Rape experiences and the limits of women's agency in contemporary post-reform Vietnam
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In this concluding chapter I review the substantive findings presented in the dissertation and assess how these findings answer the research questions. I also make some proposals regarding anti-rape interventions and reflect on the conceptual framework used for this research with implications for future work.

1. Looking back

The four substantive chapters deal with individuals’ experiences of rape along with the impact these entailed for their personal lives, the role of family and kinship in post-rape management, the rape plaintiffs’ experiences with the criminal justice process, and the ways in which the Vietnamese printed media treat various aspects of rape.

Among the important findings are that a majority of the individuals involved in this research project were raped or sexually abused by people known to them, the incidents occurred in familiar surroundings and the offenders were persons who maintained a relationship or at least were acquainted with the rapees. This is consistent with earlier research (Rozee and Koss, 2001; Pagaduan-Lopez et al. 2004; Yamawaki and Tschanz, 2005; Bletzer and Koss, 2006; Das, 2007) that suggests that a large proportion of rape cases are perpetrated by a male acquaintance of the female rapee. My research refutes popular opinions such as “only bad girls get raped,” or “rape can occur only in a certain situation,” for example “street rape” by a stranger, which appear to be unfounded. Thus, my findings lend support to the view that in any situation, a woman is vulnerable to sexual assault (Nguyen Thu Huong, 2004).

In examining the traumatic consequences suffered by female rapees, my findings are in line with the literature concerning Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that while symptoms of psychological distress manifest differently from case to case, the majority of these women showed some form of PTSD at a certain stage in their lifetime, regardless of whether the trauma was disclosed or not. Disclosure (to family and friends) and reporting (to public authorities) of rape-related incidents mostly depended on the nature
of offender-victim relationship. Early disclosure and reporting occurred often in cases involving strangers, whereas incidents within family circles tended to be slow to come out.

Furthermore a disclosure of rape - a crucial first step in the process of reporting to the appropriate authorities - was often linked with the idea of family honor, assumptions about kinship, social belonging and shared responsibility in a collectivist society such as Vietnam. Motivational factors inhibiting disclosure including fears of the social stigma their families might have to bear often made rapees keep silent about the incident. From individuals accounts in this study, reactions such as rage, helplessness, shame and self-blame were common at various stages in the disclosure process. Family decisions to report largely depended on the degree of closeness between the parents and their kindred. Parents’ behaviour in the aftermath of rape often reflected their own interests rather than genuine concern for the well-being of their daughters.

The case studies reveal that the process of rape prosecution was often fraught with hazards and pitfalls spanning across social backgrounds and ethnic lines. As gendered interactions came into play, rape plaintiffs often faced a dismissive attitude and rude treatment by the police during the early phase of the investigation process. Furthermore the long judicial procedures often imposed an emotional burden on the rapees. Seen from a broader perspective, the practice of law enforcement in rape cases was not cut-and-dry but often reflected a power play, the outcome of which was mediated between three major players: the rapee (and her family), the perpetrator (and his family) and the local authorities. This interaction took several forms, notably coercion, resistance and negotiation. Above all there was a mismatch between a concern for the harm done to the individual rapee and the need for legal redress on the one hand, and notions of honor and virginity that had more to do with family interests (in terms of the rapee’s marriageability, financial compensation, etc.) on the other. In real life situations an individualized legal battle often went hand in hand with a family-and-honor contestation that fits the notion of “private prosecution” in some of the rape cases under study. This peculiar situation often created room for a possible compromise between the contending parties.
In focusing on the case studies that involved media exposure I found that the media, in this case newspapers, played an important role in shaping popular perceptions of the problem of rape, which in turn influenced public attitudes toward female rapees in particular, and women in general. For example, the good girl/bad girl dichotomy that permeated news coverage of rape mirrors cultural narratives reflecting patriarchal notions about the “proper” place of women and their role in society. This often reinforced misconceptions about sexual violence as portrayed in the interpretation of rape incidents by the popular press, placing the blame and responsibility on victims instead of offenders. On the other hand, the changes brought about by Đổi Mới opened up a new social environment in which basic human rights issues including women’s and children’s rights were increasingly coming up for discussion, and the activism shown by some quarters of the media had a positive effect in encouraging rape victims to use the media as a useful channel for airing their grievances and seeking justice.

2. A summary of the main findings

In this section, I present the empirical findings in response to the main research question that how do female rapees cope with their experiences and how is this affected by cultural narratives about rape in the transitional context of present-day Vietnam?

2.1. Ways of coping

The results of my research on a limited number of female rapees show that they engaged in a wide range of coping behaviors, from keeping silent, disclosing to family members and friends, reporting to local authorities to filing a formal lawsuit.

Keeping silent or refraining from further disclosure

For those who maintained their silence, there were a variety of reasons including fears of family disruption, of being blamed by others for the incident or simply of not being taken seriously. Some initially disclosed the incident to friends and family, but because of negative responses such as blaming, doubting or outright disbelief, stopped talking about it altogether. This had serious consequences for rapees, since they were deprived of timely support, both psychologically and socially. While the reasons to keep silent or
refrain from disclosing were complex, such behaviour could be seen primarily as a form of self-protection.

The question is: for those who did not speak out or let themselves be heard, how did they move on with their lives? Most of them tried to forget about the incident, bent on “bringing the secret to the grave,” or “burying the pain in a secret drawer.” Some resorted to naming the experience in various ways in an attempt to alleviate self-blame and shame. Others tried to minimize the seriousness of the experience in order to escape from the rape stigma.

**Disclosure and/or reporting and migration**

With respect to cases which were disclosed to family members and/or were known in the local community, individual coping strategy depended largely on the web of family and kin relations. For those whose parents had good relations with their kin, the family could turn to them for practical support, including the possibility of (either collectively or individually) moving to a new location. In cases involving adolescents, some parents sent their daughters to stay with relatives elsewhere to relieve them temporarily from local gossip, hoping this would help them recover from the ordeal in the meantime. For individuals or families who decided to stay put, these often made extra efforts to reinforce social engagement with friends, neighbors and acquaintances in an attempt to exercise damage control in the face of hurtful gossip.

In this connection I found a discrepancy in the accessibility of (post-rape) residential mobility between the majority Kinh people and other minority groups. The few cases involving non-Kinh in this study showed that mobility via kin network either individually or collectively was unavailable because of lack of financial means. Nevertheless some young women from minority groups managed to migrate without any family backing. A migration of a non-Kinh rapee could be seen not only as an escape from malicious gossiping but also as a relief for family members having to deal with the phenomenon of “courtesy stigma.” Among the Kinh, when the rapee’s family was informed about the incident through friends and neighbors or by the police, the rapee often turned to her family and kin circles for help. If rapees were still young and single, to protect their
marriageability, some mothers arranged a “rescue route” for the girls to return to their natal home villages where no one was likely to know about the incident.

Furthermore my findings show that coping strategies generally depended on the extent of revelation about the incident. For example if it was kept within the family, concerns about rapees’ (emotional) well-being often induced parents to send them away for a time. In well-publicized cases where both rapees and their family members were subjected to malicious gossip that became unbearable, some parents also decided to move the entire family elsewhere.

Types of rape and the nature of relationship

What are the factors that contribute to the shaping of these coping strategies? My study shows that the type of rape reflecting the nature of the rapee-rapist relationship played a major role in rapees’ decision whether to disclose the incident or not. For instance, those who were raped or sexually abused by a member of their immediate families often kept silent about their experiences. In cases of disclosure, the time lapse between the incident and the moment of disclosure was usually long, even measured in a number of years. In contrast, in cases involving stranger or acquaintance rape disclosure or reporting often occurred within a short period after the incident. The absence of blood ties with the perpetrator - in stranger or acquaintance rape cases - made disclosure easier. And since stranger rape cases often took place in locations far from the rapees’ home and often involved police intervention, disclosure was often inevitable. It should also be mentioned that the type of rape as well as the relationship between a rapee and her offender also had an impact on the rapee’s behaviour following her decision to remain silent or to disclose the incident.

Reactions of others

The nature of the rape incident had a bearing on the reactions of those to whom the incident was disclosed. These reactions in turn affected the behaviour of the rapee herself. For example in intra-family rape cases - except in cases when the perpetrator was caught in the act - the initial reactions of family members were expressed in doubt,
disbelief or outright refutation. This caused despair to the rapee who withdrew into silence instead of seeking help from others.

**Age of rapees**

The age of rapees at the time of the incident was crucial in the ways in which rapees responded to their rape experiences especially in matters of disclosure and/or reporting. From their life stories it can be inferred that the reasons why most rapees tried to keep their victimization to themselves were different. For example, in cases where the rape incident occurred at an early age at the hands of a family member, the reason for keeping silence was the apprehension of not being believed. In cases concerning adult women, the reason for not disclosing was to preserve family harmony and social respectability.

**2.2 Socio-economic and cultural context**

I now zoom in to see how moral values and social mores influence the coping strategies at the individual and collective levels.

**The silence option**

At the individual level, the option of preserving silence reflects the general reluctance to confront topics related to sex in a straightforward manner. My findings are consistent with numerous studies that indicate that sex has not been a subject for public discussion in the context of Vietnamese culture. It is easy to make sex-related jokes in their daily conversations, but most people would shy away from discussing problems such as sexual violence in a serious manner. The reporting of sensational news, in particular sex crimes, in the Vietnamese media is seen as a deliberate effort to boost sales. Ironically, for rapees, the larger context of sexual culture serves to reduce their probability to speak about their experiences. It is a reflection of the lack of gender and sexual education among the general public found in stories of child rapees in this study.

Conversely, in some cases, a decision to remain silent is linked to an anxiety about the loss of one’s virginity, considered as a mark of dishonour in a patriarchal society like Vietnam. More importantly, it would have a negative impact on marriageability in the cases of young rapees.
Moreover, the decision to keep silent was also burdened by a lack of sexual knowledge that made rapees unsure of their victimization. Individual perceptions or understandings of rape were mostly fed by cultural narratives about female sexuality and sexual violence as represented in the media. For example, some claimed that what happened to them was not serious enough to warrant disclosure or reporting, particularly when their experiences did not meet their internalized ideas of what constitutes a “real” rape (i.e. sexual assault only involves strangers; penetration or serious injury are not in evidence, drunkenness as an excuse for the perpetrator’s behaviour, etc.), not to mention their perceptions of the social salience of power and hierarchy (i.e. the rape of sex workers is mostly overlooked). These feelings and meanings are embedded in the larger social, historical, and cultural relations, illustrating the permeability of the dividing line between the individual and the social.

The reluctance of some rapees to disclose their rape incident to friends or family stems from the normative expectations of females regarding the maintenance of household harmony in Vietnamese society. This attitude is traceable to cultural assumptions of resilience and endurance embodied by females. In case of rape, it is emblematic of their attempts to save “social face” by remaining silent.

A private matter

At the collective level, family coping strategies to post-rape stigma mirror moral values and cultural notions related to the intricacies of family relations, kinship and the community. In the first place, a (family’s) decision to keep the incident unreported (to the local authorities) conveys the idea that parents are held accountable for the behavior of their children and the moral image of their family. Specifically, it is expected that a respectable woman should know how to raise her daughters properly. In the case of rape, the blaming attitude is not directed at the rapee alone but at her parents as well, who are considered to have failed in their task of educating their children properly. The fear of social disgrace following public knowledge of rape can get so extreme that the rapee’s family often shows a reluctance to contact the authorities or try to treat the incident as a private matter.
Community relations

For cases where a disclosure was prompted by the situation itself, most parents initially showed goodwill in wanting to reach an agreement with the offender’s side in some forms of behavioural restitution. These peculiar situations often made room for reaching a compromise between the contending parties, instead of filing a formal charge. The implications of apology in resolving interpersonal conflicts can be traced to the prevailing views of tinh làng nghĩa xóm [Vn.: community sentiment]. This means that the common way of hushing up scandalous incidents where giải quyết kiểu tình cảm [Vn.: settlement based on sentiment] was preferred.

Furthermore, when it came to incidents of rape with all its moral and social implications the task was often left to women as mediators in negotiating a settlement. The inherent secrecy conveys the idea that sexual violence is something bad and dangerous, taking into consideration the stigma attached not only to the concerned persons but also their wider social network. In the victim’s family rape with its gender and sexual connotations is regarded as chuyện đàn bà, con gái [Vn.: women and girls’ affairs], something the husband as head of the family would rather leave to his wife to handle. Thus the outcomes of these negotiations would affect not only the “face” of the women concerned but that of their family and wider kin as well. Females who act on behalf of the offender often target the emotions of their counterparts from the victim family, appealing to a sense of sympathy not only on account of their shared gender but also their role as mothers.

During the negotiation process, it is interesting to note that while Kinh people tend to draw on cultural values associated with female virginity, the notion of “family honor” and economic value (in the form of bridewealth, for example) figure prominently among Hmông and Dao groups. It is not surprising that the possibility of marrying off a rapee to her rapist still persists in some ethnic groups in Vietnam. The offender family’s marriage proposal also serves to discourage the rapee’s family from reporting the incident.

My findings indicate that in some cases forgiveness was not obtained due to the inconsistencies of the negotiating process. For instance, if one party perceived that their demand was not met (too little compensation) or that it had the upper hand in the legal process (owing to social/political connections) the willingness to make peace might
evaporate. If a settlement could not be reached, the question of “family honor” at stake might lead to a decision to seek formal justice. In this sense, the act of filing a rape complaint could be seen as an ultimate response to protect the honor of the family and the larger kinship.

Social face

Moreover, the meanings of family’s honor as a whole continue to play a role in the post-rape management. A major factor involved here is the need to protect the family and the larger kin from social judgement, especially after the case has been taken up by the judicial system but the social repercussions are still very much alive. By relocating the rapee elsewhere through migration even for a definite period, the family attempts to help her recover from the ordeal in a new environment with the help of kin members or acquaintances. It is also an effort to relieve social pressure on the family members who stay behind now that the object of shame is removed - a sort of “out of sight, out of mind” solution. The findings of this study indicate that the main support for rapees to migrate came from their kinship network. This network was utilized to gather information about possible destinations as well as sponsorship providing temporary lodgings and facilitating job search. The parents often provided the bulk of the financing, either with their own savings or by borrowing from relatives. Some families sold their belongings to cover the moving costs. Moreover potential migrants might benefit from their kin who had already established themselves in the place of destination. Besides its central role in the decision on disclosure and reporting, the family is a major player in post-rape dealings.

My findings further show that the social role of the family as a primary institution also had an impact on invidual rapees’ coping strategies. There are cases in this study where rapees managed to migrate from their villages without any help from their own families or other kin members. However, with the passage of time, these women having established themselves in their new location often yearned for a return journey, in the sense they wished to maintain or renew ties with their own family. Migration might improve their economic situation in the meantime, enabling her to send home gifts and remittances to help with their siblings and relieve the family’s financial burden. Seen from a socio-economic perspective and amid multiple family entanglements, this
homeward journey, in both a material and metaphorical sense, may be seen as a response of the rapee to the social repercussions related to the incident in the past. It may well be a personal choice in the face of uncertainties of the future.

The transitional context

Above all I want to put the whole picture of the ways in which female rapees and their families dealt with the aftermath of rape into the present social context. My findings show that to certain extent the rapees and their families could avail themselves of the new environment in the wake of Đổi Mới to pursue their own agendas. Firstly, it was in this environment that individual and/or family decisions on migration were made. The process of economic reform accompanied by institutional changes and the emergence of non-state sectors including trade and services, have had a great impact on population movements in contemporary Vietnam. Moreover the erosion of the hộ khẩu [Vn.: household registration] regime reflecting a policy relaxation made migration possible. All these combined have fostered population mobility, making people more aware of the new opportunities across space and administrative boundaries. Secondly, the fact that some ordinary rape plaintiffs in this study have adroitly made use of the opportunity offered by a non-governmental agency in bringing their case to the court is worth noticing. To be able to get information about such organizations and their activities via the media is an interesting development, something unheard of in the years preceding Đổi Mới. Thirdly, the availability and accessibility of information in the mass media regarding women’s and children’s rights also enhanced public awareness of these issues. Fourthly, at a time when the media showed signs of activism in a social environment that began to take on certain emerging forms of a civil society, the media - in this case the print media - could serve as a useful instrument in the fight against social injustice.

3. Relevance of theoretical concepts

In searching for a suitable theoretical framework, instead of representing rapees either as desperate, hapless victims or survivors fully capable of agency, I have adopted the concept of relational autonomy for the research. This approach enabled me to look at “both sides of the same subjective coin,” so to speak. On the one hand I was able to
provide accounts of individuals’ lived experiences of rape and its aftermath. On the other hand I could observe women’s efforts to mobilize their resources however limited, to cope with the post-rape ordeal, set against prevailing cultural and social narratives as portrayed in the media and in the ways rape cases are handled by the judicial system.

By looking at the space between women’s victimization and oppression and their responses to these conditions, I have tried to resolve the victim/agent dichotomy. In the context of this research I used an approach that regards victimization as a dimension of experience - *bị* in the words of my research participants - rather than conferring connotations of an individual identity or a permanent state. Moreover, such a conceptualization shifted my analytical focus from individual predicaments to the social conditions that cause them. This, in turn, allowed me to focus on the “social” rather than the “individual” as a site of investigation. Put differently, from the perspective of relational autonomy, it is the society, and not just the agent, that is the subject of critical scrutiny and reflections in this study.

I examined the scope and nature of available choices, rather than focusing exclusively on rapees’ specific decisions. This brings to light the fact that individuals’ choices - far from being free - including the option to keep silence, stem from personal considerations arising from a maze of prevailing moral values and cultural notions related to family and kinship, gender and sexuality. This is a reminder that social construction is an inevitable fact of life. Seen from this perspective, the relational autonomy theory is relevant in that it takes into account the social conditions that shape women’s choices, making these conditions the basis of my critical analysis.

The portrayal of raped women and girls in this research is based on the notion of the social imaginary, which refers broadly to the ways individuals understand their collective social life. In this sense these women develop strategies to cope with their predicament of rape, and this coping behavior is informed by the social-cultural norms and beliefs shared by members of their ethnic group. By highlighting the social and historical contexts in which individuals are embedded, the notion of social imaginary fits with a relational account of autonomy in the sense that “autonomy is about agency, and that agency is always exercised by an embedded self. “Others” will always be a part of the exercise of one's agency in some form or another” (MacDonald, 2010: 203; cf. Truong, 2009).
Furthermore, an examination of the social conditions surrounding female rapees in this study indicates a connectedness and compatibility between the concept of relational autonomy and Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field. The case studies in this research show that former victims - even of incest - after a lapse of time often yearn for a return journey, in the sense that they wish to maintain or renew ties with the families they left behind under horrible circumstances. Time is a healing remedy and migration has improved their economic situation in the meantime, enabling them to send home remittances and pay regular visits. The fact that these women choose to make a homeward journey metaphorically or otherwise seems to conform to the gendered habitus they acquired since birth in relation to the social sphere - the field - in which they live their lives.

In short, an alternative analysis using the theoretical framework of relational autonomy that theorizes the impact of oppression on women’s choices, identities, and actions allows me to explore the dynamics between the impact of oppression and the ways women respond to it. The empirical findings of this research reveal that individuals, in this case female rapees, exercise their autonomy within particular contexts and relationships. In other words, their autonomy is shaped by “complex, intersecting social determinants and is constituted in the context of interpersonal relationships” (Mackenzie and Polter, 2010:48). The results of my research support the contention that autonomy should be “understood as social in nature and contingent, or processual, in practice” (MacDonald, 2010:203). From an intervention perspective, a combination of several theoretical concepts in my analysis indicates that “gender norms cannot be overcome by a simple act of will alone,” and as Clare Chambers points out, “the most effective intervention for social change lies in the combination of an enforced, structural change together with active promotion of a new set of norms” (2005:342).

It is within this use this conceptualization to propose a set of measures to help tackle the problem of rape in present day Vietnam. This is what I turn now in the following section.
4. A vision for the future

Before closing I wish to point out a number of limitations concerning this thesis. Hopefully this will serve as a point of departure for further research. I also include a set of concrete proposals for anti-rape interventions and offer some thoughts on the concept of autonomy as mediated.

4.1. Limitations of the research

As pointed out in the chapter on methodology, a major obstacle in this research was to find participants and the ways they were “recruited” through a leafleting campaign, a counselling office and media advertising were self-limiting. The small number of participants was a representative sample of those who felt confident enough to take part in the research.

Since the number of participants was limited, this research did not concentrate on any particular type of rape experience. Likewise the scope of the research did not allow me to engage in a comparative study of the behaviours/ responses of rapees, their families and kin networks pertaining to a particular type of rape as well as rapees’ perceptions of the behaviours of their own families and kin networks in dealing with post rape consequences. I also did not have the time and the opportunity to look into the role of religious faith that might influence the ways in which female rapees and their families cope with the consequences of the incident.

From a gender perspective since the focus of this study was on women and girls, I did not look into how male rapees (i.e. males raped by women and homosexual rape) cope with their experiences and compare them with those of female rapees, as well as to gauge the reactions from their families and community.

From an ethnicity perspective I did not have the opportunity to differentiate the ways in which various ethnic groups regard the rape problematic. For example, because women belonging to these groups often lack the means to migrate, how do they cope with their experiences of rape in the transitional context of Vietnam? These are questions for further scrutiny. Also the scope of this study did not allow me to explore how the differences between my Kinh cultural background and those of my non-Kinh participants might have influenced our interactions in the research interviews.
4.2. Recommendations

In mentioning the limitations of this research, I wish to suggest new directions for conducting further research into the subject of rape in Vietnam. Based on my working experience with a number of female rapees in this study, I also propose some practical intervention programs to deal with the rape problematic.

**From a criminal justice viewpoint**

I recommend that an elaboration of guidelines for implementing judicial procedure concerning rape-related cases should be provided for people engaged in the legal professions at various levels. Amendments to the current rape laws should be made, emphasizing that a rape conviction should not require the act of sexual intercourse to have occurred regardless of whether that act has been completed or not physiologically. Also an act of rape does not necessarily involve the penetration of the female sexual organ because it may occur in other ways, neither does it have to involve the use of the male organ since it can be done by other means or artificial instruments.

Rape can be committed not only by resort to physical force but also by blackmail, social and financial pressure, or by taking advantage of situations when the victim is asleep, unconscious, severely drugged, or otherwise physically helpless. There should be conceptual clarifications and practical implications regarding the fact that men can be victims of rape and women can be convicted as principal offenders.

In the diagnosis of rape, one should be sensitive to the fact that the physical signs of abuse may not always be obvious, especially in cases of acquaintance rape (because victims rarely fight with their attackers). Thus, the absence of cuts, fractures, and bruises does not mean that an attack has not occurred. The need to have evidence of violence or resistance to violence in the definition of “rape” has been a major obstacle in rape conviction and one of the primary targets for change.

**Awareness-raising activities**

In the longer run, the problem of rape awareness - having both an educational and preventive character - has also to be taken into account. The problem is how to raise
public awareness about a subject that socially and culturally is still very much taboo. This
could be done through public campaigns and via the channel of education.

In the case of Vietnam where sex education is still in its infancy, basic information on
sex and reproductive health should be incorporated into the school’s curriculum at an
early stage, for example from grade three upwards (about the age of nine) since most
cases of sexual abuse begin before puberty. Ideally, information on sexual abuse should
be integrated into a general curriculum of sex education. Children can learn what they
most need to know about sexual abuse, without being unduly frightened or developing
generally negative sexual attitudes. Besides, children need to know the recourse that is
available to them outside their families if they are being abused, or to know there are
concerned adults outside their family circles to whom they can turn if necessary.

Combined with school curricula, the mass media could be mobilized to enhance
public awareness of the danger of rape. For example, one can organize a panel discussion
on TV or radio with the participation of experts from various disciplines related to the
problems of rape and child sexual abuse. These measures may have an impact in
changing popular attitudes on sex issues in general, and the rape problematic in
particular. For instance, the content of talk show programs should be designed with an
aim to convey the message that rape happens to anyone (i.e. regardless of gender, age,
ethnicity and social status) in any situations (i.e. public places and private sphere).
Therefore all rapees should be able to receive emotional and practical supports from the
community, and society at large.

Consideration should be given to the ways in which rape cases are reported in the
mass media. It is essential that the privacy of both rape victims and the perpetrators must
be protected scrupulously. At the same time, as a deterrent to the crime of rape, a public
campaign should be launched - to be repeated at regular intervals - in order to propagate
the rape statutes in the criminal law, with emphasis on the severity of the crime and the
heavy penalty that goes with it.

At the community level, training courses and capacity building for dealing with rape-
related issues should be provided for officials of the courts, the prosecution office and the
police as well members of other mass organizations like Women’s Union, Fatherland
Front, Youth League and Farmers’ Union.
At the family level, parents who want to warn their children about the danger of sexual abuse need to be well informed about the problem themselves; they also ought to feel comfortable when talking about it.

With the popularity of the internet there are possibilities to set up online support groups, message boards and chat rooms for those who (or whose loved ones) have experienced rape and sexual abuse. The objective of these groups is to offer these people a safe space to vent their emotions in order to ease the pain of isolation, generate mutual support and exchange ideas for coping.

Also I recommend the establishment of support groups and clubs made up of community staffs and professionals (e.g., researchers, NGO activists, social workers, health care service providers, “volunteer” experts on legal aspects) working on rape-related issues and other highly sensitive subjects. These professionals are to be offered a space to exchange working experiences, discuss their feelings, talk about how their work has impacted them, and receive supportive feedback and validation from other colleagues.

4.3. Concluding remarks: The universal and the particular in the study of rape

By way of concluding I would like to offer some reflections pertaining to my research, placing its findings in the context of on-going debates on gendered violence and rape in particular.

Firstly, I submit that the high visibility of the use of mass rape as “a weapon of war” in conflict areas - notably in the Balkans and Africa in the 1980s and 1990s - and which has been officially recognized as a crime against humanity, has overshadowed the fact that the rape of women as “individuals” in these very conflicts has been largely ignored as shown, for example, in the very low number of convictions of rape in the records of the UN-sponsored Rwanda Tribunal (Buss, 2009). Thus violence against women in wartime as well as in “peace time” remains largely “invisible” in terms of legal and political priority (Nowrojee, 2005)

While the topic of rape in conflict areas has attracted much public and academic interest due to the severity of the crime and the implications of international politics, I would argue that sexual violence in peacetime deserves more attention. Peacetime rape
not only leads to serious consequences for the victims’ mental and physical health but also creates considerable legal and social obstacles for them in speaking out and seeking support from others, thus effecting hiding the crime from public view. If research on rape as a weapon of war attempts to contextualize rape within the military and political goals of a conflict, my research on peacetime rape reveals the everyday politics as expressed in the social attitudes and responses to the incidence of rape. More specifically, I have shown in the chapters that social prejudices and inconsistencies in legal proceedings have the combined effect of restricting women’s choices in the aftermath of rape. In a way, the current discourse on “social evils” including rape in Vietnam, which is supposed to protect “innocent” citizens has the effect of associating them with the “evil” they experienced, thus leading to victim blaming. An important finding of my study is that the institutionalized injustices women often face as victims of sexual violence are not specific to the situation in Vietnam. For instance, victims of sexual violence in Japan are liable to be blamed for their misfortune if their accounts do not fit with certain patterns including the element of resistance (Burns, 2005). Having said this, my findings support the view that prevailing assumptions from the dominant discourse of masculinity, femininity and sexuality deeply affect the functioning of the legal system surrounding rape, regardless of wartime or peacetime (Baxi, 2007; cf. Das, 2008).

Secondly, in linking up these research findings with the large body of work on sexual violence against women, my emphasis has been on aspects relating to family and kin relations and everyday community interactions. In particular the notion of “family honor” plays a prominent part as manifested in efforts of negotiating a settlement and in the ways family and kin react to the social consequences of the rape incident involving one of their member. More concretely, I dwell on responses which are formulated (and manipulated) and manifested in various (mainly non-violent) forms in the name of family honor. My analysis of the key role played by the family in dealing with the consequences of rape in which individuals’ needs are subsumed to family interests might have relevance for other cultures and societies as well. In this sense the findings of my research may have relevance to the field of sexual violence by emphasizing the importance of ethnic and cultural differences in dealing with rape in a nonwestern
society. This in turn may highlight blind spots in existing research and assist in developing new perspective in an increasingly multicultural western society.

In patriarchal societies the chastity of the woman is not only emblematic of her dignity and morality, but also reflects the good name of her family, clan, kin group, ethnic group or class. If transgressed, it is a humiliation for her extended kin (Douglas, 1991; Stoler, 1992). This is what happens to women and girls who have been raped or otherwise abused. But rape is a threat that hangs over each and every woman in Vietnam and elsewhere like a sword of Damocles. In other words, the issue is not just about rape, but about the discursive and practical constraints on women’s freedoms. This may remind us of Émile Durkheim’s (1994) notion of “social facts” (as expressed in social rules) that remain under the surface until you transgress them and feel the sanctions. Through exposure to such sanctions and - more commonly - the threat thereof, women and girls of Vietnam are reminded how to behave “properly.” In other words, women as mothers know the rules all too well, and - as I have described in the previous chapters - in many instances actively contribute to upholding these gendered social and sexual norms, even at the expense of their own daughters’ welfare.

Although the topic of my research is the horror of rape, my focus is on how women deal with the suffering and oppression caused by rape. In this respect my findings are in line with those of other researchers showing that despite barriers that hinder their search for justice, women and girls who have been raped somehow manage to muddle through the bureaucratic maze and inherent corruption in the social structures (Burns, 2005). I should add that the option of preserving silence adopted by some of the rapees in my research is comparable to the metaphor of women drinking “poisonous knowledge” as part of the healing process in the case of those who were subjected to sexual violence during the Partition of India (Das, 2004).

Regarding the ways the raped women and their families respond to the revelation of rape and to what extent family and kin relations have an influence on individual women’s coping strategies, the results of my research lend support to earlier work on the social aspect of the “autonomous self,” which in turn plays a role in the healing process of those who have gone through traumatic experiences such as rape (Brison, 2002). There is evidence indicating that recovery of raped women depends on the reactions they receive.
from their families and communities. I take a step further in showing that raped women can also rely on the social role of family and kin relations in mapping out their long-term coping strategy. The case studies in this research have illustrated women’s ability of making rational choices in writing their own scenario of life in the aftermath of the rape trauma.

From individuals’ accounts in this study, young women in Vietnam are more or less fair game in the complicated social processes of transition from orthodox state socialism to a market-oriented society with its heightened social and geographic mobility and enhanced interpersonal fluidity. While Đổi Mới is for the most part man's enterprise run by government bureaucrats, risk-taking entrepreneurs, representatives of NGO's, etc. it has also created new opportunities for women, especially in the economic and educational fields. Against the backdrop of economic and social “liberalizations,” women are simultaneously constrained to the roles of dutiful wives, mothers and daughters, harbingers of morality, and therefore are seen - and function - as the “social” glue. In a patriarchal society, rape - and the threat of rape - can be seen as part of an interlocking mechanism that makes women the (gendered) social glue that they are. What are the implications of having to live and function in these “grey” areas in which women do not have an equal voice or equal resources? And what are the possibilities and particular risks for women and girls in terms of autonomy and agency in the face of man-dominated power structures and assumptions about male and female sexuality?

Based on the findings of my research on raped women I propose an understanding of individuals’ autonomy as “mediated” in relation with other actors in the social sphere. By “mediated” I suggest that autonomy does not exist in intention and desire only but also manifests in individuals’ perception of their particular situations for making rational choices and carrying them out under certain circumstances. In this sense, mediated autonomy is an extension of the notion of relational autonomy developed by feminist theorists; it further expands and contextualizes agency that is mainly understood as intention and desire or as “situated.” In this line of reasoning, mediated autonomy also implies practicality, continuity and flexibility in individuals’ capability of weighing options to move on with their lives.
In brief, my idea of mediated autonomy might serve as a useful theoretical tool to throw light on the so-called “grey” areas in which individual women, in their nuanced and variegated ways, act out their life strategies in the aftermath of rape. In this respect, attention should be paid to individuals’ particularities, their subjectivity and their ability to mediate within the context of gender relations from a cross-cultural perspective.

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