

## **Transcript: Women of Vietnam, the Untold War**

00:00:00 Angus

Hello everyone and welcome to Women of Vietnam, the Untold War.

00:00:04 Angus

Today you are joined by myself, otherwise Angus, and my fantastic co-host Jemima.

00:00:08 Jemima

Hi everyone.

00:00:09 Jemima

In this podcast we'll be discussing the experience of women in the Vietnam War, specifically the experiences and roles of female combatants, spies and civilians.

00:00:19 Jemima

We will be talking to three experts, Jacob, Maya and Eloise, who will give us some insights and stories into these groups, which you will be able to take into your lessons to give your students a greater understanding of the Vietnam War.

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And the reason we want to discuss this is because of the fact that women are not at all well represented in the national curriculum.

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And we feel like it's important for this to change.

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In 2023, for example, out of 720 academies, 95% of history departments still use the original national curriculum as their basis.

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And this national curriculum heavily focuses on a British male perspective, not particularly including women, minorities, and also their history.

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Yeah, the curriculum focuses a huge amount on kings, empires, or just powerful men.

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And one can see an example of this in the teaching of the Vietnam War.

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Vietnamese people, and even more so Vietnamese women, feature surprisingly little in the curriculum, considering it is their war.

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We don't hear about their experiences as victims, onlookers, or even as contributors.

00:01:18 Angus

You know, we should.

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We want to hear about the history of more women and more minorities in our teaching.

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We have such a diverse society and this must be reflected in our schools.

00:01:27 Angus

To begin this discussion, we'll be talking to Jacob, who will be telling us about the female combatants in the Vietnam War.

00:01:33 Jemima

Hi Jacob, welcome to the podcast.

00:01:36 Jemima

To begin with, please can you give us an overview of the ways in which women were involved in combat?

00:01:41 Jacob

Hi, it's great to be on.

00:01:43 Jacob

So women very much form the backbone of the Vietnamese Army.

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Their key combat roles were in guerrilla and self-defence groups.

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A lot joined initially because they had to defend their families from American troops.

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when their husbands went off to participate in the official army.

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They worked heavily in support roles as well.

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They drove trucks along the Ho Chi Minh Trail for supplies and they were really heavily involved in army recruiting.

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So one of the key all-female army groups in Vietnam was the long-haired army and one of their key contributions was fighting in the Dong Khoi movement.

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which was really important for recruiting and freeing lots of Vietnamese citizens from American soldiers and really bolstering the numbers for the war effort.

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Yeah, that movement sounds very, very integral towards the success of this.

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But how successful do you think they were?

00:02:37 Jacob

I think they could be very successful.

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It's quite an interesting story, actually, of Nguyen Thi Hong Phau.

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She was a soldier.

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She came from a family of really hard-line communists and revolutionaries that really inspired her to join the army.

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She started work as an intelligence officer, so she would report on the Americans to the Central Committee.

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She was also then added to a division of 11 young women as a guerrilla fighter.

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They then participated in the Tet offensive.

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And in one particular battle at Hue,

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They were actually able, according to her, kill 120 American soldiers and destroy 2 tanks, which is very impressive.

00:03:21 Jemima

Considering this, why do you think that women have been overlooked in the history of the Vietnam War?

00:03:27 Jacob

I think it's down to the fact that the armies of the time, both the US and the Vietnamese, really overlooked their contributions.

00:03:34 Jacob

So going back to Nguyen Thi Hong Phau, once she had completed her work on the Tet Offensive, she was then moved to the jungle where she and her unit suffered constant harassment from the Americans while also suffering from starvation and disease because all the supplies were diverted straight to the official army, which was mostly made-up of men.

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And so many of the women in this unit died.

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She was one of the ones who survived, but when she was eventually relieved, instead of being sent back into combat, as she had anticipated she would, she was actually sent to the rear of the army to work as a typist.

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So even the Vietnamese army majorly overlooked a lot of the contributions that women made.

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Yeah, I mean, clearly, do you think that the Vietnam War could have been won by the Vietnamese without the help of female combatants?

00:04:24 Jacob

No, I absolutely don't think they could have.

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Women actually made-up a huge percentage of the army.

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They were 30% of the National Liberation Front and 50% of all guerrilla fighters in the south.

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So that's a huge amount.

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And also, part of the reason the Americans so gravely underestimated Vietnam's resources was because they did not consider the presence of women in the army.

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So in many ways, the role of women was absolutely crucial to Vietnamese victory.

00:04:55 Angus

Yeah, I mean, thanks, Jacob, for telling us about this.

00:04:57 Angus

To summarise briefly what he's just said, women formed the backbone of the Vietnamese army, performing not just combat, but also support roles like suppliers and recruiting.

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They made-up a large percentage of the army and carried out many successful operations.

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However, they have been overlooked due to ignorance from both the US and Vietnamese armies, which has led to little recognition in the curriculum.

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Next, we want to discuss the role of female spies with Maya.

00:05:23 Angus

Hi Maya, welcome to the podcast.

00:05:26 Angus

First of all, tell us about who the female spies were in the Vietnam War and exactly what they did.

00:05:31 Maya

Well, hello, thank you for having me on the podcast.

00:05:33 Maya

So I think, as you know, women have been associated with espionage for as long as there have been wars.

00:05:39 Maya

I mean, but female spies in Vietnam have been kind of lost in this historical narrative.

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So particularly the types of female spies that you see in this war, you have the kind of casual civilian spy, what you would call market mouths, who would just pick up gossip and information off the streets or selling fruit in the market.

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You also have these counterintelligence spies that are sussing out spies in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

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And then you have more these kind of opportunistic women that were just kind of taking any opportunity to gain any kind of information or intelligence and passing that on.

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And then you also have these more kind of major organised networks as well.

00:06:19 Jemima

So do you think female spies had inherent benefits due to their gender?

00:06:24 Maya

Oh, absolutely.

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I think in Vietnam at this time, women are kind of considered second class citizens, so they tend to be forgotten about.

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definitely more discreet, and I think having that as a spy is an excellent quality.

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There's actually a really interesting story of Nguyen Thi Le On, who was arrested and beaten on many occasions, but released as they suspected that she was not a communist.

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But after this, as a reward for her kind of suffering, the party gave her a job as a liaison officer, so like as an intelligence officer, and she decided to act as though she was crazy to try and spy on people.

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So she would wander the streets naked with just a sash around her waist, where she would disguise secret notes and messages.

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And she actually just wandered around the American military base in Phu Bai, where she gathered information on weapons storage and troop movements.

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She passes on to the party, and then they actually successfully attacked the base.

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I mean, so we can take from that there were some that were independent and some that were a bit more systematic.

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I guess the question is, were these types of spies largely independent, or were they

00:07:31 Angus

still very controlled by the Communist Party.

00:07:33 Maya

So I think they were mainly independent because you have a lot of these kind of opportunistic spies who generally weren't as connected to the party.

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They were still definitely reliant on them and were passing information back to them and definitely loyal to them as well.

00:07:48 Maya

But I think you have loads of these groups of people that are just kind of independently acting as these spies.

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But on the other hand, you do have these more organised espionage networks.

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So there's a very famous example of the Perfume River Squad, which was an all-female spy group.

00:08:04 Maya

Some were adults, but actually most of them were teenagers at the time.

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And they were deployed deep into enemy territory.

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And they gained information on troop movements and their vulnerabilities, and they acted as combatants as well.

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And they mainly spied on US Marines, and they actually fought in the Tet Offensive.

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Unfortunately, though, most of the women were doused in Agent Orange during this and later suffered from cancer or some gave birth to disabled children as well.

00:08:30 Angus

Right, okay, yeah, well, there's a lot to unpack there.

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I guess to summarize, why do you think female Vietnamese spies have been forgotten from the narrative itself?

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So I generally think that because we have this US dominant perspective of the Vietnam War,

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kind of Vietnamese women tend to be really forgotten from this narrative.

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But then you have this factor of they are Vietnamese, they are women and they are spies.

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So it's these three factors that make their history really difficult to discover.

00:09:00 Maya

But also a lot of these women only received awards for the sacrifice of their son or their husband, not actually gaining any medals from their actual experiences or their work.

00:09:10 Maya

So I think generally they kind of just get lost in this narrative of the Vietnam War.

00:09:14 Jemima

Thank you, Maya, for that fascinating insight.

00:09:17 Jemima

So female Vietnamese spies are forgotten from the historical narrative and their actions drastically unrecognised.

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Women, however, had an integral role in intelligence collection during the war, acting as independent spies or working in organised espionage networks, sneaking messages and contacting insider sources.

00:09:36 Angus

Next up, we'll be discussing the experiences of civilians with Eloise.

00:09:40 Jemima

Hi Eloise, welcome to the podcast.

00:09:43 Jemima

Tell us a bit about the experience of female civilians in the Vietnam War.

00:09:47 Eloise

Hi guys, thanks for having me on.

00:09:48 Eloise

So one of the least discussed aspects of the Vietnam War is what it meant for civilian Vietnamese women.

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And what is important to understand is that there wasn't one single experience.

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Their lives stretched from moments of newfound freedom to profound and lasting trauma.

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And I think when we look at women's experiences in war, we usually expect stories about women stepping into traditionally male roles, right?

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Yeah, exactly.

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In Saigon, there was what anthropologist Mai Lan Gustafsson called "the quintessential image of wartime Saigon."

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The bar girl in Western clothing, calling out to American GIs in broken English, selling drinks, cigarettes, and sometimes sex.

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That image carries heavy stigma, but when you listen to the women themselves, the story becomes more complex.

00:10:31 Eloise

Many of these women have grown up in small rural villages where gender roles were incredibly rigid.

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One woman Hai summed it up pretty bluntly, saying, the "girls don't mean \*\*\*\* in Vietnam."

00:10:41 Eloise

Daughters cooked, cleaned, and served their brothers, and were often denied an education, which really limited their options for later life.

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And this is where arranged marriage came into the picture.

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Incredibly, out of the 32 women Gustafsson interviewed, 28 had claimed that they'd moved to Saigon alone and penniless just to avoid being married off against their will.

00:11:02 Jemima

That's incredibly heartbreaking, but also very brave.

00:11:06 Eloise

Exactly.

00:11:07 Eloise

But for some, those years were the best years of their lives.

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Hai literally said, "the war that whole time was the best time of my life."

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I loved it".

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However, she wasn't celebrating the war.

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She was celebrating her newfound freedom.

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These women suddenly had financial independence, they were making their own money and paying their own rent, they were able to form their own relationships and were finally liberated from the traditional gender hierarchy which was forced on them.

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However, this freedom was not permanent.

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After the war, women who stayed in Vietnam faced discrimination and punishment.

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Some were sent to re-education camps or were imprisoned.

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Most never told their families about their lives in Saigon and still feared being judged.

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Hai insists her daughter would hate her if she ever found out about her life in Saigon.

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Significantly though, none of Gustafsson's interviewees will use their real name in interviews, even now, out of fear of judgement from their neighbours and friends.

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What about the women outside of Saigon?

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Did they also gain freedom as well?

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No, they didn't.

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The experience of the women outside of Saigon were vastly different.

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In rural areas, women were disproportionately exposed to wartime violence.

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Some American soldiers openly expressed abject attitudes towards Vietnamese civilians, even attempting to justify them.

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One American GI stated that "nature is nature.

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There are women available.

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Those women are of another culture, another colour, another society.

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You don't want a prostitute.

00:12:33 Eloise

You've got an M16.

00:12:34 Eloise

What do you need to pay for a lady for?

00:12:36 Eloise

You go down to the village and take what you want."

00:12:39 Jemima

Wow, so it sounds like these American GIs had an almost godlike complex.

00:12:43 Eloise

Exactly.

00:12:44 Eloise

This racism and gender-based dehumanisation meant that rural women were seen as disposable.

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However, these acts of sexual violence were not isolated incidents, but rather they became part of a wider military problem.

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As a result of this, many women endured severe physical and psychological trauma, and in many cases sexual violence was used alongside torture and murder.

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However, these crimes were rarely punished, and the survivors were left without justice or support.

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While many women carried out their lives with a silent seething, their stories have helped to turn the narrative into one which doesn't champion American soldiers as war heroes, but instead pauses to consider their shortcomings, challenging the traditional American outlook of the war.

00:13:26 Angus

These women obviously had hugely varying experiences, going from relatively positive to intensely negative, such a variation, but their experiences were a part of this war and it is very important that students learn this.

00:13:38 Jemima

Thank you, Eloise, for telling us about these incredibly important stories and experiences.

00:13:43 Jemima

And thank you to all of our experts who have spoken to us today and told us about such an incredibly important topic.

00:13:49 Angus

Today has been so interesting.

00:13:51 Angus

We've learned a lot about the vital roles women played in the Vietnam War, from making up the backbone of the army to sneaking messages and breaking into American bases, subsequently helping to shift this massive narrative around women's agency while holding American soldiers accountable.

00:14:07 Jemima

What we've also learned today is that women were not just passive victims, but actually played an incredibly important role in the Vietnam War.

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To an extent, it may not have been won without them.

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It is important students learn about their role in the war, and the history of minorities is included in our school curriculum.

00:14:23 Angus

We hope this is useful to you all listening and that you enjoy teaching about it in such a fascinating and important topic.

00:14:29 Angus

Thanks for listening and have a lovely day, guys.

00:14:31 Jemima

Thank you.

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