



Assessing the Hotline Services on Child Trafficking Victims: An Analysis of Vietnam

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Abstract

While rescuing trafficked children has been focused on several countries in the Global North, little is known about what and how it worked and what and how it has not worked in some nations in the Global South, such as Vietnam. Although Vietnam has been considered the source's country at Tier 3's classification in the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report 2022, its victim-centered approach still lacks focus and improvement. Given the country's political ideology, top-down management, and centralized governance, copying Western strategies for supporting those children's victims is challenging in Vietnam. This study analyzes the hotline services to understand better the process of child trafficking victims' (CTV) rescues in Vietnam. To assess the inside of support victims of child trafficking, we use a mixed-qualitative method by combining focus-group discussions and semi-structured interviews with 28 participants from the hotline operators, law enforcers, and social welfare. Our findings point out (1) various information of callers to hotline operators, (2) different pathways to handle these sources, and (3) the impacts of COVID-19's outbreak on supporting the victims. Outcomes of hotline services also depend on human resources, legal frameworks, and collaborative mechanisms. Some practical gaps also call for further attention to enhance the hotline services in Vietnam.

Keywords Hotline service · Child trafficking · Victim rights · Law enforcement · Vietnam

Introduction

Trafficking in persons (TIP) has captured globally increasing attention since the 2000s when the United Nations ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Protocol) to supplement the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). It is believed that no country can immunize it from TIP globally, whether they are the source, transit, or destination countries in which organized criminal networks deprive people of their liberty and freedom through massive sex work exploitation (UNODC 2020, 2021). Today, victim-centered approaches, particularly

with children, appear more prevalent and significant in TIP-related policies and programs to focus on victims' rights. While Goodey (2004, p. 42) is concerned that "anyone can be a victim of crime," gaps between understanding about trafficked children in theory and their counterparts in practice will likely lead to different ways to identify and label a victim as a legal status. Accordingly, child trafficking victims (CTV) could be not only based on the damages of those suffered but also determined by those who have the first contact with them and have the right to confirm or refuse their harmed experiences (Hoyle et al. 2011). Consequently, the classification of victims of TIP appears complicated with hierarchy terminologies, from "ideal victims," "perfect victims," "iconic victims," "innocent victims," or "deserving victims" to "bad victims" (Hoyle et al. 2011; McEvoy and McConnachie 2013; O'Brien et al. 2013; Srikantiah 2007). This disagreement on trafficked children increasingly leads to challenges in attempts of governmental agencies in responding to this crime, because on the one hand, the status of the victim is a clear proof of culpability of traffickers (Mathews 2015); on the other hand, it offers protection and assistance for victims (Dempsey 2015). Paradoxically,

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a trafficked child could be determined as an “ideal victim” or a deserving victim of an undeserving victim of TIP (Hoyle et al. 2011). Accordingly, those CTV often experience physical damages, including injuries, diseases, and exhaustion; psychological characteristics such as “distrust in people, low self-esteem, self-inflicted injuries, and social isolation” as well as social impacts, including “inability to engage with culture within the work environment, inability to move freely, absence from school and lack of travel/identity documents” (Warria et al. 2015, pp. 5–6). It needs further details to analyze these negative influences for CTV from different views of service providers such as hotline centers rather than focusing on law enforcement agencies (LEA) operations (Latonero 2011; Latonero et al. 2012; Le et al. 2018; Luong 2020).

Particularly when information and communication technology (ICT), with its boomed expansions of social networking sites, creates more potential risks to children who are vulnerable victims of TIPs online in recent years, including the COVID-19 spreading (Tillyer et al. 2021; UNODC 2020, 2021). While these threats to virtual environments have been challenging to explore and dismantle the child trafficking operations of authorities, applying ICT techniques to establish comprehensive frameworks of effective interventions also calls for further attention from policymakers and partitioners (Farrell et al. 2020, 2019). Some authorities prioritized setting up ICT technologies for service providers via establishing TIP’s hotline services to capture calls from potential and actual victims to share with their counterparts (Latonero 2011, pp. 31, 37). The Polaris Project, which operates the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, is a typical model that provides 24/7 support in more than 200 languages by collaborating with nearly 4000 partner service providers and trusts law enforcement and trained hotline advocates (Latonero et al. 2012; Polaris 2019). At the same time, several service providers have developed and applied the hotline’s platforms to support and share information based on interactive mechanisms among social welfare and law enforcement to rescue CTV in both destinations and transits such as the U.S. and European countries (Quincy and Johnston 2020; Tillyer et al. 2021; Vietor 2018; Wijers et al. 2009). Empirical studies are still lacking in focusing on these hotline services in child trafficking source countries in the Mekong Delta region, including Vietnam.

Children Trafficking and Its Related Victims in Vietnam

The recent literature shows that Vietnam has experienced both the domestic and cross-border trafficking of children for a broad range of purposes since Vietnam implemented the Open Door policies in the 1990s (Nguyen et al., 2020;

Tran et al. 2020). For the domestic market, Vietnam is inextricably linked to the rural–urban movements. Indeed, many CTV are girls trafficked mainly for sexual services at several metropolitans, including Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, Da Nang, and Can Tho (Blue Dragon 2020a). Meanwhile, the trafficking of boys for labor exploitation in agriculture and construction, begging, selling lottery tickets, polishing shoes in big cities, and working in brick kilns, factories, and gold mines has received greater attention (Nguyen 2019; Phuong 2015). In recent years, to a lesser extent, Vietnamese children, both girls and boys, have been further targeted for domestic sex tourism tours by foreigners coming from Western countries (Apland and Yarrow 2019; Blue Dragon 2020a).

On the other hand, on the external scale, Vietnam is predominantly a source country for trafficked children for illegal adoption, forced labor, and sex regional and international tourism activities. Although the Vietnamese victims are destined for countries within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), Western Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Belanger 2014; Raschke 2014), China and Cambodia remain the most prevalent destinations (Luong 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Nguyen and Nguyen 2018). The Vietnam-to-China route is the main route, with about 90% of trafficked victims, including children. It is believed that traffickers use unofficial paths and border gates in the northern provinces of Vietnam to transport girls to commonplace destinations in China while trafficking Vietnamese boys from minority ethnic groups for forced labor in mines and brick factories in China (Blue Dragon 2020a). Vietnamese children (particularly boys) are also trafficked to China for adoption due to the high demand for Chinese couples who have a girl and cannot have a second child in China’s “one child” policy (Tran et al. 2020). In contrast, most Vietnamese women and girls are trafficked for prostitution in Cambodia’s cities (Nguyen 2019). Most have severe economic conditions and lack social knowledge, life skills, and psychological lightness (Le 2017; Pham 2016). Among 4279 trafficking cases and 9304 victims identified from prosecution’s process at all court levels in 2007–2016, Le et al. (2018, p. 254) confirmed that “most Vietnamese victims are young, impoverished, uneducated and unemployed.” While traffickers, in many cases, are known to be either victims in the past or their relatives, friends, and even the same local community, around 67–70% are female with a low education qualification (Le et al. 2018, p. 254).

Since the 2000s, when building the National Action Plans (NAP) against TIP, Vietnam frequently places TIP victims into one of the essential counter-TIP programs. In 2004, Vietnam established their National Hotline for Child Protection via an eight-digit number of 18,001,567 and changed to the 111 hotline number in 2017, covering TIP’s

information calls (JICA 2021). Accordingly, since 2018, the 111 National Hotline Service has operated a 24-h platform with an operator who spoke Vietnamese, English, and seven ethnic minority languages. Under the 2016 Children's Law and the 2020 NAP program, it is a specialized public service to directly receive and process information, reports, and denunciations on risks and acts of child abuse and trafficking (National action plans against trafficking in persons in Vietnam between 2021 and 2025 and Towards 2030 2021; VACR and ECPAT, 2019). However, the Vietnamese government does not conduct systematic victim identification procedures. Almost all officials do not actively identify victims, such as women and children who have been sexually assaulted (U.S. Department of State 2021, 2022). Yet, although Vietnam has been considered the source's country at Tier 3's classification in the latest report (U.S. Department of State 2022), its victim-centered approach still lacks focus and improvement. Empirical research about the national hotline services' responses to those victims has not yet been conducted in Vietnam between 2018 and 2021, when Vietnam was recorded at the Tier 2 (watch list) to prior downgrade to Tier 3 in 2022.

This research is aimed at examining the following three research questions (RQs) to address these gaps in the literature review, including the following:

RQ1: Which hotline services recognize and assess CTV in Vietnam?

RQ2: How do hotline operators respond to coming concerns about CTV?

RQ3: What difficulties do hotline operators face in addressing these calls correctly?

Methods

This research employed a mixed-qualitative design to investigate the nature of the activities of hotline operators and their challenges when receiving calls about CTV. This strategy helps researchers explore participants' experiences, perceptions, understanding, and knowledge. The three below sub-sections describe how we conducted the research methods to collect and analyze data in the field.

Study Sites

This research selected participants working in the 111 national hotlines in Hanoi, Danang, and Angiang, targeting the Japan International Cooperation Agency Project for Strengthening the Operation of Hotline for Counselling and Supporting Trafficked Supervisors. Under the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), they are representative regions to receive and deal with calls from all 63 provinces/cities in Vietnam. As frontline law enforcers to collaborate with the

111 hotline operators, we also contacted anti-trafficking agencies, including police, border guard, and welfare officials in local communities that shared borders with China (Quangninh and Laocai provinces) and Cambodia (Angiang province).

Participants and Recruitment

The researchers recruited potential participants when participating in the capacity-building training courses for hotline operators, local coordinators, social workers, and law enforcers in supporting CTV. In the first stage, the researchers were invited as instructors for 36 officials who attended ten consecutive training courses designed and hosted by World Vision Vietnam from February 2020 to October 2020.¹ All trainees have been introduced to the course's aims, methods, and deliveries before collecting their personal information on the first day. On the final day, we divided the class into three groups (12 people per each coming from different sides). Accordingly, we have jotted down all their thoughts and opinions as part of the directed observations from those three focus-group discussions (i.e., FGDs 1 to 3). We briefly revoked three thematic focuses to discuss and exchange, including (1) assessing the CTV of hotline operators, (2) how they handle CTV situations, and (3) what difficulties they must face. Each group had 20–30 min to dialog and debate before delivering their main concerns to one representative.

The purposive sampling technique (Strauss and Corbin 1998) has been applied to look for potential critical informants in our interviews. Among those participants, we only recruit participants who meet at least three main interview criteria. Firstly, we only recruited participants with more than 5-year working experience in tackling TIP. Secondly, they must work directly or indirectly with the 111 hotline services in the ten recent cases. Thirdly, we prefer to talk with those who experienced handling CTV between 2018 and 2020. Accordingly, we recruited 20 hotline operators, including ten in Hanoi, three in Danang, and seven in the Angiang hotline. Alongside those hotline operators, we contacted other bodies responsible for dealing with CTV under Vietnam's laws through snowball sampling. Two police officers, two border guards working at the Mongcai and Laocai border areas (which share a border with China), and four officials working at the DOLISA in Laocai and Angiang (two in each department) have been invited to involve. There were 28 participants interviewed. All those interviewees have received the personal contact of researchers, both mobile phone and email address, to send back their signed consent forms before conducting.

¹ See the website <https://wvi.org.vn/special-projects/tackling-modern-slavery-vietnam-ene32.html>

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via focus-group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured interviews (SSI). While the FGD allows exchanging and meeting with open-end conversations about human beings (Hagan 2013), the SSI helps to explore TIP-related participants' experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in detail (Kelly and Coy, 2016). It helps identify and characterize the research problems on TIP issues (Hagan 2013; Siegel and de Wildt 2016). For the former, we divided into three groups. We raised each question on the final day of training courses, including hotline operators, law enforcers, and service providers, to discuss and express their ideas on A0-paper size before delivering their short presentations. We noted whatever these participants had discussed or took pictures of their products before explaining any unclear arguments. For the latter, we designed SSI with open-end questionnaires to ensure the respondent could share informal talks (Hagan 2013). All interviewees agreed to have conversations based on their suggested time and place. Almost all face-to-face interviews have been implemented at coffee shops or tea shops, while the rest were conducted via Zalo after completing training sessions in Vietnamese. These interviews lasted about 20 to 30 min and were recorded in the transcript and translated into English before analysis. The data collection took place from May 2020 to January 2021. To ensure the confidentiality and safety of those interviewees, we coded and ordered them in listing (i.e., Interviewees 1 to 28) rather than naming their affiliation. And then, a matrix of themes and sub-theme with their related contexts was created from transcriptions. Based on the thematic analysis's approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), only includable context relating to hotline operators' responses to CTV will be selected and presented in the following section.

Findings

Internal vs. External Scopes of Hotline Calls

Receiving Information Regarding CTV

All the respondents confirmed that the 111 hotlines gradually showed their role in collecting information about CTV. These interviewees highlighted the diversity of callers reflecting on news or stories about potential traffickers or victims. The hotline operators receive notices and denunciations from agencies, organizations, educational institutions, families, and individuals by phone. Remarkably, the most common callers are citizens, victims' friends, and victims' relatives. As a leader of the 111 Hanoi's hotline said:

My agency currently gets approximately 200 cases of TIP per month. We mainly obtain such information from

civilians, parents/relatives, and friends of the potential trafficked victims. Sometimes, we also take data relating to CTV from local officials and mass media agencies. [Interviewee 1].

Most interviewees agreed with the statement that calls from potential victims or their family members and their friends account for the most significant percentage of the total number of calls about CTV. Accordingly, those resources are clear, specific, and probably correct compared to calls from their parents and friends because victims understand their contexts and facts to report information to hotline operators (Interviewees 4, 6, 8, 12, 13). Under their memorable moments, these victims frequently answer questions fluently as a flow of trafficking. As a result, hotline staff approached indicators conveniently. One interviewee working in the Hanoi hotline said:

I often gather preliminary information such as name, address, current health, phone, traffickers, or other indicators provided by CTV. It differed from the calls I got from their friends or parents who were either third parties to report their cases or said their suspicion of TIP related to their children. [Interviewee 2].

The participants argued that most potential victims' calls started from foreign countries, mainly China and Southeast Asian countries. They detailed that these survivors borrowed or stole customers' mobile phones in brothels, guards, or citizens. Therefore, the hotline operators tried to collect important information quickly before losing contact. These respondents lamented that those calls might be interrupted or cut off anytime because of unstable connections, trafficker's interceptions, and the quality of mobile phones (Interviewees 1, 2, 5, 7, 18, 19). This technique frequently comes to experienced and well-trained hotline operators, as one participant from the Angiang hotline shared:

It is crucial to classify the emergency of callers quickly to get information. I focused on asking about their security, personal information, wishes, and traffickers for callers from foreign countries. It helps me to conduct further steps effectively. What will happen if traffickers find our conversation via phone? It is much harder to find and rescue the victims, I think. [Interviewee 14].

Besides presumed victims' calls, hotline operators got reports from schools, particularly boarding schools for ethnic minorities, as several interviewees depicted (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10). These participants noted that many ethnic minority students must stay at their primary or secondary schools from Monday to Friday. Those young people can visit their parents at the weekends if they want. Their parents let them use their mobile phones to contact each other during studying. Many recruiters make friends with them via social networks such as Facebook or Zalo for seduction (Interviewees 3, 7, 12, 13, 16, 19). Those traffickers lure

them to leave their school studies to visit outside or seek jobs (Interviewees 9, 11).

Interestingly, several participants in all three focus-group discussions (FGD) highlighted the proactive reception of CTV's information from the Internet. "We read daily news on the websites to find some information probably related to trafficking in persons" (FGD's reps 1). They noted that digital newspapers might reflect TIP indicators, but the news needs to be verified; therefore, hotline operators actively seek such information to send to governmental agencies or non-governmental organizations (FGD's reps 3). However, one representative of the second FGD shared their discussions that "we prefer to combine social media and our external co-operators, particularly with agency news and communication services, to assess those credible sources."

External Concerns

Consultant Services and Their Related Behaviors

All hotline operator interviewees commented that behavioral relations are common enquires, especially the behavioral ties between children and their friends, lovers, teachers, and parents. Children raise many questions in all age groups, such as dealing with online friends, consequences of lovers, conflicts with friends, disagreements about thoughts, concepts of life, and the combination between TIP and fake online love. These concerns partly reflect callers' attention to child trafficking surrounding life skills, social relations, and education. As one female hotline operator from Angiang said:

Calls to the 111 hotlines include life aspects from love, sex, or education. These topics turn around the critical point of behaviours in other relations. In CTV, many girls wonder whether online love may end by selling them to China or not. [Interviewee 17].

Other hotline operator participants added that family relations greatly influence children's psychology. Happiness, sadness, and worry from parents, siblings, and relatives may make children's attitudes up and down. One representative of the second FGD's reps highlighted that "the relationship between parents and siblings in some families is gradually changing towards individual freedom, and materialism is highly valued." Accordingly, some families are not perfect because of drugs, alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and criminals, where relations among members are biased in opposing directions. Therefore, it has affected children, making them confused, disoriented, and skeptical of life. The following story illustrates how a child is stuck for her future when experiencing her father's beats and threats.

The 15-year-old girl's father was a drug user. When he had no money for drugs, he complained to her mother and gave her back some rods as his annoyance. This girl told me her father would have sold her to a young man to buy heroin.

She felt so disappointed when she heard such bad words from her man, who was called dad by herself. She wants to live outside rather than stay with him. [Interviewee 5].

Child Abuse and Violence

The participants were unanimous in the view that children who experience abuse and violence maybe become CTV. This number of calls increased dramatically in the last 3 years (2018–2020). Especially in the hotline's interventions, abuse-related cases are high. These respondents admitted that there are many cases of seriousness with long-term effects on trafficked children's physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional problems. They detailed that members of families, relatives, babysitters, caregivers, children, and neighbors call the hotline when they witness or experience. It may indicate a positive social response to child abuse. Many CTV falls in these cases, as one experienced hotline operator in Hanoi shared:

I received many calls from neighbours who witnessed violence and abuse of children in their community. They did not know why cries and shouts often came to their ears. In late 2018, a citizen witnessed a girl jump down on the street from the second floor of a karaoke bar. Her left leg was broken. However, this shop's staff took her inside and continued beating her instead of taking her to the hospital. The man called 111 to report this case. After receiving the information, I connected to the Hanoi police station. Lastly, after rescuing, we recognized that this 16-year girl was forced to serve sex before jumping down. [Interviewee 8].

Calls to the 111 hotline come from many callers, such as victims, their families, citizens, and others. These people also provide an assortment of information relating to CTV.

Diverse Pathways to Handle the Hotline's Calls

Direct Responses to Callers

Overall, the participants demonstrated that the hotline operators give answers to callers immediately if they have enough information, knowledge, and experience. Among interviewees, a standard view was that the hotline operators addressed anti-trafficking policies and laws after passing the new regulations in 2016 (FDG's reps 1). There was an increase in calls regarding anti-trafficking rules and guidelines for CTV. The callers focus on asking about the aging of CTV and its related penalties and victims' rights after rescuing.

Concerns regarding safe accommodation were more widespread, as the member of the second FGD highlighted. These respondents detailed that many CTV has escaped their traffickers but do not know where they feel safe. In other cases, the victims stay at the places of exploitation, but they can contact their parents. Even victims are

transported to different places, but they take advantage of the trafficker's uncontrolled conditions to call the hotline. The hotline operators must give them timely and exact guidelines in all these settings instead of wasting time. One leader from the Hanoi hotline shared:

We often tell the victims they should find a safe place, such as an embassy, police station, or palace, where they see people wearing uniforms. And they should not resist traffickers drastically; instead, they should pretend to obey their words and find their mistakes before escaping. These recommendations for the callers in an emergency are necessary. [Interviewee 2].

Talking about this issue, one border guard on the Mongcai border, shared borderland with China, shared his experience:

We advised them to keep calm and try their best to take pictures of their place. These pictures aim to plate numbers of cars on the street, names of restaurants and hotels, big ads, or addresses of these places. These indicators may help to find them sooner. [Interviewee 8].

Other interviewees commented on direct responses and added that the hotline operators support the callers with psychology services. They explained that many CTV experience trauma, stress, guilt, self-esteem, alienation from people, and even suicide. These are consequences of traffickers' exploitation, threatening victims' beatings, violence, or rape. Therefore, psychological treatments are willing to provide the victims, from encouragement to psychotherapy, when hotline operators recognize these solutions to be necessary. As the interviewees concluded, all the hotline operators are psychologists to support them. The interviewee from the Danang hotline spoke:

The hotline supports victims of trafficking who experience trauma. Some victims need psychological testing to evaluate the levels of seriousness, such as stress, worry, or behavioural disorders. Some of them need psychotherapy after being shocked at the hands of traffickers. [Interviewee 9].

Several interviewees indicated that the short or long time of psychological services for the victim callers depends on the kind of service, the level of seriousness, and the recovery and wish of the victims. One psychotherapist interviewee explained that:

The severe damage to trafficked victims is different. It comes from the time of exploitation, the kind of exploitation, the means of trafficking, the victim's mental health, or the member's family's attention. Changes in treatment often occur to ensure the effectiveness of psychological therapies. [Interviewee 10].

Referrals to Counter-Trafficking Stakeholders

Many of those members in all three focus-group discussions suggested that one of hotline operators' most significant

functions is connecting anti-trafficking agencies and their received cases. Through the interviews with hotline operators, there are some paths to connect stakeholders to address each issue of child trafficking. A recurrent theme in the discussions was a sense among interviewees that there is close coordination between the 111 hotline and national agencies in addressing CTV. The interviewees from the 111 hotlines listed several agencies, including police stations; the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs; border guards; medical offices; justice offices; non-government organizations (NGOs); and civil society organizations (CSOs). Most participants agreed that government agencies are the main actors in receiving referrals from the 111 hotlines. The information sent to these agencies involves indicators of TIP, missing people, kidnapped people, removal of trafficked victims, and rights of these victims, as indicated in the following sub-headings.

Police Station

When asked about the connection with the police, the respondents agreed that referrals relating to potential TIP cases happen more than other authorities. These hotline operator interviewees explained that after listening to many stories from callers, they found some indicators of trading in persons in such cases. However, the callers do not recognize them. Therefore, to ensure the correction, the hotline operators provide such a pack of information to the police. To illustrate this, one of Hanoi's hotline operators told a story:

It happened in 2019 when a 16-year girl living in the countryside called the 111 hotlines to ask about working conditions in China. She shared that several friends have quit school to come and work in China as a waitress with a high salary. She wondered about legal documents and challenges when working in China, which seemed to double-check with the statements from her village mates. I identified some signs of TIP and provided them to the criminal police of that province. [Interviewee 12].

Several police respondents who showed that information about TIP provided by the 111 hotline operators came to their attention more often echoed this view. As one leader of the anti-trafficking unit in the Mongcai border area said:

The successful investigation of CTV originates some information from the 111 hotlines. Initially, such information is not clear to confirm this crime because that is the personal perspective of hotline operators. We need to verify the details of this information pack, find evidence and show relations before concluding. [Interviewee 20].

The respondents indicated that police oversee rescuing CTV after receiving referrals from the 111 hotlines. It is among the most common connections between the 111 hotline operators and the police. The interviewees considered

these referrals urgent when receiving information from the callers. Depending on the seriousness and difficulty of each case, the hotline operators contact different levels of police. For example, victims have been taken to foreign countries or are going abroad; the hotline operators try to get ministerial authority. On the other hand, victims stay within the boundary of Vietnam; these officials communicate with local police to ensure timely responses. The operator respondents also noted that they try to contact many sources if their provincial or ministerial police connections do not work. They detailed that rescuing victims of domestic trafficking is not as complicated as removing victims of international trafficking. One leader of the 111 hotline in Danang admitted:

Calls reflect the wish of rescue victims to remain often. The 111-hotline operators often transfer these cases to the police to do this quickly. Of course, we [hotline operators] classify the information to connect local police or ministerial policy effectively. For example, in cases where victims stay abroad, we contact headquartered police to rescue them. However, victims are in domestic places; we consider connecting with local police. [Interviewee 1].

Border Guard

Apart from the police, border guards rescue TIP victims after receiving information from the 111 hotlines. The respondents revealed that trafficked people are often transported to the border areas between Vietnam, China, Laos, and Cambodia, where border guards control national security and crimes. Accordingly, border guards are good actors to complete this task based on their profession, experience, and capacity. They play the highest authority in border control and conduct their professional studies to protect potential TIP victims across the border between Vietnam and others. Through receiving information from the hotline's services, they encouraged the 111 hotlines to provide such cases to look for relevant strategies to cross the border for rescuing.

The transfer also needs to be quick because some traffickers commit this crime in a short time. Let me exemplify a case that happened in Cao Bang. The hotline operator called me [border guard] immediately when receiving a kidnapped child from his father. Lao Cai is a province sharing the most extended border length with China. If we did not act urgently, the trafficker would have taken that child to China. It would be more difficult to find then. Therefore, they quickly controlled the border areas to locate the potential positions of the trafficker and child. Luckily, after three hours of searching, we found the trafficker with the child in a small cottage close to the border with China. [Interviewee 20].

Others

The most surprising aspect of the data is the connection between the 111 hotlines and NGOs in rescuing victims of trafficking. However, all the hotline operators agreed that Blue Dragon is their priority to communicate in doing this task. These operator participants claimed that rescuing victims of trafficking needs to be implemented as quickly as possible. Sometimes, this connection is much faster than it happens with national agencies, as the interviewees concluded. In their explanation, Blue Dragon identifies and rescues trafficked people, whether in Vietnam or staying abroad. Therefore, the 111 hotline operators prioritize connecting NGOs to take victims out of trafficking because of emergency and efficiency. The following statement illustrates the excellent connection between the 111 hotlines and NGOs in rescuing TIP victims.

We also call Blue Dragon immediately to conduct the mission of rescues. This NGO is powerful and effective in addressing this task when we send referrals. Whenever we find it difficult, we communicate with Blue Dragon. We only need to provide detailed information on trafficking events; this NGO is overseas doing the rest of the actions to rescue victims. We must thank Blue Dragon's officials' enthusiasm and responsibility. [Interviewee 3].

Reintegration of Victims

As the interviewees noted, many calls regarding supporting victims in their reintegration come to the 111 hotlines before being sent to the department of social affairs, NGOs, and CSOs. According to these participants, callers mainly mention stigma, financial aid, jobs, vocational training, loans, and psychology when the victims return to their hometowns. These calls express the challenges for trafficked victims. Therefore, the mission of hotline operators is to find the best solutions for these callers. The below statement depicts the correct ways of one experienced Danang hotline officer when connecting to a social organization.

The stigma of being trafficked for sexual exploitation will always be in their village/community. It is not easy for villagers to feel sympathy for these young females. Some victims cried to call me that no one in their village wanted to communicate with her because they believed she would sell sex rather than be trafficked. [Interviewee 24].

Another interviewee detailed that referral to local agencies or social organizations includes the assistance of commune-level child protection workers in developing and implementing support and intervention plans for each victim of this crime and monitoring and evaluating the development and implementation of these plans. Although referrals happen, the hotline operators connect

closely with these organizations to support the callers. As she stated:

For officials working in the youth centres, we worked with them to build the best plan for girl victims because they had limited experience, knowledge, and understanding of CTV. As we suggested, we follow those plans to ensure they work correctly. [Interviewee 2].

Apart from stigma, the participants were reminded that referrals regarding vocational training or finding jobs were sent to partner agencies. It depends on the area of the callers living at the time of connection. These respondents argued that many CTV does not know how to participate in vocational training programs or earn a job after returning to their hometown. By experience, the hotline operator participants either provided them with names of vocational training centers or contacted these centers for the callers' requests. However, it also depends on the capacity of each agency to respond to these connections. As one participant shared difficulties in addressing these referrals:

There are cases in which young victims want to learn a job. Still, it is hard to organize the class because the victims return to their hometowns at different times while the local vocational courses do not open regularly. When CTV return, there is no class, but when the system is available, they leave their village because either they must work for a living, may not like it, or are not suitable for that vocational training. [Interviewee 22].

To continue this argument, several interviewees indicated that calls from CTV. The latter want financial support for their start-ups rather than learning or finding a job, often called the department of social affairs or women union. These respondents added that they directly connect with or guide local officials to contact Social Policy Banks to loan with a low-interest rate for victims of this crime. This bank also prioritizes conditions, time, and money to support victims referred by the 111 hotline or local governmental agencies. Additionally, several interviewees reminded NGOs of other destinations for these referrals to assist victims. As they said, the sources of finance from NGOs are likely to support victims whenever the 111 hotline connects. As one interviewee from the Angiang 111 hotline said:

Many victims are impoverished. They have no money but want to loan to start their small business. They do not borrow money from the bank because of no collateral. They call the hotline to ask how they lend money. In such cases, we [hotline operators] contact some NGOs such as Pacific Link Foundations, World Vision in Vietnam, and Blue Dragon to support them. These NGOs are willing to provide a loan to run a business or invest in a job in their villages. [Interviewee 25].

Challenges in Responding to Ccalls

Regulations and Policies

When asked about difficulties, the respondents unanimously said policies are critical barriers to the 111 hotline's response to CTV. According to the current legal system, some interviewees argued that there is no supervision function of the 111 hotlines. "In the current law, we have not yet been involved in specific duties to respond to the CTV; only receive-and-transfer information!" (Interviewee 15). These participants considered this loophole to prevent the 111 hotlines from checking the results of referrals. In other words, the hotline operators are not active in verifying whether referred agencies make callers' requests. Hotline operators wonder about the quality or effectiveness of these agencies' responses to referrals when they cannot supervise the process of conducting referrals of partner agencies. As one hotline operator interviewee shared:

The function of the hotline is to receive information and connect to others. In reality, we only receive the news coming from the callers without verifying whether it is accurate or whether callers receive support as requested. [Interviewee 17].

The participants indicated that the anti-trafficking stakeholders lack programs, plans, and specific responsibilities; meanwhile, governmental agencies place their tasks on others' burdens. They added that policies regarding assistance for TIP victims are unsuitable for their demands. In particular, CTV's policies lack regulations on inter-agency coordination within the national scope; some provinces designed and conducted it by themselves. The participants shared that only Quang Ninh officially implements this cooperation with a legal document, while An Giang works without an official record. Yet, many provinces/cities express low-quality collaboration in addressing this crime; for example, it takes a long time to connect inadequate responses from referred agencies, and there is no support for each other.

Regarding repatriation concerns, it comes to the public sector after the 111 hotline sends referrals as the most urgent. Most of those CTV wished to return to Vietnam after being exploited. The hotline operators call the police and justice department to address their callers. These agencies support each other to protect the rights and wishes of victims as well as possible. Among destination countries of TIP, as the respondents agreed, the number of CTV living in China calls for repatriation to dominate. Calls of CTV for sexual exploitation are more common than other purposes. Several CTV girls are taken out in the street after a long exploitation time. Their wish to come home is all they need. As a result, calls for the repatriation of these victims come to the

attention of police and justice immediately after the hotline officials get the entire pack of information. One Hanoi operator interviewee said:

We receive victims' calls to return to Vietnam during working time. They have worked in brothels for a long time. They cannot stand for their exploitation anymore and want to go home as soon as possible if they can. We contact the police and justice to support these victims. [Interviewee 23].

Other interviewees argued that referrals to justice departments for issuing personal legal documents, such as birth certificates and passports, often happen, while others mentioned legal support for the rights and benefits of victims. These participants presented many typical reasons for these legal services, from the calls from victims or their parents. Several interviewees explained that victims lose identification documents because of the confiscation of traffickers (interviewees 3, 6, 7). Others offer legal conflicts between the victims, who are beloved after being trafficked (Interviewees 13, 16, 19). For example, the victims' husbands wanted to lonely get divorced, or the victims wanted to get their rights to look after their children after divorce. Some legal services relate to inheriting fortunes from the victims' parents and compensating the victims in trials. It means plenty of legal services from the callers referred to governmental agencies by the hotline operators. One interviewee from the 111 Angiang hotline gave an example:

Many calls present their wonders about legal advice. They need to issue new passports because traffickers confiscated them. They want to divorce, they want to look after children, and they want to get back to the land of their parents as inherited prosperity. Such legal calls coming to the hotline appear ordinary. We [hotline operators] contact justice departments, centres of justice, or police stations to send these referrals. [Interviewee 19].

Hotline Operators

Most participants agreed with the statement that hotline operators' weaknesses include a lack of resources, knowledge, and skills. "It is our limits to hamper our effectiveness to respond caller's requests" (Interviewee 14). The interviewee argued that the national hotline lacks human resources to cover the vast cases daily. The pressure work hotline operators face increases. Therefore, they cannot supervise patients as well as they wish. Other interviewees shared that limited knowledge and understanding of CTV are the main barriers for these officials, especially young staff.

Since 2004, our primary duties still focused on child protection with related threats and risks and child abuse cases rather than child trafficking before upgrading in 2013. Many colleagues have not completed these

training courses for CTV, such as techniques and skills to exchange and discuss with police. [Interviewee 12]

The hotline operators face embarrassment in advising callers if the requests are out of their knowledge. At the same time, a minority mentioned that the skills of hotline operators, such as interviewees or emotional management, are not good enough to listen to the callers' requests carefully. This issue happens to young staff when facing complicated cases with psychological consultants' needs. Although they provide psychological services directly, as mentioned earlier, they must send these referrals to other psychologists in the department of social affairs or the Peace House. In the participants' explanation, cases are severe. They cannot take over or cover all these cases simultaneously.

Meanwhile, other interviewees mentioned that many medical services from callers transferred to medical centers. The hotline operator interviewees detailed these referrals to come to the nearest health department. If cases are severe, they will contact the good hospitals in Vietnam to support victims. These referrals are vital to ensure the rights of victims; as one participant emphasized:

Many CTV faces mental and physical damage. They hardly treat it by themselves, especially trauma. Calls from the victims' families or local social workers come to the 111 hotlines to request assistance. These cases are transferred by the 111 hotlines to professional agencies such as hospitals or medical centres. These referrals help victims overcome their pains as soon as possible. [Interviewee 23].

Outbreak of COVID-19

The coronavirus epidemic makes the 111 hotline services challenging to respond to the callers. As mentioned above, the number of calls to this agency has increased sharply. More critically, referrals to governmental agencies and others are challenging. The information sends to these agencies, but the 111 hotline services cannot ensure the quality of referrals. Even many cases stop because of this epidemic. Many interviewees demonstrated that LEAs and NGOs could not rescue victims because of the lockdown of the border gates with China. These referrals are postponed until opening the border gates again. Others exemplified health services for victims are canceled for social distancing during COVID-19. The interviewees concluded that partner agencies focused on preventing this virus instead of doing other activities.

Reflecting and updating information regarding support for victims of TIP remains slow. Local government officials answered our questions that they are swamped and simultaneously do many tasks. They had no time to follow the victims of this crime. [Interviewee 21].

Several respondents highlighted different aspects of CTV when receiving callers during the COVID-19 breakout, such as an incredible number of calls or the high risks of child victims. One of them said:

When COVID-19 spread out the whole country, children had to study online. They started to use digital devices more than they did before. Accordingly, they used laptops, tablets, and mobile phones for online entertainment. Many parents called us to express their worries about their children's schedules, especially their safety on the Internet. They wanted to have guidelines and advances from us to protect their children from being harmed by sexual abuse, online bullying, and TIP [Interviewee 2].

Discussions

Although Vietnam has continued to conduct its 3-P's priority (prevention, protection, and prosecution) as per the U.S. Department of State's TIP recommendations, its insufficient efforts still need to meet the complete standards for eliminating trafficking (U.S. Department of State 2021, 2022). A three-consecutive year on the Tier 2 Watch List (2019–2021) before downgrading the Tier 3 (2022) still questions Vietnam's effective measures and plans to handle TIP. Once again, lacking empirical studies to assess and analyze the model of CTV's support and assistance is one of the specific needs to focus on Vietnam's responses. Consistent with the recent findings reflected on the significant roles of non-LEAs (Quincy and Johnston 2020; Segrave et al. 2009; Tillyer et al. 2021; Vietor 2018; Vijayarasa 2013, 2015), our current evidence also supports. Accordingly, achieving the highest outcomes to prevent and combat trafficked children should involve different sectors, including hotline service providers.

After 10 years, the 111 hotline providers had contributed relatively to dealing with numerous resources to provide and exchange with anti-trafficking authorities in Vietnam. Amending and supplementing the national hotline to prevent and combat TIP since 2013 based on the child hotline's services reflect Vietnam's specialized plans. It was legalized in the fourth version of the National Action Plans to Prevent and Combat TIP in Vietnam in 2020. However, our first study's findings point out the specific barriers with call for further attention of the hotline services in 2018–2020.

Firstly, regarding function and power, all the 111 hotline activities have been operated and implemented under the top-down mechanism with the powerful leading of MOLISA's perspective. It is also a distinguishing feature in a communist-state country like Vietnam. Everything comes from the headquarters' request hierarchy structure rather than independent systems in U.S. and European networks (Human Trafficking Hotline 2019; Tillyer et al. 2021; Vietor 2018; Wijers et al. 2009). Accordingly, they often set up a

comprehensive dataset to illuminate how TIP works in real-time based on their targeted system-level strategies to disrupt and prevent. On the other hand, in Vietnam, the hotline services only play a bridge and connect between (potential) victims and relevant anti-trafficking authorities rather than serving those victims through their independent services. As several trainees in the training courses and interviewees in this study shared, the limited tasks to directly handle the TIP's cases led to untimely responses with many issues. At the same time, they must wait for their counterpart's solutions. Meanwhile, dealing with clues and quick information from (potential) CTV is requested as the highest priority to collect data before responding (Farrell et al. 2020, 2019).

Secondly, regarding human resources, as a new actor of the communist-state mechanism to prevent and combat TIP, the 111 National Hotline Service is challenged with practical difficulties in building a professional expert system. Our findings show that most participants and interviewees' overload activities shared their daily routes despite unbalanced loadings between staff and training. As of December 2020, there were at least 4.5 million calls dealt with by the 111 National Hotline Service, which 6923 out of 410,552 cases related to CTV; however, they had only 22 permanent operators and nine staff at the Office of Psychotherapy, Evaluation, and Examination alongside two counsellors and nine collaborators (Child Helpline 111, 2021). Accordingly, they must operate with three shifts with a 24/24 operation without weekends and holidays, including two day shifts with five consultants on duty at Hanoi, four staff on duty at Danang (2), Angiang (2), and one night shift with only three consultants on assignment at Hanoi (Anh Tuan 2021), perhaps, establishing a dynamic team of professionals which cover domestic violence and sexual assault, labor rights, runaway and homeless youth, mental health, legal consultants, social work, and child welfare as the U.S. Human Trafficking Hotline (Polaris 2019) that is not an existing framework in Vietnam's context. Yet, it is only a "wish and dream" with the current 42 Vietnamese staff of the 111 National Hotline Service.

Thirdly, regarding specific responsibilities and tasks, almost all hotline operators in this study cover various information with different views. Accordingly, it comes from multiple callers such as victims, families, schools, or social organizations. Those operators respond to all the callers as quickly as possible based on their understanding, experience, and knowledge. Furthermore, they are essential in bridging callers to other counter-trafficking stakeholders to assist CTV. Two common forms are making referrals to LEA, such as police and border guards, to find missing victims and arrest traffickers and collaborating with NGOs (via Blue Dragon's organization) to rescue victims from exploitation places. Besides that, most hotline operators timely connect welfare service providers or social workers to provide

accommodation, food, clothes, legal services, and health examination with their CTV.

Finally, COVID-19's outbreak has continued to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of pandemics on a national, regional, and global scale. Its unpredictable counts impact political will, social order, economic development, and flows of migrations and repatriation of several foreign laborers (UNODC 2020, 2021). Our study confirmed the dilemma and complication of CTV's repatriation to Vietnam (Asylos and ARC, 2020; Blue Dragon 2020b; Wagner and Hoang 2020). Almost all interviewees revealed that many calls invoked assistance regarding repatriation, particularly from China, where this pandemic started, and Vietnamese CTV is enlarging. Victims and/or their families tried to connect the hotline to provide the urgent cases that they were kicked out of the brothels when local Chinese authorities focused on controlling foreigners tightly to fight against COVID-19 (Blue Dragon 2020b). Many had no accommodations and personal documents to stay in China and wanted to rescue while the border gates between China and Vietnam closed (Wagner and Hoang 2020). Many participants working at these borderland locations confirmed that their clients (sex workers) have been pushed out of brothels without settlements to the streets due to the strict supervision of Chinese authorities to control the pandemic.

Conclusions

This first qualitative study focuses on the factual scenario with insiders' voices to share their daily activities and specific roles in handling CTV in Vietnam. We do not firm all current findings to reflect what and how hotline operators, LEA, and NGOs in Vietnam assist victims as successfully as practically possible due to the diverse patterns of TIP. Therefore, alongside the above contributions to the body of literature, we assumed that this research has at least three main limitations. The first one is the size of participants involved in our study. With limited time and strict movement during COVID, we only invited 20 out of the 42 hotline operators, four law enforcers, and four welfare officers. The second one is geographical distribution in this study. In reality, Vietnam has several hot-spot locations relating to TIP, particularly across the border between Vietnam and its neighboring countries. However, the current study was only conducted at three regional hotline centers in Hanoi, Danang, and Angiang). The last one is the role of third-sector organizations (NGOs and/or SCOs) in rescuing and supporting CTV. We just worked and contacted only the Blue Dragon in this study. As Dworkin (2012, p. 1320) recommends in selecting sample size, the author(s) should look for at least 25–30 participants from different perspectives to

reach saturation and redundancy in studies using in-depth interviews. Thus, in the future, expanding other hotline operators, LEA in different areas, and diverse NGO participants should be encouraged to invite.

However, as we noted initially, conducting CTV in Vietnam via hotline service is still a recently developed approach and needs more empirical studies. This article demonstrates that if Vietnam can learn the model of the U.S. Human Trafficking Hotline (Quincy and Johnston 2020; Tillyer et al. 2021; Vietor 2018), the 111 National Hotline Service is likely to contribute to the literature and practice supporting CTV in Vietnam. It will focus on medical interventions, mental health services, and psychological consultants. This model is vital to improve the quality of hotline operators' skills to interview callers by expanding the training courses. By doing this, we can build their capacity to identify indicators of CTV and make referrals to exact agencies in the victim-centered principle. Interestingly, this article investigates a global challenge to adapt to callers via the hotline's system, namely, the outbreak of COVID-19, which needs further studies in the coming time to support counter-trafficking actors and thus enable more effective responses to human trafficking calls.

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Data Availability The data was collected as part of the Tackling Modern Slavery from Việt Nam Project (TMSV) which comprises from multiple agencies to focus on newly identified vulnerable groups. To ensure the confidential information for participants, those agencies have not given the researchers its permission to share their data.

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Accordingly, all data was edited, analyzed, and represented anonymized. It is, therefore, not possible to conclude individuals. The data was handled under the strict requirements of data protection. In the beginning, participants could discontinue the questionnaire before completion at any point in time.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interest.

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