brokerage. After a few months, when all the documents were completed, Hoa flew to Korea by herself, feeling both happy and worried.

Hoa was shocked from the moment she walked into her husband's hometown: he acted as if he had never met her before. She lived like a dumb person in this strange place because of the language difference; anxious and disappointed, all she could do was cry. She was then taken to a remote area where there were many Vietnamese girls the same age as her. From that day onwards, she had to slave from sixteen to eighteen hours a day, doing stressful and dangerous work. Hoa and the other girls struggled alongside each other just for three meals of rice and fish every day. Not until then did she realize that the Korean had only 'married' her so as to make use of her body and labour to gain profit.

During her time at Peace House, Hoa has been equipped with knowledge of bridal makeup. With a little practical support, she has been able to return to her hometown and open her own shop. Now she is standing firm on her own, self-confident enough to master her own life.

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Every so often in our work at Peace House, we encounter tales of extraordinary courage. Thanh Huong, one of our social workers, tells the story of Binh, who was trafficked into prostitution in China, and rescued by her mother. Huong was personally involved in Binh's case from the beginning, so I would like to quote her directly:

*"Binh managed to borrow a cell phone from a brothel customer to call her family one day. She was only able to inform her mother that she had been trafficked to China, without a specific address. Later, when she was found to have contacted her family, she was beaten ruthlessly, before being sent to another place where she could not get in touch with them anymore.*

*With all her love and energy, Binh's mother made her way to China on her own to find the child. This is a true story. I myself could not believe that a woman, who herself had never been to China before, was able to find her daughter in such a large country - twenty-nine times the size of Vietnam. It was like looking for a needle in an enormous haystack, with the only information via mobile phone.*

*But Binh's mother, a true heroine, was able to achieve such an extraordinary feat. A simple rice-farmer, she had to sell her fields and borrow 350 million VND to go to China. And, thanks to her boundless love and belief, she was not disappointed. Added to which, she rescued another five women who were with Binh at the time. She only planned to rescue her daughter, but Binh said to her with compassion: "Mum, if you don't rescue the other five, they will be beaten to death." And so she saved them."*

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The staff of Peace House are silent workers. We do not even have each others' addresses; all contact is kept by mobile phone or email, or through the address of the Department of Counselling and Development for Women. However, nobody feels uncomfortable or anxious at this state of affairs, because they know that is the rule at Peace House.

Peace House staff think their chief task is to create the most favourable conditions possible to support victims; so each achievement, even the smallest, brings joy and happiness to everyone. It is touching to hear our predecessors' story of a resident successfully giving birth to a baby boy in Peace House with the love and

care of the social workers, Hien and Ha, housekeeper Le, security guard Ngoc, and the previous manager Anh Ngoc – especially as none of the three female staff had a family of their own at that point. Recently, a woman of the ethnic minority Kho Mu brought her one-month-old daughter to Peace House, which made housekeepers Kim, Le and the others busier; however, it brought a fresh breeze into Peace House. The manager, Tuong, named the lovely girl 'Cu Tam That', 'False Ginseng' because of her dark brown skin. After "Cu Tam That" left Peace House for the remote Eastern border area, everyone here sorely felt her absence.

Like any other community, peace does not always reign at Peace House. Sometimes, when we encounter difficulties, we stay up all night because of the torment and worry, and finally come to the conclusion that everything is down to our own faults and weaknesses. With that realization, we all promise ourselves that if we have a chance to do it again, we will do it better. Sometimes, the pressure of the job also stresses out staff: the number of victims brought to Peace House has been increasing dramatically, and they often come with complicated problems.

It is sometimes hard to avoid conflicts at Peace House between the victims themselves as well. Despite these difficulties and complexities, the staff always encourage each other, saying: "If they weren't in such a terrible situation, they wouldn't have come to Peace House". We are also supported and encouraged by people at the Project Department, who are devoted to our shelter. When asked if they could make the choice again, all the staff answer that they would still choose to work at Peace House.

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Everyone coming here has the same hope: to restore their peace of mind and set up new lives for themselves. After recovering from physical and mental problems, and improving their life skills, so many have left Peace House to return to their hometown and the acceptance and love of their families.

Residents often feel sad leaving Peace House, where they have received so much care and help from their friends and the staff. On her last day at Peace House, a little girl called Mai, from a town in the Southeast of Vietnam, hugged everybody tight and wept. She said the sympathetic and encouraging words she had heard at Peace House were now written deeply into her heart. When

Minh, a sweet-natured Tay minority girl, went back to her village, she left an emotional note. She felt like she had come back to life when she returned to Vietnam; however, on returning to her family, the insensitive and prying eyes of her neighbours drained her of the confidence to continue. Minh only felt at peace and forgot the past when she was in Peace House, a place she connected with love and warmth. Minh married a man in her village and is now expecting her first child. She always phones Peace House when she has something new.

Peace House has accommodation for more than thirty residents to share their difficulties, ease their sorrows, and realize their dreams. They can learn trades such as tailoring, makeup artistry, hairdressing, cooking and waitressing. Provided that they have confidence and determination, anything is possible.

The door of Peace House is always open to welcome survivors. It is somewhere for all those in difficult circumstances who hope to find a peaceful and safe place. We live by our motto, "You are not alone: we are always by your side."

It was chilly on the bus coming to Peace House this morning; the fields were white with flowers. I suddenly realized that Autumn had come.

**Minh Doan**  
*Manager of Peace House Shelter*



*“ Life will not take everything from you. If you believe in yourself and try your best, you will be happy and successful. What we can get back is much more than what we have lost. Believe this, because my experience and achievement prove it. ”*

- <sup>1</sup> ILO Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2008. Available from: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms\\_090356.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_090356.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid* i
- <sup>3</sup> UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2012. Available from: [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/Trafficking\\_in\\_Persons\\_2012\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/Trafficking_in_Persons_2012_web.pdf)
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- <sup>5</sup> *ibid* iii
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid* iii
- <sup>7</sup> Peace House Shelter Database, 2013
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- <sup>10</sup> The Freedom Project, 2012. Available from: <http://www.thefreedomproject.org/human-trafficking/+Gcd=1Ghl=enGct=clnk>
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- <sup>12</sup> (Treating the Hidden Wounds: Trauma Treatment and Mental Health Recovery for Victims of Human Trafficking, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008) webpage: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/humantrafficking/Treating/ib.htm>
- <sup>13</sup> Peace House Shelter, 2013, Psycho-Social Services Evaluation Report
- <sup>14</sup> Siren Human Trafficking Sentinel Surveillance, 2010. Available from: [http://www.no-trafficking.org/reports\\_docs/siren/SentinelVTNCHN.pdf](http://www.no-trafficking.org/reports_docs/siren/SentinelVTNCHN.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> UNIAP Vietnam, 2011. Available from: [http://www.no-trafficking.org/vietnam\\_action.html](http://www.no-trafficking.org/vietnam_action.html)
- <sup>16</sup> TiP Report 2012, 2013. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2013/>



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*The true testimonies gathered in this book are just a small selection from all the lives and hopes that Peace House Shelter has hosted over the past 6 years. They help us to have a more comprehensive overview of human trafficking: the social context of this phenomenon, the particular gender vulnerabilities of women and girls, and the dreadful consequences that human trafficking has for individuals, the community and society. We believe that this clearer understanding will better guide our efforts against human trafficking, an outcome all the more important because we can see success will take the involvement of our entire society.*

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# AECID

## SPANISH AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) promotes, manages and executes the Spanish policy of international development cooperation, in order to achieve sustainable human development and poverty eradication, actively contributing to building peace and achieving the full exercise of global citizenship rights.

Attaining gender equality and fighting gender-based violence is a strategic priority for Spanish cooperation in Vietnam, active in the country since 1997. Aiming to enhance effectiveness and synergies, Spanish support for gender equality and the empowerment of women has been channeled through multilateral, bilateral and NGO programmes.

The Peace House Shelter Project was initiated in 2007 as a joint effort of CWD / VWU and AECID. The project, which has benefited significantly from Spanish support, aims to strengthen Vietnam's fight against trafficking in persons by empowering and supporting survivors as they reintegrate with society. Peace House Shelter also supports policy-making and implementation, and raises awareness of the societal impact of gender-based violence as manifested in human trafficking.

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