

SELECTED TRANSCRIPTION OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION AMONG DRUG USERS IN VIETNAM

Participants: Five drug users who spent time in drug centers in Hanoi, Thai Nguyen, and Ho Chi Minh City from 2002 – 2007. The discussions were conducted on September 19, 2008 in Vietnamese and have been transcribed and translated into English.

Moderator: Who is sent to the center?

Before, after a positive drug test, they had to ask for a warrant from the district (People's Committee). But now, they have blank warrant with them, already signed and stamped. If they get you, they just fill in your name, and you go [to the center].

If you tested positive before, and now they have not filled their arrest quota, and they see you wandering on the street, they can just get out of their car and pick you up, no need to ask, no need for any thing. Your file will be made in the camp. I tell you, it can even be like this – you are tested negative in the ward, they would tell you – “Okay, you just go up to the 06 [drug treatment center] if they test you negative, you will be sent back home.” But up there, they would tell you, “What? They sent you here. We are only authorized to keep you.”

I can tell you, some people I know who have never been an addict but were arrested and brought to the camp, because they were wandering around at night, drinking. They are sort of wandering people... then they were arrested. It was obvious that their tests were negative.

Moderator: how about discipline?

In terms of discipline, the drug center is stricter than prison. In the morning, when the bell rings, you get up – same as in prison. But in term of the timing for meals, timing for baths, the way you fold your blanket and bet-net, it is softer in the prison than in drug treatment camp.

Moderator: Let's talk about human rights.

Where are human rights?

Once you get there, there is nothing called human rights.

Oh yes, there is a right! There is a right in the drug center that doesn't exist in prison – it is the right to vote (in the national election).

Normally, when you see the staff, it could be a guy who still looks very young [you have to say] “I greet grandfather.” If you don't, they would beat you. Even some older men who are 50 or 60 have to call those guys “grandfather” while they were only 20-something. If you don't, they will beat you.

Moderator: Then I would like to know which rights do you have in the center? What kinds of thing are you allowed to do?

I have to say that you lose 100% of your rights there.

You have stomach ache – “Ah, you want play tricks?” - They beat you, and you are worse off. If you are in pain, you don’t dare to say.

In the drug treatment center, in principle you only lose 50% of your civil rights. That means if you are sick, you can rest. Or they are not allowed to offend our parents, not allowed to scold, to insult you. They are not allowed to call us “this *con*, that *con*” [*con* – is used to refer to an animal; when used for humans it indicates inferiority], they have to call us brother or sister, they have to say full sentence with subject and verb. But this is not the reality. As I said, in the drug treatment center you have the right to cast your vote; other than that there is nothing different from prison. How much you lose your rights depends on whether or not you have knowledge and know how to argue with them.

You cannot do what you want. For example, for the 8th of March [International Women’s Day] they organize a gala, you would like to go singing, but you would not be allowed to go singing. Or there is a contest about knowledge on drugs, sure you know a lot, and you want to go, you would not be allowed to compete. In the morning, you are too tired, you have a stomach ache, you want to rest, but you would not be allowed to rest. In the evening, before you go to bed, you want half a bucket of water to brush your teeth or clean up yourself, you are not allowed. Or you want to have a nap for half an hour during lunch break, you are not allowed. Which rights do you have? Everything is set by them and you have to obey. You are machines. And if the machine’s software doesn’t work properly, it would be beaten.

Moderator: How about things that very personal – such as bathing?

Yes, you are allowed to bathe. Now, can you imagine the bathing? It is no different than a farm. There are two groups bathing at once. Each has six or seven hundred people. Everybody is 100% naked. Each team has four or five people, one is assigned to scoop water. But when you scoop water, you are not allowed to do it as you like. Now you hold the bucket in your hands, the staff shouts “scoop,” then you should scoop the water as fast as you can to put in a container. The staff shouts “stop,” then you stop and clean yourself and wash your clothes. Then they shout “scoop,” and you get up and scoop again. Like that. But it doesn’t mean you can use as much water as you want. So we had a bath every two days only. It is in the Center No. 2, in Ba Vi.

But in the center No. 6 in Soc Son, it is like this: Everyone sit there, one would hold a bucket of water and pour it over. Now you soap, then another bucket over the group.

It can be like this: There is a water tank which is very high. One would sit on the top of the tank with the bucket. A group of 10 is down there. The guy on the top will pour water on these ten

guys. You can get wet or not, who cares. They pour the water three times, each two buckets. That's it.

What about working?

The workload is too heavy. In the morning, you get up and perform physical exercise, then at 7 o'clock you go to work. You work until 11 o'clock when you leave to have lunch. After lunch, you go to have a bath. Then at 1 o'clock you go back to work till 4:30 when you have dinner. Then you have a group meeting. Then at 7 o'clock you get back to work until 9 o'clock, then you have to be in bed by 9.30. That means now they make you work above and beyond your capacity, over your capacity not to your capacity.... Because these animals [people in drug treatment centers are made to paint decorative animals], the profit is too high.

In the female camp, some women were not allowed to take the bath for the whole month because they didn't meet the quota. In the evening, they were given a bucket of water to clean themselves up. That's all. Because they didn't meet the quota.

For the painting of animals, the quota for first week was 800 per day. But after one week, it was raised to 1,000. And now it is 2,500. So you are always behind the quota, so you have to work until 9pm. The more skilful you become, the higher the quota will be.

If everyone meets the quota, next month the quota will be raised.

If you visit the center, you would never know the truth. My cousin was beaten up severely but when the family visited and asked, "it is very good, everything is very good" – he said.

If you are in the prison, you are allowed to meet in private with your family. But in the center, you have to meet with your family in front of the staff.

If a journalist visit and wants to meet in private with a person, that person first needs to be favored by the staff or the "commander," I can tell you

Drug centers have changed their nature. Before, their only interest was to keep you there until the end of your term. Now, they consider drug users as cheap labor. They give you a quota, and you really work to produce, and your products are sold for profit.

Moderator: But do you get income from what you produce?

In the school [center], we have to work and we do get a salary. We crack cashew nuts. But the salary is usually one third or one fourth of what you would get outside. It is sent directly to the canteen. In the canteen, the price is like cutting your throat. For example, a chicken worth 100 thousand outside would be sold for three- or four-hundred-thousand inside. So, the money you earn becomes worthless.

Moderator: You speak a lot about punishments, can you tell me a bit more about that?

In the place where I was, when I first came, there was a lot of beating up. (*Moderator: who did the beating?*) Staff, we call “educators.” (*Moderator: how did they beat?*) On the female side, they used sticks but on the male side they used clubs, the black plastic club. But then when we met with our families, we showed our families because many people still had marks on their bodies. Later, the beating was abolished, instead we got chained. We were chained by the window at our arms so we could not sit, we had to stand on our toes. (*Moderator: chained for how long?*) At least 24 hours.

On the women’s side, the punishment room is like this. The room is the size of four chairs put together. This is the toilet. When it rains, the toilet floods outside. The room has no window, nothing. It is so dark that you open your hand and you cannot see it. Depending on what you do, you can be locked up there for one week or two weeks. Women, especially if they are in their days [having their period], can you imagine if they have to stay for a double punishment [14 days], can you imagine how horrible it could be when they get out of that room? For those women, the “commander” always had to allow them to spend a lot of time for bathing. Each day they give a cup of water, you had to save it to rinse your mouth and clean your face.

After being in the punishment room for one week, you get out and clean yourself but until the next day you still feel the smell. It is like the smell had penetrated your skin. Also, there was a lot of dead skin because you couldn’t bathe, and no sun, and you don’t dare to eat because if you eat you have to go to the bathroom.

If you are disciplined, you won’t be allowed to meet your family for three months, won’t be allowed to buy things in the canteen for three months, your food will only be rice and some fish sauce.