Phan Thi Thu Hien

SEXUAL COERCION WITHIN MARRIAGE
A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN A RURAL AREA OF
QUANG TRI, VIETNAM

The Thesis Submitted For Master Degree
By Phan Thi Thu Hien
Supervisor: Prof. Diana Gibson, MA, PhD.

Amsterdam Master in Medical Anthropology
Medical Anthropology Unit
Faculty of Social Science and Behavior
University of Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Table of content

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. 4
Abstract .................................................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER I ....................................................................................................................... 8
I- Introduction: ............................................................................................................. 8
II- Brief overview on sexual violence: ....................................................................... 13

CHAPTER II .................................................................................................................... 17

METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................... 17
1- Study type .......................................................................................................... 17
2- Study themes ...................................................................................................... 17
3- Data collection techniques ................................................................................. 17
   3.1- Focus group discussions (FGDs): ............................................................... 19
   3.2- In-depth interview ....................................................................................... 22
   3.3- Observations ............................................................................................... 23
4- Research setting and sampling .......................................................................... 24
5- Validity .............................................................................................................. 26
6- Data processing and analysis ............................................................................. 26
7- Ethical considerations ........................................................................................ 27

CHAPTER III .................................................................................................................. 28

CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY ...................... 28
1- Femininity and Masculinity ............................................................................... 29
2- Decision-making in sexual relations .................................................................. 32
3- Sexual relationships between husband and wife ............................................... 35

CHAPTER IV ................................................................................................................... 41

MORALITY, HONOR AND VIOLATION ..................................................................... 41
1- Moral standards and virtue of a woman ........................................................... 41
2- Abuse and violation is perceived as "teaching" ............................................... 43
3- Husband's honor and shame .......................................................................... 44
3- “Family affairs” ............................................................................................... 47
4- Sex is a sensitive issue in Vietnamese culture ............................................... 48
5- Sexual behaviors are taboo in public ............................................................. 51
CHAPTER V .................................................................................................................... 53
FROM UNWILLING SEX TO SEXUAL COERCION ............................................... 53
1- Notions of consent .............................................................................................. 53
2- The construction of the house and sexual coercion ........................................ 58
3- Lack of sexual knowledge .................................................................................. 64
4- Alcohol and sexual coercion ............................................................................ 67

CHAPTER VI ............................................................................................................ 69
TWO EXTENDED CASE STUDIES ......................................................................... 69
Case study 1: Thu .................................................................................................. 69
Case study 2: Ngan ............................................................................................... 75

CHAPTER VII ......................................................................................................... 84
CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS ................................................................. 84

APPENDICES ........................................................................................................... 92
Appendix 1- Reference: .......................................................................................... 92
Appendix 2 - Question guidelines ........................................................................ 94
Appendix 2- Pictures of house construction ........................................................ 96
Appendix 3 – Consent form .................................................................................. 101
Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Prof. Diana Gibson, who not only gave me insightful comments and edited this thesis, but also encouraged and cheered me up to finish it in limited amount of time. I gratefully thank Dr. Robert A. Miller, Senior Associate International Programs Division of Population Council for valuable comments and advice from the very beginning to the end of this study.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to all my teachers of AMMA (Amsterdam Master on Medical Anthropology) unit of Amsterdam University and AMMA’s staff, particularly Prof. Sjaak van Geest, Prof. Ria Reis, Prof. Han ten Brummelhuis, Prof. Nicolette van Duursen, all of which gave me valuable comments for the proposal of this thesis.

I would like to convey my gratitude to the Ford Foundation and Population Council (PC) as both supported me to finish the Master’s program and provided funds for the research. I thank the staff of PC both in New York and Hanoi, who were very enthusiastic and meet my requests during the time I studied in Amsterdam as well as conducted the study in Vietnam. My warm thanks go to Prof. Carole Vance of Columbia University. Not only did she provide me with a wealth of knowledge on sexuality, but also gave me critical advice for data collection techniques.

I would like to thank all of the participants and authorities of Cam Hieu commune, Cam Lo district and Quang Tri province, Vietnam, especially Mr. Thong, the head of Cam Hieu Health Station, who enthusiastically helped me to contact and gather participants despite hard weather conditions. Special thanks convey to H.S.Quang, MpH, my colleague, who assisted me to conduct FGDs, and who gave me valuable comments and helped me work out the difficulties encountered in the data collecting process.

I am grateful to Peter de Goeje & Arend van Leeuwen in the faculty of science of UvA. They not only supported me to deal with difficulties of student life in Amsterdam but also gave me enthusiastic discussions on matters related to my study. For the warm and friendly treatment I have received during the time I am living in Amsterdam, I also would like to thank: Jeannette Schoone, Carlas, all my Vietnamese friends and my dear friend.
Rebekah Park, not only for her company but also for helping me to edit this paper. I also thank my dear little ‘sister’ L.H.Thai, for her kindness and enthusiastic support during the time I wrote this thesis.
Abstract

This study explores how and why sexual coercion in marriage occurs. By looking at gender issues, cultural norms, life conditions and experiences in sexual life of married people, I raised the following questions: 1- How do gender issues and cultural norms impact sexual perceptions and sexual relationships between husbands and wives? 2- What are the different perspectives and experiences of married men and women on sexual coercion? 3- How do economic, social and cultural factors impact sexual behaviors and result in sexual coercion in marriage? This research addressed these questions on the basis of a qualitative study carried out among 81 men and women, including twenty in-depth interviews and 10 focus group discussions involving 61 men and women. The study was conducted in Cam Hieu commune of Camlo district, Quang tri province, Vietnam. The Quang tri province is located on both sides of number Ninth Boulevard, which crosses from Lao to Vietnam. It is about 2,692 km square, with the population of 5,448 people.

The study reveals that women’s sexual health is restrained by cultural constructions of gender, in which gender inequity plays a crucial role. Women’s bodies and women's sexuality are “controlled” by a complex interaction of social, economic and cultural factors. Sexual coercion and violence within marriage among low-income communities is difficult recognized because cultural norms such as morality, chastity, honor, shame and family affair are more heavily negotiated during times of economic constraints and lack of access to information. The lack of information on sexuality and public dialogue makes it difficult for sexually inexperienced people to gain knowledge before entering sexual relationships, and often leads to painful first experiences or trauma. The lack of communication between husbands and wives leads to sexual incompatibility and marriage conflicts. The absence of sexual desire or pleasure of women is perceived to be natural or normal. The marriage certificates are seen as legitimate licenses for men to exert control over their wives’ bodies. All of these factors combine together to make women develop negative attitudes toward sex or to deny sex altogether. When women do not have choice to refuse or request sex, they do not have a complete sense of physical and mental well being in their sexual lives. The cultural setting and construction reinforce a cycle of sexual coercion and violence within marriage that is not easily broken. My research produced an unexpected and significant finding: obtaining information on sexual issues
within a Vietnamese cultural setting is not as difficult as it widely perceived to be, considering many of its conservative values. These findings encourage further research on sexual domain to identify and address factors related to the sexual and reproductive health of women.
CHAPTER I

I- Introduction:

1- Background of research

Sexual coercion is one form of violence against women; it jeopardizes the autonomy of women to practice their sexual rights. According to Randall (1999) "sexual violence" is also referred to as "gender-based violence." It has been acknowledged as a global health problem in part because it severely impacts the reproductive health of women, and thus, results in negative outcome of women health as well as child health.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (1997), "violence against women is a crucial violation of the human right to liberty and freedom from fear." Sexual violence is also recognized as a priority public health and human rights' issue because its reverberations are found all over the world. Sexual coercion and violence are a part of gender-based violence against women. It occurs in every country and affects both the mental and physical health of women. According to the Population Council, sexual coercion is defined as:

"The act of forcing (or attempting to force) another individual through violence, threats, verbal insistence, deception, and cultural expectations or economic circumstance to engage in sexual behavior against his or her will. As such, it includes a wide range of behaviors from violent forcible rape to more contested areas such as cultural expectations that require young women to marry and sexually service men not of their choosing. The touchstone of coercion is an individual woman's lack of choice to pursue other options without severe social or physical consequences."

(http://www.popcouncil.org/gfd/scoer/c1.html)

In Mapping a Global Pandemic: Sexual Violence Against Women, Randall (1999) emphasizes that sexual violence lies at the heart of inequality between men and women and impacts women's sexual and reproductive health. Since the 1990s, the subject of violence against women has drawn the attention of scholars, socialists, anthropologist and public health workers all over the world. In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo strongly argued that violence against
women affects their sexual and reproductive health. Thus, sexual violence must be eliminated in order to promote women’s health. According WHO (2002) sexual health is described as following way:

"Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled."

(http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexual_health.html)

Since sexual violence is mentioned as one of the important factors related to domestic violence, it has become an international concern and focus for action. Conferences held in various countries tried to address the protection of the human rights of women to diminish any kind of violence against women and to advocate for women being able to maintain their sexual health. Political organizations, social services, health care systems as well as other organizations are involved in setting up laws, carrying out campaigns to provide public information and education in order to protect women from violence and promote women’s sexual health. Besides these activities, the research in the domain of sexual violence has been encouraged in order to gain insights into the context, where violence against women occurs. However, the sensitivity and difficulties involved in collecting information on the subject has equally discouraged scholars and researchers. Therefore, the literature on sexual behavior in relation to sexual violence and especially, sexual violence within marriage is still not comprehensive.

Although research on sexual violence has been done in various countries, different cultural settings and different contexts influence the ways in which researchers approach the topic. An understanding of cultural constructions and practices related to masculinity, femininity and sexuality within marriage in a specific setting would provide insightful knowledge of the processes that create and maintain domestic violence. Moreover, the study of this subject is an important step in developing a practical agenda for further study in the domain of sexuality and violence within marriage.
2- Situation in Vietnam

In Vietnam there is little in-depth research exploring sexual coercion within marriage. Several articles about the rape cases and domestic violence have been published in Vietnamese newspapers. In recent years, there have been some studies investigating trafficking of women, child sexual abuse and child prostitution. Yet, little research on sexual coercion in marriage has been done because sexuality is a sensitive issue and it is not easy to discuss in Vietnamese society. Since many issues relating to sexual violence are emerging and need to be dealt with, such as rape, sexual abuse, and child prostitution, sexual coercion within marriage has not received much attention. Almost all of the studies reported in the media concern rape or child sexual abuse. Thus, it is hard to find literature on sexual coercion within marriage in Vietnam.

In 1998, Le Thi Phuong Mai did research on violence and its consequences on reproductive health. She conducted focus group discussions with men and women in different occupations in Hanoi and reported that most of the women interviewed had experienced forced sex. In contrast, focus group discussions with married men indicated that men rejected the term **"Forced sex within marriage"** and were unfamiliar with the meaning of the phrase. According to the men, sexual activity is an important part of marriage and both husband and wife share the responsibility of improving their sexual relationship as a way of ensuring family happiness. (Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998:38-41)

This shows a disjunction between men and women’s perceptions of sexual coercion. Yet, the study did not address men’s and women’s perceptions and experiences of sexual coercion within marriage. Thus, it is difficult to know how men perceive sexual coercion in a marital setting.

In Vietnamese society, Confucianism still exists and strongly influences women’s lives. Its basic tenet is that **"A girl has to follow her father. When she gets married, she has to follow her husband. If her husband dies, she has to follow her son."** This ideology supports the domination of men and its patriarchal ideology. In the view of many Vietnamese people, married women belong to their husbands as a property. A woman should obey and follow any requirement of her husband. Such an obedient woman is considered to have high moral standards. The husband is seen as the head of a family and the wife is supposed to completely obey any demand of her husband including answering
to his sexual needs. Because of cultural norms and moral values, married women have to accept sexual coercion from their husbands in silence; they dare not report it, even though they might be battered.

Sexual coercion in marriage has not received attention from policy makers, researchers and others because of local cultural norms. For instance, the Law on Marriage and Family set up in 1986 by the Vietnamese Government strongly protects women’s rights, but it does not address sexual coercion in marriage. Sexual coercion within marriage also relates to domestic violence and its negative outcomes. Nevertheless, it has not received much attention by the local authorities or by policy makers and other people in society because it is viewed as a ‘family affair’. Many women bear with sexual coercion in silence as the part of a dogmatic discipline of moral standards. Women cannot report sexual coercion if the level of physical violence stays relatively low. It means that if women are physically coerced or violated, it is not easily recognized. However, many women are not only physically coerced or violated but are also mentally abused and coerced by strong social, economic and cultural forces. All those factors constrain women’s choices on contraceptive use and satisfaction with their sexual health. Thus, they have little sense of entitlement in relation to sexual health.

To advocate for women achieving physical and mental well-being as well as a satisfying sex life, sexual coercion and violence within marriage must be addressed. To realize this aim, it needs more attention from researchers to bring insightful knowledge about factors influencing the context, in which sexual coercion occurs. Cultural norms, relating to sexual behavior, the different perspectives between women and men concerning sexuality and sexual coercion in marriage should be examined.

To do so, I will try to show that sexual coercion within marriage is exacerbated by gendered relations, structures and practices of male power. Bourdieu (2001) calls this “symbolic violence” and in the case of Vietnam, I argue that it is historically reproduced in a system where women are dominated by the intersection of Confucian and religious discourses, principles and practices, as well as state discourses about women’s rights that do not address violence within marriage, and by the societal expectations of women to silently cope with violence. All of thee factors contribute to a situation where this kind of gender domination and its resultant violence seem natural and inevitable to women.
In this thesis I try to demonstrate the ways in which gendered notions perpetuate in constructions of women as weak, passive, dependent, submissive, and resigned. I will show that a deeply embedded system of perceived opposites between male and female is reflected in sexual relations and in many everyday practices and arrangements. The way in which a home is organized symbolizes ideas of gender. In this system women represent 'the left side' which is associated with the weakness. They are also considered to belong in the home to care and nurture and to fulfill reproductive capacities. By contrast, men are identified with “the right side” the symbol of strength. They are seen as strong, active, independent, dominant, aggressive and potentially violent. Men have a higher social status than women, have more power in the family, and are seen as breadwinners and belong outside of the home. Such gendered notions inform people's understanding of the world and of the natural order of things affects every aspect of women's lives. For instance, the ways in which homes are constructed represent the symbolic differences between genders. I will show that, for example, the right hand space of a house is not only physically cleaner, but is also 'purer' than the left hand side. The right side of the house is male and is used by men and elder people, who have higher status in the family. On the other hand, the left space of the house, connected to the cooking and livestock areas, is considered to be dirty and easily polluted. Thus, it belongs to women. The left and the right of the house are representative of such systems of symbolic power. Women are symbolic of weakness as the left hand, and men are symbolic as strength and of the right hand. Therefore, the use of space in home is gendered and in accordance with the power related to gendered identities.

In this study I attempt to show how all of these complex issues intersect and create the context in which violent behavior is conceived, processed and maintained. I try to gain greater understanding of how and why sexual coercion within marriage occurs. Although this is a pilot study conducted in a small community, it can contribute to an understanding of the sexual life of married couples in a rural area from anthropological perspective. I hope the findings of the study will provide a new view on the study of sexual coercion in marriage and on sexual issues within marriage in a rural Vietnamese setting.

Furthermore, I hope that researchers, health workers and policy makers will pay more attention to sexual coercion in marriage. It should not be seen as an exclusive family
affair, but as a social issue that profoundly impacts women’s sexual and reproductive health. This study was done with the expectation that it will contribute to the promotion of the sexual and reproductive health of Vietnamese women. It also makes recommendations for further research in this domain. In the next section I will give an overview of some relevant literature related to sexual violence.

II- Brief overview on sexual violence:

1- Sexual violence:

Over the two past decades, the subject of sexual violence has received attention of many researchers. There has been a growing recognition of not only the factors related to the causes but also to the consequences of sexual violence. It can affect any stage of women’s lives and both their physical and psychological health. It can occur in various forms and depends upon cultural and social patterns. There is a variety of health and feminist literature on sexual violence. I will discuss only the sources related to the causes and the health consequences of sexual violence and sexual coercion in marriage.

Many studies demonstrate that the root causes of sexual violence are traditional ideologies and gender relations in patriarchal settings, where men have an assumed right to control women (Leghorn and Parker, 1981). Masculine and feminine notions also lead to discriminations between men and women in sexual decision-making.

According to Week (1986), “we still cannot think about sexuality without taking into account gender issues, the elaborate facade of sexuality has in large part been built upon the assumption of fundamental differences between men and women, and of male dominance over women.”

Furthermore, the genital and reproductive distinctions between men and women biologically are also a sufficient explanation for different sexual needs and desires (Weeks, 1986). Yet, how couples attain consent and concur in their decisions on their sexual life varies among different cultures. When couples cannot agree in their sexual relationships, conflicts in their families will emerge. The disagreement between couples on their sexual life may lead to sexual coercion and domestic violence.
Research on sexual violence demonstrates that sexual coercion not only affects women’s emotional and physical health but also their sexual and reproductive health. Because of men’s domination, women cannot freely decide on matters relating to their reproduction, such as timing, spacing delivery and the number of children. Furthermore, sexual coercion makes it difficult for women to negotiate condom use with their husbands or partners. Some of the direct impacts of violence on reproductive health include STDs, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, unsafe abortions, as well as homicides and suicides of women in cultures where rape is highly stigmatized. (*Sexual Coercion and reproductive health: a focus research*, online: http://www.popcouncil.org/gfd/scoer/scandrh_foreward.html). Coercion and lack of negotiating power in relationships also indirectly places women’s health at risk by limiting their ability to use birth control, or prohibiting them from seeking medical care without their partner’s permission, (Heise, Moore and Toubia, 1995:59). Sexual coercion can result in sexual violence and subsequent trauma, lack of sexual desire, loss of pleasure in sexual life, unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, and STDs, including HIV/AIDS.

2- Sexual coercion within marriage

Sexual coercion within marriage can be defined as any kind of actions taken by a husband against his wife to engage in sex against her will. The touchstone of coercion is that women lack choices and encounter physical or social consequences if they resist sexual advances.

Many people assume that sexual coercion only exists outside of marriage. In many cultures, a marriage certificate is considered as a legitimization for men to satisfy their sexual desires without their wives’ consent. Many men believe that they have rights to have sex with their wives at any time or in any form. In Sexual Violence Within Marriage, a case study of rural Uttar Pradesh, it was reported that husbands take their “right” to have complete control over the body and sexuality of their wives and be violent if women refuse to submit to their sexual desires (Khan et al, 1997.) In the Population Council Report (1999), ninety-five women were interviewed in Papua New Guinea, and about half of the participants said their husbands forced them to have sex. One-third of
those said they were beaten into sex, and one-fifth were harangued into it by drunken husbands. In Uttar Pradesh, India, about two-thirds of 98 respondents reported being forced into sex by their husbands—about one-third of them through beatings. The effects of sexual coercion range from high stress situations to severe physical and emotional damage. As a result, they do not have pleasure in their sexual life nor a sense of mental well-being.

The causes of sexual coercion in marriage are various and depend upon many factors such as culture, economics, and society, in which gender inequality is a crucial factor of sexual coercion. Research on sexual violence identified sexual coercion as a masculine ideology. In A Qualitative Study of Sexual Behaviors of Married Women in Bangladesh, Khan, Townsend and D’Costa stated that:

‘Gender inequality continues to dominate every aspect of social and economic life. Social constructs like masculinity play a critical role in defining sexual relationships. Social control over women’s sexuality is strong, with different social mechanisms being used to support and perpetuate it over time.’ (2002:52.)

Because of gender inequality, women do not have the power to control their sexual desires. Their sexuality has been limited by economic and social dependence, the power of men to define sexuality, the limitations of marriage, the burden of reproduction, and the endemic fact of male violence against women. (Weeks, 1986:39). However, Weeks also argues that male violence is not entirely a product of unproblematic biology but of complex social practices and psychic structures. The change to transform the relations between men and women can only be brought about by equally complex processes, ranging from new methods of child-rearing to radically different economic, legal and social condition for women. (Weeks, 1986:65).

Bourdieu (2001, p:116) also says that violence is the result of symbolic domination, which is not only visible through physical violence but is perpetuated by wider interaction between macro structures such as the education system, church and state. Therefore, to address sexual violence, information on the epidemiology of sexual violence against women needs to be consolidated. Research on a large scale should be done to identify problems and women who are most at risk of sexual violence in different cultural settings.
and communities. In this regard Randall (1999) writes:

‘Accurate estimates of extent of sexual violence against women are critical to break the silence and myths that surround sexual violence against women, and to gain political support for action at local, national and international levels’ (available online: http://academic.udayton.edu/health/01status/rapeO1.htm)

Outline of chapters:

In Chapter I, I try to introduce the cultural setting in which particular forms of symbolic violence and dominant gender identities contribute to sexual coercion and violence. Chapter II describes the research methodology and the ways, in which I obtained information on sexuality in this study. Cultural notions on masculinity and femininity, its impact on power relations in decision-making between husband and wife will be presented in Chapter III. I also discuss issues related to the roles of men and women in sexual relationships. In Chapter IV, I try to demonstrate how cultural perceptions conceptualized by gender issues such as morality, virtue, honor and shame, family affairs as well as the sensitivity of sexual issues related to sexual coercion and violation. Chapter V will pay closer attention to the context, within which the interaction of all social, economic and cultural factors intertwine and create settings of sexual coercion. The notion of consent in the silence of women will be used to highlight the intricacies of sexual coercion and violence. Chapter VI includes two case studies that give a broad overview of individual social contexts, in which the process of sexual coercion and violence are conceived, occur and maintained. In Chapter VII, I summarize the findings, draw out the dynamics of sexual coercion and violence within marriage, and also make recommendations for health education programs as well as the further research on the domain of sexuality.
CHAPTER II
Methodology

1- Study type

There is little literature of sexual violence within marriage in Vietnam, especially of research conducted from an anthropological perspective. This study is qualitative and I applied an exploratory design to gain an understanding of cultural context, within which sexual coercion and violence occur.

2- Study themes

To explore the factors that influence perceptions, experiences and behaviors related to sexual coercion, I divided study themes into four groups: gender issues, cultural factors, economic factors and social factors. I asked questions based on following themes:

a) How do gender issues affect decision-making and sexual roles between husbands and wives?
b) How do cultural norms and perceptions of masculinity and femininity impact the sexual behavior of couples?
c) How do life conditions and cultural issues such as extended family relate to sexual coercion?
d) Why do women not complain or seek help when they are violated?
e) How do husbands and wives behave when they do not have the same sexual desires simultaneously?
f) How do men and women react when their spouses refuse to meet their sexual demands?
h) How do people deal with sexual coercion and domestic violence?
i) How and what do other factors contribute to sexual coercion?

3- Data collection techniques

The process of collecting data was carried out over a period of three months, from the beginning of September to the end of November 2003. The two main data collection
techniques used were focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews. These were combined with participant observation to gain more insightful meanings of nonverbal behaviors in FGDs and in-depth interviews. It also helped me to understand further how construction of the homes as well as life conditions related to sexual coercion found among married couples. All the in-depth interviews and FGDs of the study were tape-recorded with the consent of participants. Information collected by participant observation and detailed field notes were recorded daily after doing fieldwork.

A male assistant was chosen to support me in focus group discussions. In male FGDs, the assistant facilitated and participated the discussions. I sat behind people, took notes and observed. In female FGDs, he was the observer and took the notes. Another assistant was the head of Commune Health Station. He was chosen to inform and gather participants for FGDs. He also guided me to the homes of participants for initial in-depth interviews.

To access participants, I had to summarize and translate my research proposal into the Vietnamese language. I presented the purpose of the study and asked the permission of the local authorities from provincial to district and commune levels to carry out the study. Without the support of local authorities, I could not proceed in the collection of data. Although I used to work with people in the community as a medical doctor, I came back with a new identity as a researcher. In this capacity, I needed a permit from the local authorities to work in the commune. I obtained a letter of recommendation from the Provincial Health Service to work with the leaders of the District Health Center (DHC). I received enthusiastic support from the director of DHC, in spite of his concerns that I could not gather the participants for FGDs because of the sensitivity of the topic. He felt that people had cultural restraints about talking openly about sex in public. Thus, people might be shy and embarrassed, so they would not come when they were invited.

We held a meeting with commune authorities, the heads of the Women Union and the Commune Health Station (CHS). After I presented my objectives and content of the study, they said I should work with the CHS to access participants because my study was related to sexual health. Before my research, there was another researcher doing a study in this community about the quality of life among elderly people and he found that it was more convenient to access participants though the CHS, because the CHS consistently gathers villagers to provide health services, health education or immunization. Hence,
villagers would come when they were informed by the CHS. After choosing participants, my assistant went to their houses not only to invite them but also explain why they would be invited to discuss on matters related to sexual health. He made appointments with participants at specific times and places.

*The limitations:

Data was collected over a limited period of three months and in a specific area. The sample was chosen for practical reasons, therefore, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized for other rural parts of the whole country. Moreover, people who were not selected as participants did not have the opportunity to present their perspectives and experiences on sexual issues and sexual coercion. It would have been more interesting and useful to compare the perspectives on sexual coercion and violence of the married couples. Yet, for confidential reasons, I could not do so. I would also like to do case studies on two male participants, who usually abused and violated their wives to gain an understanding of how they experience their circumstances and how they perceive their violent behavior. However, as I am a female researcher; it was difficult to approach male participants and to get to know them well enough to tell me whether they regularly abused their wives or at least not within a short period of time.

3.1- Focus group discussions (FGDs):

The FGDs were used to explore general opinions, cultural norms and perceptions held by men and women on sexuality, sexual experiences and behaviors, which relate to sexual coercion between husbands and wives. This method provided a possibility to further pursue issues that arose in individual interviews.

Sixty married men and women were chosen and divided into ten groups. Each group was composed of six people; men and women were separated. Each FGD lasted around two to three hours. All participants were too busy with the harvest, or working as hired labors, so they were informed about the time and place they would gather, one day before FGDs were conducted. Participants were invited to CHS, I suggested a few places and we would select the venues for FGDs. Sometimes, participants came and they did not like the place where we met and we had to change to other venues. Male focus group discussions were
conducted in two different places: coffee bars or a private room in a small restaurant, where men usually gather. The venue to conduct for female focus group discussion was in a private room in the commune health station. The reason why we chose different places for FGDs between male and female groups was because of the sensitivity of the topic.

With the female groups, women were shy and embarrassed when I mentioned what the content of discussion were. Many female participants said that they would not like other people to know that they had participated in FGDs. Thus, they wanted to use a private room, where nobody could see or hear them. Moreover, if someone saw the participants were going into health station, they could say that they went there to buy medicine or to have a health check. Therefore; I used the meeting room of CHS; it had curtains and was very private.

In contrast, participants in male groups did not care much about the privacy of the venues. We chose different places because male participants wanted the place where we could drink wine or beer and chat. However, I told them that I needed a private room, which was not too noisy, so I could tape-record. In the end, we chose a private room in a small restaurant or in a quiet coffee shop.

Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, I was concerned that male participants would not talk openly on matters related to sexuality with a female researcher, so I let my male assistant conduct male FGDs. Yet, my presence in the FGDs with men altered the all-male atmosphere from participants’ perspective. The men were shy and embarrassed when they knew the content of discussion, so the atmosphere was quiet and tense in the first few minutes. After the assistant introduced the content of discussion, we got consent of participants. I did not want FGDs conducted in a formal way, so I ordered some food and wine for them to drink and eat while talking. It took about fifteen minutes of chatting and drinking to warm up. In the conversations between the assistant with participants, he tried to make some jokes on matters related to sex such as, "My wife was very happy if I drank a bit, but if I drank a lot, she would be sad." All men laughed very loudly, because people understood what the assistant implied. He inferred that when a man drank a bit he would have much more sexual desire and be stronger, if he drank so much he would fall asleep, so his wife would be sad because he could not meet her sexual demands. After a few jokes like this, participants started talking
about matters related to sexual behaviors when men got drunk. They also actively
discussed how a wife reacted when her husband got drunk, and so forth. Step by step,
participants went into the foci of FGDs. The FGDs proceeded similar to normal
conversations among a group of friends. They seemed to forget my presence, because I
sat behind them, in a corner of the room taking notes and making observation.

With female groups, after introducing the objectives of the study, contents of discussion
and get participants’ consent, I spent around fifteen minutes to talk with all participants,
learn about their families, number of children, their ages and names, the time they
married and the farmland they cultivated, number of cattle, which they have and so forth.
In fact, I talked with a few participants during the time we were waiting for the other
participants, who came late. I tried to set a comfortable atmosphere and made
conversation friendlier and warmer. All people in the community knew me as a medical
doctor, but now I had to change my identity to that of a researcher to avoid people
responding to me as a health care worker. Thus, I introduced myself as a married woman
with two children. Surprisingly, I found that after every FGD, the women participants
wanted to talk more. Although the time was over, they did not want to go home. Many
participants said that, it was the first time they talked openly about sexual issues with
other people. Even when I changed my identity, people still identified me as a medical
doctor working in the field of reproductive health. So they wanted to stay for a while after
FGDs to ask me questions on matters related to reproductive and sexual health. These are
a few example questions, which participants asked me after FGDs: “Do women also
ejaculate as men when they have orgasm?” “Will a man be sick if he restrains sex for
many months?” “Is sex harmful for health?” “I do not have any interest in sex, I hate
sex. My husband said I am not normal. Do you think it is true?”

At the beginning, I was afraid my background as a medical doctor would create a bias in
responses. However, I found that my background was an advantage for me in doing
FGDs, because participants were happy when they received consultations on matters
related to sexual and reproductive health at the end of each FGD. Through their talking
and their questions at the end of each FGD, I got more information about sexual life,
general opinions and sexual knowledge of the people in the community.
I told them I was willing to share and exchange sexual experiences between husband and wife. It was quite difficult to get over the tenseness and quiet atmosphere at the beginning when I had just mentioned sex. However, when I raised the question “What is a good husband and a good wife according to opinions of the people in the community?” Participants started talking. Many women shared their own experiences and stories about bad husbands. Sometimes, the discussions did not go smoothly. Women expressed their embarrassment and kept quiet when I mentioned sensitive issues. Therefore, I had to describe hypothetical situations for them to comment on. For example, when I asked, “How do people usually react when they want to have sex but their spouses do not want to?” Most women kept silent and shy. So I said, “I do not know how men react, but I saw in the movies, when women wanted sex, they wore sexy clothes or expressed their sexual desires and stimulated their husband...” Immediately, I received negative reactions from participants. Many of them said that it was an impossible situation in rural areas. They started discussing about situations in their community. How men and women behaved and reacted when they wanted sex. They also compared it to the situation in urban areas, which they knew through movies. Step by step, the groups were led into the main focus of FGDs.

3.2- In-depth interview

Through in-depth interviews, I gained insights on men and women’s behaviors, experiences and cultural context in which sexual coercion occurs. This method also provided deeper understanding of the cultural norms and gender issues related to sexual coercion and violation, which had not been revealed in FGDs.

A total of ten men and ten women were chosen for in-depth interviews. I paid participants for each visit. Depending on the quality and quantity of information gained after each interview, I made decisions to visit the participants on the second or third time. Each interview lasted from one to one and a half hours. All interviews were tape-recorded with participants’ consent. When visiting the participants on the second or third time, I tried to encourage them to discuss deeper on matters that we discussed in previous interviews to verify the validity of information.
To be convenient for participants, interviews were undertaken in many different places such as homes, on the way home from work, gardens, private rooms of CHS, or in quiet coffee bars. Depending on the situation, and where participants felt comfortable and confident to talk openly, the places for interviews were chosen accordingly. All interviews were carried out in a comfortable setting and atmosphere. It simulated chatting about sexual issues rather than formal interviews. Since the topic of the study was very sensitive, I approached the themes gradually. I started with general topics that were less sensitive (but still social tactful). For instance, relationships between husbands and wives, decision making on the matters related to their reproduction, the differences in their sexual life before and after contraceptive use were among the conversation starters. Then step-by-step I lead informants into more detailed conversations about sexual relationships between husbands and wives, sexual perceptions, and experiences of sexual coercion and violation.

When doing interviews in participants’ house, sometimes, I often had to stop interviews and return another day because many times someone arrived and interrupted the conversations. I found that interviews done in other place than the home were more successful in creating a free dialogue and less likely to be interrupted. However, not every participant came to the agreed venues, so I had to visit them at home. Since the study was carried out during the rainy season and also during harvest, it was not easy for them to always keep appointments.

3.3- Observations

I did participant observation during the FGDs and when I visited people to do in-depth interviews. It was combined with the above two methods to gain insight into non-verbal behavior. When visiting the house of participants, this method helped me to recognize that the construction of houses limited privacy of couples in sexual life. The furniture in houses and the ways people arranged what they had in family settings provided me with valuable information about life conditions and other factors related to participants’ sexual life and cultural notions about sexuality and violence.
4- Research setting and sampling

4.1- Research setting

The study was carried out in Cam Hieu, a rural commune of Cam Lo district, Quang Tri province, which is located in the middle of Vietnam. Cam Hieu has ten villages, with a population of around 5,448. The commune is about 6-7 kilometers far from Dong Ha town, the capital of Quang Tri. Most villagers are farmers, but after harvest, men also go out to work as masons, bricklayers, “xe om” (taxi-driver), or hired laborers.

The reasons I chose Cam Hieu commune of the Cam Lo district were for practical ones. Quang Tri, one of the poorest provinces in Vietnam with a population of around 58,000 is located in the middle of the country. It has two main seasons, winter and summer. In the winter, there is a lot of rain. Floods and storms usually occur every year, especially in recent times. The rainy season begins from September to December. Cam Lo is a midland district of Quang Tri province, where most people are farmers. It has nine communes. In the rainy season, floods and rain in this area are as heavy as in other districts of the province. The process of collecting data was carried out in rainy season, thus if I chose a community in another district, I could not finish my data collection in the limited time because of the bad weather. Cam Hieu was chosen after I contacted the district authorities. Since I had only three months to collect data for a qualitative study on the sensitive topic, I had to ensure that the commune authorities would support the study. If I chose a commune at random and if commune authorities and people in the community did not support and approve the study, it would have been difficult for me to achieve success in collecting data.

4.2- Sampling

The total number of participants were eighty-one, in which thirty-one married men and thirty married women were chosen to participate in FGDs. Although I originally chose the an equal number men an women to participate, one man who refused to participate in FGD at the beginning of the study later joined after another new participant had been already invited to replace him. As a result, there were thirty-one men participating in FGDs. Ten other married men and ten married women were chosen for in-depth
interviews. Two women, abused by their husbands, were selected among participants for the case study. The names of participants were randomly chosen from the list of married couples based on their prime age of reproduction (18 to 49 years old). I obtained this list from CHS and randomly selected every eighth person on the list until I had enough people for the sample. If any person chosen in the list refused to participate, I would choose the person whose name next to him/her in the list of married couples from CHS.

Participants were chosen based on following conditions: 1- They are married. 2- Men and women are not husband and wife in the same family. 3- All of them are under 45 years old. (The reason to choose people under 45 years old was to capture people still in their reproduction period.) All of their own sexual experiences were affected by the current cultural and social context, which I wanted to explore to give recommendations for health programs. It would have been interesting to interview couples, who are husbands and wives, and to compare their experiences and perceptions in the same situation. However, in Vietnamese culture, conflicts between husbands and wives such as sexual coercion or domestic violence are considered to be family affairs and should not be made known to other people. If both a husband and wife in the same family are interviewed, it was potentially risky and harmful to a woman who is violated. Thus, to reduce risk and ensure ethical issues, I chose married men and women who are not husbands and wives of each other. However, in one case of in-depth interview, a male participant asked me to interview his wife. According to him, his wife was “frigid”, a term he learnt from a magazine. He asked me to give his wife a consultation if it was possible. So I chose his wife as a substitute for one of the people who refused the in-depth interview.

Nineteen of sixty people approached, refused to participate in FGDs, four people said they could not come because they were busy, ten people did not refuse directly, but they did not come. One man refused to participate in FGD when he was invited, but he came on another day when he heard his friend said he learnt something from FGD. Only five people, three women and two men said that they were ashamed and did not want to talk about sex. Therefore, I had to choose other participants. No one refused to participate in the in-depth interviews.
5- Validity

To get valid information for a study on a sensitive topic such as sex requires a period of time more than three months. However, the community, where the study was conducted, is not unfamiliar to me. I have worked in that community as a public health worker for over nine years. Therefore, I have particular insights into the cultural issues as well as experiences with people in the community. My working experiences and relationships with the people in the community were advantages to accessing participants during the data collection process.

I conducted interviews with a non-judgmental attitude, as an attentive listener. I expressed my sympathy with them by sharing my own experiences as a married woman. I tried to encourage them to express their feelings and opinions, and showed my genuine interest in getting valuable information. Observations were combined during the interview process to understand the issues, which cannot be expressed by participants through verbal communication. All interviews were undertaken as conversations around stories of daily life rather than as formal interviews. When participants felt confident, I started raising questions around my research themes. I visited participants’ homes when their spouses were not present, or met them on the field where they were working, talked with them while they were working in their garden, or on walked with them on their way home from work. Sometimes, when questions touched on sensitive issues and the participants did not want to respond, I shifted to other issues that were less sensitive and came back when I had chance.

With male participants, my background as a medical doctor helped me a lot in overcoming the hesitations and embarrassment of the participants during the interviews. Since, I was a female researcher, I was a woman in their mind. However, with a female doctor, male participants could talk more confidentially.

6- Data processing and analysis

Data was processed by hand. In fact, the preliminary phase of analysis was begun during data collection period. The terms, cultural norms and codes, which were used by participants, were analyzed and translated into English after every day of fieldwork.
Because of the limitation of the time, I asked my assistant to transcribe the tapes and then I checked and listened repeatedly many times to decode the slang language. To avoid missing information, all tapes recorded were listened to and checked again when the information had not been clear. All data was read over many times and was marked up with different colored highlighter pens on hard copy as well as on the computer. They were cut and sorted into different groups of information. All groups of information were named and put into different files. All files were read again to look for subcategories and relationships between categories and subcategories. Based on research themes, data were categorized and condensed.

7. Ethical considerations

I know the research itself might harm my participants if it is published under their real names. Thus, all information has been kept confidential and anonymous. I am the only one who knows the real name of the participants and their identity. I changed participants’ names and identities when using their information. To ensure confidentiality all appointments and meetings between researcher and informants were kept secret. I did not try to coerce participants to get information if they did not want to continue participating in the research. Fortunately, no participants withdrew from the research when the interviews brought up sad or painful experiences. They tended to share their painful and sad experiences with me when they felt confident. I discussed the sensitive topics with them and gave advice on how to protect themselves and their children and to keep them safe, if they are abused or violated by their husbands. For instance, we worked out a plan on where they should go, whom they should call for help if they are violated, or what they should do to prevent or avoid violation. (See consent form in the appendix)

At the end of the fieldwork, I held a meeting with local authorities to report the general situation concerning violence and to discuss with them the solutions to help people who were abused.
CHAPTER III

Cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity

To understand gender relations and its complex interaction with violence and sexual coercion, we have to look at it from and within the cultural context of Vietnamese society in general. Gender inequity in Vietnam is predominately influenced by remnants of feudal ideology. In an early age, girls are taught to do housework. They are required to be obedient and submissive. Boys on the other hand, receive better care, do less housework, are treated with more kindness and are educated in order to advance in society. In many poor families, girls are prevented from going to school in order to work as laborers to help to pay for the schooling of their brothers. This practice originates in the preference for sons who can continue the lineage, provide for their parents and look after their ancestors after death. Discrimination between girls and boys begins in childhood and continues from one generation to the next. The notion that females and males are not equal is rooted deeply in minds of both men and women and it is accepted and expected from as early as childhood that females do not have the same rights as males.

Yet, Vietnamese society has been changing as does culture. The Government set up policies and programs that have begun to address gender equity in the family, community and society. Gender inequity is eliminated little by little, especially in the urban areas where women nowadays have more power than in the past. In many institutional settings, women also hold important positions, and women's voices are as strong as those of men in some decision-making processes. However, in many rural areas, patriarchal ideology is still powerful. Women are required to follow moral standards, which originate in feudal ideology. While having an equal de jure position, their de facto position is lower than that of men and they are not equal in reality. Women also have less power than men in the family and community. As a result, rural women cannot always exercise their sexual rights and freedom.

In the past models of sex roles have been fairly rigid and based on the assumption that sex and gender roles for males and females are socially and culturally proscribed and that people are socialized into it in similar ways. (Connell 1987: 191-2). According to Henrietta Moore, gender identity is more complex than just being the result of being
exposed to and complying with one’s own ‘culture’ and its construction of gender. Masculinity and femininity is rather mediated through practically living our lives. In this process people do comply with and accept some of the cultural expectations around their gendered roles, but they can also resist and change it (Moore 1994: 56). At the same time it is not always equally easy for everyone to resist gendered expectations, particularly not when, like the married rural Vietnamese women, patriarchal ideologies and practices have such a long historical and religious past and are still extant.

It is now widely accepted that masculinities and femininities are socially and historically constructed, and that men and women have active parts in the construction of gendered identities. Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (1994) stress that gender differences are continuously created, transformed and contested in interactions every day. Yet these interactions are not neutral negotiations between equals. Unequal power relations are the pervasive part of it. If the notions of masculinity and femininity, like the notion of gender itself, are fluid and situational, we have to consider various ways people perceive masculinity and femininity in any particular setting. Exploring the notions of masculinity and femininity in a specific cultural setting will provide comprehensive knowledge of gendered identity and power relationships between men and women.

By examining the notions of masculinity and femininity, I tried to understand how gender identity creates power relationship between a husband and a wife. The notions of a good husband and wife also revealed expectations and requirements concerning spouses in the community. These norms and notions provided insightful understandings of cultural context, where sexual coercion occurs.

1- Femininity and Masculinity

1.1- Femininity:

Passivity, dependence, submissiveness and tenderness as well as bearing men’s violence represent femininity in the rural area where I conducted this study. A ‘real’ woman should embody these characteristics. In addition, she must take responsibility for her husband’s reputation, housework, reproduction, taking care of children and supporting
her husband by working in the field. In sexual relationships, a ‘real’ feminine woman restrains her sexual desires and is sexually passive.

A good wife:

A good wife is firstly a real woman and is feminine. She behaves in a feminine way, knows how to properly take care of her children, husband and parents-in-law. She must be obedient and never refuse her husband’s sexual demands. She is expected to be tender and calm. She must not fight with her husband when he gets angry, but know how to calm him down. Nam said proudly about his wife:

“My wife is really feminine. She is a good wife. We have lived with each other more than 17 years, but we do not have many quarrels as other couples. She knows I have a violent temper. So, she dare not say anything when I am angry. Sometimes, I scold her because of nonsensical reasons but she still keeps silent. When I get drunk, she takes care of me very well and carefully. She is very tender, so we do not have many quarrels.”

(Nam, a 42 years old man)

In a sexual relationship, a good wife is expected to satisfy her husband’s sexual desires. She should not refuse her husband’s sexual requirements, even when he gets drunk, because it is her responsibility to keep harmony in her family. A feminine woman is expected to know how to gently restrain her husband but also to bear the problems and troubles he creates for her and her family. Whenever conflicts occur in a family, women are always blamed. People believe that, if a woman is ‘good enough’ her husband cannot be mad or get angry:

“A good woman knows how to keep harmony in a family. If she is wise and good enough, her husband cannot get mad or angry with her. She should not fight against or reject her husband when he is angry or when he gets drunk, because men have hot temper. They cannot control themselves when they are angry or drunk. Because of that, women who are born tender, calm and bearable should keep men calm, otherwise men and women cannot live together ... if a woman lets other people know they have quarrels, people will not do anything to but only laugh at her for being a bad woman.”

(Linh, 47 years old man)
To be a good wife, a woman also has to be a good mother. A woman is required to dedicate all her life for her husband and children. This is also considered as a trait of femininity. In the *Search of our bodies* in India, Dietrich and Gabriele (1987) mention the terms of motherhood and the notion of femininity as means of patriarchal ideology to control women’s body and women’s sexuality. They say ‘women were born into ‘motherhood’ ... a woman’s physical existence does not underlie her own control. She is meant to pour her love out to her children and to concentrate all her physical desires on marriage and husband.’

1.2- Masculinity:

Activeness, aggressiveness and domination are perceived as masculine. A man who is considered to be “manly” should exhibit those characteristics. He has to become a leader of his family and a breadwinner. A “real” man will not allow his wife to make decisions in his family without his consent. He should be able to make decisions whether his wife accepts them or not. Being active in sexual relations and drinking alcohol are also seen as masculine. A man who does not drink alcohol or who cannot control his wife is seen to be weak and not a real man:

“If a man does not know how to teach his wife, he is not the real man.”

(Hung, a 40 years old man)

A good husband:

Similar to the notion of a good wife, a good husband is defined as being a “real man”. He knows how to teach his wife to make her respect him. He cannot allow her to ‘sit on his head’. Both male and female participants agreed that the above descriptions are the characteristics of a good husband. However, women also said that a good husband should not always get drunk. He should also not violate or force his wife to have sex and he should concern himself on his wife’s feelings when having sex. It was apparent from the FGD’s that women were often maltreated, violated and coerced. They were not respected in sexual relationships.
The notions of masculinity and femininity and the perceptions of what being a good wife and husband entail, contribute to the fact that men’s violation or abuse of their wives is condoned. Women are always blamed if there is conflict in the family. As a result, women were more constrained by cultural norms and patriarchal ideology and practices than men. They were expected to accept their fate as females and thus are considered to be moral and virtuous.

2- Decision-making in sexual relations

1.1- The main decision maker in a family

Because of the notions of gendered identity, men are considered to be the main decision makers in the family and women are supposed be obedient and submissive to their husbands. Both men and women who participated in FGDs and in-depth interviews said that men have more power and rights than women to make decisions in their families. Women have some decision making power in relation to the household such as buying food, or clothes for children, raising poultry and such. Men decide about matters, which are supposed to be male concerns such as building a house, buying a television, planning and raising an income for their families:

“I decide on almost all things, my wife decides on matter related to housework such as purchasing poultry, clothes for children or buying food. I decide when or how to build a house, or TV, purchasing buffalo or cow... sometimes I discuss with my wife before making decision but not always... Women have limited knowledge on matters belonging to men. So, sometimes I make decision although my wife does not agree.”

(Giang, a man 47 years old)

“ The man is always the head of family; he has to make the decisions. Sometimes, he asks for my opinion, but I always follow his decisions. I can make decision on unimportant matters such as buying pigs or poultry, but I cannot decide to buy a cow... But, if my husband does not agree I will not do it. I have to keep harmony in my family. I cannot make decisions by myself; yet my husband can because he is the husband.”

(Hue, a woman 35 years old)
In both FGDs and in-depth interviews, men said that they usually have discussions with their wives before making a decision. However, the meaning of having such “discussions” was disclosed when I interviewed both men and women. Informing a wife about a decision was commonly understood to be a discussion:

“I always discuss with my wife before making decisions... I raise issues and my wife has to follow me, my wife has lower education than me, she has limited knowledge, and she is also younger than me, so she cannot make the right decisions.”

(Nam, 36 years old man said)

“I know it should be equal between husband and wife in making decision, so I always ask my wife’s ideas before doing something. However, it is not necessary to get her agreement in everything because in some field women do not have knowledge as broad as men do. So I just tell her what I am going to do.”

(Phuong, a 39 years old man)

Most participants said that men normally made decisions by themselves before informing their wives about it. If their wives did not agree with them, they would either ignore or try to get their wives’ agreement by many different ways:

“My husband beats me if I do not listen to him”.

(Ngan, 43 years old, a case study woman)

“My husband always tell me before doing something. Sometimes, I did not agree with him, but I could not reject. He always said women had limited mind. If I reject him, he still did it, but he would be angry because I did not support him... In contrast, I dare not do anything without my husband’s agreement. I have to keep harmony in my family.”

(Hue, a 35 years old woman)

In this context, women are required to be submissive and follow their husbands’ orders and to agree with their decisions. They have to accept them to avoid troubles in their families. The decision-making in families emphasizes men’s domination. They do not only have power and authority over women within the family setting but also control women’s bodies. As a result, women could not freely make decisions even in when it concerned their own sexual and reproductive health.
1.2-Making decision on sexual and reproductive issues

Because of men’s domination, women cannot make decisions regarding their own reproduction. Both male and female participants said that husbands and wives had to agree on reproductive matters such as the number of children they wanted to have, the time to have children or the space between children. In reality, women had to accept their husbands’ decisions on reproduction, as was the case in relation to other family matters.

“I have four girls. I do not want to have more children, but my husband wants me to give him one more son. He said he needed a son to maintain lineage and worship his ancestors after he died. If I could not give a son, he would look for another woman who could give him a son.”

(Tam, a 43 years old woman)

Women cannot decide freely to choose the contraceptive methods they prefer:

“We have five children, my wife wanted to apply female sterilization but I did not agree. I told her to use IUD. She did not listen to me, so I beat her.”

(Giang, a 47 years old man)

One of many reasons why men tried to have a say in the contraceptive use of their wives was to constrain women’s sexuality. An example is that of Linh, a 33-year-old man, who said that he did not want his wife to use any modern contraception:

“I can apply withdraw method. I do not want my wife use IUD because I usually go away from home several days for working. If she use IUD, she could easily follow another man...”

In Linh’s opinion, if a woman used the IUD, she would not have to be concerned with pregnancy when having sex. This will enable her to have illicit affairs. The opinion of Linh might be not representative of the ideas of all other local men, but is not very exceptional either. I mention it because it is one of many ways in which men control women’s sexuality. As a result, women cannot have a free choice to concern themselves on their own reproduction. They often do not even have a negotiated choice. The fear of
unwanted pregnancy makes women to be unable to enjoy and satisfy their sexual desires:

“I wanted to use an IUD but my husband disagreed. He applies the withdrawal method. I always worry that I will become pregnant. So when he comes to (have sex) me, I cannot enjoy it when we did it (have sex). If I enjoy too much, maybe he could not control himself and I would get pregnant.”

(Van, a 41 years old woman)

3- Sexual relationships between husband and wife

2.1- Role of women in sexual relationships:

As described above, to be feminine, women are supposed to be shy, tender and passive. As a woman, a wife should neither play an active role nor take the initiative in sexual relationships. Women are required to accept the sexual demands of their husbands, whether they want to have sex or not:

“I do not know if she enjoys it or not. She always keeps silent. But she is my wife, a woman cannot refuse her husband’s sexual want.”

(Ngo, a 30 years old man)

Women rarely approach their husbands when they have sexual desires. Many women said that they had to restrain their sexual urges and could not indicate to their husbands that they were feeling desired. A few women tried to express their sexual needs in unobtrusive ways such as wearing attractive and sexy nightclothes; others pretended to take care of their husbands such as helping their husbands to hang up the mosquito net, or preparing a nice dish of food for their husbands at night. However, it is not easy for many other women to do so because they live in the same house with many members of their husbands’ family. None of the women felt that they could be active and take the initiative in sexual relations with their husbands.

Yet, meeting a husband’s sexual desires is considered to be a responsibility of the wife. As a wife, a woman is responsible for meeting her husband’s sexual needs whether she wants to have sex or not:
"... Sometimes he wakes me up in the middle of the night, and I feel really irritated, but I try to satisfy him because I know I am his wife."

(Van, a 41 years old woman)

"She is my wife, she can refuse me sometimes, but not many times."

(Ngo, a 30 years old man)

"I do not like sex, sometimes, I am so tired and I do not want to have sex but I cannot not refuse my husband because I am his wife."

(Hong, a 32 years old woman)

Accepting a husband's sexual demands is also considered as an expression of love from a wife:

"If a wife loves her husband, she never refuses him."

(Giang, a 47 years old man)

"If I refuse, my husband says that I do not love him. He said I do not want to have sex with him because I still think of my ex boyfriend..."

(Thi, a 27 years old woman)

2.1-Role of men in sexual relationship:

Since playing an active role in sexual relationships is considered as manliness, men always take the initiative in sex. When they have sexual needs they go to their wives. Men, who are not sexually aggressive, are considered weak. Generally, husband and wives sleep separately and in different beds after they have the second child (read chapter V). Men only come to their wives when they have sexual desires. They can satisfy their sexual needs whenever they want, because it is thought to be normal for men to take the initiative in sex. However, it is deemed abnormal if women are sexually active or demanding towards their husbands. Thus, it is very difficult for women to express their sexual need:
“Sometimes, I want sex, but I cannot go to him (go to his bed to have sex). If my husband wants sex, he will come to me, if he does not want to have sex, then I have to restrain my sexual desires... If I go to him, he will have bad thoughts about me. He might think that I have excessive sexual desires or that I am a lascivious woman...”

(Hue, a 35 years old woman)

“I am a woman, and I would feel shy and shameful if my husband knew that I wanted sex.”

(Ngoc, a 31 years old woman)

When men want sex, they go to their wives to satisfy themselves. They do not concern much about women’s sexual desires and willingness:

“... My husband never ask me if I like it or not, when he wants, he comes and does it (intercourse). He does not wait for me (ejaculate after she has orgasm); he finishes it when he arrives (has an orgasm.) I want to tell him but I cannot, it is so shameful if I say I want more... Sometimes, I did not like it but he did it so long, I felt tired and painful... I do not like sex much, but I have to satisfy him when he wants because I am his wife...”

(Minh, a 27 years old woman)

There is lack of reciprocity and considerateness towards each other in sexual relationships between husbands and wives. Women are not able to either refuse sex or to expect that their own sexual desire will be satisfied or can even be expressed:

“How could I enjoy sex with him when he just scolded me and beat me just few minutes before doing it? When he wanted, he came and did it (intercourse) as animal. He never concerns if I want it or not.”

(Ngan, 43 years old woman, a case study)

2.3-Notions of sexual desire and pleasure of male and female:

In both male and female FGD groups, participants were convinced that men had more sexual desire than women. Hence, it was seen as obvious and normal for women not to have sexual wants or to feel a need for such pleasure:
“My wife does not like sex much. It is normal because women do not enjoy sex as much as men... in ten times we have sex, she has pleasure around two to three times. I think it is good enough for women.”

(Linh, a 33 years old man)

“I do not like sex. My husband said I have a problem. I do not think so. I do not see anything wrong if I do not like sex. I still meet his sexual demand when he wants it...”

(Hong, a 32 years old woman)

“I do not think women can have pleasure every time they have sex... I do not know but I think women are not interested in sex as much as men. Thus, it is normal if women have pleasure around 3 to 4 times out of ten times having sex. Normally, women accept their husband’s sexual desires because they love their husband than they want it.”

(Giang, 47 years old man)

While a woman is required to meet her husband’s sexual desires, she should not have much sexual desire herself. A woman who has a great deal of desires is considered to be bad. It is assumed that women cannot control their own desire and will easily have sex with other men:

“It is very bad if a woman has much sexual desire. She might follow other men if her husband cannot meet her sexual wanting.”

(Ngheim, 43 years old man)

There is a contradiction in men’s expectations concerning women’s sexuality. While women are required not to have much sexual desire and keep their sexuality secret, they should also be compliant and even enthusiastic and active when having sex. However they should not be too active either:

“It would be nice if women are active in their sexuality sometimes, but it should not be too much.”

(Duc, a 36 years old man)

“My wife is never active and takes initiative in having sex... I am very happy if she is, but if she is too active I will feel very bad, because it means that she has much sexual
demand, so she might be adulterous if I go away from home... Sometimes, I feel a little bit sad because she never comes to me, but I think it is better than she has so much sexual wanting.”

(Phuong, a 39 years old man)

This contradiction pushes women into a dilemma. If women are active and take initiative in having sex, they will be regarded as bad, because they have an excess amount of sexual desire. Yet, women are expected to satisfy their husbands’ sexual desires and sometimes even to be active in their sexual relationship. How can women know what is the limit? This context reveals how cultural perceptions reinforce the notion of natural differences between men and women. Bourdieu (2001, p. 8-14) says that men’s domination is an agreement between cognitive structures and social structures. Women’s status identified by cultural construction, opposite to that of men, is perceived as natural and normal in society. Therefore, sexual abuse, coercion or violence against women is difficult to be recognized.

Domestic violence, including sexual coercion, undermines women’s sexual and reproductive autonomy and jeopardizes their health. The female respondents expressed a sense of vulnerability to unwanted pregnancies, especially when they were forced to have sexual intercourse without using contraception because of fear about their husbands’ reactions. In this cultural setting, marriage is apparently interpreted as granting men the right to unconditionally sexual access to their wives and the power to enforce this access through force if necessary (Sen, 1999). This eliminates the sexual autonomy of women and makes them unable to refuse unwanted sex or to use contraception. This in turn, exposes them to the risk of unwanted pregnancies.

Through pervasive patriarchal ideology and gendered relations women and men are viewed as opposites. Women are socialized and constructed to be passive, tender, harmonious, and subservient. These attributes become part of the ways in which women deport themselves. Behaving themselves and physically bearing their husbands’ violation in such feminine ways are seen as moral and as ‘good women’. Contrastingly, men are supposed to be natural leaders, decisive, and active. They are easily filled with sexual desire. The bodies of their wives are the vehicles through which they can deal with their
own physical need. Masculine husbands need sex, feminine wives submit to them. According to Bourdieu (2001) these are examples of symbolic violence, or the many unchallenged and accepted ways in which masculine domination is seen as the natural order of things.

As a result, women exercise less power to make decisions, not only on matters in their families but also in relation to their own bodies. Patriarchal ideology is so pervasive that not only do males internalize gender ideologies but females also believe that they have to service their husbands’ sexual requirements as a marital duty. The control husbands exert over their wives’ reproductive capacity and sexuality is part and parcel of patriarchal ideology and gender inequality. However, because of cultural norms and moral standards, women cannot fight against the sexual coercion or even express their own sexual health needs. Suffering sexual coercion in marriages is considered to be a virtue of women. In short, discrimination between men and women in the community is one of the main reasons leading to sexual coercion in marriage. In the next chapter, I will present how cultural norms and moral standards, which basically are gender issues, relate to sexual perceptions and behavior leading to sexual coercion and violence.
CHAPTER IV

Morality, honor and violation

The perceptions of morality, honor and shame are differently constructed in various cultural settings. Yet, in any setting, the notions of morality, honor and shame are not separate from sexuality. Especially in this society, where men are dominant, these kinds of notions contribute to the control over women’s body and women’s sexuality. Female virginity and chastity are idealized. According to Gilmore, “The correlative emphasis on female chastity and the desirability of premarital virginity remains strong throughout the region despite modernization.” (1987a: 3). However, in the cultural setting constructed by patriarchal ideology, women are more strictly required to follow moral standards and also take responsibility for their husbands’ reputation. If women fail to protect their morality or the reputation of their husbands, they are considered to bring shame to her family and therefore they are vulnerable.

In this chapter, I try to illustrate how moral standards and cultural norms conceptualized by gendered ideology are involved in the sexual behavior of couples. I will show how the notions of shame and honor related to violence and take away women’s sexual autonomy.

1- Moral standards and virtue of a woman

A woman, who is considered to have high moral standards, behaves decently (doan trang). She always pays attention to her behavior when in contact with other people, especially with men. She should not think about or have close contact with other men, except her husband. She does not stay in private spaces or have intimate talks with men. A decent woman never hangs around places where men usually gather. She should not wear sexy clothes nor express any sexual desire, either verbally or nonverbally in public or private places.

An unmarried woman should be a virgin. A chaste woman is required to know nothing about sex before marriage. This is considered as proof of her mental and physical virginity. The less knowledge a woman has about sex before marriage, the purer and more virginal she is, and the higher her moral standards are deemed to be:
“She was very innocent when I married her. She knew nothing about sex. (Hai expressed his pride when talking about this) The first time we had sex, my wife was so scare. I think my wife was educated in a good family breeding (gia dinh gia giao). She never thought about sex before marriage. Through the ways she wore clothes, and the way she contacted when we met each other when we were still boy and girlfriend, I knew that she was a good girl...”

(Hai, a 36 years old man)

Because of the conceptions of morality and virtue, many women became stigmatized when they ‘fail’ the moral standards set up for women. They become subjects for gossip and are insulted as immoral women. Such a woman is considered to bring shame to her family and to blacken the honor and reputation of her parents. If a woman is not a virgin when she marries, her husband and other people will despise her. This can influence her mental picture of herself and also her sexual life after marriage. Not only other people, but also she always think of herself as an immoral and unchaste woman and she does not have right to fight for her sexual rights:

“When I was at age seventeen my husband loved me, I did not know anything about sex. One night he asked me to go out with him and he coerced me to do it, he said, it was love. I felt painful but I loved him, so I tolerated for him. After that I got pregnant. My family cursed me, his family did not want him to marry me, and they said that I was a bad girl. If I could easily offer their son sex, I would also do the same with other men. I cried so much but did not know what to do... When I gave birth, the child looked after his father so much. My husband still loved me and he came to bring me to his house. We did not have a wedding. All members in his family look down me. If I do something wrong they insult me, (she said in strangled voice)... They acted as if they bestowed a favor on me when they accepted me become their daughter-in-law. As you know, when people know you have sex before marriage, they will look down you; they will think you are an easy woman. And the man, who makes you pregnant, will abandon you when he knows you get pregnant. I’m very lucky; my husband did not abandon me. I am grateful to him for that so I tried to satisfy him.”

(Thu, 27 years old, case study woman)

The accepted notions of morality and virtue make it almost impossible for women to
express their sexual desires or wanting. If a woman expresses or displays more knowledge of sexuality than her husband, she is thought to lack virtue. It is supposed that a woman, who has much sexual desire, is lascivious and immoral. In FGDs, both males and females said that a woman who has much sexual desire is a person who takes the initiative in having sex and expresses her sexual desire more than her husband. By extension, she is also lack of morality. These ideas affect the sexual behavior and actions of both men and women in sexual relationships. Being a woman, who has high moral standards, she has to restrain sexual desires. As a result, sexual decision making for women hardly exists. They cannot refuse their husbands because they are required to be ‘good women’. They cannot satisfy their sexual needs because they are afraid to be criticized.

2- Abuse and violation is perceived as "teaching"

It is believed that men have the right to teach their wives. The term “teaching” can also involve the violent behavior of a man who violates or abuses his wife:

“As a husband, a man should know how to teach his wife. As the saying goes “Teaching children when they are infants, teaching a wife when she just comes to a husband’s family (day con tu thu con tho, day vo tu thu bo vo moi ve.) ”

(Hung, a 40 years old man)

Beating a woman is perceived as teaching her:

“I know that beating wife is not good, but to be a man- a man knows how to teach his wife- if he pampers his wife, accepts what she wants, she will sit on husband’s head (leo len dau len co chong)It means that man cannot control wife if he does not know how to teach her.”

(Phuong, a 39 years old man)

Since it is believed that a husband is the leader of the family, his sexual violations are interpreted as part of his teachings. When men beat their wives they defend themselves by saying they are teaching them how to behave properly:
"If a woman does not know how to behave in the right ways, her husband has to teach her."

(Giang, a 47 years old man)

The same men’s opinion, in female FGDs, women also said that men could beat their wives, if their wives did something wrong, or had bad behaviors, which were not accepted by culture. They said that they would not blame their husbands and they would accept to be beaten if their husbands violated them because of sensible reasons. For example, if a wife has friendly contact with other men or she makes decisions without asking her husband’s agreement, or she quarrels with her parents-in-law, she deserved to be beaten. In these cases, people think that the violent behavior of the husband is a sensible action to teach his wife:

“My husband does not violate me. Since we have been married, he beat me only two times: one time I went to my mother’s house and stayed over night there without asking his agreement. Another time, he beat me because I did not listen to my mother-in-law, so my mother-in-law and I had quarrels. When my husband knew, he beat me; he said that I should not fight against his parents... I could not blame him because I was wrong, that time I was young, I did not know how to behave in proper way... I younger than my husband ten years old, I was married when nineteen, his parent said that, my husband had to teach me to know how to become a good wife and a good daughter-in-law.”

(A female participant of 28 years old in FGD)

Cultural conceptions and the notions of masculinity and femininity make both men and women believe that men have rights to teach their wives. Since violent behavior is perceived as teaching, so it is viewed as normal. As a result, violence against women tends to be tolerated and ignored by other people. Women have to accept their husbands’ violation as women’s fate.

3- Husband’s honor and shame

According to Nancy (1994), the notions of honor and shame construct various masculinities in terms of how much one can control women’s sexual behavior. They can also be used to inform different masculine identities in different contexts. (Nancy, 1994,
In the rural context, which I worked with, the ways that women react and behave when they are abused or violated are viewed as a part of their husband's honor and shame. Women are expected to be silent when being violated to keep honor for their husbands.

As I presented above, a good wife is required to know how to keep harmony in her family. If a woman lets other people know that her husband abuses or violates her, she is considered to bring shame to her family. And she will be blamed if she does not know how to keep silent to protect the reputation of her husband.

"A good wife should save face for her husband. Even though her husband did something wrong, she has to defend him..."

(Giang, a 47 years old man)

"She should be silent or avoid me, wait until I calm down... a wise woman should shut up when men get angry to avoid troubles... she cannot tell other people. We are husband and wife, if people laugh at me, they also laugh at her. A wise wife has to defend her husband’s honor."

(Hai, 36 years old man)

The silence of women in this context does not rely upon obvious and explicit forms of coercion or enforcement, but there are psychological motivations underlying this silence. The crucial feature of silence is both a consequence and an index of unequal distribution of power (Sheriff, 2000). According to Sheriff, ‘silence resembles discourse in its subjection to the broader pull of economic, political and cultural forces.’ The silence of women is not only to reveal explicitly their weakness, but also to implicitly show the ways the women's status is identified in the society.

In FGDs, the majority of the women participants said that they knew many women, who are violated by their husbands. However, when asked about the injuries and black and blue marks on their faces, they gave evasive explanations like they had hit something or they had fallen. They dared not tell the truth, even when people suspected it. The fear of shame and more violence, the need to be seen as good wives and general social pressure make women keep quiet:
“People help nothing, if my husband knows that I told other people that he violated me, he would beat me more, because he thought I made him lose face... In fact, I did one time, I told my parents that he beat me. My father told him that he should not beat me like that. He said I had become his wife since my parent married me off. Thus, my parent does not have any right to interfere our family affairs. He is a husband and he has the right to teach his wife. He told me it was acceptable if I told his parent but not my parent or any other people.”

(Thu, 27 years old, a case study)

In terms of sexuality, a husband’s honor and shame adhere to the capacity of controlling their wife’s sexual behavior. Men do not want their wives to contact or have any close relationship with other men (see Ngan case study.) or to be sociable. As I described above the term teaching is also identified as a sign of manliness. If a wife is unfaithful, her husband is seen not to know how to control his wife’s sexual behavior, and he is described as weak, shamed and dishonored:

“When I went a way from home for months, I heard that sometimes people saw my ex-wife talking with her ex-boyfriend on the street ... They said that, I was a cuckolded man, I was unable to teach my wife and she cuckolded on my head. I felt shameful.”

(A 43 years old male participant)

According to Nanda and Warms (1998:209-10), most men counter potential infidelity by adhering to an image of masculinity such as competing with other men in public, powerful, dominant, aggressive sexuality and trying to succeed in warfare. They fear infidelity because it would emasculate them and ruin their family’s honor. According to Bourdieu (2001:51), manliness is understood not only as “sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and exercise violence”. This is a male duty. Female honor can only be defended or lost because her virtue relates to virginity or faithfulness. Male honor can be increased by control and violence. Women are weak and they also represent the vulnerability of male honor. Thus men tend to abuse or violate women if women fail to protect their husbands’ honor.
3- “Family affairs”

Abuse and violation in the family are viewed as family affairs, which are supposed to be dealt with between husband and wife. Because the notion of honor and shame, women are expected not to reveal family matters to other people:

“My husband always beats me. One time, I could not stand his violation, so I called for help from my neighbors. When some people came, my husband cursed at them, he said that my neighbors poked their noses into our family affairs. After that no one wanted to interfere in my family affairs anymore.”

(Thu, a 27 years old woman, case study)

If a woman tells other people that her husband violates her, it is considered as “brining family affairs to tell other people,” and is regarded as bad behavior for women:

“A woman who brings “family affairs” to tell other people is stupid, because she is smearing the reputation of her husband.”

(Giang 47 years old man)

If a woman tells others about conflicts in their family, the conflicts would increase. Her husband is not supposed to tolerate such shame and indiscretion by his wife. Thus, she might be abused or violated more:

“...She has to keep silent, I do not tolerate for her if she brings our family affairs to tell other people. Husband and wife should close door to teach each other.”

(Linh, a 33 years old man)

Since the conflicts, abuse and violence in families are viewed as family affairs, women cannot reject or fight against them or ask for help from other people when they are abused or violated. If they do so, their husbands will accuse and blame them. In addition, they are afraid that other people will know and laugh at their families. Consequently, women suffer their husbands’ abuses and violence in silence:
"When he abuses or violates me, I keep silent, avoid him, run out, hide somewhere and wait until he calms down. I do not want to go to neighbors’ houses, I am afraid that other people will know we are having a quarrel. I should save face for my husband. If people laugh at him, they also laugh at me, when you are married; husband and wife becomes a unit. If you tell other people your “family affairs”, they help nothing but gossip. I told his parents once about his behavior with a hope that they would teach him, but they could not help much... My husband did not want me to tell my parents about his violent behavior, if I did that, he would be very angry because he would think, I did not protect his honor. Therefore, I stand him myself, I dare not share my unhappiness with any one else. I afraid they gossip and they will have bad thinking about my family.”

(Thi, a 27 years old woman)

The norm of *family affair* is conceptualized by cultural construction of men’s domination as the means to control over women. Such cultural perception combines with violence that makes women to conceive themselves as subordinate and voiceless. Consequently, women cannot fight to obtain their rights as equal as that of men.

4- Sex is a sensitive issue in Vietnamese culture

Sex is an extremely sensitive issue. It is true not only in the community where the study was conducted, but also in Vietnamese culture. When I said I would do research on sexuality, all my Vietnamese friends expressed their doubts. They were afraid that I could not get information because people had cultural restraints talking about sexual issues with other people.

In the community, where I did the study, sexuality was thought to be a very private, shameful, secretive, and bad, particularly in relation to women. Many people were very shy and kept silent in the first minutes when I mentioned sexual issues. In in-depth interviews, I could not get much information at the first meeting. In FGDs, men and women were embarrassed, abashed and quiet when I told them that I would like to discuss matters related to sexual life. However, when people started talking about cultural norms, the notions of a good husband and a good wife, the sexual issues came out. Some people refused to participate in the study because they felt embarrassed to talk about sex. Many participants said that they had never talked about sex with anyone before, even with their
spouses:

"I have never talked with others about sex as I am talking with you. I am afraid that they will not understand and think about me as a bad woman. They might think I like sex and concern about sex so much. Your mind is not healthy if you concern much about sex."

(Minh, a 27 years old woman)

Hong, a woman of 35 years of age, is very shy, did not talk much and was very embarrassed. I thought I had failed to get information from her at our meeting, although I avoided talking about sex in the first fifteen minutes of the conversation. She only smiled and kept silent or responded in very short answers. I suggested if she did not feel comfortable with the cassette recorder, I would switch it off. She said it was okay. The cassette was no problem, but she found it difficult to talk about sex. I felt frustrated, so I ended the conversation. I suggested taking her home on my motorbike, because it was raining heavily and her house was quite far from the place we had the interview. She agreed. On the way home, my motorbike broke down, so we walked. I told her that I sympathized with her and understood why she found it difficult to talk about sex. After I shared some of my own experiences on sexual issues, she started talking a bit about her sexual life. In the conversation, Hong said:

"This is the first time in my life I have talked about sex with other people. I have never talked about sex before, even with my husband. I am so shy and ashamed when talking about it. I think sex is something very secretive. It should be known only between husband and wife.... I have been married for ten years but I dare never change my clothes in front of my husband..."

I asked her how she could have sex if she did not dare to be naked in front of her husband, she said,

"It always happens in the dark, my husband cannot see any thing... I feel more confident if my husband cannot look at my body."

Not only women restrain when talking about sex, but also a few men do. During conversations with me, Bao, a man of 37 years, mostly kept silent, he was very shy and
his face turned red when I mentioned matters related to sex. After I closed my interview, I accompanied him to his house, I asked him on the way home why he was so quiet, he said:

“I’m very nervous, this is the first time in my life someone asked me about sexual matters. I never talked about it even with my wife. It is difficult to talk and I feel so shy. Sex is something very private and you cannot tell other people... if I talk about sex with other people they will think that I am a bad man. In this community, if you bring sexual issues to discuss or ask other people they would think you have dark thoughts; (dau oc den toi, brain stain or stain thought) they would assume that you always think about sex.”

People were afraid that other people would think they had excessive sexual desire if they were concerned about sex. Hai, a man of 36 was very embarrassed when he tried to tell me that he wanted me to see his wife because he thought she was frigid (the term he learned from a magazine.) He said,

“You should not think that I am a bad man or have much sexual desires or too much concern about sex, but my wife does not like sex and I want improve it... Many times I wanted to get consultation from other people, but I did not know whom I should ask and where I should go. I was afraid people would think I have much concern about sex if I ask them.”

Since sexuality is conceptualized as shameful, people do not discuss sexual issues with each other, even though they are husbands and wives. They dare not share sexual knowledge or experiences because they are afraid other people will criticize their concern with sexuality. Most people never read books written on sexual issues or watch sex movies because they think it is immoral and depraved behavior. Few people, who read these kinds of books said that, they had to hide from other people when reading because they were afraid others would know and think badly about them. This leads to the lack of understanding of sexual desires, willingness and sexual satisfaction between husband and wife in sexual relationships. It also makes people have limited knowledge and experiences regarding sexuality, which contributes to sexual coercion in marriage. (See item 3, chapter V.)
5- Sexual behaviors are taboo in public.

Expressing sexual behavior such as kissing, hugging or touching each other in the presence of other people is unacceptable. It is rare to see couples walking hand in hand in public in rural areas, especially in the community, where this study was conducted. Even though they are husband and wife, they should avoid intimacy in the presence of others:

"We never stroke or intimate each other with the witness of other people. If you do that other people will think you are not good."

(Van, a 41 years old woman)

Thu, a 27 years old woman said she had been married for ten years. She had never showed any signs of intimacy with her husband in front of others. When they lived with her parent-in-law, once, after having worked very hard, she wanted to take a rest at noon. Her bed was in the kitchen, where people had meals every day. It had no curtain and her husband was lying on it. She knew that she should not lie on that bed at the same time as her husband while other members of the family were around. But she was so tired and there was no other place for her to rest. So she went and lay down next to him. Although she was carefully keeping a space between her husband and herself, she immediately received looks of aversion from members of the family. Because of her exhaustion, she ignored them, but her mother-in-law said "Um... it is still broad daylight..." She was startled and jumped up from their bed. I asked Thu, "So it means that husband and wife can not sleep on the same bed on the daylight?" "Yes, you can if you have privacy room or your bed has a curtain on condition that no one can see you obviously." Thu said.

When I asked people about pornographic films, many said they had never seen it. The few people who had seen it, rejected this kind of movies and said it was very nasty and unacceptable:

"Sex should happen in the dark, it is a private issue, you cannot show it in public. I feel really bad for the girls on the movies... I married my wife 12 years, and she dare never change clothes in front of me. She is so shy, but in those films, women show their bodies in public, it is unacceptable."

(Phuong, a 39 years man)
The community where the study was conducted is the same as many rural areas in Vietnam. Sexuality is something behind closed doors and in private spaces. It is taboo in the public. Expressing sexual behavior in front of other people was considered as the lack of respect for those who witnessed it and as an indication of shamefulness. To conform to these perceptions about sexuality, people have to restrain their sexual need, especially women, because the cultural style of houses and general life conditions make them lack privacy in sexual relationships (presented in item 2, chapter V.)

All those cultural norms and perceptions emphasize on honor and shame related to women's sexuality. They were conceptualized based on gender discrimination of patriarchal and feudal ideology, which were constructed as men to be central. The control of men over women’s sexuality is explicit through the conceptions of the masculinity such as aggressive, active and dominant characteristics. It opposes the feminine concepts such as tender, passive and submissive characteristics. The morality and virtue are constructed by gender norms such as women should not have much sexual desire. They should not know anything about sex before marriage. Women belong to the home and men to the public places. All of those notions both explicitly and implicitly aim to control women’s sexuality and women’s body. The norms such as teaching and family affairs are means for men to dominate and enhance their power in families. Men protect their honor and reinforce their manliness by forcing women to be silent and submissive. Women’s bodies and women’s sexuality are confined in cultural perceptions such as virtue, moral standards and chastity. They are not only coerced to be silent by explicit forces but also by cultural construction.
CHAPTER V

From Unwilling Sex To Sexual Coercion

"I laid down and closed my eyes, let him do whatever he wanted. Deep in my heart I wished he could finish as soon as possible."

This quote is from Thi, a 27 years old woman, and the feelings that most female participants experience in their sexual life. To gain insightful comprehension of sexual coercion within marriage, we not only look at physical sexual abuse or coercion, but also look beyond it to understand women’s feelings and the meanings of their silence when they physically accept to have sex, but mentally they might not. This will help to answer the questions of how sexual coercion in marriage occurs and why women accept to be coerced in silence.

In chapter III and chapter IV, I discussed how gender issues and cultural norms influenced sexual perception and behaviors of men and women. In this chapter I am going to present: 1-How the notion of consent leads to unwilling sex. 2-The construction of the house limits privacy of the couples in sexual life. 3-The lack of sexual knowledge of couples leads incompatibility in their sexual relationships, which erodes sexual desires and pleasure of women. The content of this chapter combines with chapter III and IV will provide insightful knowledge of a cultural context, which sexual coercion occurs.

1- Notions of consent

1.1-Consent in making decisions

In chapter III, I introduced the decision-making process and power relations between husband and wife. Here, I want to illustrate the meaning of consent, both from male and female perspectives and try to illuminate the context of unwilling sex and sexual coercion.

According to men, a lack of resistance is understood as consent. In FGDs, men said that they were the main decision-makers in the family, but sometimes, they sought their
wives' agreement before making or carrying out decisions. The men described consent in the following ways:

"...If she does not resist, it means that she agrees."

(Linh, 33 years old man)

"... I tell my wife what I want to do, if she is silent, it means that she agrees."

(Phuong, 39 years old man)

Although males indicated that they sought their wives' agreement when carrying out decisions, yet they did not expect that the women would disagree or refuse. Taking decisions is seen as a male responsibility and prerogative:

"... I always raise an issue, and my wife cannot refuse, because I think I am right."

(Linh 33 years old man)

"I raise issues and my wife has to follow, I am a man, I know what should be done for the family."

(Nam, 36 years old man)

Nevertheless, from the women's perspective, not disagreeing or resisting does not necessarily mean that they consent. The authority given to men makes it very difficult for women to speak out. They keep silent to avoid troubles, which might be caused by a husband if a wife opposes his decisions:

"Sometimes, I do not agree with my husband, but I know he would not listen to me. Thus, it is better to be silent. If I resist, he still does what he wants but he will be angry if I do not support him."

(Minh, a 27 years old woman)

"Sometimes, I do not agree but I have to follow his decisions to keep harmony in my family."

(Ngoc, a 31 years old woman)
Because women feel that disagreeing it is not only futile but could also lead to disharmony, they seldom oppose the decisions made by their husbands. The silence of women is also a strategy to avoid violence. Men, in turn, understand the lack of resistance or silence though grudging acceptance of women as a kind of agreement. Yet, for the women, such acceptance of male decision-making power is not about being able to make a choice, it is more or less compulsory. Yet, the coercive nature of decision-making is concealed by cultural norms and practices which make women responsible for upholding moral standards, for being silent to protect their husbands' reputations or to maintain the family harmony. As I discussed in chapter III, keeping the family harmonious and being responsible for upholding the husband's honor is considered to be the wife's responsibility. If a woman rejects her husbands' decisions conflicts might occur and abuse and violence against women are almost inevitable. Even then, women are blamed, the faults are theirs, and they were too foolish or too ignorant to keep harmony in their families. Bearing with a husband's domination is seen as normal. Consequently, women are steered away the rights to say no.

1.2- Consent in sexual relationships

Since women cannot say no, they are easily abused and coerced in sexual relationships. However, such sexual coercion is not easily to be recognized, because it is disguised by love, morality, and virtue, all of which have gendered meanings and involve gendered practices.

In his own ethnographic work, Bourdieu (2004) shows that male domination is frequently so much in the part of everyday social practices that people do not even think about it and often do not see it as an inequity. The uneven relationship in making decisions thus is seen as normal and as the way things to be. Bourdieu sees this as a form of symbolic violence. It is the way, in which not only the difference in power between men and women is seen as natural and normal, but also analyses how the pervasive yet largely unseen violence are exercised through everyday practices in social life. He argues that we can only come to grips with this kind of violence by, for example, understanding the processes by which difference between males and females came to be seen as natural. In such a way, symbolic violence becomes the 'normal' way that things to be. Both women and men perpetuate these seemingly straightforward yet unequal gender relations and
especially women cannot really question it. This also makes it so difficult for women to avoid sexual abuse. Meeting sexual requirements of a husband is after all the responsibility of a wife. Thus, husbands interpret the silence or lack of resistance of their wives in sexual relationships as agreement to have sex. Husbands think they are not being coercive. In-depth interviews, many men said that they would not have sex if their wives did not agree:

"I do not do it (have sex) if my wife does not want."

(Ngheim, a 43 years old man)

Many men denied sexual coercion existing in their family. They said that they never coerced their wives:

"I never coerce my wife to do it, if she does not accept, I will give up. I might chase her on another day but not coerce."

(Hai, a 36 years old man)

"It is not nice to force a wife to have sex. We are husband and wife, living in the same house, if she does not want it on that day, she will want it on the next days. She cannot refuse forever, so it is not necessary to coerce her."

(Linh, a 33 years old man)

"I think sexual coercion rarely happens between husband and wife. It is not human behavior."

(Ngheim, a 43 years old man)

In men’s perspective, women are naturally shy, secretive and passive. Women never express their sexual desires or wants. (Presented in chapter III) They usually restrain their sexual desires and keep silent even though they want to have sex. Thus, it is normal when women do not respond enthusiastically or positively when having sex. According to men, women would refuse sex either verbally or by avoiding their husbands, putting a child between them and their husbands, or by saying that they were sick or menstruating and such. If a wife did not explicitly refuse sex or merely keep her silence, it was interpreted as a confirmation that they also wanted to have sex:
"If she does not refuse, or doesn’t react negatively, it means that she agrees. If she doesn’t want to, then she tries to avoid me... she lays my child in between her and I, or she pushes my hand back when I try to touch her."

(Phuong, 39 years old man)

In many interviews with men they repeatedly said that they never coerced their wives to have sex. However, when I asked them whether they sometimes recognized that their wives did not refuse sex but were not enthusiastic they said that this was normal for them:

"When I came to my wife, she did not refuse but she was not enthusiastic... Sometimes, she did not have any reaction even when I hug her; she lies still like a dead body..."

(Linh, a 33 years old man)

From the male perspective, women are not as interested in sex as much as men are, but they have the responsibility to meet their husbands’ sexual demands (presented in chapter III). Because of these perceptions men are not particularly concerned about the women’s feelings. They are mainly interested in satisfying themselves when they have sexual desires. They view the unenthusiastic responses of women as normal. Nonetheless, for the women there was little consent in sexual relationships:

"...I accepted him but not willingly, sometimes I felt, as I was tortured... I lay down and closed my eyes, and let him do whatever he wanted. Deeply in my heart, I wished he could finished as soon as possible..."

(Thi, a 27 years old woman)

The ways in which men obtained women’s agreement for having sex, demonstrate why women could not refuse the sexual demands of their husbands:

"... I could not refuse him, actually I did refuse him sometimes, but he was angry, he said that I had another man... he went out and did not come home for many days."

(Thi, 27 years old woman)

"If I refuse him, he would be angry, he scolded me and said I saved it for another man."

(Hoa, a 29 years old woman)
"I could not refuse him, especially when he had drunk alcohol, if I refused, he would drink more... and you know how much my husband is aggressive and violent when he gets drunk, so I have to accept him."

(Ngan, 43 years old woman, case study)

"I do not like sex, I invented reasons to refuse him sometimes but I cannot always refuse him because I am his wife... If you refuse your husband many times, he will be angry, he may not beat or scold you, but he might fed up and look for other woman... Thus, I tried to satisfy him."

(Van, a 41 years old woman)

Physically, it is difficult to see men coercing or forcing their wives to have sex, because they always get their wives’ ‘consent’. However, when looking at the feelings of women and the ways that men obtained the agreement of women in sexual relationships, sexual coercion is exposed. Cultural practices and embodied responses of women in relation to male domination created a context in which females were coerced into silence and acceptance. Women had few options to accept their husbands’ sexual requirements and thus to avoid troubles. Yet this is not really free choice or consent either. Sexual coercion could not only be perceived at the physical perspective, but it should also be recognized at complexly cultural context, within which women are coerced to have sex.

2-The construction of the house and sexual coercion

When I visited houses in Cam Hieu, I realized that the structure of the houses contributed to sexual coercion. In Vietnamese culture, extended families are common, especially in rural areas. In addition, a couple usually has many children. Hence, in a family with members of different generations, the construction of the house, lacking of private space limits the privacy of couples in their sexual lives.

"...We are sharing a house with eight other people, my parent in-law and my husband’s siblings... as you see, my house is very small and has three spaces, one is used for my parent, one is for the alter, and the other for my brother’s siblings and us. We did not have any private room. My bed was also used as a bench where all members in family
having meals. When I was tired or sleepy, I could not take a rest if other members in family still stayed up. The bed was so small and had no curtain; we dare not sleep on the same bed in the daylight."

(Minh, a 27 years old woman)

Almost all of the houses in Cam Hieu were built according to classical construction of Vietnamese house, which is called Nha ba gian (a house with three spaces.) The house is one big room, which is divided into three spaces. There is no wall between spaces. Three spaces are implicitly divided by the way that furniture arranged. The middle space is an altar to worship ancestors and deities. It is a sanctified space. Therefore, it has a curtain to prevent it from being polluted by the rest of the house and always kept to be the cleanest. The activities or behaviors, which are considered as impurity, are forbidden to occur in this space. For example, women are forbidden to sit or stay in this space when they are on menstruation because menstrual blood is considered dirty and makes the altar polluted. Actions such as violence or sexuality should not take place in this space, because it is considered as dirty behavior and will make the altar impure and sacrilegious. Thus, people never use the middle space for sleeping. Outside the curtain, in front of the altar is a set of table and chairs for visitors.

The other two spaces of the house on the right and left hand sides of the altar are beds for the members in family sleeping. The use of space is also gendered. Normally, the left space of the house is connected with the cooking areas, and the poultry and pigs are also kept inside this area. The left space is hence be easily polluted by cooking and animal, so it is seen as being dirty, impure and low status. Therefore, it usually belongs to women. If a family has many members, but the house is not big enough, the beds are also arranged in the cooking area for women. During the postnatal period of childbirth (normally, three and a half months) women are not even allowed to stay in the left space, because the other side of the left space is also connected to the altar. It is supposed that women’s body and delivery to be very dirty in childbirth and they will pollute the sanctified space. Therefore, during the childbirth time women usually stay in a cooking area.

The right space of the house is usually for men and elder people, who are out of reproduction age. This space of the house is seen purer and cleaner than the left space. If a couple lives with their parents and also their grandparents, they should not let their
parents or grand-parents sleep in the cooking area or in a space close to it. If they do, they will be perceived as not respecting the elder people. The use of space in the houses reveals the status of women in family and the symbols of gender identity. Women are considered to have lower status than men; women's bodies are connected to reproduction, which is viewed to be dirty and impure, especially when they are menstruating or giving childbirth. Thus, they are not allowed to stay in the spaces considered to be cleaner. Men and elder people have a higher status, their bodies more pure, so they can sleep in the better spaces in the house. In the past, this idea and practice were very heavy, nowadays the society changes a lot but still this idea and practice remains in many families.

The division of sexuality and other activities in daily life, according to gendered notions, illustrate that people perceive gender inequity as natural and inevitable phenomena of the opposition between men and women. As a result, women that are abused or violated is not seen abnormal.

The lack of privacy and sharing house with many people could potentially be a form of protection when women are violated, because other people cannot see what is happening, and intervene. However, sexual coercion or abuse is deeply rooted in people's minds as something that is natural and normal between husbands and wives. Thus, people tend to ignore them; they only intervene when violation occurs severely and physically. When violence occurs, only husband's parents or other men, who are considered to have power and higher status in family or clan, can interfere violence and dissuade abusers. Women never have right to interfere into these matters because women's voice in family and community is meaningless. However, it is not easy for other men, who also abuse and violate their wives, to stop an abuser from violating his wife. If they do so, the abuser might say they also 'teach' (violate) their wives, so why they interfere into his family affair.

The low level of physical violence or mental abuse and coercion occurs in every day life and in most families, thus, people do not think it should be intervened. Because of that, sexual coercion and violence still occur even though couples live in the same house with many other members of their families. The lower level of violation such as sexual abuse, coercion, or slap is seen as normal matters of daily life. The mental abuse or coercion cannot be recognized because it is perceived as the gendered symbol, the symbol of
masculinity and femininity (see chapter IV.)

The reasons why people prefer Nha ba gian is that it is very convenient for farmers in the harvest, wedding or in funeral occasions. In the harvest, people can use the whole house to store rice and corns, which have not dried when it suddenly rains. In this area, people usually dry farm products on their yards. In the occasion such as funeral and wedding, people can use the whole house as a big room to perform rituals and hold parties. However, the construction of the house is not conducive to creating a safe space for couples to explore their sexual life.

As I discussed in chapter IV, expressing sexual behavior in the presence of other people is seen unacceptable, shameful and bad. Thus, married couples cannot sleep together on the same bed without curtains or else risk being seen by other family members. Yet, because of economic conditions, few families have curtains surrounding the beds. Even though they have curtains, it is still difficult for couples to have sex when they want to, because they share a house with many different generations. In interviews with men and women, they said that they only had sex after midnight, when all other members in their families were well sleeping:

"... We have to wait until my mother and my children sleep well. Sometimes my mother goes to my neighbor's house to watch TV and then we do it."

(Linh, 33 years old man)

In the cultural context, where sex is very sensitive and shameful, the construction of houses contributes to sexual coercion and the women's inability to resist. Couples cannot have sex when other members in their family are awake. Nevertheless, after a hard working day on the fields with their husbands, women still have duties to take care of their children and to do all the housework in the evening. In contrast, husbands have chances to take a rest while their wives are working. Thus, after finishing all their chores, they are usually very tired, but it is time when their families are finally asleep and their husbands want sex. This created the situation that husband and wife did not have sexual desire at the same time. However, since meeting sexual demands of husbands is considered the responsibility of wives, husbands will not accept to be resisted their sexual
demand. If they refuse, the quarrels might occur and people in the family will know, women will be blamed as not good. As a result, women cannot refuse even thought they are exhausted and not willing to have sex.

"...Every day I come back from the farm and start cooking, prepare food for poultry and cattle, and it is often very late when I finish. ... Our bed was in kitchen, where people used to have meals.... When he wants sex, he comes to me. He used to come very late, when other people were sleeping very well. I had to work hard the whole day up to the midnight, so I did not have any other want except to sleep but I cannot refuse him... When he came, we dare not make noise because we were afraid that other people would wake up and knew what we were doing... I sleep with my child on a small bed, so it is difficult to enjoy. I don’t like sex in that situation. When he came, he did it very quickly, sometimes, I feel pain."

(Hue, a 35 years old woman)

Too many people sleeping in such three-space house exaggerates the lack of privacy and pushes couples into difficult situation to enjoy sex, especially women. Customarily, wives sleep with their children at least till they are ten to fifteen years old. If a couple has more than two children and the bed is not large enough, the husband has to sleep in a different bed. When I asked people why they do not let their children sleep in different beds so that husbands and wives can sleep together, they said that children need the love of their mother. A mother, who sleeps with her husband and lets her child sleeps alone, is selfish, and seeks affection only for herself and does not love her children. Therefore, sleeping with their children is the way to express the love of a mother to her children and it is the manner of a good mother (see a good wife in chapter III). This makes women lack the chance to express their affection and sexual desire with their husbands.

When a husband wants sex, he comes to his wife’s bed. In contrast, a wife cannot come to her husband if she has sexual demand because women are supposed to be passive and not to have much sexual desire. Hence, women always are pushed into passive situation, which creates an inequality in the satisfaction of sexual health need between men and women. Moreover, couples always worry that other people might know they are having sex, so they tend to finish as soon as possible. Men always play an active role in sex, yet they do not concern themselves much on women’s pleasure and sexual desires.
Consequently, women's sexual desires are not satisfied:

"... When my husband did it, I was so scared other people might hear. I was afraid they would know we were having sex; it is so shameful if other people know you have sex, so I could not enjoy it. My husband dare not make noise. Every thing happened in the dark and silence..."

(Minh, a 27 years old woman)

The construction of houses combined with sharing house with many people in extended family creates an atmosphere, which contributes to women's lack of enjoyment and unwillingness to have sex. It limits the ability of women to refuse or require having sex:

"I had slept in different beds with my wife since we have the second child, because my children have to sleep with her, and the bed is too small for four people. I came to her when I want it (sex). I asked her to go other place... If she did not go, I moved my children into my bed... sometimes, we had to go out of the house because someone in my family had not slept."

(Ngo, a 30 years old man)

"... We have stayed with my parent-in-law, I sleep in the kitchen with my two children, and my bed has no curtain. My husband has slept separately in another bed since I had the second child... when he wanted it; he came with me and pulled me to his bed. I could not resist, if I resist, we would fight and make noises, and other members in family would wake up and know what was going on, it was so shameful. Sometimes, I did not want to go with him, so he coerces me on my bed... one time his mother had not slept but he wanted it so he pulled me to the garden..."

(Van, a 41 years old woman)

Many women said they felt stressed and did not like having sex in that situation, but they could not refuse their husbands:

"I have five children, the oldest is 21 years old, she is married and they are living with me... My bed has no curtain and in the middle of the house. Sometimes, my children had not slept, but my husband wanted sex, he did it, I was so ashamed, I told him that I could
not enjoy because I was afraid they would see us, but he did not care... he said they could not see without the light. But I thought they might hear the noises. I was so ashamed and did not want sex in that situation but I could not refuse him. He said if I refuse, he would make noise and my children would know that we were having sex. Thus, I would rather keep silent to let him finish quickly than let my children know what we were doing.”

(Ngan, 43 years old woman a case study woman)

In the cultural context, where sex is extremely sensitive, the lack of privacy makes sex unpleasant for women. Yet, they have to satisfy their husbands’ sexual desires. For the women this kind of co-optation into sex was very coercive.

3- Lack of sexual knowledge

The limited amount of sexual knowledge leads men and women to be sexually incompatible. In the community where the study was conducted, there was no source of sexual information to educate people about sexuality and sex. Both men and women have limited knowledge on their own bodies and sexuality.

As presented in chapter III, men play an active role in sexual relationships. They require that their wives meet their sexual demands. Yet, men lack knowledge about sexuality and do not concern themselves much with women’s sexual desires and feelings. They are only interested in satisfying themselves and hence the women have little pleasure and even more rarely have an orgasm. As a result, women lose their enthusiasm or desire to have sex.

“I like to be intimate first, but he usually wants to do it when he comes to me, so he gets in (penetrate) so soon. This makes me feel dry and pain. I do not like it. Sometimes, I was going to enjoy it, but he finished already. He never cares about my feelings.”

(Hue a 35 years old, case study woman)

Because of their lack of sexual knowledge, women are also not well prepared for the first time they have sex with their husbands. In addition, the imitated sexual knowledge of their husbands caused negative experiences for their wives. This made women afraid of or not interested in sex:
"I don't like sex or I can say I hate sex so much, it makes me feel painful and tired... I never forgot the first night we had sex. It was horrible; I was so scared when my husband approached me. He tried to convince me, and waited, but he could not wait more, so on the third night of our marriage, he did it. He said he had to do it and I would like it later, but what he said was not true. It was so painful and it bled..."

(Hong, a 32 years old woman)

Hong, a woman of 32 years is an example of how the lack of sexual knowledge can lead to unwilling sex, and sexual coercion. I met Hong at the request of her husband. I did not have a plan to interview both husband and wife because I did not want to break confidentiality. However, in this case I made an exception. When I was interviewing Hong’s husband, he said that she was frigid (the term he learnt from a magazine). She neither enjoyed sex nor had sexual desire. When they had sex, Hong was not enthusiastic or had negative reactions; she laid as if she was a dead body. These were words from Hong’s husband used to describe his wife’s response during sex.

According to Hong, she knew nothing about sex before marriage. She was only taught to be a decent and a high moral woman. She knows sex is shame and bad thing for a woman to think about. She learns that a good girl should not let a man touch her or have any sexual behaviors with her. What Hong has known about sex is that sex only happened between husband and wife to have children. From her friends Hong knew that women would be painful and bleed at the first time having sexual intercourse. This gave her a negative impression. Hong was not prepared with an accurate knowledge about sexuality for enjoyable sexual life after marriage. In addition, the first time having sexual intercourse with her husband gave Hong painful experiences. This left her a trauma and fear of sex. However, Hong is not frigid as her husbands said. According to Hong, she enjoyed and had sexual desires sometimes after giving the first child. But the lack of sexual knowledge of her husband one more time takes away Hong’s sexual desires and pleasure:

"Although, he scared me on the first night of wedding, after having the first child, sometimes, I was happy when came to me (have sex)... I like to be fondled and to be intimate. However, when he came, he only wanted to do it (intercourse) soon, I felt my
vagina was too dry and it was painful when he got inside (penetrate). It reminded me of the wedding night and I was stressed about sex. Sometimes, I was about to enjoy it but then he finished (have orgasm) already, he did not care about my feelings, I felt frustrated, sad and bored. ... I have 3 children, I think that is enough, but I cannot refuse my husband because I am his wife. Men are different from women; they always like sex and they want to have sex all the time... I refuse my husband sometimes but not always. I am afraid he would look for other women if I always refuse him. So, when he came, I let him do it and lies still without any reaction... he complains that I look like a dead body... I am so happy if my husband does not require sex for many days...”

Nonetheless, Hong’s husband did not recognize that she was unsatisfied with his sexual performance. The cultural construction and morality are barriers to preventing them from discussing openly about sex. Especially Hong, a woman, she could not tell her husband about her sexual desires and want. Moreover, the conception of femininity convinced people that lack of enthusiasm is a common characteristic of women. Thus, the lack of sexual desire and pleasure of Hong was seen as normal until her husband coincidently got information about frigidity from a magazine and doubted what he had believed.

The social and economic factors limit the ability of people to access information, especially information about sexuality. There are few families in the community having televisions. Many people have a limited reading capacity, because they stop schooling at an early age. Even when people are literate, there are few resources of information or education about sex and sexuality.

In addition, cultural conceptions and morality prevent people from seeking or acquiring sexual knowledge. Especially women, cultural construction controls women’s sexuality by denying them to access information of sexuality. (Khan, at el, behind closed the doors, 2002, P.253) The unprepared psychology for sexual life and lack of basically sexual knowledge of young women before marriage leads to painful first sexual experiences. The limited sexual knowledge of husbands leads to sexual behavior that erodes women’s sexual pleasure. All these things contribute to develop from a negative attitude towards sexuality to resisting sex. As a consequence, sexual coercion is practiced to uphold societal expectations.
The limitation of sexual knowledge combined with the lack of communication in sexual relationships between husbands and wives cause unequal power relations relationships. In the cultural construction, where men dominate and control over women’s body and women’s sexuality, the inequality in sexual relationships accounts for the high numbers of sexual coercion.

4- Alcohol and sexual coercion

Drinking alcohol is considered to be a normal part of male behavior. In the community there is little entertainment for people except watching television. Thus, after work, the elders, children and women usually stay home, or watch TV. Men often gather with male friends or in small cafes in the village to drink alcohol and chat. It is believed that the higher the man’s a capacity of drinking, the manlier he is. According to Nanda and Warms (1998, p.209-210) men adhere to an image of masculinity that center on aggressive sexuality, a willingness to confront and compete with other men in public (whether in the bars, on the street or warfare). Thus imbibing cultural codes of masculine behavior becomes a competition among men who drink a great deal. As a result, men usually go home when they are intoxicated or drunk.

Most female participants said that they were usually abused or violated by their drunken husbands. Women do not like to have sex when their husbands come home reeking of alcohol. Yet, women have to satisfy their husbands when they require sex, otherwise, they will be violated:

“If my husband drinks too much, he will fall asleep, and it is better for me. If he is not so drunk, he wants it. I hate to have sex when he gets drunk because the smell of his breath is horrible, but I cannot refuse. If I refuse him, he will beat me...”

(Ngan, 43 years old woman, case study)

“My husband does not drink much, when he gets drunk he usually falls asleep, but sometimes, he requires it. I have to accept him. Normally he is quiet and gentle, but when he is drunk, he is so aggressive, if I reject him, he easily gets mad and beats me...”

(Ngoc, 31 years old woman)
In FGDs both male and female groups said women should not refuse their husbands’ sexual demands when they are drunk, because under such circumstances, men cannot control their behaviors. They might abuse or violate women if women resist. Yet, the violent behaviors or being coercive wives when men get drunk seems to be tolerated. Thus, a woman, who tolerates a drunken husband and acquiesces to his sexual demands, is valued as a virtuous woman:

"I do not force my wife to have sex. Yet, when a man gets drunk he does not know what he is doing, so if a husband requires sex in that situation, women should satisfy him... She can blame him later, but not that time. It is the way a good woman behaves."

(Phuong, a 39 years old man)

The conception of a *real man* who is pressured to prove themselves, control women, succeed in competition with other men and be daring, heroic and aggressive is almost an universal cultural pattern (Gilmore, David D, 1990). In this cultural construction, where men are identified as central and dominant, and drinking alcohol is conceptualized as a symbolic of manliness, the suffering of women from sexual abuse or coercion by drunken husband is seen as normal consequence.

As a conclusion for this chapter, I would say that sexual coercion and violence within marriage are not only created by individuals’ characteristics, but they are conceived by the complex interactions. All cultural, social and economic factors combine together and generate the context of sexual coercion and violence against women, in which gender inequity plays crucial role.
CHAPTER VI

Two extended case Studies

Thu and Ngan are two women, who are abused and coerced by their husbands in sexual relationships. However, they cannot escape from their difficult circumstances. I employ these two cases studies to demonstrate how cultural, social as well as economic factors combine to create an environment for sexual coercion to occur in marriage. The two cases study will enhance the theory that cultural and social construction, in which gender inequity play crucial role, control over women’s body and women’s sexuality. The cases study also picture a complicated interaction of all above factors, which process and maintain sexual coercen within marriage. Moreover, their life stories illustrate the will of women to escape from men’s domination but she cannot succeed, because they are confined inside cultural walls. This leads to the health consequence of a woman when she suffers from pressure, stress and painful experiences of men’s control.

Case study 1: Thu

Thu is a 27-year-old woman and has 3 children. I visited Thu one day when her husband was still outside working on the farm. Her house was very small. It was made of thatch and bamboo. The construction of the house was similar to other houses in the community, called Nha 3gian or house with three spaces. In front of the altar, which was in the middle of the house, were a table and two benches. On the two sides, left and right spaces were two bamboo beds. One was for her husband and the oldest child; the other was for Thu and the other children. Since there was no wall between two spaces, the altar in the middle, the arrangement of the furniture and the construction of the house made people implicitly understand that it was a house with 3 spaces. There was no any other furniture in the house.

When still in secondary school, Thu fell in love with her husband, who was five years older than her. Thu got pregnant and became his wife. She had the first child when she was seventeen. At that age, Thu knew nothing about sex:

“I loved him, ... At that age I knew nothing about sex. One night he asked me to go out
with him and he coerced me, he said, it was love. I felt painful but I loved him, so I tolerated for him.”

According to Thu, it is difficult for woman to live peacefully in the community if she gets pregnant without marriage. People would scorn, criticize and look down on her. She is considered to be a “spoilt” and indecent girl:

“When I got pregnant. My family cursed me, his family did not want him to marry me, they said that I was a bad girl. If I could easily offer their son sex, I would also do the same with other men. I cried so much but did not know what to do... When I gave birth, the child looked after his father so much. My husband still loved me and he came to bring me to his house. We did not have a wedding. All members in his family looked down on me. If I do something wrong they insult me, (she said in strangled voice)... They acted as if they bestowed a favor on me when they accepted me become their daughter-in-law. As you know, when people know you have sex before marriage, they will look down you; they will think you are an easy woman. And the man, who makes you pregnant, will abandon you when he knows you get pregnant. I’m very lucky; my husband did not abandon me. I am grateful to him for that so I tried to satisfy him.”

When Thu told her boyfriend that she was pregnant, he was scared and did not come to her house anymore. Thu did not know what to do while her stomach grew day after day. Since Thu was afraid that villagers would know she was pregnant, she used strips of cloth to bind her stomach to make it was look smaller. When people in Thu’s family realized that she was pregnant, her mother cried for many days and her father was very angry. He wanted to kick Thu out of his house. He said he did not accept a ‘spoilt’ daughter like Thu. Hers parents scolded, blamed her and said that she had tainted their reputation, thus they could not go out and could not look any of the other villagers in the eyes. When villagers found out that Thu was pregnant they jeered at her and said bad things behind her back. They said that Thu was an easy and uneducated girl; since she had lost her virginity, she might have sex with many other men, etc. Thu tried to persuade her boyfriend and begged him to marry her, but he said his parents did not consent.

When Thu delivered the child, it was a son; and many villagers came to see whom the child looked like. Through other villagers Thu’s parents-in-law knew that the boy, Thu’s son, resembled his own son (Thu’s boyfriend). Thus, six months after Thu had given
birth, they permitted Thu’s boyfriend to bring her and his baby to their house. Thu did not have a wedding. Thu was nevertheless happy because she had not been abandoned as other girls, who had been in the same situation:

“I’m very lucky; my husband did not abandon me... In this village, when people know you have sex before marriage, they will look down on you and the man, who makes you pregnant, will run away. Men never want to marry a woman who is not virgin.”

When she moved in her husband’s family, Thu had to stay in the kitchen, because the family consisted of ten people and the house was too small. Thu’s bed had no curtain and was next to the pigpen. It was also used as the bench for people to sit on when they had meals. The kitchen was built as an extension of the main house. It was connected to the left (female) side of the house and there was no door or wall between the main house and the kitchen. According to Thu, she has never taken the initiative in having sex, because her husband sleeps in a different bed in the main house with his parents and siblings. Moreover, people in the family believed that Thu was a bad woman, and she dared not express any sexual desires or be intimate with so many people around. Thu is always careful to avoid criticism:

“...I live with a large family, so, I dare not even sit close to my husband in front of other family members. If I express intimate behaviors with my husband in plain sight of others, they might think I do not respect them... If my husband wants to have sex, he will come to me. When he comes, sometimes I do not want but I cannot resist. If I resisted, we would make noises and other people would wake up.”

Thu said that she could not enjoy sex because she was afraid other members in the family were not asleep and would know when she and her husband were having sex. Moreover, her husband did not care about her feelings; he did not spend time on foreplay, he usually penetrated her immediately and had an orgasm. It made Thu feel pain, exhaustion and frustration:

“He is never concerned about my feelings. When he came and did it... he made me pain. Sometimes, I was going to like it but he finished already, he left me and went back to his bed, I felt so sad and frustrated... I hate when he came to me when I could not refuse him.”
At the early period of marriage, Thu usually resisted her husband when he coerced Thu to have sex, but Thu was abused and violated more. He forbade Thu to speak loudly or cry because he did not want other people to know. Even though, her husband slapped her in front of other members in his family, they did not stop him. Her mother-in-law gave Thu advice that Thu should shut up when her husband gets angry to avoid troubles. One time, when her husband beat her severely, his father stopped him and said,

"It is enough, don't beat her so much that she cannot wake up tomorrow, and who would take care of your children and work for you."

It is clear that men use violence to control over women, but they also think about advantages and disadvantages for them if women are physically injured. Thus, violation at the lower level such as coercion, mental or physical abuse seemingly occurs more frequently than that of higher level. However, since gender inequity is viewed as nature, the notions of masculinity and femininity make people not recognize the low level of violence such as coercion or abuse is violation. They see sexual coercion or mental abuse as the fate that women have to accept.

Thu thought that maybe her husband dared not care much about her sexual feelings because they have to live with the many members of his family, and he was afraid he would be criticized. Thu was happier when they could afford to build their own house. She thought that her life would be better if they moved out. Yet, by this time they had three children. Therefore, Thu’s husband had to sleep in a different bed with their oldest child because Thu’s bed was too small; there was not enough space for five people. In this culture, parents cannot let their children sleep alone. If a family has many children, the youngest always sleep with their mother at least till the age of ten. Thu’s husband sleeps with the oldest child and Thu sleeps with the two others. Sometimes, Thu feels lonely and craves her husband’s affection. She wanted to come to him, but it was impossible. Thu had a really bad impression in people’s eyes about her chastity. If she came to his bed, her husband would think worse about her. If she slept with her husband and let her children sleep together, she held a tormented conscience. Her children were so young. They needed love of their mother. Moreover, her husband and people would criticize Thu and think she had excessive sexual desire. They would think Thu was
selfish, and only thought about her erotic desires and did not care about her children. This was considered as an immoral behavior of a bad mother. After ruminating about her position, Thu consoled herself that it was life of a woman. When her children grew up, everything would be changed, Thu thought.

Thu’s husband only comes to her when he wants sex. He usually comes very late at night when their children are fast asleep. He moves the children to his bed and has sex whether Thu wants or not. Sometimes, Thu does not want sex but she cannot refuse him because her husband told her that a wife should not refuse her husband’s sexual demands. If Thu became his wife, she has to accept him, otherwise, she must go back to her mother’s house and he will marry another woman. Thu’s husband makes her meet his sexual desires in many ways:

“You know sometimes I cried and begged him, but he slapped me and pushed me down to do it. ...Sometimes he did not beat me when I tried to avoid him, but he was angry and broke down everything we had in the house. He broke all glasses and bowls. (She shed tear and silent) ... We do not have much money to buy them again, so I dare not to refuse him ...He knew that I did not have any other man, he is my first also last boyfriend and now he is my husband, but if I refused him, he said I have other man and he threaten to kick me out of his house, so now I dare not refuse him any more.”

This happens many times in Thu’s family. Thu is not interested in sex, and it does not give her any pleasure; she tries to satisfy him as the responsibility of a wife. Thu thought that she owned her husband when he accepted her to be his wife even though Thu was pregnant before marriage. Thus, she tried to satisfy him as her gratitude. However, sometimes Thu felt tired and was bearing him, Thu did not have sexual desire or pleasure:

“... In 10 times he came with me (have sex) I only have pleasure 1 or 2 times. Normally, I do not have pleasure. I do not have any positive feeling. When he does it, I wish he could finish soon. ... Sometimes, I felt unbearable when he lasted so long, so I pretended to enjoy in order making him to finish soon. ... He blamed me that he could not arrive (orgasm) because I always looked like a dead body...”

The sexual violation and lack of sexual knowledge of Thu’s husband, combined with the conditions in which they live, has taken all her sexual pleasure and desire away:
"He always complains that I am like a dead body; I am not enthusiastic when he does it. But he should know how can I enjoy sex with him when he beats me and insults me just some minutes before that. Sometimes I feel tired because I have to work hard the whole day on the farm. When going home, he can take a rest while I am doing housework, cooking and taking care my children. After having dinner, I continue washing dishes and doing chores, preparing food for pigs and poultry until late. While I am doing chores, he goes out to watch TV or hang around with his friends, when he come home, I am very tired and sleepy, I just want to sleep but he wants sex. I do not have a good health as him. So how can I enjoy sex in that situation? Now I know I cannot refuse him so I accept him to avoid troubles but no positive feelings. ... Sometimes I was sleeping and he wakes me up. I do not say anything just let him do on his favor..."

Although Thu is abused and violated, she cannot struggle, speak out. Thu cannot tell because she is afraid that people will mock her family. Sometimes, she feels unable to bear it, she told her mother, but her mother said it was the normal affairs in many families. Every family has its own problems but they try to hide them because of their reputation and their children. If Thu gets divorced, people would immediately deride her parents. Secondly, Thu thinks about her children. Her children will be separated from their parents, if they have a mother, they will not have father and vice versa. Thirdly, people will criticize Thu and see her as a bad woman, who got pregnant before marriage and now divorces her husband. Furthermore, it will be very difficult for Thu to remarry. In this culture, a man easily remarries after divorce but it is very difficult for women to have an opportunity to remarry. If Thu does not remarry after divorce, it will be difficult for her to be a decent woman. Thu is still young; she will become a target for married men who look for sex outside. So Thu can easily become the object for gossip. Finally, Thu’s economic status also depends on her husband. Without a man in the family, Thu cannot do the tilling on the farm by herself. Many times Thu thought about divorce but she made a decision to continue and accept her unbearable life as the fate of women:

"...Sometimes I feel that I can't stand him any more but what I have to do now? I have 3 children. I cannot change or do anything else. (She is in tear and sad)
I do not know how about other women but my life is unbearable. My mother knew everything and she tried to cheer me up, she said no women was happy when they got married, it was life. It is fate of women. Do you think it is true?"
Case study 2: Ngan

After finishing a FGD, one woman did not want to leave the meeting room. She stayed for a while and seemingly wanted to say something. When I asked, she burst into tears and started talking about her life, her husband and what she has endured for many years. It was Ngan, a woman of 43 years old. She finished high school and has five children:

"My husband always beats me when he gets drunk. You see... (Ngan showed in her mouth) I lost two teeth because he beaten me. I have five children, the oldest 21 years old; she is married and next month she will give birth. She is staying in my house. My job is collecting and selling discarded stuffs... It is hard to earn money. My husband is bulldozer driver, he doesn’t contribute much income to my family but he wants to be a leader of the family. If I do not listen to him, he gets angry and beats me. ...If you have time I can tell you more about my life, it is a long story. ... I wish I could become a writer to write about my life for all people know. I know, there are many education programs to empower women, but women can do nothing if men are not educated. If you work for that kind of program, I want to suggest that you should take men into account; you should educate men not to beat their wives. If men have knowledge they will not abuse women...."

I did not intend to do in-depth interviews with participants in FGD’s. However, what Ngan said, made me pay attention to her. Hence, I decided I would see her some day. Maybe I could give her some advices, or at least I could share her pain. I made an appointment to talk with her the next time.

I came to Ngan’s house a day after that conversation, but she was not home. Ngan’s house was constructed according to nha ba gian style (the house with three spaces), similar to many other houses in the community. In the space on the right side of the altar was a bed for her husband; on the left was another bed for Ngan and her youngest child. The middle, as usual, contained the altar, which was covered by a colorful curtain. Connected to the left space of the house was the kitchen, where two the other beds were. One was for Ngan’s oldest child, who was on the first month of delivery and the other bed was for Ngan’s sons. The house looks simple and small, but it was the result of Ngan’s efforts to save money for many years. It had enough space for the whole family of eight people.
Customarily, a woman has to live with her husband's family after marriage. Yet, she comes back to her mother’s house. Her mother has the responsibility of taking care of the woman and the child for at least three months. It is assumed that a woman does not have experience on the first childbirth, so she needs help from her mother. This explains why the oldest child of Ngan was staying in her house after her marriage.

I met Ngan another day in a private place. She started talking about her life. She knew what I wanted to know, so she talked without hesitation. When Ngan was talking, I felt that she was relieving her stressful experiences, which she had to restrain for a long time.

Ngan said in a sad voice:

"It would be nice to speak out my confidence. I feel better when I can share the sadness. But I cannot tell other people in the village, because maybe they will gossip about my stories, and they do not sympathize but laugh at my family. I tell you because you are not in community and you can understand me…"

Customarily, men take responsibility to build a house and become the breadwinner of the family. What Ngan’s husband earned was only enough for him. He did not concern with building or repairing the house, although the house they were living in before was rotten. Nonetheless he was the head of the family. He dominated and controlled everything in the family. Her husband said that a family only had one head. He has to be a decision-maker in their family. He would not tolerate for her if Ngan did anything without his permission:

"I have to ask his ideas before making any decision, otherwise he will be angry. He wants to control everything in my family. I know his income is not bad but he drinks so much. So he cannot save money for family... but he wants to know the amount of money that I earn everyday and what I use it for. He said I could only become the leader of the family after he died. If he was still alive, I had to listen to him. Actually, I did not want to become the leader, but I felt I did not have any rights in my own family. I felt that I was as a servant and he was a boss. I had to satisfy what he wanted."

Because of Ngan’s husband has a patriarchal mind, he wants control Ngan’s sexuality and her body. He expresses his power in family by his violation. In his point of view, a
married woman should only concern herself on her family, and take care of her husband and children. Going out and being sociable with many people was only for men. He is afraid that if Ngan goes out and has chance to contact with other men, she might be driven by insatiable sexuality and will be unfaithful and emasculate and ruin his honor. Due to this thinking, he sexually abuses and violates Ngan. He said that, he had to sexually satisfy Ngan, otherwise Ngan would follow other man. In fact, Ngan does not have as much sexual desire as he thinks. Ngan feels she is bearing her husband's sexual demand rather than willing to have it, although sometimes she has sexual desire, her husband makes her dare neither express nor be enjoyable. Ngan is afraid of expressing her sexual desire. She worries that her husband will be jealous and beat her if she is active and has much sexual desire (express sexual desire is considered to have much sexual desire, in his view.) Although Ngan is never active in bed, he abuses and beats Ngan for inconsequential things. He does not feel assured that he can control Ngan's sexuality. For instance, he beat Ngan when she talked to another man. He forbade Ngan to wear nice clothes to go out without him:

"My husband is too jealous to let me to be in contact with other men. When the village holds meetings, I want to go but he does not permit me to go. Normally, there are more men in the meetings than women. Thus, he said I want to go to the meetings in order to meet other men. ... If I wore nice clothes he said that I did that to attract other men. ... You see I am not young any more, who cares about me? ...When I washed clothes for a boy, seventeen years old, who helped us to build our house, he thought I liked that boy and beat me. ...One day I went to the forest to pick up firewood, I came home a little bit earlier than other people and he beat me. He suspected that some man helped me to picked up that firewood... He always says that when I refuse him to have sex, or when I do not enjoy sex, I am not enthusiastic, he scolds me and beats me."

Because she is afraid of her husband, Ngan is always careful when she contacts with any person. She pays attention to her own behavior and tries to present herself as a traditional woman. She avoids meetings or occasions where other men would be present. Once time I invited her to have a cup of coffee in a coffee bar near by the village, where young people and men usually hung around. Ngan refused:

"I want to go there with you, but you know, I am afraid villagers will see me. They will look at me as a bad woman. It is no problem for you because you come from the city. I
know in the city, women can also go to bars. In the town, I saw few women in coffee bars. But here, in rural areas, it is very strange if a married woman sitting in a coffee bar; especially I am not young any more. The commune is small, every people know each other... If any one in my village sees me in the coffee bar, they will gossip about me. They will question why I do not care about criticism; I might have troubles in my family. They will think I am not a traditional woman; I am imitating urban lifestyle, etc."

Ngan tried her best to satisfy her husband and to limit troubles in her family, but she still did not how to do to please her husband. He wanted Ngan to be a passive, traditional and dependent woman who was easily controlled. Yet, he also wanted Ngan to sometimes be active and enthusiastic in sex. These contradictions bothered him:

"... If I was not enthusiastic or enjoyable when having sex, he was angry and said I might think of other man, or I did not love him. If I enjoy sex, he thinks I have excess sexual desire. When he was angry with me because of other reasons, he would say that I was lascivious woman, that if he went out many days, I might follow other men. ... I have to go out to work as a scrap-iron dealer. He is jealous because he think when I go out, I have chance to contact with many men and he cannot know what I am doing during my working time. But still he did not bring money home. When I came home if I refuse him sex, he will beat me, so I am not enthusiastic with him... You see what should I do?"

Ngan said that her husband had much sexual desire. In Ngan's opinion, having sex three to four times per week is too much. Ngan can only refuse him when she has particular reasons such as menstruation or sickness. Yet she cannot refuse him on two or three time in a row. If she continued to give reasons why she could not have sex he tried to either force or coerce her in some other ways.

"My husband has much sexual desire. If I do not refuse, he can have sex every day. Although I refuse, he still requires having sex at lest three or four times per week. I can't meet his demand. I am not as healthy as him. I work hard the whole day without a rest, when I come home; I have to stand him, I have to accept his sexual requirements. If I refuse him today, the next day I cannot refuse. Sometimes, he did not beat me at the
moment when I refuse him but the whole day, he was unhappy, but he would find out nonsensical reasons to scold or beat me later. ... When he is angry he can use whatever he can grab around him and beat me. You see, I lose 2 teeth because he beat me. On my body, you can see many scars.”

Ngan’s husband usually drinks alcohol. Whenever he comes home with the heavy alcoholic smell, Ngan is worried. She dares not refuse him or do anything, which might make him angry:

“He usually drinks. Whenever he comes home, I am so worried and pray that he would not cause any troubles. I try to smile and to be tender with him. If my children know my husband is drunk, they are so scared. They hide in the corners of the house. Or they pretend to be sleeping very well. When he comes home with heavy alcoholic smell. I try my best to be tender with him. I try to restrain my anger to please him. If he wants sex, I cannot refuse. You know, the alcoholic smell from his breath is horrible, but I have no option. I let him do it, or he would beat me. I felt I was being tortured. . I feel happy if he drinks a lot because then he will fall asleep when he comes home. If he is not so drunk, he wants sex and I have to please him.”

As I described above, Ngan had a small house without private rooms. She had five children sleeping around her. Ngan was shy and embarrassed when she told me that she had very bad feelings when her children saw them having sex. She felt embarrassed and could not enjoy it when her husband came to her:

“It is so shameful if any one knows that you having sex. When he wanted, he did not care about that. Sometimes, my children had not slept, he wanted and he still did it. My bed has no curtain; is close to my children’s bed. I was so shy, and I told him that I couldn’t enjoy it because I was afraid that my children would see us, but he did not care. When he does it, he usually talks (moans). Sometimes I have to put my hand on his mouth, because he “talks” very loudly. One day he talked so loudly that and my children woke up; they saw we were having sex. Next day morning they told other people “my parent did it last night” I was so ashamed. People laughed at us, they said that we had grandchildren, but still did it.”

Ngan had more sexual desire in the past, but now she is not interested in sex much. She said that, when her husband wanted sex, she had to satisfy him whether she wanted to or
not. However, when Ngan had sexual desires, she had to restrain it. She dared not express her sexual desire because she was afraid that her husband would think she was oversexed. Ngan desired her husband to care for her feelings but she dared not tell him because she was afraid that he would think Ngan was more concerned about sex. Normally, Ngan did not have sexual pleasure when having sex. Sometimes, she was going to enjoy but her husband had an orgasm and then just left her unsatisfied. Ngan felt frustrated and lost her interest in sex. In addition, the way in which her husband treated her, the smell of alcohol, the abuse, violation, work overload, cultural norms and moral standards deprive Ngan’s opportunity to express and satisfy her sexual desires and to try to find pleasure:

“As I told you, because he beat me so much, so I dare not refuse him. I accept to avoid troubles, but he still does not satisfy if I do not enjoy or I am not enthusiastic with him when having sex. He has so much sexual desire. Sometimes, he lasting so long, this makes me tired. If I cannot please him, he insults me. He required me using my hand to please and satisfy him. ... I think he does not have a mind, he beat me, he insulted me, and after that he had sex with me. How can I enjoy sex with a person who maltreats me like that? How can I be enthusiastic to have sex when I am so tired after hard day working? My mind is always full of things to worry about. I always worry how can I earn enough money to feed for my children, to save a little just in case they are sick, and for repairing the house, etc. He is a man, but he does not share this burden with me. I did not love him any more, except responsibilities of a wife.”

I asked Ngan why she did not run away or ask for help from other people when she was violated, deep in sadness, she said:

“I did, but they did not help. After that he beat me more. ...My son came to help me and tried to protect me, my husband had beaten both of us. ...My neighbors and my relatives came to talk with him, few people in local authorities also talked with him, but he accused all those men loved me. If they do not love me, why they wanted to interfere into our family affairs. He had rights to teach his wife... after that every one steered away, no one wanted to involve in our family because they were afraid they would get in troubles with him. ...One time, a man in commune security told my husband that he should not beat me. My husband drunk and scolded the security man. Therefore, he never interferes in to my family.”
Ngan tried to find ways to deal with the abuse that she experienced, yet in the end, others accepted her husband’s insistence that they stay out of their family affairs and did not try to help anymore. In desperation, Ngan decided to get divorce at one stage. This happened just after the birth of her first child, but she had lost her marriage certificate and the local authorities could not assist her at the time. They asked her to wait, and if, after six months, her husband continued to violate her, they would help her:

“They gave us advice that we should reconcile because my husband promised he would not beat me any more. During the time we were waiting to divorce, my husband did not beat me much, but he always scolded me. He still required me to have sex. I wanted to refuse him but I was afraid he would beat me, because we had not divorced yet. Anyway, I was still his wife, so I had to accept him. He improved a bit after that time, but when we reconciled and had more children, everything was the same. He was still violent.”

At another time, Ngan tried to escape from her husband. By the time she had three children, she took one of them to run away:

“One time I felt I could not stand him any more, so I decided to escape. I ran to the town with my oldest son and took bus to go to the South of Vietnam. After 2 hours on the bus, I got carsick, I was so tired and could not continue my trip. I got off, while I took a rest on the side of street, I thought about my children, who I could not bring them to go with. I thought it was very difficult for them to live without me. They might think very badly about their mother, who ran away to find happiness for herself and abandoned her children in the process. So I went back. When I came home, he beat me savagely. He used a section of electric wire as a whip to beat me. In spite of my begging, he still tortured me. I never forget that day (her voice is strangled with tears)

Since, having many times of failures to escape from sexual abuse and violation, Ngan develops strategies of resistance and for survival. To avoid troubles and violation, Ngan became submissive to her husband. She became quiet and obedient. As with Thu, Ngan accepted her life as the fate of women. She was constrained by cultural expectations and practices. She is ‘enclosed’ and confined by a whole system that expects her to reconcile with an abusive husband, to not look for her own happiness but to always keep her
feminine duties and responsibilities in mind. She pretends to enjoy sex to get him to have an orgasm quickly. This is a form of resistance, which not only Ngan but also many other female participants said that they applied to escape from the male dominated hegemonic discourses and practices:

"You might do not believe if I say that sometimes I pretend to be enjoyable to make him arrive (have and orgasm) soon, because the longer he lasts, the more tired I am."

Sometimes, Ngan feel her life is unbearable and she thought about divorce, but the power of her traditionally embedded femininity played a strong role. She thought about the impact of the inevitable gossip and criticism about her behavior on the reputation of her parents and the future of her children, and so forth. In Ngan's opinion, it was too late to get a divorce:

"It is too late to get divorce now, I am not young any more. I regret that I could not divorce him earlier, when I just had one or two children, now I have five. If I divorce him, my children will be separated into two. A half of them have to live with my husband and the other will live with me. My children cannot be happy without me. My husband will violate them. Moreover, I am afraid that villagers will have bad thinking about my parents. My father have two wives, my mother is his second wife. She had me with him without marriage. My older sister also had a child without marriage. My younger sister got pregnant before marriage. She did not have a wedding. This shamefulness is enough for my parents to suffer from. If I get divorce now, people will laugh at my parents. They will think my parents did not know how to educate our siblings. My mother would die because of the shame, which are caused by three of us (my sisters and I) if I divorce, three of us will have children without husbands. It is also difficult for my children to look for their future spouses. Who want to marry a person with a family background like this? Especially, it is difficult for my daughters to get married, if their mother runs away and gets divorce. They will think my daughters might take after me. Although people say they do not mind, but in fact, they are biased against those things."

It is not easy for Ngan to escape from the cobweb of cultural setting. Although, Ngan has a sense that the ways her husband treats her is unequal, she cannot fight to achieve a mental and physical well-being. When she was a little girl, she was taught to take responsibilities for the honor of her family and her husband. She absorbed the education from her family about cultural perception of morality, shame, honor and being femininity.
In Ngan’s and other villagers’ minds, the bearing, submissive, resigned, passive manners and lower status in family of women are very natural. Thus, if she tries to escape from her situation, which the cultural construction identifies for a fate of women, she will be more vulnerable.

Ngan has a miserable life. She has suffered from both mental and physical abuse and violation. Her mind is always full of worries about their lives, about ways to earn money to survive, about the future of her children, and the violation by her husband. Ngan leads a stressful life. She suffers from a great deal of heart distress. In her own language Ngan calls ‘dau tim’ (heart pain). When her husband comes home with the alcoholic smelling or when he gets angry, Ngan feels her heart beating in a disorderly way and there is seemingly a thorn pricking her heart.

Other female participants in both in-depth interviews and FGDs also described the term of ‘heart pain’, when they talking about their feelings if their husbands got angry or had signs of violence. The term ‘dau tim’ is not simply presented the meaning of disease, but a common language to express their feelings, sufferings and stressful experiences in their daily life. Through describing “heart pain”, women expose injustices in society, strict rules or moral standards, which burden on them. The term “heart pain” interprets both physical and mental unwell-being, in which environmental, cultural, social factors will be taken in to account as causes of ‘heart pain’ problems. As Scheper-Hughes & Lock (1998) says “Sickness is a form of communication – the language of organs - through which nature, society, and culture speak simultaneously.” (p:368)

I want to repeat the word Ngan told me at the very beginning of this story when she did not want to leave the meeting room after FGD:

“I wish I could become a writer to write about my life for all people know.”

The wish of Ngan reveals that she is suffering from a huge psychological pressure, but she cannot express or share with any one else because she is afraid of stigma. The need to share stress and bearings with other people illustrates that Ngan is confined by cultural construction and she wants to escape from the cultural cobweb, which is constructed by moral standards, notions of culture, society and natural conditions. All of these resulted in
her heart distress. The injury of psychology lasting a long period leads to physical injuries.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion & Recommendations

1- Conclusion

Although recent economic and social change in Vietnam have contributed to the transformation of women’s status and power in the family, community and society, the remnants of feudalism and patriarchal ideology still remain pervasive in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas. Men’s domination, viewed as the symbolic of manliness, impacts on cultural constructions, in which women’s bodies and women’s sexuality are strongly controlled. Gender inequality continues to dominate and jeopardize the sexual autonomy of women. Although this is only a pilot study conducted in a small community, it provides an understanding of factors constructing the context, within which sexual coercion and violence are processed and maintained. Moreover, the study brings out a new view of the studying of sexuality in Vietnamese culture.

The study brings out an important finding that, getting information on sexual matters in Vietnamese culture is not as difficult as expected. When people were approached in a situation of confidentiality and I tried to understand and talk with them in their own ‘coded’ language, it was easier for them to relate their sexual perceptions and experiences. For example the term arrive was used to implicate ejaculate, talk mean moan, or do it infer sexual intercourse, etc. Moreover, when people found that, they could learn something from conversations, not only with the researcher (in in-depth interviews), but also through other participants (in FGDs), they were willing to discuss and share sexual experiences.

The second finding of this study is that gender still plays a crucial role not only in influencing the sexual roles of husbands and wives, but also in maintaining sexual abuse, coercion and violation. Cultural perceptions and its related symbolic violence including notions of morality, chastity, honor or shame, which are basically gendered forms of inequality, silence women and restrain their ability to speak out about their abuse. The
cultural setting constructed by patriarchal ideology makes both men and women believe that the marriage certificate is legitimation for men to satisfy their sexual desire and they ignore women's sexual rights. Women's sexual rights are confined by the complex interactions of environmental, cultural, social factors. They have to suffer from the restraining of their anger and in the long-term experience adverse health effects.

The symbolic violence is reproduced by gender inequality underlying the notions of masculinity and femininity. Men enhance the image of their manliness by their dominance, aggressiveness and violence. The notion of femininity coerces women to be submissive and silent to protect their gendered honor. Therefore, physical violence at a low level or mental abuse is seen as natural and normal phenomena in daily life of couples. The self-restraint of women is perceived as part of being a female, women are assumed to have been born in such a way that they have to accept them as a characteristic of femininity. Women do not have the right to request or refuse sexual demands from their husbands. The suffering from stressful experiences of sexual abuse, coercion, violence and unsatisfying sexuality of women in a long period can lead to physical injury and mental ill-health. The need of sharing sadness and painful experiences through somatization in their bodies such as 'heart pain' reveals that women's voices are confined.

The lack of respect for women in sexual relationships constrains women's sexual desire and pleasure. Therefore, women are not able to satisfy their sexual and health needs. Since cultural constructions of maleness and femaleness, as well as men's domination wear away women's sexual desires and pleasure, they neither enjoy sexual intimacy nor have ways to express their sexual demands. Yet women cannot deny their husbands sex. Consequently, sexual coercion and, if they are unwilling to cooperate, domestic violence is frequent. The number three of the ten women interviewed in depth were regularly and severely beaten if they tried to resist having sex is not lest.

Moreover, the lack of sexual knowledge contributes to sexual coercion and violence. 'One important means of controlling women's sexuality is to deny them to access information on sexuality' (Khan, Townsend, et. al, 2002.) The morality, shame and the sensitivity of sexual issues prevent people from seeking and acquiring the necessary sexual knowledge. Cultural constructions of shame and decency are great barriers for people to discuss sexuality as well as to share sexual experiences. Besides that, economic
conditions also contribute to the limited knowledge of sexuality of the people in the study. Few families in the community have television. Even though people have television, there is rarely programs or other mass media resources that provide information about sex and sexuality for the public. In addition, low schooling is also one of the factors involved in the limited ability of people to acquire information on sexuality. All these issues lead to the limitation of people’s sexual knowledge and negatively affect the sexual life of couples. The lack of knowledge about their own bodies as well as their partners’ bodies lead to incompatibility in sexual relationships. In unequal relationships of power between husband and wife, women are sexually abused and coerced by their husbands as a result of sexual incompatibility.

Furthermore, unmarried people enter sexual life with vague knowledge of sexuality. This gives women painful experiences and trauma, and this experience has a long-lasting effect on women’s sexual life (Khan, Townsend, et al., 2002.) As a result, many women develop a negative attitude toward sexuality. This convinces both men and women that, women have less sexual desire than men, and they cannot have an orgasm and pleasure every time having sex. Thus, the absence of pleasure and orgasm of women in sexual relationships are seen as normal. Consequently, women’s bodies are considered as a means for men to satisfy their sexual needs. This belief also makes both men and women not motivated to seek for the sexual knowledge to improve their sexual life. Women accept sex as a responsibility of wives, and husbands use their husbands’ rights to satisfy their sexual needs instinctively.

Not only do women suffer from the consequences of sexual coercion, but also men do. When men sexually coerce their wives to have sex, they might physically satisfy their sexual needs, but on the term of mental satisfaction, they might not. This is shown by the responses of many male participants that they wish their wives would be active and sometimes take the initiative to have sex. However, men do not recognize that their own domination and violation negatively impact on the women’s sexual desires and willingness. The more men control women’s bodies and sexuality, the more they restrain their sexual desires and the less willing to they are to have sex. This creates a circle of cause and effect. Since women are not interested in sex, they are coerced or violated.

The construction of the houses and the symbolic meaning attached to use of space
contributes to the lack of privacy - sex almost always happens in the left, female space, which is also potentially contaminated, not only by menstruation, giving birth, cooking and being connected to the spaces used for animals, but also by violence. The middle space of the house is sacred and menstruating women and other forms of pollution, such as sex and violence will never happen there. The right-hand space is considered as male and dominant – woman hardly intrude into it. Yet this way of symbolically dividing space is also a kind of gendered violence.

At the same time as men are seen as dominant and as being inherently sexual, sex and violence are also viewed as somehow shameful. Violence or abuse is viewed as family affairs, and the lack of privacy makes it hard for women to deny the shameful and secretive sex imposed on them in the dark. Yet other household members sometimes observe them, but this seems more shameful for women than men. The ways in which houses are constructed and the ways in which people use space in the houses, unveil that gender differentiation is deeply rooted in people’s minds and present in every aspect of daily life. The division of roles and status of each gender in this cultural setting undermine women’s power and their sexual rights.

For the women in the study the complex interaction between their being symbolically associated with all things regarded as feminine, weak, passive, without desire yet potentially oversexed and thus to be constrained and the very real practices of gender inequality, such as the fact that husbands control their reproductive choices make violence against wives seem natural and mundane. Thus, to recognize sexual coercion within marriage, we have to look not only at physical acts, but also at the meanings of cultural and gendered perceptions and practices as well as gendered divisions in a specific setting. Sexual violence such as mental abuse or sexual coercion is only recognized through understanding the cultural context, in which women are coerced to be silent. At the same time women cannot escape from sexual violence, even when it is witnessed by members of the family. It is seen as the concern of the husband and the wife and not of others. The woman cannot flee or expose it, because she will shame herself and her family by making this known. Ultimately it is the responsibility of women to bear with their circumstances. Although they find small ways to resist and to show agency, these are always constrained by the wider system of uneven gender relations and expectations of women as wives and thus ‘legitimate’ sexual objects.
The cultural setting constructed by remnants of feudalism and patriarchal ideology

Economic condition:
- Low schooling, and disadvantage in access information of sexuality
- Overload working
- Lack of privacy spaces

Gender inequity

Women low status and less power in family, community and society

Women lack autonomy on their reproduction and less power in decision making on contraceptive use and sexuality

The absent of sexual desire and pleasure

The fear of unwanted pregnancy

Developing a negative attitude toward sex: from being unwilling sex to denying sex.

Sexual coercion and violence

Cultural norms of morality, and conceptions of gendered identity

Social factors:
- Lack of information source of sexuality
- No education program on sexuality for unmarried people

Trauma, painful experiences in initially sexual intercourses
2- Recommendations

Gender inequality is the core of sexual coercion and violation. To deal with these issues, the larger socialization process needs to be addressed. (Khan, Townsend, et. al, (2002, p:254.) It needs the co-operation, interaction and sustained commitment among all sectors and at all levels of society. As Weeks says: “Male violence is not at all product of unproblematic biology but of complex social practices and psychic structuring, the change to transform the relations between men and women can only be brought about by equally complex processes, ranging from new methods of child-rearing to radically different economic, legal and social condition for women.” (1986, p: 65.) The elimination of gender inequality requires a long period of time with the change of societal expectations and norms, and the efforts of all members of the family, community and society.

It is demanded that women are empowered and facilitated to have a chance to speak out. However, in the short term, it needs the education program of sex and sexuality for public, especially for young people. They are in need of being provided information of sexuality before entering sexual life. This will help young women to be able to enjoy sex after marriage and avoid trauma as well as painful experiences for them in the first time having sex. Furthermore, when sexual issues are brought out in the public as propagated information, the great barrier of culture on sexuality such as shame and taboo will be unloaded. This will encourage couples to discuss more openly on sexual matters and give them chances to understand each other about sexual desire and willingness. This will help couples ability to enjoy sexual life and reduce sexual coercion and violence.

Young boys and girls should be equipped with information of reproduction and sexuality. This will help them to develop positive attitude toward sexuality and have a chance to achieve their sexual health in the future. The empowerment programs not only focus on women, but also to be designed to educate men on gender issues. Children should be educated on gender equity at early age to change their perspective on the discrimination between boys and girls. However, to have good strategies to eliminate sexual coercion and violence within marriage, the study on this topic should be conducted on the larger scale both qualitative and quantitative research. This is only a pilot study with a small sample in a rural area. The findings cannot necessarily be generalized for other parts of
To promote women’s sexual and reproductive health, it needs more research on the field of sexuality within marriage. Sexual coercion and mental abuse should be recognized by public as the low levels of violence, and it should be received attention by policy makers as well as health workers as the issues of public health.

There is another suggestion for further research on sexuality of women, who are not married, widowed, or divorced, are confined by moral standards and the notion of honor, shame. Those women are expected not to have sex. They are not coerced to have sex, but coerced to restrain their sexual needs. In the term of sexual health, those women have a little sense of entitlement to sexual rights. Thus, they cannot achieve both physical and mental well-being.
APPENDICES

Appendix 1- Reference:


Jeffrey Weeks (1986), Sexuality, The open University, Milton Keynes, p:46-65)


Vietnam Case, South and East Asia, Regional Working Papers, no12.
Population report, *Force sex*, online: http://www.jhuccp.org/pr/1111111chap3_1.shtml#top
WHO web, *the definition of reproductive health* (2002), link:
http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexual_health.html
Appendix 2 - Question guidelines

1- Questions in focus group discussion:

1. What is a good husband/ a good wife? What are a real woman and a real man?
2. Who is the main decision-maker in families?
3. Who make the decision on matters related to reproductive and sexual health?
4. What are the roles of husband and wife in sexual relationship?
5. Sometimes husbands and wives don’t always feel the same sexual desires at the same time. How do they think most husbands and wives manage this issue?
6. How does husband or wife react when they are refused to have sex?
7. Can women express their sexual desires to their husbands?
8. Do couples discuss sexual issues with their spouse? What are they usually talking about?
9. Do men concern about women’s willing before having sex? (both verbal or non-verbal communication)?
10. How people react when they are violated, do they ask for help from other people? Who do they usually ask for the help? Why?
11. Where they acquire knowledge of sex?

2- Remarked questions in in-depth interviews:

1. The role of husband and wife in a family?
2. Who is the main decision-maker in their families
3. Who make the decisions on the matters related to reproduction such as the number of children they want to have, time and spacing to deliver children, when and frequency to have sex.
4. Who make decisions in sexual relationships, the role of husband and wife in sexuality?
5. Sometimes husbands and wives don’t feel the same sexual desires at the same time. How do husbands and wives mostly manage this issue?
6. Have they ever had sex even if they did not want to have it?
7. How people usually act when they want to have sex?
8. How people react if their spouses want to have sex but they do not want to?
9. What did they do when they want to have sex but their spouses do not want to?
   How they react if they do not get the agreement from their spouses?
10. Do people concern themselves on their spouses' feelings when having sex?
11. How people react when they are violated, do they ask for help from other people?
    Who they usually ask for the help. Why?
12. Do they discuss sexual issues with their spouse? How frequently they discus
    matters related to sex with their spouse. What they usually are talking about?
13. Who should initiate a discussion about matters related to sex?
14. Where they acquire sexual knowledge?
15. Do they think people should acquire sexual information before marriage?
16. Can women express their sexual desires to their husbands?
17. How often they have sex without wanting of their spouses?
18. Do they ask their spouses if they are willing before having sex? (both verbal or
    non-verbal communication)
Appendix 2- Pictures of house construction

Figure 1: Nha ba gian house (The house with three spaces)
The walls are made of bamboo, clay and straw. It has a tile roof. It has three spaces. The right space of the house is a bed (1). The main door leads to the middle space and a half of left space (2). The other space, where another bed is (3). This space is connected with the kitchen (4).

Figure 2: Another Nha ba gian house.
This is another Nha ba gian house, but it is more expensive. The walls are built with cement and bricks. The main door goes straight into the right space of the house. Through the main door we can see the bed.
Figure 3: The right space inside of the house in figure 1.
The door goes to the house (1). A bed for sleeping (2), which is also used as a bench with the table. The table is putted at a half of the middle and right space of the house. The curtain is in front of the altar (3). On the wall is wedding picture of the couple, who are owners this house.

Figure 4: In side of another Nha ba gian house.
The curtain in front of the altar (1). A bed is used for the wife and two children (2). The door leads to the kitchen (3) is closed. The curtain covers in front of the bed (4).
Figure 5: The same picture 4, but looking at it from the main door of the house.
The middle space with an altar and a set of table for visitors (1). The space for sleeping (2). A
half of the wall makes the altar private (3). The other space of the house is the same. If the family
has many members, other beds are put in both the right and left hand spaces of the house.

Figure 6: Other side of the house in figure 4 and 5.
Figure 4 and 5 are the space on the left side of the house. This is the space on the side of the
house. The bed has no curtains, it is where husband usually sleeps. The red curtain is in front of
the altar. The table with chairs is for visitors. The main door (1) is closed.
Figure 7: Inside of another Nha ba gian house
The bed is set in the left hand space of the house, without curtain. Above the bed is mosquito net. There is no wall between middle space and two the other spaces. The red curtain covers the altar. In front of altar is a set of table. The woman is coming from the kitchen.

Figure 8: Two spaces inside of a Nha ba gian house.
The altar and a set of table are in the middle space of a house. The curtain is lifted to unveil the altar. In front of the altar is a table and chairs for visitors. When the curtain is lowered the altar is isolated with the outside. On the right of altar is other space with a bed (1) is another bed.
Figure 9: The third space of the house in figure 8.
The picture was taken from the right space of the house. We can still see the table and chairs in
the middle space. The woman is sitting on the bed, which her husband, her seven years old child
and she sleep. Above her head is a mosquito net. The door leads to the kitchen (1). The main door
of the house (2).

Figure 10: Inside of a kitchen.
Looking at it from female space, on the left hand of the house.
Appendix 3 – Consent form

University of Amsterdam

Consent Form of Men’s and Women’s Sexual Behaviors and Perceptions Research.

Introduction/purpose: You are being asked to participate in a research study that will explore issues related to sexual life between husbands and wives. The purpose of this study is to understand men’s and women’s sexual perceptions and behaviors related to delicate situations and conflicts between husbands and wives, which might affect women’s health. The result of the research will be used to give recommendations and suggestions for intervention programs, which contribute promote women’s sexual and reproductive health.

Procedure: As a participant in this study, you will be asked to share your views, experiences and knowledge about sexuality. The interview will be audio taped. Your participation I this study will be approximately 3 hours. Researcher might visit you more than one time.

Risk: There is a possibility that the interview might be overheard while I am conducting it. In addition, some questions may bring up emotion and personal issues.

Benefit: There may no direct benefit to you by your participation in this study. The potential benefits to you from participation in this study may include more efficient public health programs and improve ways care for women's health. However, after finish interview, if you have any questions related to reproductive or sexual health, I can provide you some information in my own ability as a medical doctor.

Alternative: You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this study. No harm will come to you if you refuse to participate.

Confidentiality: The result of this study may be published or presented at scientific meetings, your words may be quoted; however, you will be identified by a false name so that your identity and personal information will be kept as confidential as possible. All research materials will be held in strictest confidence until the study is completed, at
which point all research materials will be destroyed. Only investigator knows your identity. The investigator’s research advisors will have authority to review your study records. They are required to maintain confidentiality regarding to your identity.

**Subjects’ rights:** Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at anytime. Participation or withdrawal will not affect any rights to which you are entitled.

Consent:
I agree to participate in this study described above. I understand that this interview will be audio taped.

*Cam Lo district, date..............................*

Participant’s signature                                      Researcher’s signature

Phan Thi Thu Hien