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## The War Against Women

### Prostitution In Vietnam

I AM opposed to prostitution because sexual relations are our most intimate expression of the human longings for love and ecstasy. If we have sex for reasons other than desire and at least some degree of tenderness, I think we harm ourselves spiritually, quite apart from any damage we may

suffer physically over a long period. The "other reasons" for which woman usually have sex include money, job or career enhancement, a need for love and regard from the partner, security, peace and quiet in the home, and subjection to violence. The "other reasons" for which men usually have

sex include lust separated from tenderness, the wish to prove their potency, the desire to control and conquer, and violent aggression. Of course, not all these reasons are equally harmful, but I think that none is desirable.

In effect, and until recently in law,

men have owned their wives privately, enjoying or at least to some extent controlling their work, earnings, reproductive power and sexuality. It was because most women were owned privately, first by their fathers and then by their husbands, that adultery and sex with an unmarried woman were considered crimes, as were abortion and contraception unless ordered by the husband or the state. At the same time, the authority of working class husbands has always been restricted by men of the ruling classes—by priests, slave owners, feudal lords or capitalists—who took the greater share of the wife's surplus produce, commanded her labour, controlled her children for work or warfare, and encroached on her sexuality. In slave states and among the lowest layers of capitalist societies such as domestic servants, many men as well as women have had no families, both sexes being under the control of men of the owning classes.

Prostitution is the other side of the coin of male dominance and class oppression of women. To maintain their privileged position, men must have access to sexual pleasures that are usually denied their wives, yet the private ownership of wives makes adultery dangerous. There are therefore "public women" to whom all men, or all of one class, have access. Depending on the mode of production or the wealth of the customer, such women have been commanded at will in the temple, owned as slaves or concubines, rented by the month or hired by the hour or the act. Prostitution implies a double degradation of women. Prostitutes themselves are oppressed by their partners and usually exploited by pimps and the state governments who take their taxes, while wives are crushed by the knowledge that their husbands can always resort to the favours of prostitutes. The traditional enmity between wives and prostitutes that results helps to bolster male

dominance. At the same time, prostitution provides a sexual outlet to men who cannot afford or achieve a wife, and allows them a sense of temporary possession and dominance.

Under capitalism, the worst abuses of prostitution have occurred in colonial and neocolonial states, especially during wars of conquest or counter-revolution. South Vietnam in 1965-75 provided, it seems, the most vile example since the second world war, revealing the depths of brutality of which north American society is capable. For we must be clear that this brutality was north American, not Vietnamese, in origin; it resulted from occupation by more than half a million US troops engaged in the most callous forms of modern counter-revolutionary warfare. Prostitution in neocolonial south Vietnam has to be seen in the context of economic and political dominance, and of mass slaughter, racism and rape by foreign forces.

A ditty that accompanied training exercises in the US army typified the ideology taught to GIs in Vietnam. Soldiers would chant:

"This is my rifle (holding up an M19)

This is my gun (putting hand at crotch)

One is for killing,

The other for fun."<sup>1</sup>

In the countryside, especially when troops sought out revolutionary guerillas, prostitution was unnecessary since rape was the order of the day. Peasants and national liberation forces reported thousands of instances, many of them gang rapes of individuals or public rapes of several dozen women. Most people know that at My Lai in 1968, US troops killed about 400 civilians within a few hours. What is less often reported is that before the massacre, troops of the Third Airborne Brigade raped several hundred women. GI testimonies bear out the frequency of rape. Joe Galbally of the American Division reported: "We went

through the villages; it was about an eight man patrol, entered a *hootch* (peasant house). These people were aware of American soldiers do to them so naturally they tried to hide the young girls. We found one hiding in a bomb shelter in a sort of basement in her house. She was taken out, raped by six or seven people in front of her family, in front of us and the villagers. This isn't just one incident; this was just the first one I remember. I know of 10 or 15 such incidents least."<sup>2</sup>

Some of the psychologists who later treated GIs argued such behaviour was but an extreme form of everyday American male urges. Ralph Garofai, a psychologist at the centre for diagnosis and treatment of sexually dangerous persons, Bridgewater, Massachusetts, reported: "The rapist is not an exotic freak; in some cases, his behavior merely an extreme manifestation the normal male sex drive. I don't think there's a man worth his salt who hasn't seen some chick walking by and wanted to screw her. The crucial distinction is normal men find a socially acceptable outlet for their desires, while the rapist loses sight of moral and legal considerations."<sup>3</sup>

All too often, rape preceded murder as a standard means of terrorising peasants suspected of insurgency. A GI told Jane Fonda: "I saw one case where a women was shot by a sniper, one of our snipers. When we got up to her she was asking for water. And the lieutenant said to kill her. So he ripped off her clothes. They stabbed her in both breasts, then spreadeagled her and shoved an entrenching tool up her vagina, and she was still asking for water. And then they took her out and used a tree limb and she was shot."<sup>4</sup>

In the cities and the barracks, rape was less acceptable, and GIs and puppet troops resorted to prostitution. Together with drug peddling, it was south Vietnam's biggest business and source of profit. The population provided an endless supply of

prostitutes because millions of peasants had come to town when their villages were destroyed and their lands defoliated. The population of Saigon, in particular, increased from 400,000 to four million during the US occupation. Thousands more were marched from their villages and herded as prisoners in strategic hamlets to separate them from the revolutionary forces.

Women were kidnapped by Vietnamese pimps, sold by starving families, or beguiled with promises of American consumer goods. Every rank and type was available. The highest, employed as concubines or callgirls by officers, often underwent cosmetic surgery to have their eyes rounded, cheeks and chins dimpled, hips padded and breasts stuffed with silicone. Lower down were the women whom GIs rented by the month from pimps to serve as domestic servants, laundresses and sexual slaves. Liberty Street, the red light district of Saigon, had more than 2,000 agencies recruiting or kidnapping girls from the provinces to serve in the 21,000 bars, hotels and whorehouses.

Prostitutes crowded every street corner before curfew hour. Pimps drove around hundreds of them on the backs of motor cycles, offering them at bargain rates.<sup>5</sup> Some facilities provided multiple services, for example, garages with signs saying "Car wash and get screwed."<sup>6</sup> Sin City, just outside the Pleiku base, was made up of tents with 15 or 20 beds. Prostitutes worked in shifts, receiving the equivalent of one dollar per customer. In each major city, pimps maintained hundreds of prostitutes, who were sometimes imprisoned in underground cells policed by thugs. Each evening, helicopters took scores of them to the camps of troops on operations. Officers were allowed one prostitute apiece; five to seven soldiers shared one girl per night. The women were ferried back next morning, broken and bruised in body and spirit.<sup>7</sup>

If anything, the plight of prostitutes

grew worse in 1973-75 after the US troops pulled out but the puppet government remained. As their employment disappeared and US imports dried up, thousands of people started or had to resort to theft or lowgrade whoring. Girls of 10 to 12 were often sold by their families to the highest bidder.

The GIs also paid their price. Out of 2.8 million troops who went to Vietnam, 56,690 died there. Some were killed by prostitutes while in bed with

chemical weapons they were forced to use. A further three quarters to one million are in psychiatric treatment in hospitals.<sup>8</sup> Many more are unable to adjust to civilian life, continually reliving the nightmares of slaughter and sexual brutality to which they were inured.

When south Vietnam was liberated in April 1975, the country had at least half a million prostitutes. Most were drug addicts. All of them were reported to have one or another venereal



them. Since the rest came home, another 57,000 have committed suicide. A known 110,000 have died of cancer, no doubt from defoliants and other

disease. Immediately, the Women's Union, which has branches in every district, began the work of rescue and rehabilitation. With the help of

neighbourhood committees and security police, they reported the pimps and brothel owners who were arrested and placed in re-education camps for three years of political and social re-education and of training in useful forms of work. Mobile teams from the Women's Union sought out prostitutes and brought them for medical treatment and job training.

Those prostitutes who recovered quickly were allowed to go home to their villages, or volunteered for the new economic zones in which agriculture is being developed in virgin or defoliated lands, or were restored to their urban families when they could find jobs. Those more seriously corrupted or diseased were kept for longer in centres called Homes for the Restoration of Human Dignity. By 1976, a year after liberation, only 50,000 prostitutes out of half a million were thought to remain; by 1981, about 30,000. In 1982, I was told by authorities in Ho Chi Minh city that only a few hundred were still in the city, to be redeemed as soon as possible. The rehabilitation of prostitutes is called the Reason and Love movement, following the twin ideals set forth by Ho Chi Minh.<sup>3</sup> Four centres for the restoration of women's dignity remained in Ho Chi Minh city in the early 1980s, each housing about 600 women.

The first task of these centres is to cure venereal disease and drug addiction. Acupuncture and herbs are used as well as western medicines. The second is to provide education and the third to train the women so that they can use their talents in reconstructing society.

Nearly all the former prostitutes have children and other relatives to support. The state subsidises the support of their dependants until the women leave the centre and find jobs.

The former prostitutes elect their own representatives who administer the centres along with cadres chosen by the members of the Women's Union

who live and work there. Visitors have said they could find no trace of authoritarianism. Everyone is addressed as "sister" and the cadres sleep and eat in the same rooms as the former prostitutes. Together, they publish a handwritten newspaper.

Each day starts for all with a period of gymnastics followed by breakfast. In the mornings, the women practise their new crafts such as weaving, basketry, carpet making, carpentry or agricultural work. The noon meal is said to be more nutritious than the ones most citizens eat so that the women can regain their health and strength. After a midday rest, the women attend literacy and elementary education classes three afternoons a week and political and history classes the other three. In the evening, they spend their time in cultural activities such as drama, singing, poetry recitation or story telling.

Political education includes such topics as "Why it is necessary to study", "The origins of prostitution", and "The new woman in the new society." After a lecture, the class breaks into discussion groups, then reassembles for a question and answer session.

Unfortunately, the programmes are restricted by Vietnam's poverty. There are not enough antibiotics to cure venereal diseases quickly, not enough cloth for sewing, and very few machines to sew with. In one centre, there was

no radio, very little writing paper, and only one fountain pen for 20 students.<sup>11</sup> Prostitution still exists in Vietnam. A few cases have come to light in Hanoi during feed shortages since 1977, to the glee of some western male reporters. But prostitution is now rare and marginal and the government of Vietnam is doing all it can to abolish the trade, along with pornography and drug addiction. As fast as possible, these evil being wiped out by medical treatment, work training, and ideals based on love and reason. □

### References

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