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# Wombs of Entrapment: Forced Pregnancy and the Manipulation of Maternal Bonds Among Vietnamese Trafficking Survivors

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on insights from 23 frontline support workers to examine the experiences of trafficked women from Vietnam who endure rape, forced pregnancy, and prolonged exploitation. It explores how motherhood creates deep emotional bonds that entrench women in cycles of abuse, as many are unable to escape with their children. For those who do flee, reintegration is hindered by trauma and the loss of language, identity, and community ties – both for mothers and their children. We propose the concept of “wombs of entrapment” to show how motherhood functions as a mechanism of control, limiting women’s autonomy. The article calls for gender-sensitive, trauma-informed interventions that address the unique burdens of coerced motherhood and offer long-term psychosocial support.

## KEYWORDS


Coerced motherhood; gender-based violence; human trafficking; maternal bonding; reproductive violence; survivor reintegration

## POLICY AND SDG RELEVANCE

By highlighting the intersecting impacts of gender-based violence, forced reproduction, and trauma, this study contributes to SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 16 (just, inclusive societies). It informs the development of policies that ensure survivor-centered approaches in anti-trafficking efforts, particularly those that address reproductive coercion and the needs of trafficked mothers.

## Introduction

Human trafficking remains a pervasive and devastating violation of human rights globally, with women and girls disproportionately affected, particularly through gender-based violence such as sexual exploitation and forced reproduction (UNODC, 2020). According to the UNODC, nearly 50,000 victims are identified each year, with women and girls accounting for approximately 70% of all cases (UNODC, 2020). In Vietnam, over 6,500 trafficking victims were reported between 2011 and 2017, with an estimated 70% trafficked into China, primarily through border regions (Home Office, 2020; Liang, 2022). This movement is largely driven by longstanding gender imbalances and restrictive reproductive policies in China, which have created a sustained demand for women as wives and mothers (Liang, 2022; Stöckl et al., 2017). Marriage trafficking remains underreported, as it is often subsumed under broader categories such as sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2020). Vietnamese women trafficked for marriage are compelled to bear and raise children for their captors, often under constant threat of violence, surveillance, and isolation (Liang, 2022). These violations strip women of bodily

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autonomy and create complex emotional and psychological entanglements, making both escape and reintegration profoundly difficult.

This article examines how pregnancy and motherhood are used to enact coercive control over trafficked women from Vietnam, drawing on support workers' narratives to deepen understanding of these complex experiences. Departing from prior research that focuses primarily on returnees/survivors, this article foregrounds the insights of those who provide frontline care and advocacy. These perspectives offer a critical lens to examine the distinct challenges faced by trafficked women, particularly in comparison to men, through an emancipatory framework that exposes the structural inequalities sustaining trafficking in the Vietnamese context. Crucially, the article highlights how forced pregnancy and resulting maternal bonds serve as powerful mechanisms of continued entrapment. Any effective anti-trafficking response must recognize these dynamics and prioritize gender-sensitive, trauma-informed support to address reintegration barriers and promote survivors' long-term recovery and well-being.

The article is divided into six sections. The *Introduction* reviews existing literature on trafficking and contextualizes the situation in Vietnam, highlighting key socio-political and economic factors contributing to women's vulnerability. *Methodology* outlines the research paradigm and details the data collection and analysis processes. The first of three finding sections, *Too Young, Too Vulnerable*, examines how women trafficked for marriage are frequently targeted at a young age and remain trapped for extended periods. *Maternal Bond Entrapment* explores how pregnancy and childbirth can be distressing experiences for trafficked women and how the maternal bond often compels them to remain in exploitative situations to stay with their children. *Challenges in Reintegration* highlights how trafficking robs women of vital years for personal growth and significantly erodes their linguistic and cultural competencies, making reintegration difficult—and even more so for their children. The *Discussion* summarizes findings, emphasizing the physical, psychological, and social toll of coerced motherhood and the urgent need for gender-sensitive reintegration support.

## Literature Review

The UNODC's *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* highlighted a 25% increase in detected human trafficking victims globally in 2022, compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (UNODC, 2024). This increase is linked to factors like regional conflicts, climate disasters, and global crises, which have heightened vulnerabilities. Human trafficking is thus a significant threat to human security and fundamental rights, violating principles of equality, eroding the rule of law, and threatening global security (Soesilowati, 2020; U.S. State Department, 2016).

Human trafficking is widely recognized as a form of gender-based violence rooted in gender inequality, leading to the exploitation and abuse of women and children throughout the trafficking process (Burke et al., 2020; Lansink & Nampewo, 2022; T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021; Pertek, 2022; Wylie, 2023). The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 40.3 million people were living in modern slavery in 2016, and this number increased to 50 million in 2021. Women and children face more severe violence, with women experiencing physical or extreme violence at three times the rate of men, and children suffering such violence nearly twice as often as adults (UNODC, 2020). While sexual exploitation is the most common form of trafficking for women and girls, many are also forced into work, particularly in the domestic sphere, forced marriages, and criminal activities (UNODC, 2024).

Southeast Asia is a major hub for global human trafficking (Perry & McEwing, 2013; Sweileh, 2018; UNODC, 2020). According to one estimate, between 200,000 and 225,000 women and children from Southeast Asia are trafficked annually, driven by gendered vulnerabilities (Grow Think Tank, 2024). Trafficking for forced marriage is detected less frequently than other forms of exploitation but it remains particularly prevalent in Southeast Asia where women and girls are coerced or deceived into marriages, often with men from China (Lhomme et al., 2021).

Vietnam, a country covering an area of 331,114 square kilometers and home to more than 100 million people, is part of Southeast Asia's Greater Mekong Sub-region and is significantly affected by trafficking (O. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Human trafficking spans all provinces of Vietnam, with the country functioning both as a source and a destination for trafficking victims (V. D. Nguyen et al., 2020; UN Women, 2019). Available statistical data on human trafficking in Vietnam is incomplete and does not reflect the full scope of the issue (Dinh et al., 2019; T. H. Le et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2008; O. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; UN Women, 2019). In Vietnam, over 6,500 trafficking victims were reported between 2011 and 2017, with an estimated 70% trafficked into China (Home Office, 2020; Liang, 2022; Pham, 2018). Women and girls constitute 90% of rescued people in Vietnam (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021). Calls have long been made for a comprehensive profile of trafficking victims in Vietnam to support elimination efforts (P. T. D. Le, 2014).

The 2024 *Trafficking in Persons Report* shows that traffickers in Vietnam exploit both local and foreign victims, and also send Vietnamese victims overseas, with sexual and labor exploitation being the most common. Inside Vietnam, women and girls are often taken from poor rural areas to cities. Vietnamese people are trafficked to countries in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021). From 2012 to 2020, about 85% of trafficking cases involved people taken across borders, mostly to China (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2021; Son Ha, 2023). There are four main trafficking routes into China, involving forced marriage, labor, sex work, and adoption (UN Women, 2019).

Human trafficking in Vietnam is driven by an interplay of geographical, demographic, historical, cultural, and economic factors that perpetuate vulnerabilities, particularly among disadvantaged communities (P. T. D. Le, 2014; N. T. Nguyen, 2019). Structural challenges—such as poverty, patriarchal norms, limited education, and restricted financial autonomy—further increase the risk of trafficking (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021). Trafficking reflects entrenched gender inequalities, exacerbating the abuse of women and children at every stage (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021). Traffickers exploit these socioeconomic conditions and the lack of education and access to information, making many women and girls vulnerable to trafficking (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021).

In addition to risk factors such as poverty, low levels of education and unstable family backgrounds, a key driver for trafficking is the shortage of women in China and increasingly South Korea and Taiwan (O. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). The unbalanced sex ratio in China, exacerbated by policies such as the former one-child policy, has fueled bride trafficking. The trend of transnational marriage migration to countries like South Korea and Taiwan has also led to situations of commodification and abuse (T. H. Nguyen & McIntyre-Mills, 2021). Additionally, the porous borders with China, Cambodia, and Laos facilitate cross-border trafficking, with China and Cambodia identified as significant destinations for trafficked women (N. T. Nguyen, 2019).

The Vietnamese government recognizes the forced marriages of young Vietnamese women to foreign men as a serious concern but lacks comprehensive policies to address this issue, which leaves brides vulnerable to exploitation (O. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). More research is needed to develop evidence-based, gender-sensitive policies and programs that support women (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). As such, this article aims to contribute to these efforts by providing insights into the gendered dimensions of trafficking and advocating for comprehensive and targeted interventions. It specifically addresses issues such as forced pregnancy and maternal bonding among trafficked women from Vietnam, highlighting a cycle of entrapment.

## Methodology

### *Research Paradigm and Theoretical Framework*

This study adopts an emancipatory worldview, which focuses on the lived experiences of marginalized and vulnerable populations (Creswell, 2009; Naeve et al., 2017). An emancipatory

worldview is a research orientation rooted in critical theory that seeks to challenge social injustices and empower marginalized or oppressed populations. It is often aligned with participatory, feminist, critical race, postcolonial, or decolonizing methodologies, and is grounded in the belief that research should not only describe or interpret the world but help to change it in ways that promote equity and justice. Specifically, we are using this theory to center the adversities faced by women trafficked into marriage and who later return to Vietnam, a group underrepresented in policy discourse. The emancipatory worldview perspective aligns with the study's objective to amplify victim/survivor stories and advocate for social change.

An intersectionality framework also underpins the study, recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, including gender, class, race, ethnicity, and migration status, and how these systems interact to shape lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2014). Originally developed to articulate the multiple burdens faced by women of color, intersectionality has since become a critical tool in understanding how structural inequalities operate in tandem rather than in isolation. In the context of this study, intersectionality provided a lens to examine how the experiences of trafficked women from Vietnam are not solely shaped by their gender, but are also profoundly influenced by other identity markers such as poverty, rural origin, limited education, and ethnic minority status. This framework enabled a more nuanced analysis of the systemic barriers these women face, such as discriminatory migration policies, exploitative labor conditions, and limited access to justice, and how these are compounded by cultural and geopolitical dynamics. By foregrounding intersectionality, the research moves beyond one-dimensional explanations of vulnerability and instead captures the complex interplay of social forces that render certain women more susceptible to trafficking and exploitation.

### **Research Design**

The research underpinning this article adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of trafficked women as interpreted and shared by support workers. Narrative inquiry, a widely used methodology in the social sciences, emphasizes the significance of lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). This approach was particularly well-suited for the study as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena and provided valuable insights into the challenges and resilience of trafficking survivors. Thematic analysis, a well-established method within narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2022), was employed to analyze the data. The study used narrative inquiry both as a framework for data collection—gathering stories from support workers through interviews—and for data analysis through thematic analysis.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling and direct outreach. Snowball sampling facilitated access to specific populations through participants' social networks (Naderifar et al., 2017). This technique starts with a small group of initial contacts who meet the research criteria and are invited to participate. These participants then refer others who also meet the criteria, creating a chain of referrals until the desired sample size is reached (Parker et al., 2019). Snowball sampling is particularly effective for sensitive topics, such as human trafficking, as it builds trust and confidentiality within participants' networks, encouraging greater participation (Parker et al., 2019). Many participants preferred to remain anonymous due to their affiliations with NGOs or government organizations. Initial participants were identified through personal networks and formal introduction letters, and they subsequently referred others.

### **Participants**

The final sample consisted of 23 participants, grouped into three categories: government employees, NGO workers, and professionals (e.g., researchers and project consultants). All participants had at least six months of experience in human trafficking-related work. Support workers who lacked direct engagement with trafficking cases, or who worked exclusively with male or non-Vietnamese clients, were excluded to maintain the study's focus and relevance. This approach ensured that the data reflected informed and contextually grounded perspectives.

### **Data Gathering**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to collect data. This method enables participants to share personal and emotional dimensions (Kvale, 1996; Mashuri et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted by the first author in Vietnamese, the participants' native language, and lasted between 30 and 158 minutes, with an average duration of 80 minutes. COVID-19 travel restrictions changed the way we conduct research (cf. Davies et al., 2024; Long et al., 2022). Due to travel restrictions, interviews were conducted online via Zoom between September and December 2021, yielding approximately 30 hours of data. While trafficked individuals were not interviewed directly, insights from support workers provided a rich perspective on trafficked women's experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun, 2005) was used to identify and interpret recurring patterns in the data. This process involved multiple stages: Data Familiarisation (transcribing interviews verbatim and immersing in the data), Initial Coding (generating preliminary codes to capture significant features), Theme Development (grouping codes into broader themes reflecting the research questions), and Refinement (reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and alignment with the study objectives). The integration of narrative inquiry and thematic analysis allowed for a nuanced, in-depth exploration of the experiences of trafficked women from Vietnam.

We acknowledge that there is a murkiness in our analysis between (1) women who were explicitly trafficked into marriage, (2) those who consented to marriage but did so without full information, and (3) those who entered marriage willingly but subsequently experienced domestic violence and were unable to leave. While these distinctions are significant and reflect important differences in women's experiences and circumstances, they are less central to the focus of our analysis because our primary concern lies in examining the structural and social barriers that prevent women from exiting harmful marriages – barriers that are often intensified by pregnancy and motherhood.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Auckland University of Technology's Ethics Committee on 5 July, 2021 (Approval Number: 21/205). Informed consent was secured from all participants through signed or verbal agreements. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with all identifying details protected throughout the research.

## **Results**

### ***Too Young, Too Vulnerable***

Our first key finding is that women trafficked at a young age are especially vulnerable, often facing the most severe and enduring consequences. Trafficked as children or teenagers, they are more easily manipulated and less able to escape than adults. Many lose their native language and cultural identity during prolonged periods of exploitation, making reintegration deeply challenging even if they do

manage to return. Our study confirms earlier research finding that the longer the trafficking, the deeper the erosion of identity, requiring more extensive support for recovery.

Victims' ages vary across trafficking types. Girls trafficked for sex are typically younger than those trafficked for labor (Cockbain & Bowers, 2019). Women are mostly trafficked when young, while men tend to be trafficked later (IOM, 2023). Moreover, women are disproportionately trafficked for domestic work, commercial sexual exploitation, and forced marriage, while men are more likely to be trafficked in construction, mining, and state-imposed forced labor. In respect to forced marriage, girls younger than 18 are particularly targeted, and sometimes they can be as young as 10, depending on local customs and norms (Kakar, 2020). According to the UN Trafficking Protocol, trafficking in children—defined as individuals under the age of 18—does not require evidence of coercion or deception to be classified as trafficking, only the act and purpose. In practice, however, it is often difficult to make this age distinction, as many of the women were themselves unsure of their exact age at the time of trafficking. This uncertainty reflects broader structural issues, including the lack of birth registration and official documentation, particularly in rural areas. Where possible, our analysis reflects this complexity and acknowledges the specific legal and protection implications of trafficking involving minors.

Court data from Vietnam (2012–2020) shows that the average victim age is 19.2, and the most vulnerable group is aged 19–25 (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2021). Around 75% of trafficking victims were lured by promises of work or marriage. Many of our participants shared that the women they supported were trafficked very young—often into forced marriage or the sex trade—and remained trapped for years. One participant described a client who “. . . was trafficked when she was very young [. . .] only 13–14 when sold as a wife.” (An, female, 35s, Professional). Similarly, another noted knowledge of, “Three sisters from the same family were trafficked at ages 11, 19, and 20,” (Oanh, female, 50s, Professional).

Women's time in trafficking is often long and marked by multiple forms of abuse. While IOM (2023) reports women are trafficked for 1.8 years on average and men for 2.3, women—especially in forced marriages—can be exploited for much longer. In cases reviewed in Vietnam, 71% were women trafficked into marriage with Chinese men (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2021). Court records focus on traffickers and offer limited detail on victims, frequently underreporting how long women are trapped (Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, 2021). Participants in our study described women who were trafficked for 10, 20, even 40 years. One explained, “There are cases where we rescue victims who've been trafficked for more than 40 years” (Nhung, female, 40s, NGO), and another “One woman I supported was trafficked for 10 years before returning,” (Nam, male, 40s, NGO).

Trafficked women are not only denied freedom but they are also denied time. Years spent under coercion mean missed chances for education, relationships, and growth. For those trafficked into marriage, the illusion of belonging sometimes leads to small freedoms, such as using a phone, which eventually helps them escape. As noted by one participant who explained, “After many years, they build trust with the husband's family and are no longer strictly guarded—that's when they can call for help,” (Duyen, female, 30s, Government).

These long durations, despite potentially offering opportunities to escape, rob women of decades of their lives. Recovery takes time, and recognizing the depth of this loss is crucial to building trauma-informed reintegration programs.

### **Maternal Bond Entrapment**

A second key finding from our research is that traffickers strategically use forced pregnancy to entrap women and girls. Raped without access to contraception or abortion services, victims can become mothers against their will. Once a child is born, the possibility of escape becomes far more complex. We term this phenomenon “wombs of entrapment”: a deliberate tactic that exploits the strong

emotional and cultural attachments women feel toward their children, a bond that cultures in Southeast Asian emphasize through promotion of nurturing motherhood and safeguarding children's wellbeing (Martin-Anatias & Davies, 2023).

This framing of wombs of entrapment builds on existing literature on forced pregnancy in marriage trafficking but extends it by highlighting the specific difficulties faced by women trying to escape who became mothers while trafficked. Their maternal responsibilities, though born of coercion, create powerful emotional and practical barriers to escape. Unlike male victims, who often face fewer constraints related to childcare, females are disproportionately burdened by the consequences of pregnancy and motherhood during exploitation. Nam explained, "Women don't want to stay in these situations. But once they have children, everything becomes more complicated. It's exhausting, and women face more risks," (male, 40s, NGO). In some cases, trafficked women are forced into polyandrous arrangements, becoming the "wife" of multiple male family members, with a primary objective of rapid childbirth, as noted by another participant who explained "One girl might be made the wife of all the brothers in a family—the goal is to have children quickly," (Nhung, female, 40s, NGO).

Participants further reported that victims often become pregnant soon after arrival in trafficking destinations, leaving them with limited options. Ngoc provided an example: "She was lured to China for marriage, became pregnant, and called for help when she was six months along," (Ngoc, female, 35s, NGO). In some cases, it was explained, women attempted escape with their children despite the extreme risks. In one instance, "She ran with her child, knowing they might die. She had no idea where to go or what might happen," (Nhu, female, 30s, NGO).

The presence of children often immobilizes women, not due to apathy or resignation but because of maternal devotion. Faced with the impossible choice of abandoning their children or remaining in exploitative conditions, many women choose to stay, enduring years—even decades—of captivity. Nhung reported, "They want to escape, but they have children. That bond is strong. They give up the idea of running away," (female, 35s, NGO). This sentiment was reiterated by Nam, "The first issue is always about children. When they think of returning home, it's the children that stop them," (male, 40s, NGO).

Even for those who do manage to escape without their children, the emotional toll of separation from their children can be devastating, as noted by Uyen who said, "Some women return [home], but their children cannot. This leaves them caught in deep emotional conflict," (female, 50s, Professional). In some cases, women have returned to trafficking destinations in order to reunite with their children, despite the risk of re-exploitation. Duan explained, "They often wait 15 years to return—once the children are grown. But even then, they stay in contact. Some return because they cannot bear to be apart from their children," (male, 40s, NGO).

These findings suggest that wombs of entrapment are not simply a by-product of trafficking, but a deliberate mechanism of control. Exploiters use forced pregnancy to deepen dependence and reduce the likelihood of escape. In political and media representations, Vietnamese women are often celebrated for their self-sacrifice and devotion to family with messaging that they should continue to embody these traits even in the most extreme circumstances (Hoang, 2016). Such cultural norms are manipulated by traffickers. Through these norms women can become trapped not only by external forces but also by internalized responsibilities and cultural expectations. As Kakar (2020) observes, forced pregnancy aligns closely with the goals of forced marriage, stripping women of agency, autonomy, and time.

### ***Challenges in Reintegration***

Our third key finding is that women trafficked in their youth experience a profound loss of cultural identity and significant interruptions in their personal development making reintegration difficult. Child, forced, and servile marriages erode a victim's sense of self and inhibit their individual potential (Kakar, 2020). Women trafficked into marriage frequently suffer from severe

psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, in addition to enduring physical pain and illness (Stöckl et al., 2017). Upon returning home, survivors frequently face difficulties in social reintegration and relationship-building, shaped by the enduring effects of trauma (Preble et al., 2022). These consequences often manifest as feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and an impaired ability to trust, which collectively hinder reintegration efforts (Bryant-Davis, 2011). Our research supports these findings and contributes additional insight from the Vietnamese context, demonstrating that the prolonged nature of forced marriages impedes women's personal development and severs their cultural connections, exacerbating reintegration challenges.

Mental health concerns, particularly shame and stigma, amplify feelings of isolation, diminish self-worth, and obstruct the reintegration process (Davies & Najmah, 2020). Many returnees report a pervasive sense of emotional numbness that impedes meaningful social engagement. Anh explained:

Female returnees, especially those who are victims of sexual exploitation or forced marriage, often feel like they are trash and have no self-esteem [...] During their stay at the safe shelter, they receive a lot of support to improve their self-worth so that they can increase their value and not self-blaming of becoming a victim. However, not everyone can overcome this difficult barrier. (female, 35s, Professional)

Long periods of trafficking often lead to the erosion of cultural identity, including language loss, unfamiliarity with home environments, and weakened familial ties. Nhung explained, "...and they have forgotten their Vietnamese language, only just remember their parents' names and forgot the way back home, because they have been abroad for that long," (female, 40s, NGO). Similarly, Nhu noted, "Many women shared that when they return to Vietnam, they still can't talk to their parents and other people like before. When they went and came back, they also changed, and their families also changed," (female, 30s, NGO).

These ruptures are compounded by missed educational and developmental milestones. Many were trafficked before completing formal education and were denied opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills. Upon return, they often find themselves without the foundational competencies needed to restart their lives, which hinders both their personal growth and employability. As explained by Nha "They were trafficked when they were very young, so their education was interrupted, and they [survivors] will have to go back to school from the beginning, but many of them find it hard to accept that," (female, 50s, NGO). Another participant similarly explained:

As far as age is concerned, they lose their skills as they often migrate to do housework or farm work without expertise or training. This results in a lack of professional skills necessary to secure employment, even a job in the industrial sector, for example. (Giang, female, 50s, Government)

Trafficking thus strips women of critical developmental periods, leaving deficits that complicate reintegration. These challenges are magnified by the psychological toll of sustained violence and abuse. While these difficulties are substantial for individual women, they are often even more acute for those returning with children.

Reintegration becomes exponentially more complex when women are accompanied by children, particularly in cases where the children are born of exploitative relationships and are not registered Vietnamese citizens (Duong et al., 2005). These women face legal obstacles in securing birth certificates and accessing education for their children, in addition to the broader struggles of emotional healing and economic survival. "I know a case of a young girl who returned with a child who didn't speak a word of Vietnamese," explained Nam (male, 40s, NGO). Dung's experiences were similar. She reported,

When they came back, they had several kids with them, but there was no one to take care of them. They had no money and were having difficulty getting back on their feet. Women have it more complicated in these situations as they have to care for their children and work hard to support themselves and their kids. I supported a woman. who escaped and returned with three children. (female, 40s, Professional)

Fulfilling parental responsibilities presents a gendered dimension to reintegration. Women returnees often bear the dual burden of caregiving and rebuilding their own lives, a reality less frequently experienced by men counterparts. As noted by Nam, “Generally, men may have an advantage in dealing with these situations since they typically have fewer limitations regarding children [. . .] There are numerous challenges that women face, and a prominent obstacle revolves around the issue of children,” (male, 40s, NGO). Anh explained further, “Survivors need a bit more sensitive support, for example, those returning with children, those being female . . . Appropriate support should be set for that group,” (female, 35s, Professional).

The maternal bond, while a source of strength for many women, also introduces added complexity during reintegration. Prolonged exploitation often leaves returnees with no cultural or linguistic grounding, and their children may likewise lack these essential connections. The study findings align with Stöckl et al. (2017), who underscore the necessity of targeted legal, psychological, and health support for Vietnamese women trafficked into forced marriage, especially those with children. Reintegration is not merely a matter of returning home. For many trafficked women, especially mothers, it involves rebuilding identity, recovering from trauma, and navigating complex legal and caregiving landscapes. These realities necessitate sensitive, comprehensive, and sustained support mechanisms tailored to the unique needs of women survivors.

## Discussion

This article has explored how traffickers exploit gendered vulnerabilities to exert control over women and girls, with forced pregnancy emerging as a particularly insidious mechanism of entrapment. Drawing on interviews with individuals who support escaped victim-survivors reintegrating into Vietnamese society, three key findings emerge. First, many women and girls are trafficked at a young age, which heightens their vulnerability, limits their understanding of the situation, and severely constrains their ability to prevent or escape it. Second, traffickers deliberately exploit the power of maternal bonds to maintain control, using children as emotional leverage to deter escape. Third, prolonged periods of trafficking from a young age result in the erosion of victims’ language, cultural knowledge, and sense of place. Upon escape—often with their children—many women struggle to reintegrate due to these losses, which also affects their children’s ability to adapt. These findings extend prior research on forced marriage and reproductive coercion (e.g., Lansink & Nampewo, 2022; Stöckl et al., 2017) to deepen understanding of how maternal responsibility, highly valued in Southeast Asian contexts, entrenches dependence on traffickers and hinders reintegration.

To sharpen focus on this urgent issue, we introduced the concept of “wombs of entrapment” to capture the deliberate weaponization of women’s cultural and emotional bonds with their children—particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where caregiving and maternal responsibility are deeply valued. Raped and denied access to contraception or abortion, many victims are compelled into motherhood, deepening their dependence on traffickers and severely constraining their ability to leave. While expanding on existing research into forced pregnancy in marriage trafficking (e.g. Dinh et al., 2019; T. H. Le et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2008; O. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018), our analysis foregrounds the specific challenges faced by trafficked mothers, whose roles as caregivers, though imposed, bind them to exploitative situations. These findings also highlight the gendered dimensions of trafficking, as male victims are less likely to encounter the same forms of reproductive and emotional coercion.

This article therefore contributes to the growing body of literature on the reintegration of trafficked women by highlighting the profound and multifaceted challenges they face upon returning to their home communities as mothers. The findings underscore that reintegration is not simply a matter of physical return but a complex process shaped by psychological trauma, cultural disconnection, disrupted development, and caregiving responsibilities.

Mental health challenges further complicate reintegration (Kakar, 2020). Survivors often carry the weight of shame, stigma, and trauma, resulting in social withdrawal and difficulty forming trusting

relationships. These internalized struggles are frequently exacerbated by a lack of specialized support tailored to their needs, particularly in rural or resource-limited areas.

The burden of reintegration is particularly heavy for women who return with children born of trafficking-related unions (Burke et al., 2020). These mothers face legal and logistical obstacles, including the lack of birth registration and citizenship for their children, which affects access to education and healthcare. In addition, caregiving responsibilities restrict their ability to pursue education or employment, placing them at heightened risk of poverty and social marginalization. The need for gender-sensitive and child-inclusive reintegration services is therefore urgent.

Our research affirms findings from previous international studies (e.g. Duong et al., 2005; Eglen, 2024; Liang, 2022) and adds new evidence from the Vietnamese context, where reintegration is shaped by unique social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. While NGOs and shelters provide important initial support, long-term, holistic strategies are essential. These should include psychological counseling, vocational training, legal assistance, and community sensitization to reduce stigma.

Our findings align closely with an emancipatory worldview, as the research prioritized understanding the experiences of trafficked women who face complex, intersecting vulnerabilities (Creswell, 2009; Naeve et al., 2017). By highlighting their struggles with trauma, stigma, cultural dislocation, and caregiving responsibilities, the article not only describes these challenges but informs more just and responsive reintegration policies that empower survivors and address their specific needs. Further, an intersectionality framework has been integral to interpreting these findings. The experiences of trafficked women cannot be understood through a single lens of gender alone; rather, their vulnerability and reintegration challenges are shaped by the overlapping impacts of gender, age, motherhood, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and legal marginalization (such as lack of documentation for their children). This intersectional approach enables a nuanced understanding of how multiple forms of oppression and structural inequalities combine to entrap and disadvantage survivors in distinct ways. Together, these frameworks have deepened our analysis and highlighted the necessity for holistic, multi-sectoral responses that reflect the complex realities of trafficked women and their children.

Successful reintegration must be understood as a gradual and individualized process, requiring sustained commitment from state and non-state actors alike. Addressing the specific needs of trafficked women—particularly those who return with children—demands coordinated, multi-sectoral responses that recognize the intersecting impacts of gender, trauma, and prolonged exploitation. Without such targeted support, the risk of re-trafficking and intergenerational cycles of vulnerability remains unacceptably high.

Addressing the reintegration of trafficked Vietnamese women, particularly mothers, requires a coordinated, long-term policy response. Forced pregnancy and maternal bonds are exploited as tools of control, leaving survivors with compounded vulnerabilities upon return. Policies must prioritize gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches that include legal assistance, mental health services, vocational training, and child-inclusive support, such as access to education and citizenship documentation. Reintegration should be recognized as a gradual process, requiring collaboration between state, NGO, and community actors. Without sustained investment, survivors and their children face heightened risks of poverty, re-trafficking, and intergenerational marginalization.

### **Limitations**

This study faced several limitations. Although we aimed to amplify survivors' experiences, survivors themselves were not directly involved in the research. While drawing on support workers' perspectives offers valuable insights given their broader overview and multiple viewpoints, this approach may introduce interpretation bias. Our sample included 23 participants from diverse professional roles; however, it was relatively small and geographically concentrated in Vietnam. This regional focus limits our ability to fully capture the complexity of trafficking patterns across different regions and destination countries, thereby constraining the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, we encountered

difficulties in accurately determining victims' ages since many women were unsure of their exact age at the time of trafficking due to a lack of documentation. This posed significant challenges for support workers in applying legal definitions, especially regarding minors, where consent is legally irrelevant under international law.

## Conclusion

This article has illuminated how forced pregnancy and maternal bonds operate as mechanisms of coercion that entrap Vietnamese women trafficked into marriage, shaping their experiences of exploitation and complicating reintegration. By introducing the concept of wombs of entrapment, we foreground the gendered, reproductive, and emotional dimensions of trafficking that are often overlooked in policy and practice. Reintegration is not simply a matter of physical return but a deeply layered process of rebuilding identity, restoring cultural belonging, and navigating the demands of caregiving under conditions of stigma and structural exclusion. Our findings emphasize the urgent need for holistic, gender-sensitive, and child-inclusive responses that extend beyond immediate rescue and short-term care. Without sustained, coordinated support that addresses trauma, legal barriers, and social reintegration, survivors and their children risk remaining trapped in cycles of marginalization and vulnerability. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is essential to achieving meaningful justice and recovery.

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