



BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY

# The debts of undocumented Vietnamese migrants in Europe

Debt and trafficking were used to explain why 39 Vietnamese migrants were found dead in a lorry in Essex, but whom did the migrants owe?

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The container lorry in which 39 Vietnamese migrants were found dead is driven away by police. | Aaron Chown/PA Wire/PA Images

**P**hong, 27, is an undocumented Vietnamese migrant working eleven hours a day, six days a week at a Vietnamese restaurant in Paris for €1,550 a month. He lives a minimal existence. Every penny Phong can spare goes to repaying the €15,000 debt he incurred while travelling from Nghe An in central Vietnam to France. The smuggler had charged him €4,000 up front, which was enough to get him to Moscow on a tourist visa. The trip to Poland cost a further €6,000: €2,000 for the arrangements to leave and €4,000 for arriving safely. A final €5,000 was due once he arrived in France.

Phong, of course, did not have this sort of cash sitting around. He borrowed it and now he has to pay it back. This is why he spends nearly all his waking moments working at a restaurant for less than €6 an hour.

Even though Phong was not among the dead, his story can help us think about the recent tragedy in Essex, where the bodies of 39 Vietnamese migrants were found in the back of a refrigerated container lorry. Are smugglers simply travel service providers? Or are they traffickers luring migrants into debt to later enslave them? In the days following the discovery in Essex the media was full of claims of trafficking. But portraying such events as clear-cut cases of trafficking and modern slavery is neither necessarily accurate nor practically helpful.

## **Knee-deep in debt, but to whom?**

In law, trafficking refers to the deception, transportation and exploitation of unsuspecting victims, including through debt bondage. Smuggling refers to the illegal transportation of willing migrants. So, was the person who moved Phong a smuggler or a trafficker that put him into a form of slavery? Many would

assume the latter. Irregular migration is often equated with trafficking and indebtedness with enslavement – the migrant's labour serving as collateral until all debts are paid.

On the ground, however, things are more complicated. My recent research shows that Vietnamese migrants are rarely in debt to the people who move them. Smugglers provide logistical services for a fee, and that's usually where the relationship ends. Migrants' creditors are much closer to home: they are relatives, friends, communities, moneylenders, and banks.

**Migrants owe their debts to people they care about, people who frequently have gone into debt themselves to make that migration possible.**

Phong started with a €1,000 loan from his uncle and a further €6,000 from his local parish. The priest had given him money from the church's renovation fund because Phong's father had worked for him for decades. For the remaining €8,000 he turned to his parents, who mortgaged their house to a commercial bank in order to get the money. These debts were personal, and Phong felt immense pressure to pay them back. His inability to repay his parents during the first two years had already cost them €400 in penalty fees.

Over the course of my research I met many Vietnamese migrants like Phong with stories like his. We can learn a lot from their experiences. First, irregular migration to Europe requires long-term planning. Phong was no stranger to migration: at eighteen he had gone to Ho Chi Minh City to work as a construction worker for €200 per month. But when he saw the remittances his cousins were sending home from France he decided to migrate again. That was in 2010, however it was only in 2014 that he managed to travel. For four years

he collected information about smugglers, saved money, and secured a patchwork of loans. He knew what he was doing when he set out. As such, he is a far cry from popular depictions of Vietnamese migrants as naïve farmers who hit the road on a whim and throw themselves willingly into the arms of 'traffickers'.

Second, funding for migration is often personal. Families and acquaintances are used to being called upon for support in Vietnam and they generally offer the best terms for loans. But although family finance is cheap and flexible, it comes with time limits, moral obligations, and hidden costs such as gifts to lenders. Phong felt compelled to repay his uncle quickly, even though the latter never pressed him, and he knew that the money had to be there when the parish's renovation works started. He also felt obliged to donate €2,000 to the priest as a token of his appreciation.

The tangible and moral pressures of being indebted to his family, his Catholic community, his priest, and his Lord were, for Phong, frequently overwhelming. This means that while commentators correctly identify debt as a reason for work at any cost, they often get the owners and thus the consequences of that debt wrong. Smugglers simply collect their fees. Migrants owe their debts to people they care about – people who frequently have gone into debt themselves to make migration possible – and that is a heavy burden to bear.

Third, irregular migrants repay their debts by finding work in the so-called 3-D jobs: work that is dirty, dangerous and difficult. The hours are long, the working conditions poor and insecure. Phong's first job in Paris was in construction. He earned €800 a month for working eleven hours a day, six days a week – brutal, but already much better paid than the similar work he had done in Ho Chi Minh City. After three months, his cousins found him his current job in a Vietnamese restaurant. He now works 66 hours a week, eats up to five times a day, and receives two weeks holiday annually. In a year he earns €18,600.



The appearance of multi-storey houses show which families receive remittances and which don't. | Photo by Nicolas Lainez. All rights reserved.

## The drive to self-exploit

One could argue that Phong and his fellow workers are exploited. They receive less than minimum wage and no benefits. One could also argue that Phong was 'bonded' by debt. He allows himself no more than €500 a month in living expenses, so that the rest of his wages can go to quickly repaying his loans. But no one can suggest that Phong's *smuggler* has lured, deceived and exploited him for his labour. Like the other migrants I interviewed in Paris, Phong paid his

smuggler the final instalment of his fee shortly after arriving in France and never heard from him again. Theirs was a simple, commercial transaction governed by the laws of supply and demand.

The lesson of all this is that debt and debt-fuelled illegal migration is complicated. It is far more complex than the way it is usually portrayed whenever tragedies such as the refrigerated lorry deaths occur and people begin to speak about trafficking. Debt can crush both undocumented migrants and their families. Phong was obsessed with repaying his loans, and his greatest fear was being arrested and deported back to Vietnam before he could.

However, he was optimistic about the possibilities that his debt had opened up to him. His goal, he said, was to save €40,000 and then open a restaurant in Vietnam. That was how his debt would improve his life. It was an investment, in the same way affluent Europeans use debt to invest in education and real estate. Reducing this sort of a long-term strategy to 'debt bondage' or to entrapment by a single 'evil' creditor – be it his trafficker, smuggler or employer – is to do Phong a disservice.

Yet governments, the media and NGO workers continue to speak of 'naïve Vietnamese' being forcibly trafficked into slavery and debt bondage in the UK. Such analysis doesn't begin to address the complexities of migration, debt and anti-trafficking policy, let alone deeper issues related to misrepresentation of migrants, hostile migration legislation, strict border control, and development in the global south. Until that changes, people like Phong will continue to show up in the backs of lorries.