Young Sex-Workers in Ho Chi Minh City Telling Their Life Stories
Birgitta Rubenson, Le Thi Hanh, Bengt Höjer and Eva Johansson

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What is This?
There was a girl living in a small palm-leaf house in bad condition in the countryside. She often envied those living in beautiful houses in the city and dreamt of once living in a house like that. One day an acquaintance offered her a job as a salesgirl in a small restaurant in the city. The girl happily went there and worked. After some time another person offered her a better paid job in another place. She now earned a lot more money than in the first place. Then chance smiled at her. A friend introduced her to a Taiwanese man. He bought a house for the family. The house was well equipped with electricity, water and high-tech appliances like a TV-set and cassette player. Her parents were now able to pay all their debts. Now she is learning Chinese preparing to resettle in Taiwan next year.

A 16-year-old sex-worker in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) told this story at the beginning of the interview, when the researcher asked her to tell the story of a girl drawn on a picture. By asking them to tell a fictive story they could choose to tell their own story without being too personal, the story of a friend or to relate their own dreams and desires. With these stories as common ground, the interviewer could move on and encourage the girls to tell...
their own stories or narratives as a way of expressing their understanding of events and experiences in their own lives (Mischler, 1986: 68).

When referring to children and child prostitution in this article we follow the UN definition, which includes persons up to 18 years, while we have used the term adolescents when referring to the participants in our study and their age group in Vietnam. Like most societies, Vietnam differentiates between children and adolescents, with a floating divide somewhere between age 10 and 13 depending on how independent the child is, if he or she is in school or not, living with parents or not, earning an income or not. Adolescence is seen as a transition period to adulthood, with independence, responsibility and maturity, rather than age, determining when a person is socially considered an adult.

Sexual exploitation of children has profound effects on both physical and mental health and is an abuse of their dignity and autonomy (Willis and Levy, 2002). Yet it is a reality and the livelihood of thousands of adolescent girls in Vietnam, as in many Southeast Asian countries. Its spread is of great concern to those engaged in issues of child rights and welfare in Vietnam (Hoang, 1999). The total number of prostitutes under 18 in Vietnam is unknown, but the estimates given vary between 2000 (UNICEF, 2000b) and 20,000 (Hoang, 1999). The right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and in the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO, 1999), which have both been ratified by Vietnam. Vietnam has reported twice to the CRC committee, bringing up difficulties with the growing problem of sexual exploitation of children and the lack of resources and competence to meet the challenge (UNHCHR, 1992, 2002). There have been national, regional and international efforts to abolish prostitution and trafficking of children, but still children are exploited in this lucrative business (ESCAP, 2000; O’Grady, 1992; UNICEF, 2000a). As in most countries, though, the possibilities of eradicating it are limited as long as there is demand, especially since the labour market is unequal and poverty forces many girls to earn a living (Cusick, 2002).

Recognizing that child prostitution will continue for many years to come, the focus of our study is not to look for ways to abolish it, or for interventions to help girls leave it, or to give an overview of child prostitution in HCMC or Vietnam. Instead, our aim has been to let the girls themselves tell their stories to increase the understanding of how they live, survive and cope with their daily challenges. The study is part of a research project with children working in the informal sector in urban Vietnam, where sex-work constitutes a minor part, while shoe shining, street vending, home-based production and domestic service are more common (Free, 1998).
Method

In her book *Modern Babylon*, Heather Montgomery underlines the need for more research on how children themselves describe and understand their lives as sex-workers, as this may give a different image than the depiction of the exploited, suffering, powerless young girl presented in NGO reports and by the media (Montgomery, 2001). As our main aim was to discern how the girls themselves described and understood their situation, we decided to use narratives and narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996).

The study was planned and developed by Le Thi Hanh, Birgitta Rubenson and Bengt Höjer. Le Thi Hanh is a Vietnamese social worker and researcher well familiar with HCMC and with extensive experience of working with children in difficult circumstances, and Rubenson is a public health scientist with a focus on child rights who has visited Vietnam frequently and for longer periods of time since 1998. They did the data gathering, the structuring and interpreting of the data and the writing, thereby contributing the insider view of the Vietnamese social worker and the outsider view of the Swedish public health scientist. Eva Johansson supported and supervised the analysis and writing.

Life stories or narratives are increasingly being used in social science research as a means to describe and give meaning to experiences and choices in the lives of people. Narratives are understood as stories that ‘include a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events’ (Sandelowski, 1991: 162). When relating their lives and experiences, explaining their choices and actions, interviewees try to make their life experience understandable (Mischler, 1986), thereby also forming their identities (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992). Riessman (1993: 4) stresses that: ‘Precisely because narratives are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents’ ways of constructing meaning and analyse how it is accomplished.’

With the help of life calendars and social networks (see later), the participants in conversation with the Vietnamese researcher structured their life stories into narratives with a clear beginning and an end, into a sequence of happenings describing and sometimes explaining the turns their lives had taken and how they coped with them (Riessman, 1993). The stories represent how the girls wanted to describe, and thereby themselves also make sense of, or give meaning to their life stories. Telling the story to an interested listener can be a great relief and help in coming to terms with one’s life story (Frank, 1995; Huntz and Koller, 1999). At the end of the interview T said:

The more I talked to you, the more I felt confidence in you. I feel released after having told you my whole life story.
Setting
For our study, we wanted to interview participants who were actively involved in selling sex, rather than those who had left the business and could be contacted through welfare organizations, health services or local authorities. Below is the story of how one of the girls participating in the study was found.

Following the directions of a peer educator in an HIV/AIDS project, we came to the Binh Trieu Bridge area, which is a well-known suburban area for prostitutes in Ho Chi Minh City. We first entered a small lane behind high buildings along a busy street. After driving the motorbike through lots of bumpy, dusty and narrow lanes with many curves, we finally arrived at a small lane, usually called ‘the cave’. The lane had two rows of small rooms for renting to prostitutes to live and receive customers in. But this day the lane seemed very quiet with closed doors. From some women hanging around we learnt that there had been a government campaign two weeks earlier to ‘clean up prostitution’. Some of the prostitutes were caught and some had moved away. Going around the city looking for another ‘cave’, we came past a park. There we saw a skinny girl playing on the ground with four to five young boys. We approached them to make friends, and after some reluctance they accepted us. We made an appointment to meet with the girl again later.

The study was conducted during 1999 in HCMC, Vietnam’s biggest city and commercial centre, with a constant flow of domestic and visiting international businessmen. It is also becoming a popular place for foreign tourists. Both factors encourage prostitution, including child prostitution, which makes up around 10 percent of the prostitution in HCMC (UNICEF, 2000b). HCMC has a big influx of adolescents from rural areas hoping to find a job and an income. Many of these young girls find work in restaurants and cafes, an entry point for some to more lucrative sex-work (Free, 1998). The high value attributed to virginity renders adolescent girls extremely vulnerable. The majority of the girls work independently in parks/streets or cafes and bars, and are more rarely tied to brothels (Bond and Hayter, 1998). A few belong to secret telephone networks related to hotels frequented by travelling businessmen. For the study, we interviewed girls in the two districts (1 and 5) known to have many prostitutes at all price levels, but also in six other districts. District 1 is the city centre with many hotels and restaurants, as well as the railway station and several parks, and district 5, also called China Town, is favoured by many Asian businessmen.

In rural Vietnamese families, children are brought up to participate in the daily activities of the household, where duties are distributed according to ability and strength and with clear gender differences from about the age of 7 (Chinh, 2000; Rydström, 1998; Theis and Huyen, 1997). They are raised as social beings with duties towards their parents and society rather than with rights of their own (Bich, 1997). By the age of 15, many are expected to work like adults (Theis and Huyen, 1997) and contribute to the family income.
Parallel with this cultural and structural emphasis on adolescents as income-earners, the modern concept of an extended childhood as a time for play and preparation for the future, free from labour and responsibility for daily survival (Boyden, 1997; Cunningham, 1995; Ennew and Milne, 1989; Therborn, 1996) is gaining influence. The ratification of the UNCRC and the legislation passed to fulfil the obligations required are, together with an expanding school system and the media, the most important factors promoting this different view on childhood. Adolescents in Vietnam are pressed to incorporate both views as they move into adulthood. The traditional transition is no longer self-evident given laws about education and the labour market, while the temptations of the new open economy increase the need for an income (Thi, 1998). For rural adolescent girls, the dilemma is obvious. Education beyond a few years may not be financially feasible, nor considered necessary, and the legal age of marriage is now 18. To share in the responsibility for the family income is the social norm, but opportunities are few. For many, the move to the city seems to be the best option.

Participants

Our study consists of the life stories of 22 participants (see Table 1), who were between 15 and 18 years old at the time of the interview. They had all been involved in sex-work for more than a year and all but three were still active. Initially, 12 girls were interviewed but after reviewing the data, it was decided that additional girls should be included to gain a broader picture. Another 10 girls were then invited to participate.

All contact with the participants in the study was handled by the Vietnamese researcher, who could move around the parks and the streets and mix with the sex-workers without arousing unwanted interest or drawing the attention of the police. The Swedish researcher visited the main areas where the sex-workers congregate on other occasions to get an impression of their life. She also visited shelters run by child welfare organizations for young sex-workers leaving prostitution and talked to them and to the staff of the shelters.

While prostitution is the terminology commonly used by the media and the general public in Vietnam, the participants in the study referred to it as ‘this job’ or ‘selling to earn money’, but they would not use the word ‘sex’. We have chosen to use the term ‘sex-work’, however, to underline the work connotation, which is how the participants describe it. When using ‘prostitution’ it reflects the more general use in Vietnam and in much of the literature.

Of the 22 girls in the study, three had in principle left prostitution and were married, earning a simple living through petty trading, but occasionally returning to sex-work when in need of funds. The others were still active as sex-workers waiting for customers in the parks and streets or connected to a bar or brothel. Some worked as call-girls in connection with hotels where
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<th>No/age</th>
<th>Starting</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Family/social situation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. T. 16</td>
<td>15 – sold by aunt</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>Parents and 4 siblings; lives with boyfriend, thrown out by parents. Narrative 3.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. H. 16</td>
<td>15 – introduced by friend</td>
<td>Never been to school</td>
<td>Parents and 3 siblings; lives by herself, parents know nothing. Narrative 1.</td>
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<td>3. L. 15</td>
<td>13 – introduced by friends</td>
<td>Never been to school</td>
<td>Parents street vendors; lives on her own in rented room. Narrative 1.</td>
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<td>4. T. 16</td>
<td>14 – sold by mother</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>Father dead, mother remarried; left mother and lives on her own, stopped sex-work and joined sewing course. Narrative 3.</td>
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<td>5. N. 17</td>
<td>14 – sold her virginity</td>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>Father dead, mother very poor; living with husband; continues ‘job’ secretly to support mother. Narrative 1.</td>
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<td>6. B. 16</td>
<td>15 – abused by police</td>
<td>Never been to school</td>
<td>Mother and 5 siblings; lives with mother, big debts to pay off. Narrative 3.</td>
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<td>7. H. 17</td>
<td>15 – own choice to support siblings</td>
<td>Never been to school</td>
<td>Mother dead, father remarried; with husband, no customers anymore. Narrative 1.</td>
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<td>8. HG. 17</td>
<td>15 – cheated by friend, who sold her</td>
<td>Never been to school</td>
<td>Mother, 8 siblings, father dead; with mother; big debt to brothel-owner. Drugs? Narrative 3.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. X. 15</td>
<td>13 – boyfriend raped her, sells her</td>
<td>Attends 7th grade</td>
<td>With parents, abused by cousin when 8, scared of pimp/boyfriend, drugs? Narrative 3.</td>
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businessmen come or as independent sex-workers only through private contacts.

All girls were offered a sum of money as a compensation for giving up their time to the study.

Data collection
The Vietnamese researcher contacted the participants on a one-to-one basis in parks and other areas known for prostitution, or through the introduction of street-educators working for social welfare organizations. When making the first contact with a girl and inviting her to participate, the researcher described the aim of the study, explained that the identity of the girls would not be disclosed and noted that they had the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The researcher asked the girls to suggest when and where they would prefer to meet, since we wanted them to tell their stories in an atmosphere where they felt secure and comfortable.

To build a trusting relationship, the researcher asked each girl to participate in a series of four meetings. By meeting the girls on more than one occasion we hoped to gather better data. Tape-recorders were not used, in order to avoid negatively influencing the conversations and possibly intimidating the girls. Instead, the researcher took notes of expressions and details she wanted to be sure not to forget. The researcher sat down immediately after each meeting and recorded the conversation with all its important points. These reports were then discussed and checked for accuracy with the girl at the next meeting. The Vietnamese researcher translated all the reports to English and both the Vietnamese and the English versions were used for the analysis.

The study included several methods for data collection to give the girls a variety of opportunities to tell their stories (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Punch, 2002). In this way, we hoped to get a good picture of their life situation, social network, experiences and hopes for the future. It also gave us the possibility to cross-check information.

Meeting 1: For the first meeting we chose a picture, of a lonely girl in a village setting (Figure 1), which we asked the participants to tell a story about. This was used as an introduction where they could tell a story about the life of a Vietnamese girl. Our aim during the first meeting was to establish contact, which could be developed into a trusting relationship during the following meetings. It gave the girls an opportunity to tell a story, which might be similar to their own, but which they did not have to identify with directly. The story could also contain wishes and dreams of what they hoped for in the future.

Meeting 2: The aim of this meeting was to let the girl tell her own life story. What had happened to her? What did she think and feel about it? What
were her attitudes and values? For the exercise we prepared a life calendar with 12 squares, one for each year between the age of 3 and 17 (Figure 2), where the girl could draw or write about the most important happenings in her life, indicating both positive and negative situations that had influenced her present life. If she wanted to use two squares for one year or wanted to jump other years she could do so. By using a calendar we hoped to give the interviewee a structure that would help her recall events and see in which order they had happened. The interviewer asked questions and sought clarifications during the process to get a clear picture of the life story of the girl.

Meeting 3: During the third meeting, the girls were asked to illustrate their social network (Figure 3) with the help of small figures that they should glue onto a piece of paper. They were asked to put themselves in the centre and then organize their social contacts around the centre, indicating which were positive and which were negative contacts, which were active and which passive. Also during this process, the interviewer asked questions about who the figures were and what kind of relationships existed.
Figure 2  H.’s life calendar
Figure 3 H.’s social network
Meeting 4: At the final meeting, the interviewer gave a summary of the life story and social situation as she had understood it and asked the girl if it was correct, or if things needed to be changed or clarified. The interviewer had a list of topics that should be covered, if they had not been mentioned during earlier meetings, such as reasons for being a sex-worker, payment, family contacts, future hopes, disease and illness and worries.

The notes from the four meetings, the life calendars and the mapping of social networks are the data on which the results in this article are based.

Analysis and writing
The reports from the meetings with the girls, the life calendars and the social networks were read and reread by the researchers, resulting in the identification of three main themes. These themes illustrate differences among the girls in their experiences and understanding of life. During the analysis we were acting both as ‘narrative finders’ – looking for the narratives contained in the interviews – and ‘narrative creators’ – organizing the many different happenings into coherent stories (Kvale, 1996: 201). Kvale describes the analysis in narrative structuring as ‘a condensation or a restructuring of the many tales told by the different subjects into a richer, more condensed and coherent story, than the scattered stories of the separate interviews’ (Kvale, 1996: 199). The result is a new story based on the interviews and developing the themes found in the original interviews. As narrative finders, we read the reports and looked for narratives describing and explaining the three different themes. We divided the life stories of the 22 girls into three groups, based on the theme that was the dominant in each of the stories. As narrative creators, we selected the story of one girl from each group to use as a frame narrative for the respective theme. With these three frame narratives as a base, we created three thematic narratives by adding thematically relevant stories told by the other girls in each of the groups, to make the narratives richer and not to lose important information. As described by Frank (1995: 76), using thematic narratives can encourage closer attention to the stories told and help sort out the different narrative threads in the many stories.

Ethical issues
The study was approved by the Hanoi Medical University with acceptance of the Ministry of Health, as well as by the ethical committee of Karolinska Institutet. The participants were informed about the study’s aims and methods and their right to withdraw at any time during the process.

Children involved in prostitution are difficult to reach and to interview (Cusick, 2002). They do not want to be identified as sex-workers, and are afraid that the interview might lead to contacts with the social authorities or the police. It is therefore important that they feel confident that their participation will not expose them to the risk of disclosure. All meetings were arranged according to the wishes of the participating girls, as discreetly
as possible, and by a person well aware of their situation (Huntz and Koller, 1999).

As the study was touching on very sensitive issues in the girls’ lives, which might arouse memories they were otherwise suppressing, we had arranged for psychosocial back-up, through contacts with an NGO working with child prostitutes. We also had the possibility to help the girls seek medical care if needed. As none of the girls expressed or showed any need for psychosocial help, this opportunity was not utilized, although two girls were helped to find medical care.

Results

The narratives that follow are all based solely on the material from the interviews and presented under three themes: ‘Poverty leaves few choices’, ‘The dream comes true’ and ‘Abuse breeds prostitution’.

Poverty leaves few choices

This first theme is based on the stories of participants 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 19 (see Table 1).

When H was small, the family lived in Da Nang. Her parents were hardworking farmers. The family lived in a thatched house. As they possessed only a small plot of land they had to sell their labour to add to the family income. All the family members worked very hard, but it was difficult to make ends meet. When H was 11 years old her father contracted tuberculosis. The family had to sell the land to pay for the father’s hospital treatment and medicines.

When I was 14 years old my mother died after giving birth to my twin sisters. I had to sell my labour for the living. I did all kinds of labour when being hired: weeding, rice planting, loading or carrying to earn money to buy milk for my twin sisters and food for the rest of the family. After a year of hardship and starvation, I thought about selling myself, so I went to the city. In the city I was ‘lucky’ to meet a man, who listened to my life story. He promised that he would pay me 7/10 of a piece of gold whether I was a virgin or not. I agreed and came with him to a hotel room that evening. In the morning he gave me a full piece of gold (10/10), as he had found out that I was still a virgin. I came back home with only 1/10 piece of gold. The rest I had hidden, because I was afraid that my father would otherwise suspect that I had sold my virginity.

– Was it very painful as this was your first time?
– Yes, of course it was painful and I cried, but the man was very nice to me.
– Did you use a condom that day?
– No, I did not know what a condom was at that time.
– Then, who told you to use condoms later on?
– My friend X later instructed me to use a condom.

When I came home with the money, I told my father that the money was from my work in the city. After a few days at home I returned to the city to work as a porter at the seaport for my livelihood and for supporting my siblings in the countryside. Every month I added 1/10 of the gold I had hidden to the...
savings from my labour and sent it to my father and siblings in the countryside. We lived like that for 10 months. Then the gold savings were finished.

One day a woman told me that she knew a job vacancy in a coffee shop with an attractive salary of 700,000 dong a month. I was happy to hear about it, because what I earned was not enough to support my father and my siblings. Unfortunately I only earned 300,000 dong a month for the job. Then X, a colleague, told me that all the girls working in the coffee shop had extra work outside. X knew a place where I could earn extra money. So I went with her to the park to receive customers. After some time I quit the job in the coffee shop and since then I have been doing ‘this job’ on my own. I now earn between 1.5 and 2 million dong a month and every month I send 700,000 dong to my family to pay for my sisters’ food, my brother’s school fees, and other expenses. I send a fixed sum to make them believe that I am still working in the coffee shop and get a fixed salary. My father does not know that I am doing ‘this job’. I go home to visit my family for holidays now and then. Usually I come home some days before the holidays to prevent my father from coming to see me in HCMC.

Luckily I have never been ill, or taken any medicine but contraceptive pills. The whole family relies on me so that I cannot let myself become sick. I always request the customers to wear a condom not to become infected by STD, or become pregnant. If a customer does not want to use a condom I don’t accept him, but leave the place immediately. I only earn between 70,000 to 100,000 dong for each intercourse, which is not enough to cover all the treatment fees, if I were infected by a non-condom using customer. If I get pregnant I will go immediately to the hospital for an abortion. I will declare that I am a student abandoned by my boyfriend and that I need to have an abortion to continue my schooling.

Once I was caught by the police. A man pretended to go with me. When we were talking a police car came with four policemen and I was caught. I was taken to the Vocational School No. 2 for prostitutes, but was released already after 3 days, because it was my first time. Now I am very careful. I never carry condoms in my pockets, in case the police should stop me and search me. I have also learned how to distinguish an ordinary man from a policeman, when seeing a man approaching me as a customer. Ordinary men like to joke, while policemen speak formally. So when a man approaches me with formal talk, I say that I am a student going out for a walk, and then I move away. Sometimes it is very easy to recognize a policeman, because he only wears an everyday shirt with his uniform trousers.

I will work here for 1 or 2 more years to pay for the schooling of my brother, then I want go back home to my family. They are the only ones who really love me and I am not sorry to sacrifice my life for them. I want to get married to a man in my village and have a family. My biggest worry is that my father and people from the village will get to know that I do ‘this job’.

The dream comes true
This theme is based on the stories of participants 10, 18 and 20.
T is 16 years old and earns her income as a call-girl. Her father is half Chinese, her mother Vietnamese. T looks like her mother and is very pretty. She has two older sisters, one older brother and one younger sister. Her eldest sister is 24 years old and married. Her brother is 21 years old, jobless and has a girlfriend who works in a restaurant as a waitress. The other older
sister is a prostitute and a drug-addict. Her younger sister attends school. T’s house is very luxurious and comfortable.

My childhood was not happy at all, I lacked everything. My parents quarrelled all the time. When I was 9 years old, being in grade 4, I had to drop out of school. My mother was in debt due to gambling. She took V, my sister, to sell her virginity at 5/10 pieces of gold to pay back her debts. After that V became a professional prostitute, and she became rich. V spent a lot of money to buy what she wanted. Seeing my sister’s way of life, I went voluntarily to sell my virginity to put an end to my life of poverty and hardship. I was 14 years at that time. Since we now had money our family fell apart. My mother kept the money earned by my sister and me and continued her gambling. Then she got involved with a famous gambler/playboy. My father could not intervene. He started to drink to forget his life. Later on he married a butcher at the Xa Cang Market.

My sister worked as a prostitute in a karaoke bar in district 5. Then she married – by mistake – a famous gangster boss. V became aware of this only when her husband was caught by the police and his photograph appeared in the newspapers. At that time I had already become a famous waitress in a bar near the An Dong market. In reality this was a hidden sex-cave. The most frequent customers were Taiwanese. They paid 100 US dollars for an hour. The bar-owner/brothel-owner kept 60 and gave me 40. If the customer reserved the whole night, I would get 200–300 US dollars.

In the beginning I did not use condoms, because the customers did not like it. They were prepared to pay a higher price to feel more comfortable when having sex. Then I heard that if I did not use the condom, I could easily become infected. I felt a bit scared. Later on a colleague in the bar got gonorrhoea. The customers informed each other and no one chose her when coming to the bar. She lost her ‘business’ and she also had to spend a lot of money for the treatment. I also heard about a colleague who got HIV and had to stop working. Seeing this I decided to always use a condom to be safe. I go for health checks now and then to a female doctor, who works for the Hung Young hospital. If I accidentally get pregnant I will ask her to help me with an abortion. I use my money for eating and buying what I like, to compensate for the hardship and lack of commodities in my childhood. I also give money to my parents and my youngest sister to help her through school, so that she will not have to become a prostitute like V and myself.

Working in the bar for half a year I was always afraid of being caught by the police. So, when hearing about an organization which was taking girls to work in Macao, I decided to go there with two colleagues. We went by car to Cambodia, Thailand, China, and finally arrived in Macao. This illegal organization took us to a Chinese brothel-owner. She agreed to receive us to work there but separated the three of us. Every day I had to receive more than 10 customers. We were more exploited then we had ever been in Vietnam, sharing the income 7 to 3 with the brothel-owner. Some customers beat me cruelly before having sex with me. Being afraid, depressed and homesick I started to use heroin. I wanted to go back to Vietnam, but had no money to do so. When my life was in the most miserable circumstances I met a rich Singaporean man, who came to Macao for business. Seeing my difficult situation he covered all treatment expenses for me to give up drug-addiction and helped me to get back to Vietnam.

In Vietnam he rented a flat for me, which was more luxurious than this one and gave me 5000 US dollars for subsistence. Since then I ‘belong’ to him.
I am his ‘reserved girl’. Every 1–2 months he goes to Hong Kong for business and passes by Vietnam to live with me for some days. Now I could have everything I needed but I still felt as sad as before. Every month I got my 100 US dollars on the condition that I did not receive any other customers, but I felt so restricted. With all the free time I got, I remembered the heroin. So I started to use it and became a drug-addict again. When I had no more money to buy heroin, I had to put my motorbike, my TV-set, video etc. in pawn. When all the things in the house were gone, I had to start receiving other customers again to be able to buy heroin. My sister V introduced me to a secret telephone system for prostitutes. They call me and I go immediately. There is a car or a motorbike to pick me up. It takes me to various places: hotels, little villas or luxurious houses. The system is very smart, so it is difficult for the police to catch us. I really want to stop using heroin and I have been to the Binh Trieu Drug Addiction Treatment Centre three times, but I have always left because I could not stand not taking the drugs.

When Mr S plans to come to Vietnam, he always calls me 1 or 2 weeks in advance. I borrow money and take my things out of pawn and ask the doctor to treat my addiction. Every time he comes to live with me I ask my sister V to also come to live here.

– Do you think that your job is not a good one?
– I think it is OK for me. Everyone has his or her own way of living, thinking and making a livelihood. This job is fair business. As I need money I sell. A needing man will buy. It is not related to anyone else. My way of earning money is my business as long as I do not harm anyone. I have paid more than 100 million dong for my parents’ debts, but they are still in debt. I feel so tired of them. I would like to marry an overseas Vietnamese, who would take me to live abroad far from my parents, where no one knows my life story.

Abuse breeds prostitution

This third theme is based on the stories of participants 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 16, 17, 21 and 22.

My parents are very poor, they work from early morning till late in the evening. My father is repairing motorbikes and my mother helps him in the repair work. They had little time to care for us children, as they were so busy earning money. Sometimes they were so tired and depressed that they let all their anger out on us children through extremely cruel beatings.

When I was 6 years old I was violently beaten by my father, because I was so absorbed playing. He used a big electrical wire to beat me and gave me at least 15 strokes. I had plenty of blue marks and nearly bled. Since then I am scared of and hate my father very much. When I was 8 years old, my cousin – living next door to us – carried me to his home, where he raped me. He put rags into my mouth to stop my screaming, but my parents heard me and came. When they arrived I had fainted. My father gave my cousin a severe beating. My organ was swollen and I was bleeding a lot. My mother had to carry me to the hospital.

When I was 13, I started to have a boyfriend, who was much older than me. Once, when we came home late, I was beaten badly by my father and he forbade me to meet my boyfriend again. But I did not listen to him and continued to meet my boyfriend in the evenings, telling my father that I did extra English classes. One evening when we were walking home late, my boyfriend suggested that we should take a shortcut to be quicker. When passing over an
empty area – where the houses had been pulled down for a government relocation programme – he suddenly pressed me down and threatened me. I was so frightened but I did not dare to scream, because I was afraid that all people around would know my story. So I had to let him rape me. I dared not tell my parents about this event, as I was afraid my father would beat me even worse than before. After that my boyfriend had intercourse with me several times and then he forced me to also receive customers.

One day a woman in the neighbourhood convinced my mother to sell my virginity. She had got a big deposit from a Taiwanese man for buying a girl’s virginity. Enticed by such lucrative business my mother agreed – as I was anyway destroyed in her eyes. The Taiwanese man was old and terrible. I was so afraid of his torture. I escaped from the hotel after a night of suffering, but I did not dare go back home for fear of being sold again to another man. I hung around without money for 2 days. Being so hungry I snatched a purse from a woman in Binh Tay market. I was at once stopped by some young men passing by. Also a pick-pocket gang came to beat me up for ‘working in their area’. I lay unconscious on the pavement. Then a gangster leader in the nearby area took me to his home. He gave me food and drink. His name is K. Since then I became his girl. Although he fed me, he often beat me. Living with K for some months I got pregnant. K arranged for me to have an illegal abortion. Then, as I also got STD, he got bored of me. Instead he forced me to receive customers when I recovered. From the income he gave me a small sum as pocket money and kept the rest for himself. One day when I was so sick that I refused to accept any customers K gave me a violent beating. I was lost in pain and hate. I ran away from K and now I work for a brothel here nearby.

— How often have you been caught by the police?
— Twice.
— So how much have you had to pay for your release?
— The first time I was only held for the night as I paid 2.1 million dong the next morning. But the second time I was caught by ‘team eight’ and taken to School No.2.
— How long did you have to stay there and who came with food?
— I had to stay there for 3 months. My mother came to see me two to three times and the brothel-owner brought me food. Then the brothel-owner added another 3 million dong to my debt. Now I owe her 9 million dong.
— How come it is so much?
— You know, after I had left K I had no beautiful clothing at all. So the brothel-owner gave me 500,000 dong to buy some clothes. The first time I was taken by the police it cost me 2.1 million dong and the second time the brothel-owner added 3 million dong to the debt for the food she brought and the loss of income from my work. Then I also lost some money on gambling. I can earn between 100,000 and 150,000 dong on a normal night after the brothel-owner has taken her share and I have paid the motorbike driver. This is just enough for the rent, some food and heroin.

I would like to live decently as everyone else. But, please, think about this: everyone has a happy family, but for me the family is pain. When we were children they neglected us. They did not send us to school. Now when we are able to make money they exploit us. They use all different ways to get our money. Many times I feel I hate my parents extremely ‘deep in my blood and to my bones’.
Interpretation and discussion

Since our aim with the study was to document and learn more about how child prostitutes understand and manage their lives, narrative methodology proved to be a good choice. Instead of deconstructing the interviews into codes and categories to develop theory, we kept the stories of the girls unfragmented, respecting the way the girls chose to tell about their lives and how they understood it. Through the stories told in conversations with the researcher, the girls themselves, together with the researcher, analyzed and structured their lives (Riessman, 1993). The role of the interviewer was to encourage the girl to tell her story, to support her through difficult passages by showing knowledge about and understanding for her situation, and to help her remember by using the life calendars and the mapping technique for social networks. In their stories, the girls tried to explain and justify to the researcher and to themselves, how they became involved in ‘this job’ and what it had done to them. The girls sometimes ended the interviews with: ‘Isn’t my story very sad?’ or ‘This life was my fate.’

We do not know to what extent the stories told by the girls are ‘true’, or what they have left out or added on when telling their story, but these are the stories the girls told and the lives they described during the interviews. Riessman argues that even if people lie about their lives, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused or get things wrong, they still give us the truths of their experiences in the context and culture to which they belong (Riessman, 1993). It was our impression that even if the girls did not tell us everything and possibly changed some things, their stories gave a good and trustworthy picture of what it is like to work as a young prostitute in HCMC.

Plausibility, or to what extent the analysis in the narratives is believable and coherent, is the main criterion for assessing validity in narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; Sandelowski, 1991).

We found that the girls handled their experiences and managed their lives very differently depending on both personal abilities and earlier experiences. In the first group, whose narratives focused on the theme of ‘Poverty leaves few choices’, the girls showed resilience and ability to cope and plan for the future. In the second group, organized around the theme of ‘The dream becomes true’, the girls demonstrated a positive and capable self-image, while struggling with another, less positive parallel identity. The third group, framed by the theme ‘Abuse breeds prostitution’, saw themselves as victims with little ability to change anything themselves.

The group that managed their situation best were the girls with a close and warm relationship to their parents, whether the parents knew about how the money was earned or not. These girls presented themselves as sufficient and competent, coping with their lives and with the task they had set out to achieve, namely, to support their family. Their life was a story of enduring, of learning how to cope with the risks of being taken by the police, catching
STDs, becoming pregnant or just encountering the daily misfortunes in life. Earning an income for the family, keeping siblings in school, paying for a new house or even for the debts of their parents gave meaning to their life and what they had to endure. Even if the way they were earning their money was not accepted, they fulfilled their duties as children and hoped for a possibility to return home.

It was very different for the girls who perceived themselves as victims trapped by debts, oppressive relationships and often substance abuse. They saw little meaning in their life, had poor relations with their family and felt that they had little power to change anything. They blamed their situation on others and had few hopes for the future.

In the small group living on allowances from foreign clients, experiences were mixed. They were proud of the money they earned, the living standards they could afford, and the support they provided for the family. Their life was dependent on the foreigner and his visits, when everything had to be in order, whatever they did in between.

Antonovsky (1987) has shown the importance of a 'sense of coherence' (SOC) for the ability to cope with stressful experiences and demands, which includes the ability to see life as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. In our study the girls who were most content had positive relations with their parents, and a strong feeling of duty that gave meaning to the work and a sense of ability to handle the situation. In their stories the girls described their lives with as much meaning and cohesion as possible, thereby also creating a life story they could live with. The girls with a story of abuse and negative relations with their family had great difficulties coping and told a story of misery and discontent.

Similar research from the Philippines has shown that children may develop different ways of coping with traumatic experiences (Bautista et al., 2001). A sense of meaning, belonging and cohesion are important ingredients for coping, while children with an abuse history identify themselves as victims without responsibility for their lives.

**Conclusion**

As for most working children in Vietnam, poverty and the need and duty to help support the family was a common feature also among the young prostitutes in our study. The strong relationship and interdependence of parents and children in Vietnam, which is well documented (Bich, 1997; Le Thi, 1999; Rydström, 1998), explains why, for the sake of their families, so many of the girls accepted a job they disliked. Parental authority and a willingness and ability to earn an income and help the family is promoted and praised in Vietnam (Chinh, 2000). Most of the girls and their parents would have preferred other sources of income, but had found that it was difficult for teenage
girls to find other jobs, especially with a similar income. Even if publicly abhorred, prostitution was privately accepted as the best of given alternatives. The same situation has been described in a study with child prostitutes in Thailand (Montgomery, 2001), which underlines the importance of putting child prostitution into the wider context of the economy and social structure, instead of only focusing on the exploitation of the individual child by the client.

From the stories told by the girls, it is obvious that policy and programmes for the implementation of the UNCRC in Vietnam had not affected their lives, which were characterized by lack of education, resources, social welfare and protection. The rehabilitation programme to which they were sent when caught by the police cost them a lot, but did not change their situation. It was something to fear and try to avoid. The girls complained not so much about the poverty that they had to struggle with, but the lack of security and the disdain of society. Being looked down upon by other women and insulted by the police was felt a worse abuse than the poverty they struggled to alleviate.

**Note**

1. Dong = VDN; Vietnamese currency. 15,000 dong is roughly equal to US$1.

**References**


