



Article

Combatting the Trafficking of Vietnamese Nationals to Britain: Cooperative Challenges for Vietnam and the UK

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Abstract: The issue of Vietnamese nationals consistently having some of the highest numbers of referrals into the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is increasingly apparent. However, this did not gather nationwide attention until the Essex tragedy of October 2019 which saw 39 Vietnamese nationals found lifeless in a lorry after they were brought into the country by a criminal network of human traffickers and smugglers. This paper seeks to understand the circumstances of these Vietnamese victims of human trafficking to the Britain by reviewing the situation in both countries—Vietnam and the UK. Three instances of Vietnamese nationals trafficked to the UK have been chosen as case studies. Through semi-structured interviews, issues regarding how voluntary migration led these vulnerable people into slavery will be explored and this will be analysed alongside a review of literature in the field. This paper reveals the complexity of the matter, which is primarily derived from the multinational nature of trafficking and the different attitudes and approaches of the various countries involved, as well as the difficulty facing the authorities when combating this particular crime involving this specific group of vulnerable people, especially in terms of victim support. The ultimate goal of this paper is to offer authorities and practitioners in both countries a fresh review of the challenges in supporting these victims, and to redirect their focus on the obstacles to addressing Vietnamese trafficking. These obstacles include the prevalence of—often illicit—labour-exporting companies in Vietnam, instances of initial voluntary engagement in labour migration relationships which later become coercive, and the failure of the UK and Vietnam to agree what constitutes a genuine trafficking victim.



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1. Introduction

While the majority of us believe that human trafficking and modern-day slavery are abhorrent crimes which trade in human misery and should have no place in the world today (Loweth 2021; UK Government 2011), such crimes are nevertheless on the rise. Schauer and Wheaton (2006) revealed that criminal experts believed that within the next decade, human trafficking will surpass drug and weapon trafficking in terms of incidence, cost to human wellbeing, and criminal profitability. In the UK, the trafficking offence was added to the legislation almost 20 years ago, in the first instance in relation to prostitution. Further down the line, the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 covering trafficking for labour exploitation was added, followed by the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 which was designed to combat modern slavery in the UK and consolidate previous offences relating to trafficking and slavery (Home Office 2014).

This paper explores the issues surrounding the trafficking of Vietnamese nationals into the United Kingdom and how different measures put in place over the years have still resulted in an increasing number of suspected victims each year (Home Office 2019, 2020). The paper's analysis is positioned around cases studies of Vietnamese victims, some of whom went through the criminal justice system in the UK, while others were waiting for protection to be granted by the government. Some details, starting from the recruitment process in Vietnam, through to the methods of control once they are already abroad, through

to how they finally encountered the authority figures in the UK are revealed. This shows the complexity of the matter and suggests that while there may be a certain degree of voluntary decision-making in the process of travelling to the UK initially, it is often ill-informed consent that ties victims to tragic situations, from which they later find it hard to break free. This can make it difficult for some victims of trafficking to be recognised as true victims, and some previous studies have shown that it can be particularly difficult for male victims to be recognised (Hynes et al. 2019). Nevertheless, it is the complexity of how the network operates and the differences in how the UK and Vietnam perceive the matter that prevents effective cooperation between the origin and destination countries.

2. Materials and Methods

This study, funded by Locate International, utilises three case studies of trafficked Vietnamese individuals, collected by the author, to examine key issues of identification, criminalisation, and the effects of debt-funded migration on the labour-migration trajectories of trafficked persons in-depth. The resulting analysis stems from these case studies involving participants who have experienced the intense trauma and cruelty of human trafficking first hand. These data were originally gathered for professional and multi-agency training purposes, but all participants were informed that the information could be used for publication and consented to this.

The author regularly works with organisations which support victims of trafficking and, in this capacity, she was able to ask these organisations to recommend suitable candidates to be interviewed. Both the organisations and the individuals involved were given a participant information sheet, requesting their consent to data collection and explaining their right to remove themselves from the study should they choose to do so. Being a Vietnamese speaker, the author was able to interview the candidates directly, thus avoiding language barriers which can prove problematic for non-Vietnamese speakers.

The focus of the analysis on case studies from three individuals needs to be considered in recognition of the considerable barriers to accessing Vietnamese people with experiences of trafficking, and building their trust to gain informed consent for engagement in social research. The author's professional area of work as a practitioner able to offer support and her connection to Vietnam were critical to securing access to and informed consent of these three interviewees of a very under-researched population. Ideally more case studies would have been used; however, we were presented with the challenge of participant recruitment. That most researchers face in negotiating access to Vietnamese nationals. The issues of victimisation and criminalisation meant that some vulnerable Vietnamese victims approached for inclusion in the research were doubtful of their victim status and therefore did not wish to discuss their labour experiences further. For those few who may be willing to talk to researchers, wishing to avoid stigmatisation and re-traumatisation is likely to limit their type and extent of engagement with research framed around 'trafficking'.

The following three case studies were gathered by the author after these candidates were recommended by specialist organisations working in victim support. The author's professional practice in combatting human trafficking and proficiency in the Vietnamese language was invaluable in collecting these data. Originally a number of potential candidates were identified by the specialist organisations, but ultimately only three were willing to take part to the end of the study—demonstrating the difficulty researchers can have in obtaining data from victims of trafficking. It was evident in the data collection process that societal conceptions of victims, and the victims' own perceptions of their victimhood—perhaps influenced by those of society at large, affected their willingness to participate. These challenges mean that research involving direct interviews with Vietnamese persons with trafficking experiences in the UK are incredibly rare. Consequently, the author feels somewhat privileged to have had some individuals with difficult journeys of exploitation share their experiences in such depth. To supplement the small number of case studies, current academic and legislative literature in the analysis of the cases to draw up some com-

mon themes, and the analysis benefits from the author's wider knowledge and experience of Vietnamese cases and trafficking for labour exploitation in identifying key themes.

Three Vietnamese nationals who were identified and/or suspected as victims of human trafficking and modern slavery were the main participants of the study. An exclusively adult group was chosen so as to avoid the sensitive and complicated issues relating to interviewing underaged victims. These candidates were carefully selected as they were 'out of danger or restriction' and they were free to talk. That is to say, the author knew that these victims were now being supported by responsible organisations, they were not in immediate danger of re-trafficking, and they felt safe. Participants were given a clear explanation of the purpose of the interviews; it was explained to them that the discussions were for a small study which may later be published in academic journals. They were also informed that their personal information would be anonymised and their real names coded by use of fictional names. There were two meetings for each participant, with a few telephone calls before and after the meetings for arrangement and clarification purposes.

The talks were constructed as semi-structured interviews in order to encourage the participants to talk and share their stories freely. As the participants were wary of voice recorders, with their permission, note taking was used throughout the talks as the principal method of recording their contributions. The purpose of the interviews was to illustrate the whole story of trafficking, from Vietnam to the UK and experiences in the UK on arrival, from the perspective of the victims. It is hoped that the understanding of victims' experience which this paper provides will be useful to those working in law enforcement and victim support in the UK.

In order to protect the victims their names were changed, as were their provinces of origin in Vietnam. An approximate age range for each of the candidates is given, as this is important for the reader to know, but the candidates' specific ages are not included. Any references to geographical locations in the UK are given only in vague, regional terms, e.g., 'North West' or 'Yorkshire' rather than referencing any particular city, with the exception of London which is large enough in itself not to pose any concerns in terms of identification of the participants. Similarly, the names of the particular organisations which have supported these victims are not given.

Case Study A: Hoang Nguyen—male, mid-forties

In 2017, Hoang Nguyen was arrested in an estimated-half-a-million-pound cannabis factory in Yorkshire, England. "I spent six months in prison, in a foreign country, not knowing what would happen to me and not completely understanding the situation. It was while I was waiting to be tried that the prosecution dropped the case, as they eventually recognised that there were grounds to believe I was a victim of modern slavery".

Hoang Nguyen was not brought into the UK against his will, but through his own choice: "I wanted to build a better future for myself". However, the UK destination was not in his initial plan: "I had been preparing to go to South Korea, and I was actually attending a pre-departure Korean language and culture course—which was a requirement—when I was approached by an agent who told me that working in the UK would earn three times more than in South Korea—three thousand pounds each month". Because of the promise of such lucrative employment, Nguyen decided to try his luck with this agent.

"The problem was that I was only able to pay 300 million dong out of the 900 million dong quoted (equivalent to £10,000 out of £30,000). The agent said they were happy with that, and the rest could be paid off once I started work in the UK". Through this Hanoi-based agent, Nguyen obtained the necessary travel documents and was flown to Russia, before being transported by land through various eastern European countries and getting into a lorry in France bound for the UK. However, his arrival in the UK, was not as he had hoped.

"When we got to the UK, I was told I had to keep working for the network, and I would only be able to work as a free man after the cost of bringing me to the country was paid off". Nguyen then spent two years taking different jobs assigned to him by the network. "I believed after all that time that I must have paid off the debt, so I decided to

leave". He did not seek approval of the network: "I simply ran away from where we were staying in London—I just left. But they found me in the West Midlands and that was an horrific experience. They decided they had to 'teach me a lesson'. I was beaten up and even had my leg broken". After this incident Nguyen could not walk properly and was sent to be the cook for a group of Vietnamese workers employed in the half-million-pound cannabis farm where he was arrested.

Case Study B: Thanh Tran—male, mid-twenties

Thanh Tran was convicted in the Crown Court in the North West of England in 2020 for conspiracy to produce controlled class B drugs, contrary to Section 1(1) of the Criminal Law Act 1977. He was one of eight defendants on the same case.

Tran had left Vietnam for the UK in 2017 to look for better opportunities. At home his family had put together a fund to pay for the journey: "They tried very hard to put the money together, but despite their best efforts, they couldn't gather enough funds". Because of this an agent suggested that his parents sell their house to help raise the money. They would then help to find a care home for them. "The idea was that after a certain amount of time working abroad, I would have raised enough money to re-purchase my parents' home" explained Tran, "Or at least, I could buy a new home for them to move back out from the care home".

However, just as with Nguyen, Tran's arrival to the UK was not as smooth as he would have hoped. "After arriving in the UK, I was put straight to work into a cannabis farm. We were moved from one farm to another, all under the control of the same network". Working in this underground operation led to Tran's arrest: "It was in September 2018, that I was arrested—there was a raid at the cannabis property where I was working. It's really a terrifying thing to be involved in a police raid—not something I would ever have expected to happen when I first left Vietnam". However, after some initial interviews, Tran was suspected to be victim of modern slavery and was sent to a local authority where he was given temporary accommodation.

And it is here that Tran's story takes a further negative turn, as he went missing from the local authority only two days later. "I felt I had a debt to repay, not just for me but for my family. When the traffickers made contact with me, I felt had to go back to work". Working in the same situation again, Tran was subsequently arrested, charged, and then convicted at the Crown Court in the North West. Before sentencing, the judge acknowledged the vulnerable position that had prompted him to run away from authorities the year before and return to his keepers, despite having been assaulted by them previously. While he had failed to cooperate with the authorities when he was presented with an opportunity to do so and reoffended, given his vulnerability, the judge passed a sentence that saw him released from custody the same day, having served half of his sentence in custody while awaiting trial.

Case Study C: Thuong Bui—female, early forties

Thuong Bui was brought to the UK from Hai Phong in the north east of Vietnam. Her family's business went bankrupt and as she was being hunted down by the loan sharks, she opted for a desperate overseas escape: "I had to pay 400 million dong (equivalent to £13,000) through borrowing from my relatives and selling my only piece of farmland in order to be able to make the journey. Then I was brought to the UK by lorries. I was told my work would be childminding or else in restaurants". However, upon arriving in the UK, Bui was told that the money paid previously was only enough to cover her journey from Vietnam to France.

"They [the traffickers] told me I was under their control until I paid off the debt for the leg of the journey from France to the UK by working for them. They promised that after that I could be a free worker". But Bui's work for the traffickers was extremely harrowing: "I was made to work at cannabis farms in the day, and then in prostitution at night—truly awful. And it was absolutely terrifying—four years of a living hell—but I was able to escape in 2019 with help from one of the 'customers'".

After her lucky escape from the keepers Bui ended up floating around as an undocumented illegal immigrant who would take any work she could find: “I was desperate and had to do anything I could to make money”. Most of her work in this time was domestic work, cleaning, cooking, babysitting, etc. She only came forward to seek help as the COVID pandemic hit the country: “Nobody wanted to take me in. The pandemic situation made things really difficult”. Bui had been looked after by a charity who spotted her after she came to them for free meals during the lockdown.

Recalling her ordeals, Bui said: “The keepers were brutal. I lived in constant fear of physical punishment and I was badly beaten up more than once. It has left me with health issues, including constant migraines. I think this because of head injuries I have sustained from being beaten up on several occasions”. Bui was referred to a body of the Home Office called the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which is responsible for identifying victims of modern slavery and allocating appropriate support to them. Bui has since received help while she was applying for protection from the UK government.

3. Discussion/Analysis

Cases like these are not uncommon. The [Single Competent Authority \(2021\)](#) reported that Vietnamese nationals are the third largest group referred to the NRM, and this was consistent with their figures reported across the last five years. Since the Essex tragedy of October 2019, 659 Vietnamese victims of trafficking have been referred to the NRM, as of November 2021 ([Home Office 2021](#)). In order to combat trafficking in humans from Vietnam to UK, it is obvious that both governments need to work closely with each other and the British embassy Hanoi in 2017 reported that they had joined others in the Counter Trafficking Network in Vietnam for awareness raising ([British Embassy Hanoi 2017](#)), but what obstacles are there?

3.1. *Matters of Definition of Trafficking and Victim Support*

While the European Court for Human Rights, in the case of *Rantsev* ([Allain 2010](#)) stated that domestic authorities have to cooperate with the relevant authorities abroad if there is a cross-border element to any case of human trafficking, this has not always been feasible in reality such as in the case of United Kingdom and Vietnam. There is difficulty not only because of the geographic distance but because the two countries’ perception and definition of human trafficking and victim identification are vastly dissimilar. While the UK adopts the definition of trafficking in person as defined by the [United Nations \(2000\)](#) and consider that all activities included in the definition would amount to human trafficking, from “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (Article 3, paragraph a), there are some fundamental differences in how Vietnam views the matter.

In the Essex tragedy that created a shock-wave in the UK (and Vietnam) in October 2019 when the bodies of 39 Vietnamese nationals were found in a lorry as they were transported into the country from abroad, a high-profile figure of authority in Vietnam was very much in denial that these people could be considered victims of human trafficking. This figure was the head of Public Security in Nghe An—the province that accounts for the majority of the unfortunate lives lost in that lorry—and his analysis was simple: “These people paid to go abroad for work, nobody paid up to one billion Vietnam dong to be trafficked” ([Nguyen 2019](#)). Nguyen’s opinion demonstrates how it can be difficult for personnel in public security bodies to recognise how labour journeys which are initially consensual may become coercive en route, hence their frequent failure to recognise and support victims.

Nguyen’s view was not solely his own; he represents the general sentiment of law enforcement and of the general public, in Vietnam, on this. This may explain why none

of the three people in the above cases studied actively came forward to seek help even in their most desperate moments—Hoang Nguyen when having his leg broken in the West Midlands by the gangs when he tried to run away, Thanh Tran’s running back to the gangs even after having previously been beaten up by them during his captive, and Thuong Bui after running away from being forced to work as a sex slave. In the conversations with the author, all three people admitted they believed that the situation was their own fault, coming to this country illegally as well as owing money back home and so it was their duty to perform whatever work assigned to them—however traumatic and dangerous the nature of that work—in hoping the debt would be paid one day, and they would be working as a free labourer and that they could start saving from there. None of them was able to tell when that would be.

It is well documented that often the initial agreement for victims to work as a form of debt repayment can be consensual (Skrivankova 2010), often because they cannot afford to pursue legal routes for migration (Bastia and McGrath 2011); but it must be noted that although the Vietnamese victims in this study did consent to work as a form of debt repayment, there was no indication that this would involve clearly illegal and exploitative trades such as prostitution and the production and distribution of illegal drugs. Although in many cases the victims have initially agreed to work for their traffickers, there is clearly a great deal of deception as to what the nature of the work will involve and the length of time for which they will be required to work.

As the authorities of the country of origin and country of destination hold such different views of the matter, the collaboration of the two countries to stop human trafficking has at times hit some dead ends. Indeed, the difficulties in cooperation are complex and ongoing. The UK Government, from 2015, introduced the Modern Slavery Act to guide local authorities and practitioners in identifying victims of modern slavery, human trafficking included, in order to provide appropriate support to them (Home Office 2014, 2022). However, many of these victims, after returning to Vietnam encountered numerous difficulties with the first and foremost fundamental one which was that their victim status was not recognised, regardless of whether this had been accepted abroad (Tran 2019).

The Home Office (2020) observed in their report, while they acknowledged some significant effort from Vietnamese authorities to combat human trafficking, that the situation for trafficking victims remains mostly the same as a decade ago. The authorities are therefore concerned that their counterparts in Vietnam are focused mainly on the prosecution of the traffickers and little focus on support for the victims. The Home Office (2020) listed a number of reasons for this, including the fact that the definition of trafficking in Vietnam does not fully correspond with what is accepted internationally, together with budget constraints and victims’ perception and the stigma that comes with being victims. In our interview with a local government official however, it appears that there were budgets allocated to them to assist victims of trafficking upon their return; but there was a long list of check boxes that needed to be ticked which prevented these people from accessing the fund (Tran 2019). The official went on to share that in the previous financial year, the fund allocated to support victims of human trafficking in his province was returned to the central government in full due to the fact that the money could not be distributed to any victim, as nobody met all the required criteria.

Such lack of support and disregard for victims upon their return to the country, as well as the general disbelief that these people are victims, because their departure from the country was consensual and that they paid for their journey, was one of the reasons these victims would not seek help from authorities when they are in the UK. This is partly because the victims themselves hold the same belief as those in Vietnam and they did not know or did not believe that they were the victims “because I chose to come here”, said Hoang Nguyen. Nguyen said the reason he did not come forward to seek help from authorities when he was assaulted in the West Midlands was because he feared that he would then be deported to Vietnam and that was the last thing he wanted. He had to work to earn money as so much had been invested in his journey to the UK. The situation

was similar to that of Thanh Tran who feared deportation so much that he would abscond from the safe house that he was sent to and ran back to his 'keepers' regardless of the maltreatment he experienced when being with them previously. For these people, any slim hope of remaining in the UK, to earn some money to recover at least the cost for their journey, would be worth holding onto.

3.2. *Matters of Deception and Rogue Agencies in Vietnam*

In early 2019, Ha Tinh News published a number of reports regarding labour exporting companies in its region violating the law where they carried out illegal acts of exporting labour without being licensed to do so (Bao Ha Tinh 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). *Reporters of Nguoi Hanoi* (2017) had previously reported similar issues for companies in Hanoi. According to these reporters, together with carrying out illegal activities of exporting labour, these companies were also found charging families of those who want to find work abroad excessive amounts of money, including agency fees, deposit fees, and whole package fees that would mean, in many cases, even after three years working abroad, these people would still not be able to pay off all the fees incurred from their departure. Some people had no option other than running away and becoming illegal undocumented immigrants, trying to find work elsewhere, because the work and the income promised to them were not what they had been told in Vietnam.

While those cases reported above were from those returning to Vietnam from Japan and South Korea (*Reporters of Nguoi Hanoi* 2017), labourers buying their way to the UK went through exactly the same format, the format of deception that lured them into debts and bondages which would take them years to come to pay back, if they are lucky. All three Vietnamese interviewees in this study had some form of debt or bondage that tied them to the network from which they did not dare to run away, and when they did, the consequence could be dangerous, such as in the case of Hoang Nguyen. This mirrors the findings of other studies, for example O'Connell Davidson (2013) which have examined debt-bondage in relation to modern slavery.

In the case of Thuong Bui while she has had a successful escape, her health condition has deteriorated with her developing several serious health problems. It is possible that she has remained safe since because her 'keepers/employers' would not be particularly interested in recapturing an ill worker. In their study on the economics of human trafficking, Wheaton et al. (2010) made a harrowing observation that when trafficking victims are no longer considered as profitable to 'employers' due to issues related to poor health, age or noncompliance, they can be discarded at very low cost.

These researchers also acknowledged that human trafficking networks, on top of having all the tactics and methods required of them, would also have good knowledge of vulnerable populations (Wheaton et al. 2010). This is precisely what can be observed in the trafficking network of Vietnamese vulnerable people. Nghe An and Ha Tinh are the two provinces that account for the majority of Vietnamese illegal and/or undocumented immigrants in the UK, the majority of the Essex victims were also from these provinces. Unlicensed companies for labour export hidden under different names had been set up in these particular regions, with the network using a few cases of success, as well as a network of local people and even acquaintances in the recruitment process (Bao Ha Tinh 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Tien Phong's Journalists (2019a, 2019b) investigated a number of companies in the capital city of Hanoi, posing as legitimate agencies for sending workers abroad, but their networks operated like labyrinths and it was almost impossible for normal people to differentiate between the legitimate companies and illegitimate ones. Alarming issues like these were also investigated and reported by Ba Do (2021) who reported on the official inspection of the labour export industry carried out in six key provinces in Vietnam, Nghe An and Ha Tinh included. Ba Do's report on the inspection also showed that the authorities of these provinces had lost their grip on the supervision of labour exporting companies/agencies, licensed or unlicensed. Not only were the local authorities incompetent, an inspection of

the central government body governing overseas labour exporting found this body had some serious misconduct and failures in their management, which resulted in the suffering of poor and vulnerable people, often from deprived areas who desperate to improve their lives (Vu 2021). Thanh Tran in this study is from Nghe An province—one of the most deprived areas in the centre of Vietnam where they are hit by seasonal floods and hurricanes almost every year.

Deception and intimidation were amongst the major tactics employed by these agencies and this is what the victims told the UK authorities once they were rescued, that neither the work they were doing, nor the money they were earning, if any at all, was what promised to them back home in Vietnam. Despite this, when an opportunity arises, they would still head back to their keepers such as in the case of Thanh Tran, or not come forward for help even after being freed such as in the case of Thuong Bui, because they fear deportation.

Under the UK's asylum-seeking rule, a potential victim of modern slavery or human trafficking seeking for asylum would need to have two applications logged in with two departments of the Home Office: with the NRM to ascertain whether they are a victim of modern slavery or human trafficking, and with the Asylum, to apply for the protection from the UK government.

While the NRM was set up to identify and support victims, even a positive conclusive grounds decision from this body does not necessarily secure success in an asylum application—Section 1.2.3 of the Home Office (2020) guidelines state that:

“The outcome of the reasonable or conclusive grounds decision is not indicative of the outcome of any asylum claim. A positive or negative reasonable or conclusive grounds decision on modern slavery does not automatically result in asylum being granted or refused. This is because the criteria used to grant asylum are not the same as the criteria used to assess whether a person is a victim of modern slavery”.

This means people like those in this study may still face deportation if they come forward to seek help—even where it is conclusively decided that they are victims of modern slavery—and that is a gamble that not all the victims were willing to take. Furthermore, the administrative process is complex, and most people in this situation need to make two applications: one to the NRM to verify their status as a victim of modern slavery, and another to apply for asylum to remain in the UK and secure protection and support.

Taylor and Humphrey (2021) observed that Vietnamese nationals, during their asylum-seeking process, could easily be criminalised and/or deported under the ‘sped-up’ removal scheme implemented by the Home Office. Citing an interview with Robertson from Human Right Watch, these authors point out that this happens due to the combination of inaction or little regard for the victims from Vietnamese authorities, and the willingness of the UK authorities to send them back to potential harm.

3.3. A Complex Multi-National Operating Network

Vietnam is 6000 miles away from the UK. In order to smuggle people into the UK, the traffickers used a complex method involving multi-national and multi-agency networks. This poses immense difficulties for investigation because the agencies along the journey may not be connected with each other at all. Some of them were used on an ad hoc basis and were responsible for only one leg of transportation from one country before handing these people to another group at a border somewhere. This study found that it is more challenging and complex to investigate cases related to the ‘grass route’ than the ‘VIP route’. Before elaborating further on why this is the case, the difference between the ‘grass route’ and the ‘VIP route’ shall be explained.

The ‘grass route’ refers to the route used by people with less money, as it is ‘cheaper’. However, it has been found that people who pay for the ‘VIP route’ can end up in similar situations to those in the ‘grass route’ (Hynes et al. 2019); this is clearly demonstrated by the fact that a number of the victims of the Essex tragedy in 2019 had paid for the ‘VIP route’ (Gentleman 2021; Van Dinh 2020). The ‘grass route’ transportation is often over land,

using lorries or vans, and sometimes cars to transport people to China from Vietnam, then through Russia and various Eastern and Western countries before arriving in the UK. Some legs of the journey could be on foot through the forest. Travel time therefore takes weeks or months, and in some cases years. Those with longer travel times could be made to work, and/or could be physically or sexually abused along their way. The 'VIP route' is generally safer and much faster. People would typically be flown from Vietnam or China directly to one of the European countries, before being brought into the UK by lorries, vans or boats. The VIP route promised to bring people into the UK within two to four weeks. None of the interviewees in this study used the VIP route as they could not afford it. Two of them, Hoang Nguyen and Thanh Tran, were able to talk about that route as the network had previously told them about it and they had also heard from people whom they met in the UK that used this route to arrive in the country.

Investigating cases associated with the 'grass route' poses more challenges because of the variety of agencies involved along the way, passing through several countries, and some of the agencies are not connected with each other at all as they could be some ad hoc transporter being booked for the day. This is similar to what Kelly (2002) observed in their review of research on trafficking women and children in Europe, that under the heading as 'traffickers', there come various groups, from businesses, recruiters, to transporters, guides, and then enforcers and employers at destinations—the exploiters and the keepers, etc. Gathering the information shared by these Vietnamese interviewees however, the agencies from departure, either in Vietnam or China, would often be connected with those in a country in Europe, France or Belgium for instance, and finally the UK. This is because these agents need to cooperate with each other to control the journey payments and/or any debts/bondage. This is why some victims told authorities that they were kept to work in France or Germany for a while as the payment for the journey was deemed not adequate due to unexpected extra expenses. Some others, like those in my study, would be kept after arriving in the country where they were expected to work for the network until the cost to bring them to the country, or any debt they own back home, is settled.

When questioned, none of the victims knew how long the pay-back period would be, or how much per day their labour was estimated for, they were simply told that when the debt was balanced out, they would be informed—in the meantime their horrendous situation would endure. Hoang Nguyen believed that after working for the network for a period of 2 years, his debt must be paid off already and it's why he decided to abandon the network, thinking that they would not peruse him as he 'must have paid off the debt'. Little did he know that for a Vietnamese person who did not speak the local language (English), it was impossible for him to stay distant from the community and that's where his vulnerability was. His London keepers were alerted soon after his arrival in the West Midlands and he found himself being brought back to the network, but this time, with a broken leg as a taught lesson. Thanh Tran, on the other hand, placed his firm belief in the network that they would one day honour their deal and he would be made a free labourer to start earning and sending money home to Vietnam. That belief resulted in him staying in prison for over a year.

The 'VIP route' involves only a few agents, in one or two countries other than Vietnam and the UK. This route also involves flights and customs, so some form of identification would be recorded along the journey, together with the biometric data taken as part of the paperwork involved. Although we are well aware that people could be boarding flights with fake identity, a Chinese passport could be made for them for instance, at least investigators have some indication of where to start. This would not always be the case for the 'grass route' as a person could be taken out of Vietnam without any official paperwork and even if they initially bring some form of ID with them, the route they travel through would not involve any border control forces, hence nothing would be recorded. Their paperwork, if brought with them, would subsequently be taken away or confiscated by the traffickers, leaving them with the identity of a 'straw man' as the Vietnamese would call it.

This term is explicitly used by the Vietnamese community to refer to people with no official documentation of their existence.

3.4. *Understanding the Victims and the Destination 'Market'*

Human trafficking networks that are successful are those with a good understanding of the market they operate in, and this means they are dynamic and adaptive to market demand (Bales 2017; Wheaton et al. 2010). Traffickers can be very astute in taking advantage of local rules and regulations.

Under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Home Office 2014) and the guidance on the NRM (Home Office 2022), suspected victims of modern slavery and child victims are given specialist support. The fact that 253 of the 659 victims referred to the NRM between 2019 and 2021 were children (Home Office 2021) suggests that traffickers, enforcers and employers understand very well that if these youngsters are caught out doing exploitative and/or illegal/criminal work at nail salons or cannabis farms, they are likely to be sent to social services to be homed and less likely to be sent to prison.

In their report Hynes et al. (2018) particularly focus on the vulnerability of Vietnamese nationals who are victims of human trafficking in the UK. These authors observed how the UK system failed to recognise their victim status but instead perceived them as criminals and how they were then punished by the criminal justice system with prison sentences and subsequently with deportation. This has multiplied the fear these vulnerable people have: the fear of failing to pay back any debt or bondage incurred from their journey and having to face their loan sharks or 'black creditors', and that magnifies the fear of being deported. As shown in this study, Thanh Tran, a victim of modern slavery would rather run back to his criminal keepers than accept help from authorities when he was presented an opportunity to do so.

This may explain why the vanishing of Vietnamese in care homes in the UK has been a perennial issue. Hynes (2016) suggested several hitherto unexplored reasons why victims of human trafficking or modern slavery could go missing and seeking to avoid detection from authorities was one of them. The fact of them going missing is often referred to by the UK authorities as them 'absconding'. This frequent lack of recognition of the reality of the complexities of the situation, the mindsets, and the engendered fear which these victims face—often to the point of not even recognising them as victims—can hamper the authorities' ability to intervene in the problem satisfactorily. Moreover, a failure, or at least reduced capacity, to identify victims successfully in the UK make cooperation with Vietnam to help these victims, or prevent future cases of trafficking, all the more difficult.

In their study of trafficked victims in the UK, Simon et al. (2016) presented a table that showed children suspected/identified as trafficked who went missing by nationality with Vietnamese nationals being positioned at the top of that table, in the first position. That means this group is ranked as most likely to go missing from care, compared to other groups/nationalities. While we acknowledge that Simon et al.'s study was six years ago, as a practitioner and a researcher in this field, I would suggest that the situation for this particular ethnicity being the worst affected remains largely unchanged.

For those deemed to be adults, if they are suspected victim of slavery, they would be subsequently released and offered support. But they have to go through a different route of assessment before support can be allocated to them. Also, these older groups are more mature and perhaps more difficult to manipulate, unless they are in a vulnerable position like Hoang Nguyen, Thanh Tran and Thuong Bui in this study, and so the preference of the trafficking and illegal employment market is still the young workers. As there is always a demand for underpaid/exploited workers in this particular group, such demand motivates the criminals to facilitate this illegal network (Schloenhardt 1999). This explains the well-entrenched operational network from Vietnam, with some headquarters stationed along the way in China, Russia, Romania, Czech Republic, Germany, Belgium and France, and of course, at the final destination, the UK.

Finally, the law stipulated for the prosecutions of human trafficking in the UK makes it challenging and sometimes impossible for conviction. CPS (2011) specified that in order to secure prosecution for this crime, three elements that are defined by United Nations (2000), cited in Section 3.1, need to be present: the act, the means and the purpose. With the trafficking chain involving several groups in several countries such as this, to prove all three elements is not always feasible. Some of the rare cases that secure a conviction would then result in relatively lenient sentences such as in the case that was sentenced in the Crown Court in the North of England in December 2021 (Healey 2021). With the huge amount of profit the criminals make from victims of human trafficking, having some of their members at the relatively low level in the chain be sent to prison for just over a year is a worthwhile gamble for many of them.

This section analysed some major issues that have been challenging to the authorities of the two countries Vietnam and UK when they try to combat the trafficking issue. Legal and social issues, as well as matters of practicalities and logistics have been discussed and examined. The following section will be a summary of the key points as well as some recommendation for practitioners and researchers in their future work and study.

4. Summary and Recommendations

The fight against human trafficking from Vietnam to the UK continues to pose several complex challenges, including identifying and supporting victims and reaching agreement across countries as to who are genuine victims. Similarly, it can be difficult for researchers in the field to put together a complete picture of the human trafficking situation due to its complexities. It can be very difficult to do this because agencies along the trafficking journey are often not connected with each other, as some are only used on an ad hoc basis, and only responsible for one leg of transportation from one country to another. Therefore, it can be very difficult to assess the whole process from place of origin to final destination.

Major challenges in combatting human trafficking persist even after some changes and adaptations in the polices of the fight. Since 2007 for instance, instead of largely tackling the supply chain only, the UK authorities included their focus on the demand side of the matter (UK Home Office and Scottish Executive 2007). This includes frequent inspections of the most common destinations for the trafficked Vietnamese such as nail salons and restaurants, as well as public awareness raising for spotting signs of exploitation and reporting. Nevertheless, the issue has remained as critical as ever, if not more so than, before, and the Essex tragedy was just the tip of the iceberg.

Bertone (1999) listed several consequences resulting from human trafficking, including increasing crime and illegal immigration as well as endangering vulnerable populations. Human trafficking of vulnerable Vietnamese citizens into the UK particularly contributed to the drug lords who are the enforcers and employers that are particularly interested in this group of vulnerable people. By drawing on the current issues of trafficking that starts from the country of origin to the country of destination perceived through the lens of a Vietnamese practitioner and researcher who lives and works in both countries, this paper has revealed a number of issues, such as identifying and supporting victims, and building greater cooperation between countries involved, especially with regard to defining what constitutes a victim of modern slavery. In particular, the UK has struggled to persuade Vietnam to adopt the UN definition of human trafficking. These issues are discussed in the paper as the underlying challenges, faced by both the UK and Vietnam governments, and also by the passing countries, such as China, Russia, Belgium, Germany and France.

Replicating the study elsewhere, by collecting further qualitative data from interviews with other victims of modern slavery, particularly if conducted by practitioners and researchers who are based in the passing countries listed above, would help us to better understand the operations in those countries so these international trafficking networks could be disrupted along the route. That would enhance the effectiveness of combating this practice at the country of origin and country of destination. This is what this paper suggests as a direction for further discussion and research. Furthermore, although we have

avoided interviewing children in this study, as this can bring up many complications, much could be learned from future studies involving child victims. Moreover, if a study such as this could be completed on a larger scale, it may be possible to collect useful quantitative and ethnographic data which might yield interesting findings.

Additionally, there needs to be shared agreement—between the UK and Vietnam—about the description of this crime and the definition of victims. This would allow the crime to be tackled more effectively and victims to be given greater support. Although in Western countries there is a common understanding of what constitutes modern slavery, this is not widely accepted in Vietnam (Nguyen 2019); clearly, Vietnam needs to enhance its definition of victim status, if the country is to play a full role in combatting modern slavery. However, the UK authorities should also look into ways of enhancing collaboration with their Vietnamese counterparts, pushing for more action within Vietnam to address issues with rogue agencies and encouraging the Vietnamese authorities to be more proactive in assisting their own citizens abroad.

The inaction of the Vietnamese authorities has been met with criticism from Human Rights Watch who were deeply concerned by the lack of care the Vietnam government had for its own citizens, acting almost like an onlooker, observing desperate people being preyed upon by rogue agents and brokers (Taylor and Humphrey 2021). Again, this could be due to a lack of understanding of what constitutes a victim. However, it is not only the Vietnamese authorities which could improve their knowledge of modern slavery. The UK authorities perhaps need to acknowledge the voluntary factors in the initial labour migration relationships, which later turn sour and coercive, as this knowledge is key to understanding why some victims of trafficking do not even identify themselves as victims and why they can be reticent to contact the proper authorities. Therefore, urgent action is needed in both Britain and Vietnam if the situation is to improve.

Finally, human trafficking is hugely profitable (Schauer and Wheaton 2006) but the conviction rate indicates that the risk of being convicted for this crime is much lower compared to the illegal drugs and arms trade (Wheaton et al. 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to revise the law and regulation to make sure prosecution takes place in a timely manner and that when convicted the traffickers are given sentences that reflect the damage they cause to other humans and society as a whole, and serve as a deterrent to those to be involved in this practice. The convicted traffickers in the Essex case received stern sentences, between 13 years, 4 months and 20 years (Gentleman 2021; Sky News 2022; Van Dinh 2020) and that should be the way forward for all cases and not just the high-profile and sensationalised cases.

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