

# 'Trafficked' Viet women: There's more to the tale

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

**M**EDIA reports abound of the case of 15 women from Vietnam trafficked into Thailand, impregnated or allegedly raped, and forced to act as surrogates carrying babies for clients in Taiwan.

In Vietnam, there have been more than 40 newspaper reports of the surrogacy racket run by the "Baby-101 Eugenic Surrogate" company. The company, registered in Taiwan and operating in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, offered a plethora of services from egg and sperm donation to the sale of babies for US\$32,000 (S\$40,000).

On Feb 23 this year, Thai police raided two houses in Bangkok and rescued 13 women - two others were in a hospital where they had just delivered - after one of them contacted the Vietnamese embassy in Thailand asking for help.

The case has been reported in several print media in Vietnam: the Law Newspaper, the Women's Newspaper, the HCMC Police newspaper, and youth newspapers Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien. The reports described the "savage" nature of the con-

tract the women were allegedly forced to sign in "tears" and "disgrace". Many articles said the "deceived women" endured harsh conditions in Bangkok - living under "house arrest", with their "passports seized" and all "personal activities being watched", and being "forced to take embryotropic medicine".

Reports claimed that while some women voluntarily entered into the surrogacy deal, they did so under personal duress. An archetypal image emerged, as from a March 22 article in HCMC Police newspaper: "Almost all of the surrogates' families are poor, and the women are dropouts from school, factors which, when combined, made the women easy targets to fall into the trap of human trafficking rings, in this case one managed by Taiwanese people."

Tuoi Tre highlighted the potential revenue generated by the "trafficking business", by comparing the price received by the company per baby (US\$32,000) with the payment promised to each surrogate mother (US\$5,000).

While media coverage portrayed the women as "trafficked victims", findings from the research conducted by non-governmental organisation Alliance Anti-Traffic (AAT), which has monitored the case since the beginning, show that the re-

ality is more complex.

First, of the 15 women rescued, only four claimed to have been deceived with promises of well-paying jobs in Thailand. The other 11, of whom seven are pregnant, admitted to the authorities that they had voluntarily agreed to be surrogates. They are aggrieved that the highly publicised rescue resulted in their identi-

ties being disclosed. Some told AAT that they did not ask to be "rescued" and do not consider themselves "trafficking victims". Their main concern is to deliver the baby and get the US\$5,000 promised.

As for the ones who were trafficked, of whom two are pregnant and claim to have been raped by the Taiwanese manager, all four want to discreetly return to Vi-

etnam to abort their pregnancies.

Second, it is not certain if the conditions imposed on the women were as bad as reported by the media. The women told AAT that they were given proper care in a comfortable house, and received visits from the biological parents. House rules were reportedly simple but strict: "no eating of raw vegetables", "no smoking, alcohol or narcotics consumption", and "no leaving without permission".

So who are the real "victims"? The four women who said that they were deceived would fall into this category. However, all the women have been placed under the protection of the authorities, which involved being moved to the government-managed Protection and Occupational Development Centre for trafficked women and children. This will be followed by repatriation to and re-integration in Vietnam.

While this may be appropriate for the "trafficked" women, it is far from ideal for the other 11. It is true these women may have been forced by economic pressure into consenting to surrogacy for money. Many people also have value judgments against any notion of hiring a womb, which is what paying a woman to carry a baby amounts to. But if we set aside these moral dilemmas and just look at the women's situation today, the truth is that the 11 who willingly signed on for surrogacy may not be better off after the "rescue".

Well-intentioned agencies have taken the women out of a situation they had willingly entered into. As a consequence, the women are faced with troubling questions: What are they going to do with the babies they are carrying since they do not want to raise them? Will they be compensated for the pregnancy?

The Vietnamese media has also jeopardised the safety of all the women by disclosing their identities. Will they suffer repercussions from those involved in the surrogacy racket? Are they in greater danger now than before?

As the media turns its eye towards other events, these women will have to deal with the consequences of the raid and the media's indiscretion. Their victimisation may not have ended after all.

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