Rape experiences and the limits of women's agency in contemporary post-reform Vietnam
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Summary in English

“Rape Experiences and the Limits of Women’s Agency in Contemporary Post-Reform Vietnam” explores how women and girls cope with their experiences of rape and how this is affected by social discourses on gender and sexuality in the Vietnamese context. Conceptually the research is based on contemporary theories about relational autonomy as well as on anthropological visions of embodied experience. As the focus of this study is the “experience” of raped women and girls and their “coping” strategy rather than the nature and incidence of rape, a qualitative approach and a context-specific interpretative analysis are adopted for the main body of the research. Data are collected primarily through an ethnographic study of a limited number of respondents, using open-ended interviews, life histories and participant observation. Supplementary data are retrieved from court files. These sources are used for a discourse analysis of the meaning of rape as a gendered crime. Of additional value is an examination of representations of rape cases in a number of selected newspapers.

If research on rape as a weapon of war tends to contextualize rape within the military and political goals of an armed conflict, my research on peacetime rape scrutinizes the everyday politics as expressed in the social attitudes and responses to the incidence of rape. My findings show that social prejudices and inconsistencies in judicial proceedings have the combined effect of restricting women’s choices in coping with the consequences of rape. The current discourse on “social evils” including rape in Vietnam, which is supposed to protect “innocent” citizens has the effect of associating rape victims with the “evil” they experienced, thus leading to victim-blaming. Additionally, the notion of “family honor” figures prominently in family and kin relations and everyday community interactions in the aftermath of rape. This can be seen in efforts of reaching a negotiated settlement and how families and kin respond to the social consequences of the rape incident involving one of their members. These responses are formulated (and manipulated) and manifest in various (mainly non-violent) forms. The role that the family plays in dealing with the consequences of rape and the ways individuals’ needs are subsumed to family interests as shown in this research no doubt have relevance for other cultures and societies as well.
In patriarchal societies the chastity of a 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. 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. There are social rules that remain under the surface until you unwittingly transgress them and feel the sanctions. Through exposure to such sanctions and - more commonly - the threat thereof, women and girls of Vietnam are constantly reminded of their “proper” behaviour. Women as mothers know the rules all too well, and more often than not actively contribute to upholding these gendered social and sexual norms, even at the expense of their own daughters’ welfare.

Although the topic of this 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. It should be added that the option to remain silent adopted by some rapees in this research is comparable to the metaphor of women drinking the poisonous knowledge as part of the healing process.

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.
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.

This 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.