

## LOOSING THE REPRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS – A DISASTER OF THE CHEMICAL WARFARE

*Truong Thi Ngoc Lan*

**M**y name is Truong Thi Ngoc Lan, the third child in an eleven-sibling family. I was born in 1941 and got married at the age of 22. After university graduation, I began my teaching in Chi Linh district, Hai Hung province (former) from 1961 to 1970. After this period, I moved to Hanoi and taught there. I retired in 1989.

Among four times of my giving birth, we only have the second son alive; the others were died at their infancy. My son is 37 years old now, his name is Lam, Pham Duong Lam. Usually, a mother having a son at such age will be very happy because he would support for his own life, have his own family, or make her a grandmother. However, I am denied the pleasure of these simple things.

My husband and I are victims of a painful and angry event - the event with lasting consequence. How painful it is! We do not know when it will end for us, as well as for other victims like us. For how long each individual, family and society will pay the price and suffer great pains caused by such consequences!

Pham Chieu Duong is my husband's name. He was born in 1935. He graduated from Medical university and joined the army working as a doctor. In 1965, he worked at Military Medical Research Institute. From 1963 to 1969, he was a medical officer in the battlefields of Quang Binh, Quang Tri and even the severe battle along the Road No.9-Southern Lao. At that time, the war was very fierce. Like other soldiers, he was suffered from malaria and bomb pressure. He often told me about the battle fields, Duong and his friends had to dig hideouts under the low bamboos due to other kind of trees were fired and destroyed. They even had to cover their noses and mouths by wet clothes in order to prevent inhaling terrible smoke and smell.

I knew through mass media, newspapers and books, about chemical agents that were used during Vietnam War by the US army. They carried out the Ranch Hand Operation from 1961 to 1964, mainly using three chemicals: Purple Agent, Pink Agent and Blue Agent. Following years, they moved to use much Orange Agent. They sprayed totally more than 600kg of dioxin in the South of Vietnam throughout the war from 1961 to 1971.

The dioxin used in Vietnam war had been openly released and criticized in mass media with undeniable evidences and alive witnesses, not only in Vietnam but also in the US and some other countries. Dioxin has affected on both the environment and human. In 1994 and 1995, the Institute of Medicine under the American Academy of Sciences officially admitted that there was evidence linking several diseases to Agent Orange exposure. Vietnamese scientists also have conducted many studies on the long-lasting effects of chemicals on human health. Those studies suggest that it have serious health consequences on men, women and children. In both men and women, it causes an increasing rate of cancer, immune-deficiency, metabolism disturbances, diabetes and general health impairment such as loss of appetite, insomnia, weight loss, headache, impaired vision and/ or impaired hearing. In women specifically, it causes abnormalities of pregnancy such as miscarriage, still births, premature births and birth defects ranging from external, benign defects (cleft lip, cleft palate) to deformity of limbs (clubfoot, clubhand) to severe neural defects (anencephalia, learning disabilities) to most severe (cerebral palsy, several children with disabilities in the same family, second generation disabilities).

I gave my first birth in 1965. The baby was died just after being born. In 1969, I had Lam, at first, he was very chubby with 3,9 kg weight. He grew up normally in the first few months; he was able to roll over when he was five months. Since then, we realised that my son seemed to be abnormal. He had no expression to prove the ability to recognize mother and father touch and gestures. We brought him for medical check but no disease was seen. We received lots of my relatives' love and affection. My brothers tried to help Lam learning to walk. He could totter at the age of two and stammer nearly three. However, our anxiety increased day by day when we could not control his everyday life.

At the age of 37, he is just like a one-year-old child, needs all assistance from parents. So far, he can not say a meaning word, no ability to do anything. Sometimes, he is sleepless and eats nothing, hops at night and cry without reason for a period of time; then he sleeps all day after that time. We have tried on different methods but no bright change. It is more painful to my husband because of his helplessness as a doctor in front of the son's suffer, though he still tries on oriental medicine.

Being so disappointed about this son, we wished to have a normal child in the third giving birth in 1971. My daughter was very lovely and like other babies. Terribly, she got her neck too soft, atelectasis and died at the age of three months. Hoping still for a normal child, I gave birth to another son in 1973. How painful it is, the baby had curved arms and very weak. He also left us forever at three-month age. What was a tearful time for me, there was nothing left... We gradually came to accept the fact of giving up to have other children. We encourage each other to persist in bringing up our abnormal

son. Our pain is less thanks to neighbour and relative's encouragement and help. However, we can not feel assured and confident deeply. Being a wife and a mother, I always feel torment and lost. I fear of leading my son on the road. This self-pitifulness cannot be stated...

There was question squeezing our mind why we had to suffer that despair. Our siblings in both sides have their children healthy and normally grown up. My husband and I had no diseases related to reproductive function since we got married. However, my husband health appears worse and worse. He usually has headache, feels dizzy and his eyes is always wet. In 1982 he experienced an eye operation in Military Hospital 108. He also suffers chronic colitis. His teachers and colleagues advised him to get comprehensive health checked and diagnosed. Many of his mates in the army have suffered from similar effect of dioxin infection. Of the three children born to Nguyen Tuan Binh – one was born with cleft lip, one is clubfooted and the newborn has skin disease with white dots all over the body. Another of my husband's colleagues, Nguyen Ngoc Tha is infertile and has worsened eyesight. Yet another of his colleagues, Nguyen Xuan Thu has blood diseases caused by dioxin and is being treated in Army Hospital.

It was then that we started realising the cause of the despair we are suffering. The time my husband was in the battlefields constitutes the peak time of chemical spraying by the American army. The spraying was aimed at protecting the US and the military bases alliance from attack by clearing grass and shrubs and by defoliating trees, destruction of foliage in order to discover the guerilla's hidden military positions, stores and transport routes, thus facilitating air and artillery strikes and destruction of crops thought useful to guerilla forces. In the early period of the chemical war, Western pilots in civilian clothes flying US aircraft with Sai Gon regime markings conducted aerial spraying operations. The soldiers in the sprayed areas were all at high risk of dioxin infection through three routs: food, direct contact and respiration. Duong has been concluded to be dioxin infected. I often wonder why they would use such severe chemical to destroy human beings, not only direct contact person, but also his/her partner and their innocent children who are unable to be a complete human.

Whenever looking at the children of my siblings, my neighbours and friends, both my husband and I can not help feeling self-pity and comparing to our situation. I am not loosing my mind thanks to my husband. He is always by my side. We both have to rely on each other; one is living for other's shake. For me, the "human right" voiced in many national and international arenas just the right to have normal children as it naturally is. I want to have such a simple right fully enjoyed by my sisters and brothers. They have wonderful, clever and competent children. I feel pity for my lost children, and more for my son, Lam, as he has no right to play, to go to school and to grow normally as others, as a human being! He cannot understand that he should have lives a normal life if that

terrible chemical did not infect his father Duong. I feel sorry for my husband so much as I know that he suffers too great pain and always complains himself because of bringing the despair to his wife and child. We now understand the cause of our pain and cannot accept its violation to the right of many like us to live freely and safely.

In my view, spraying of that toxic chemical into the living creatures is so savage, violating reproductive rights of any living beings in the earth. This violation is violation of human rights of everyone: a man who should enjoy the right to be a father, a woman who should enjoy the right to be a mother and a child who should enjoy the right to live, play and go to school. I am also thinking of many others, families in the same situation like ours, of children who are taken away the right to grow up healthy and happily. For how long will such physical and mental pains seize our future generations and us? Is there no one who is responsible for that terrible violation? Both of us are intellectual, normal citizens. Why we had to bear the severe consequences caused by the US army that affected to our children and next generations.

Now, our standard living is being improved. I am a native of Hanoi; both of my brothers and sisters live in Hanoi so that they could help my family in material and spiritual aspects in difficult time. After retirement, Duong had a traditional medicine store at home to earn our's living and time to take care of my son. Though our standard living is not well off but it ensures the life as most of Vietnamese people. Everyday, we have to work hardly, save every bit of money to improve the living conditions and moreover to have no free time to think about our misery and unhappiness.

On the coming of the old age, we have to make every effort, take medicine for restorative day by day for a better health, overcoming the difficulties and miseries by our fortitude and spiritual help from relatives and friends.

However, my husband and I always bother about the future of our pitiful child and ourselves. Everyday, from giving birth to Lam to now, we are spiritually obsessed with the misery and torment. When we are observing my son hopping whole day, spelling meaningless words, my husband and I feel the pain in our heart. The pain cannot be treated, as it is hurt more by constant torments and anxieties. There comes one day when my husband and I fall sick and being treated at the hospital, who will take care the patience and Lam who is the victim of Agent Orange. And when we become too old to take care of him or later pass away, who is the person to take over for us? This is the most worry before we decease.

*Hanoi, 2000-2006*