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## Internal Migration, Networks and Gender Roles among Domestic Workers in Vietnam

Van Nguyen, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Tracey Adams, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in  
Sociology

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INTERNAL MIGRATION, NETWORKS AND GENDER ROLES AMONG  
DOMESTIC WORKERS IN VIETNAM

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Nguyễn Hồng Vân

Graduate Program in Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

The University of Western Ontario

London, Ontario, Canada

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines social networks and gender roles among domestic workers who are rural-to-urban female migrants in Vietnam. Using qualitative data collected from 10 in-depth interviews and one focus group with 17 domestic workers and one interview with a NGO staff member, I argue that networks and gender are closely linked as migrant women drew support from their circles of female friends and families yet these networks also constrained them by monitoring behaviours against rigid gender expectations and ideal womanly virtues. My findings show that while most migrant women continued to adhere to their traditional gender roles and overcame many difficulties in order to fulfill their domestic obligations, their new earning power also enhanced their status in their families and communities. Lastly, this study places migrant women within a broader context of a country in transition and draws attention to the agency they exercised before, during and after the migration process.

**Keywords:** Internal migration, domestic work, gender roles, social networks, agency, Vietnam, rural-to-urban migration, labour migration

## **Acknowledgement**

I have contemplated this part long before my thesis was completed, because it is a rare opportunity for me to publicly thank a person who has inspired me in many ways. Cô Minh has lived with my family for almost seven years. She is a domestic worker with a wonderful talent in storytelling. Although she does not know it, her many accounts of how her migration journey started, the struggles she has been through, and even the tears she shed while singing along her children's favourite songs broadcasted on TV, kindled my interest in studying domestic workers and migration. This thesis was given its earliest form during our many chit-chats in the kitchen. From the bottom of my heart, cảm ơn cô.

The thesis writing process opens my eyes to the collaborative and social aspects of ideas. Showing my tangled and clumsily expressed thoughts to another human mind is a dreadful task, let alone an extremely intelligent and dedicated Sociology professor. My advisor, Professor Tracey Adams, on many occasions has understood what I wanted to say before I did, and gracefully walked me through the process of transforming my chaotic thoughts into convincing arguments. I am deeply indebted to her for spending many hours reading and editing my thesis and all the discussions we had during my time at Western. She has shown me how it feels to stand on the shoulder of a giant, without making me feel like a dwarf.

Next, I want to thank my participants for sharing their stories with me, even though I just met many of them for the first time. It is very courageous and trusting of them to tell me (a stranger!) about their lives, their families, their worries and their problems. I am also very grateful because their stories still fascinate me after the long days of transcribing and line-by-line coding, thus making writing my thesis much more

bearable. I hope I have done justice to the participants and readers of this thesis can feel their beauty and determination shine through the pages.

This thesis would not have been possible without the very generous financial support from Western University. The Department of Sociology has provided an intellectually stimulating environment and much assistance to my completion of the Master degree. This thesis certainly benefits from the courses I took, as well as seminars and workshop discussions with professors and fellow students. In particular, Professor Lorraine Davies edited my draft and gave me helpful suggestions.

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

Using qualitative data collected from interviews and focus group discussions with rural-to-urban women migrants in Ha Noi, Vietnam, and this thesis explores the connections between internal migration, social networks and gender roles. Specifically, I will examine how these three elements are interconnected in a complex web of cause and effect, leading rural women to migrate to the capital city and engage in domestic work. Their stories will also be placed in the broader context of Vietnam, a post-socialist country undergoing rapid socio-economic transformations, so that a link between individual agency and structural elements can be drawn. Some questions that will be addressed are: To what extent is migration a personal choice or an outcome of desperate situations? Does migration empower women? And how do migrants and their families deal with the changes brought about by migration in terms of gender relations and care arrangements?

### **1.1 Migration and Gender**

Labour migrants have always been central to the field of migration studies. While young, unaccompanied males used to characterize migration flows into industrial nations, there has been an increase in other types of migrants, notably unattached women moving in search of jobs. Indeed, thirty years ago, research confirmed a growing feminization of migration, not only from developing countries to developed countries, but also between Asian countries and between Latin American countries (Fong and Lim, 1982; Hancock, 1983; Marshall, 1979). This trend was predicted to increase in the decades ahead (Salt, 1987). Two processes can account for this gendered pattern of labour migration. First, the movement of capital to peripheral areas coincides with the increasing demand for low

wage labour in the core (Sassen-Koob, 1984; 1988). Boyd (1989) asserted that economic transformation in the core regions does not innately require female labour, but it creates a low skill, low wage service economy which is consistent with the perceived characteristics of female labour, i.e. obedience, docility and endurance. Another process is commonly referred to as global care chains (Hochschild, 2000: 131), in which women from economically disadvantaged regions migrate to offer domestic services and undertake care work. Their labour is in high demand due to the double burden shouldered by their female employers who hold full-time jobs while being charged with domestic responsibilities.

Despite this interest in women migrants and current attention paid to the gendered nature of migration, researchers still claim that women's experiences have not been appropriately integrated into migration studies. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000) cautioned us that there are still large-scale surveys conducted on immigrant men that purport to be about all immigrants. Gender-sensitive research designs are few and far between. Besides leaving out women's voices and stories, migration studies that fail to take gender differences into account also overlook important sociological concerns, such as intra-household relations of power that shape migration decision-making processes, or the gendered nature of social networks and the ties between friends and family that facilitate migration. Since families and communities are highly gendered spheres, they impact men and women differently, resulting in different pressures and opportunities for migration. Fifteen years ago, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000) claimed that women as research subjects, and gender as an analytical category, continued to be marginalized within mainstream migration research. A more recent examination of the migration literature by

Louise Ryan (2007) unfortunately yields a similar result. She concluded that the challenges set out by Boyd in 1989 for researchers to strive for a greater specification of the roles, dynamism and the gendered nature of networks among migrants still remain.

## **1.2 Migration and Networks**

One question that has been examined time and time again in migration studies is whether migration empowers women or alters gender relations significantly. Researchers have reported mixed results. Research by Yen Le Espiritu (1999) on Asian American immigrants, by Cecilia Menjivar (1999) on Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants in California, and by Prema Kurien (1999) on Hindu immigrant professionals finds that there are shifts toward greater gender egalitarianism, but these are unevenly expressed in diverse contexts. Counter to what one might expect, domestic inequalities seem to be especially marked in instances where wives earn more than their husbands. One reason that might lead to different interpretations is the tendency to equate gender empowerment with economic integration while ignoring other intangible dimensions such as social capital and social networks. Through the process of migration, women may develop their own social networks that allow them to contest domestic patriarchal authority.

Social networks are important to consider because as a theoretical concept, networks allow researchers to move beyond the push–pull theory that explains migration decisions as purely individual and rational calculations. Social networks, on the other hand, place the emphasis on structural elements, such as linkages between sending and receiving countries (Lim, 1987a; 1987b; Salt, 1987). Boyd (1989) argued that studying networks, particularly those linked to family and households, permits understanding migration as a social product, not as the sole result of individual decisions made by individual actors, nor as the sole result of economic or political parameters, but rather as

an outcome of all these factors in interaction. This approach also permits conceptualizing migration as a contingency. Whether migration occurs or not, and what shapes its direction, composition and persistence is conditioned by historically generated social, political and economic structures in both sending and receiving societies.

Social networks and the related concept, social capital, are both multidimensional and multifaceted. Granovetter (1973) divided social networks into strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties represent relationships that require significant amount of time, effort and emotional investment to sustain. Examples of strong ties are spousal or parent-child relationships. As a result, individuals can expect financial and emotional support from these stable, secure relationships. On the contrary, weak ties are connections to acquaintances or distant relatives and tend to occupy a less significant place in one's social world. However, Granovetter (1973) emphasized that weak ties are more likely to be the source of new information than strong ties, which is very important for immigrants searching for jobs and opportunities in a new society.

Putnam (2000) added another dimension to the concept of social capital, namely bonding and bridging ties. Bonding ties occur between people who have similar backgrounds, while bridging ties are between those different from each other. Although bridging tends to happen between weak ties, it is not always the case. For example, a mixed-marriage results in a strong tie between two people from different racial backgrounds. On the contrary, fellow church-goers or other mere acquaintances can be very similar to each other in terms of ethnic and social backgrounds; these relationships are examples of weak ties with bonding effects.

Putnam (1994) studied social capital in the context of civic engagement and he argued that social networks can facilitate collective action. Similarly, Coleman (1994) considered social capital as collective goods of reciprocity, trust and cooperation. While social theorists often agree that families and communities are the most common sources of social capital where individuals acquire the support they need to succeed, they differ in their views of these resources. Bourdieu (1984) asserted that social capital is not merely a benign side-product of connections and relationships but rather the very means by which social inequality is maintained across generations.

Despite these complexities, social capital theories are still criticized for three main shortcomings. First, they tend to focus on positive aspects and neglect negative outcomes of social ties and membership in some particular groups (Hellermann, 2006; Zontini, 2010). Second, social capital theories may overlook power structure within groups, such as gender inequality (Zontini, 2010; Zhou & Carl, 2001). And lastly, many studies of social capital among im/migrants use economic integration as the standard measurement and fail to appreciate the importance of other social processes (Hellermann, 2006).

### **1.3 Research Objectives and Thesis Organization**

This thesis seeks to contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, by looking at female labour migrants in Vietnam, their networks and gender roles, my study is situated in the intersection of networks and gender in migration, precisely the area that has not been received adequate attention. Second, the majority of current research focuses on transnational migration, while movements within nations have not been documented to a similar extent. Significant social processes and interesting interplay between individual agency and structural elements also happen at this level. Third, my findings



add one more answer to the still inconclusive question of whether women's status improves with migration. To further complicate the relation between these two variables, I also ask how gender expectations affect migratory trajectories, rather than taking the direction of influence for granted. In other words, I avoid the common assumption that changes to gender relations only take place *after* and *because of* migration. Lastly, to remedy the oversimplifying representations of networks' operations and networks' impacts on labour migrants, I explore multiple levels of networks, as well as enduring tensions and conflicts embedded in them. There are gender-specific functions of the networks I study, but there are also impacts of networks on changing and preserving gender norms. While many studies focus exclusively on the benefits brought about by networks that support migrant men and women, I seek to shed light on the pressure they exert on individuals as well.

The next chapter of the thesis provides further information about the research context. I will discuss gender roles and gender relations in Vietnam in connection to a socio-historical review of recent changes in the country. Subsequently, I examine rural-to-urban migration, together with challenges faced by labour migrants and how networks are used to help offset those difficulties. The last section of my literature review is dedicated to domestic services, both globally and locally. I draw attention to how domestic work in Vietnam, similar to other countries, is performed in a paradoxical space occupied and contested by women of different means, who strive to fulfill their respective gender roles. This place is also filled with gender, class and rural-urban inequalities.

I recount my research methods in the third chapter. The reader will also find demographic information about the research participants and how data for this thesis was collected and analyzed.

The fourth chapter presents my findings. This chapter is divided into three sections; each addresses one research question. The first section discusses benefits and challenges brought about by networks comprised of fellow-migrants, families and communities in sending areas, and other urban residents. The second section documents different ways in which the women challenge or preserve gender norms when they are working in the city. The last section makes connections between individual stories and the broader context, trying to identify where agency and structural forces intersect.

A summary of main findings, along with a discussion of the implications of my study, how it is linked to the literature, and my study's limitations are included in the final chapter. The very last part offers my concluding words, hoping that I have done justice to all the participants who trustingly shared their stories with me, and that my goal of honouring their voices has been achieved.

## **Chapter 2: HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The first part of this chapter provides a brief overview of the economic reform taking place in Vietnam in the last few decades. In the second section, I will discuss some major features of gender in Vietnam, focusing on state discourses and how gender roles are performed, negotiated and reproduced among migrant women. The following section is an overview of rural-to-urban migration, structural challenges faced by migrant workers due to policies aiming at population control and the roles of networks in facilitating migration and settlement. Next, I will present a section on domestic services in Vietnam, including a brief history and a review of the current situation of many domestic workers. Lastly, I will tie together all different elements described in this chapter in order to identify some gaps in existing literature before leading the reader to my research questions.

### **2.1 Overview of the Economic Reform**

Eleven years after the end of the Resistance War Against America (kháng chiến chống Mỹ), commonly known as the Vietnam War in the West, the Vietnamese government officially abandoned its socialist dream. In 1986, facing a stagnant economy, a looming famine and a highly unstable society, the government introduced an economic reform (Đổi Mới – literally change to the new) and embraced the market. Switching from a centrally planned economy (kinh tế kế hoạch tập trung) to a market-based economy

with a socialist orientation (kinh tế thị trường có định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa), Vietnam embarked on a new journey of development.

Since then, three decades have gone by. The economic reform is largely considered a significant success, for Vietnam has recently become a low-middle income country. According to a report written by the Asia Foundation (2011), in 1985 average per capita income in Vietnam was \$130, making it one of the five poorest countries in the world. However, policy reform pursued by the Vietnamese government has led to sustained high economic growth and remarkable successes in poverty reduction. By 2010 average per capita income was more than \$1,000 (Asia Foundation, 2011).

An emergent middle class and their conspicuous consumption lifestyles are on display in major cities such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh. Expensive cars, designer clothes and annual vacations to exotic destinations are becoming signs of status desired by many Vietnamese, the majority of whom are so young they have no direct experience with or memory of the war. International corporations have gradually entered Vietnam as the country joined regional and global associations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations in 1995, the World Trade Organization in 2007, and negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership were underway as of August 2015. Modernization and globalization are adopted by government officials as mottos for a better future. On the grassroots level, American fast food chains such as McDonalds and Starbucks have been enthusiastically welcomed by young Vietnamese eager to become global citizens. At the openings of these globalized brands, local customers can be seen waiting patiently in a long queue for a chance to pose with a Starbucks cappuccino and upload the picture on Facebook. With such a young population, Vietnam unsurprisingly boasts a deep

penetration of the Internet: almost half of the population were Internet users in 2014 (Internet Live Stats, 2015).

However, the economic reform has not had the same impact on all citizens. While foreign investment, a thriving export industry and other opportunities for quick cash help certain individuals accumulate capital quickly, many others have been excluded from the process. Rural women, for example, are among the most marginalized in the new system. On the one hand, they possess low human capital such as formal education, which makes them less competitive on the labour market. On the other hand, the state's withdrawal from the provision of basic social services adds even more pressure to their already strained shoulders. One solution for this dilemma is migrating to urban centers where readily available opportunities to make money in the informal sector exist. Women have increasingly been predominating in the flow of rural migrants, working long hours in low skilled jobs that subject them to unsafe conditions and inadequate protection. Many of these women perform domestic services.

Another less visible side of the economic reform is the impact it has had on cultural norms, especially changes in gender roles. In daily conversations, Vietnamese people often employ essentialist terms to explain gender differences (Leshkovich, 2012)—namely how men and women are inherently different—without referencing the underlying processes that facilitate certain assumptions and ideas about what is considered appropriate. For instance, women are often portrayed in mass media as naturally suitable for childcare or housework and men as providers. Following the economic reform, the state urged women to step up and take on more financial responsibilities, so their families can be self-sufficient and less dependent on state

welfare. The pressure to ensure basic subsistence is most acutely felt by rural women, which contributes to an increasing feminization of rural-to-urban migration.

## **2.2 Gender Dimensions in Vietnam**

### **2.2.1 A General Picture**

Vietnam is a South East Asian country heavily influenced by Confucianism which stresses social and gender hierarchies (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2010). Women in general are thought to be inferior to men, making the society a patriarchal system. Family is seen as a corporate and a hierarchical institution that must have a head, who is usually male (Werner, 2009). Patrilineal kinship is the norm among Vietnamese<sup>1</sup> who pass down family names as well as inheritance through sons (Hy Văn Lương, 2003). Both domestic and public authority rests with men. Women and girls are believed to be more gentle, submissive and restrained in nature, thus expected to behave more considerately. Men and boys, on the contrary, are portrayed as hot, aggressive and more spontaneous, thus their insensitive or thoughtless actions are more likely to be tolerated (Rydstrom, 1998). However, because men are carriers of the lineage line, they are considered to be moral beings, i.e. morality is embedded in them, while women must constantly prove their moral characters in everyday behaviours (Rydstrom, 1998). Men are also responsible for worshipping ancestors in their after-life, thus son preference is strong (Haughton & Haughton, 1995) and has been on the rise since the state imposed the “two-child” policy. Sex-based abortions are not uncommon, especially among families with one or several daughters trying to give birth to a son. This has led to an alarming unbalanced sex ratio,

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<sup>1</sup> some ethnic minority groups in Vietnam have a matrilineal kinship system but they are not the focus of this study

especially since the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (United Nations Population Fund, 2010).

There is a strong division of labour, according to which women are exclusively responsible for domestic work, while men are charged with work that is more labour-intensive and important. A time allocation survey conducted in Ho Chi Minh City found that urban women spend almost six hours on housework a day and men spend one and a half hours a day; in rural areas women spend 7.5 hours and men a mere 30 minutes (Vietnam News, January 30, 1999 as cited in Long, Le, Truitt, Le, & Dang , 2000). It should be noted that the notion of women doing light and trivial work is problematic, because many tasks typically reserved for women are as hard as or even harder than men's work but are not acknowledged as such (Werner, 2009). For example, during socialist times when rice production was performed in collective co-operatives and each task was awarded with points, women often received fewer points for transplanting, harvesting and weeding, even though these activities demanded great strength and endurance. Men ploughed the fields and were awarded more points, yet ploughing was less back-breaking and only needed to be done once for a season. Despite many political and economic changes throughout recent history, men continue to be marginally involved in housework and care duties (Long et al, 2000), while women's economic contributions through unpaid work were estimated to be anywhere from one-tenth to ten times the average income per person (HealthBridge & Institute of Social Development Studies, 2008).

Women's virtues consist of working hard and speaking little, i.e. avoiding drawing attention to themselves. The financial and emotional values of domestic work

are underappreciated, as most people, especially men, often do not consider daily tasks of household maintenance and management work at all. Vietnamese women are known for their greater participation in productive activities in comparison to women in other countries that are influenced by Confucianism such as China, Korea and Japan (Hy Văn Lương, 2003). Indeed, Vietnamese women are praised as “general of the domestic” (nội tướng), for they usually manage the family purse and make expenditure decisions (Werner, 2009: 99). However, contrary to resource theory which predicts that the larger one’s financial contribution to one’s family is, the more power one will have; their economic power does not necessarily translate into an enhanced position within the family (Hy Văn Lương, 2003), or a reduced share of housework and care work (Drummond & Rydstrom, 2004). Earning an income to feed the family is considered *a part of* women’s domestic responsibility, not beyond or outside of this realm (Population Council, 1997). This is in part because post-marital residence is overwhelmingly patrilocal, i.e. the married couple live with the husband’s parents, and thus a woman’s role as a wife and a daughter-in-law is marginalized within her own household. Gender norms in Vietnam, Werner (2009) argues, are not dictated by economic contribution but roles and habits.

In terms of decision-making, women tend to take care of everyday decisions such as agricultural routine expenses like purchases of seeds or fertilizers (HealthBridge & Institute of Social Development Studies, 2008). A large purchase or bigger expenditures such as home renovation or a child’s wedding are determined by men, though often with their wives’ input (Werner, 2009). Even when wives contribute more income than husbands, men still make the most important decisions. Similar to the common



perception of women doing light and easy work while men take charge of tough and difficult work, the gendered division in decision-making does not come close to reality in many cases. During wartime when the majority of men were in the forefront, women assumed many leadership roles in the public sphere and demonstrated their competence in making important decisions.

Within the household, domestic violence is rampant. A study conducted in 2010 by the General Statistics Office in partnership with UNWomen shows that, one in three Vietnamese women reported experiencing domestic violence at some point in her lifetime. Folk wisdom advises women to restrain and avoid confrontation<sup>2</sup>, or openly criticize their husbands even if the latter mistreat them<sup>3</sup>, perpetuating the widely accepted view that men are naturally more violent and must express their anger. As prejudices against divorced women are deeply ingrained, survivors of domestic violence face structural barriers and receive little support if they want to separate from the perpetrators. Abused women are typically unwelcome in their natal families due to the patrilineal logic that after marriage, a daughter becomes a member of her husband's family, thus no longer belongs to her natal family. Faced with a low probability of having a place to live or a chance to re-marry after a divorce, most women hesitate to turn to this option. The divorce rate is increasing in Vietnam, especially in larger cities where it is less frowned upon. A significantly higher number of women are filing for divorce, probably signalling a lower level of tolerance towards gender inequality among the younger generation, but overall the rate is still very low (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; General Statistics Office; UNICEF; Institute for Family and Gender Studies, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Một điều nhịn là chín điều lành – You restrain yourself once, you get nine good things

<sup>3</sup> Xấu chàng hổ ai – Who would be ashamed if your husband is embarrassed?

Outside the household, men often represent the family in events held in the kinship network or the larger community as head of household. Family hierarchy is accepted as a part of everyday life. Werner (2009) shows that even when women are officially registered with the local authority as household heads, their authority lies in administrative matters such as reporting birth and death on behalf of the whole family. The real head of household is still the man, because important decisions reside with him and not the wife.

### 2.2.2 Đổi Mới, the State and Gender

Committed to a socialist vision in which gender equality is a high priority, the government of Vietnam has issued a number of laws and policies that have undoubtedly resulted in improvements of women's position. Vietnam has signed many international conventions expressing a strong interest and determination in promoting women's rights. The government has passed several initiatives to improve women's representation in accord with the World Summit on Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women (United Nations Development Programme, 1996). One of these measures was the creation of the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW), which is mandated to implement the National Platform of Action. Thus, from a legal standpoint, Vietnam is a progressive country when it comes to gender equality. In education, the gap in literacy for boys and girls has almost disappeared as women had the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts, especially among the younger cohorts (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, 2010). As a principle, equal education for boys and girls has been embraced and practiced even at the most local level. Some families organize kinship's funds for study encouragement which recognizes both schoolgirls' and

schoolboys' academic achievements and awards them equally (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, 2010). This is a very positive change compared to the pre-socialist era, when only men were allowed to pursue education and only (male) patrilineage members could benefit from incentives provided to encourage learning. Female donors are also able to contribute to this fund financially and serve in the patrilineage study encouragement committee if they wish, which is another significant improvement considering how married women used to be considered neither a part of their natal families nor their husbands' families (Harms, 2011). Polygamy and child marriage were made illegal. Increasing power of daughters as chief providers for the family when the men were away at war coupled with more liberal attitudes towards unmarried daughters among parents lead to an increase in the number of never-married women, another slow but decisive break from the cultural norm of marriage (Belanger & Khuất, 2002). Generally speaking, Vietnam was considered as one of the most successful countries in East Asia in narrowing the gender gap in last 20 years in the domains of educational and health services, opportunities to work, and participation in decision making (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UK Department for International Development, Canadian International Development Agency, 2006).

Although things look good on the surface, a deeper examination of the state's efforts to use gender discourses to serve its economic development purpose reveals many contradictions (Werner, 2009). While women and men are formally equal before the law, differences in the treatment of men and women are evidenced especially in the areas of reproductive health, the Land Use Act, and labour ordinances. The decline in the state's

ability to influence gender relations suggests that the state's penetration has weakened and so does its capacity to promulgate equality (Long et al, 2000).

First of all, in spite of official policies that support gender equality, Nguyễn Kim Hà (2007) shows that the state has gender bias because it imposes biological terms on women. In the labour force, women are well represented in some sectors and occupations, and men in others, based on their perceived biological characteristics. Although women participate in parliament, they are highly represented in “soft” committees such as social affairs, culture, education and youth while men get involved in “hard” issues deemed more important to the country such as finance or security and defence (World Bank 2006: 32).

As *Đổi Mới* marked the end of three decades of state-controlled economy in the North, and one decade in the South, Vietnamese citizens found themselves having more freedom to trade, to participate in the private sector and open their own businesses. At the same time, they were left with little or no support for social welfare. Except for primary school, students are required to pay tuition and a variety of fees. Nurseries and kindergartens which were operated on a state subsidy during socialist times to facilitate women's participation in productive labour started closing down in large numbers (Beresford, 2003). Specifically, the number of state funded nurseries dropped from 40 to 13 thousand within the first years of *đổi mới* (Trương Thanh Đạm, 1996). There was no longer universal free healthcare (World Bank et al, 2006). Free medical insurances provided by the government for disadvantaged populations such as the poor, veterans, those with disability and ethnic minority have very limited coverage (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2014). As early as 1990, an estimated 70 percent of health expenditures were

through the private sector (International Finance Corporation, 1992 as cited in Long et al, 2000).

In rural areas, the once dominant agricultural co-operatives were replaced by households as the new productive unit. Collectivized land was re-distributed to individuals based on household registration (hộ khẩu). As a result, the state put a new emphasis on the family as both a productive and a reproductive unit, playing a crucial role in national economic growth (Trần Thị Vân Anh & Lê Ngọc Hùng, 1997). Together with resurging patriarchal norms, pro-family discourses promoted by the state encourage men—as the head of family—to exercise their power over women (Nguyễn Kim Hà, 2007). Women, in contrast, are urged to nurture and protect their families from negative influences that might impact the family as the country opens its door (mở cửa) to the capitalist market and the outside world (Fahey, 1998). This ultimately shifts more burdens to households and specifically to women in the context of local definitions of women’s family responsibilities (Nguyễn Kim Hà, 2007; Barbieri & Belanger, 2009).

Together with traditional family hierarchy, the re-emergence of the family as the locus of development has some unintentional effects on women’s participation in the public sphere. In most state campaigns that feature the “cultured family” (gia đình văn hóa) as a noble goal to strive for, important criteria include having one or two children as recommended by the state and raising them well (Ministry of Culture, 2011), tasks that are often assigned to women. Women’s roles as producers and reproducers are tied to discourses of building “Happy Family” (gia đình hạnh phúc) (Werner, 2009; Leshkovich, 2012). Female employees are awarded certificates if their children achieve an “excellent student” (học sinh xuất sắc) title, recognizing the mothers’ efforts in raising

their children. Even for women not formally employed with a salaried job, such messages still reach them through the women's union, community meetings, and an effective communication channel consisting of ubiquitous loud-speakers installed on electricity poles. These loud-speakers jarringly announce winners of the "cultured family" certificate after some supposedly rigorous selection processes, reading out loud their names and addresses, regardless of how honoured or indifferent citizens feel. Slogans such as "good at public work, competent in domestic tasks" (giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà), demonstrated by hand-drawing pictures of a neat-looking woman doing some kind of income-earning job while taking care of (no more than two) children, can be seen on billboards displayed throughout the country. Portrayal of Vietnamese nationalism through gendered images includes women as mothers of the nation, as prime defenders of the nation and always sacrificing their own interests for the family and the greater good (Werner, 2009: 63).



**Figure 1:** A ceremony in the Vietnam Electricity Corporation to recognize female employees who were qualified for the title "Good at public work, responsible for domestic tasks". Source: <http://npc.com.vn/> (2013)

Unlike the West, gender equality in Vietnam has not been interpreted in terms of individual autonomy or family relations, but rather involvement in the public sphere; thus

some have even claimed that gender equality has been achieved. Yet, Trần Thị Quế and Suki Allen (1992) assert that women were gradually withdrawing from the activities of society and state management to focus on domestic responsibilities. In Werner's (2009) study conducted in the late 1990s in a rural district just outside of central Ha Noi, most women and men defined gender equality as women having equal opportunities to participate in productive activities, contribute to their family's budget and help develop the nation. Their comments echoed the state in emphasizing productivity and less dependency on social welfare. Consequently, women are upheld as both keepers of family happiness and productive citizens, a double standard not required of men. Their role as caretakers of children is seen to conflict with their role as wage earners (Long et al, 2000). Charles (1993:135) argues that in socialist countries, "definitions of womanhood and femininity have been transformed in order to encompass roles as workers, political activists and mothers while it has not been thought necessary to make any changes to definition of manhood and masculinity". In Vietnam, according to Nguyễn Kim Hà (2007), women are mobilized in projects and programs conducted by the Vietnamese Women's Union in order to reduce child malnutrition and dropout rates in schools. At the same time, women are also encouraged to actively participate in the labour force. The Women's Union is a state agency with branches at multiple levels, from a central body at the national level to the smallest units present in residential wards and communes. In the past few decades, the Women's Union has engaged their members in various activities that help ensure a happy and successful family, most notably raising awareness about family planning, educational programs on nutrition for children and micro-credit projects aiming to improve income-generating activities. Political

empowerment and individual expression have never been a strong component in the Women's Union's agendas (Oxfam UK/Ireland , 1997).

Ironically, the state's desire to maintain stable and productive families in the interest of a strong economy may at times come at the expense of women's rights and individual freedom. For example, instead of advocating for women in cases of domestic violence, local Women's Union cadres often try to reconcile the couple and discourage the abused woman from filing for divorce, because one more "broken family" in the area could affect the ranking of that Women's Union unit negatively. The post *Đổi Mới* state promotes conservative values, such as a patriarchal hierarchy, for fear of family frictions resulting from excessive individuality introduced by the market economy and influence from the West. Meanwhile, as the state avoids a serious challenge to men's lack of involvement with domestic work, the pressure to assume the roles of a financial provider as well as a care-taker falls squarely on women. To make the matter worse, rural women have the lowest incomes among all (Trần Thị Vân Anh & Lê Ngọc Hùng, 1997: 96). Nguyễn Kim Hà (2007) argues that it is this pressure that motivates rural women to migrate to cities and offer their labour for domestic services so they can *feed* their children. Urban women with good incomes and time-consuming jobs, on the other hand, hire domestic workers to *care* for their children so they can live up to the expectation of being nurturing mothers.

Another contradiction dominant in the state's gender discourses is a strong emphasis on consumption, while job opportunities and living standards have become increasingly unequal across regions (Taylor, 2004:4). According to Long et al. (2000), over the last twenty years, the purchasing power of both men and women has increased



by three to four times. The percentage of households owning colour televisions increased from 0.7 percent in 1980–85 to 46.7 percent in 1996–1999. Since this study was conducted in 2000, consumerism has been on an even more dramatic rise since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although Vietnam is not yet a consumer society, after the economic reform, spending and displaying status through consumption is no longer frowned upon. A happy family on government documents or public posters is typically portrayed with a number of assets such as a two-wheel vehicle, a TV, and a nice house (Gammeltoft, 1996).



**Figure 2** Public poster to encourage family planning, in which a happy family is portrayed as having two children and a number of material assets such as a TV, a refrigerator, two motorbikes, a rice cooker and a nice house. Source: [mythuatvh.violet.vn](http://mythuatvh.violet.vn)

State slogans encourage citizens to generate wealth as a form of patriotism to build the country (Leshkovich, 2012). Poverty is no longer a proud symbol of socialism or a praiseworthy mark of working class status. Nowadays, the attitude has shifted, and poverty is implicitly linked to individual problems such as gambling, drug addiction or an oversized family. This last failure is more often than not attributed to women, as they are taxed with the primary responsibility for family planning. Together with increasing tuition fees and healthcare expenses, a consumption-oriented definition of happiness again puts pressure on women, especially as men continue to shield themselves from taking more responsibilities (Nguyễn Kim Hà, 2007).

Besides an idealized version of the family, the state also shapes gender discourses through complex interactions between socialist ideologies, cultural beliefs and state policies. Leshkovich (2012) argues that on the surface, the fact that traders in Ben Thanh market are overwhelmingly women is explained in gender essentialist terms, i.e. women trade because they are naturally more skilful at bargaining than men. In addition, handling money is considered below men and thus challenges their masculinity. Villagers in Werner's (2009) study informed her that ideally men should be generous and broad-minded; if they count their money too carefully or spend it too thriftily, they will be mocked for "being a woman". Similarly, Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2013) finds that even when a couple migrated together and operated a business together, the wife took care of daily business transactions while the husband delivered products or developed business partnerships away from the shop. Interestingly, Leshkovich (2012) digs deep into this nearly universal gendered pattern to discover intertwining elements of political discourses and cultural norms. At the height of socialism and the centrally planned

economy in Vietnam, any private trading activity was considered capitalist and thus exploitative in nature. However, during this period, women could trade without much hassle from the state because government officials enthusiastically embraced Engels' understanding of gender relations, according to which women by nature are oppressed by men; thus they were considered a disadvantaged group together with landless farmers and low-wage factory workers. Second, because traditionally handling the family's purse is seen as a domestic extension of women's everyday tasks, a woman engaging in trading invites less attention than a man does. Women traders themselves affirm this perception by downplaying the scale of their businesses, frequently referring to their stalls as just small shops earning little. Another impact of state discourses on traders is the assumption that the household economy is good because it contributes to national development, while big business is bad because it is a manifestation of capitalism.

Many researchers have documented how state discourses on gender present incoherent and conflicting messages to Vietnamese women about what is expected of them. While increased stress seems to be an inevitable consequence, the new situation also enhances their position to a certain extent. As households become sites of both production and consumption in the market economy, women exercise increasing power and authority over investment and savings decisions (Long et al, 2000). A telling finding reported by Leshkovich (2012) is how urban traders in Ben Thanh market located in the Southern metropolis rely on their female relatives to run and build businesses. Most stalls are run by several women, who are sisters, mother-daughters, aunt-nieces or cousins, related to each other by blood or by law. Given that the default mode of kinship in Vietnam is patrilineal, and a woman often finds herself in a neither-nor position—neither

a part of her natal family, nor a part of her husband's family—then the ability to mobilize human resources through a web of her kin and not her husband's kin is a step forward. Another research conducted in a different context confirms this finding. Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (2010) discusses the ways in which rural women in a Northern village build and use social capital in ego-based kin networks where a woman is at the center. This changing gender dimensions allow women to access capital, labour assistance and other benefits from relatives related to themselves, thus gaining choice and economic opportunities not available to them previously when the only mode of kinship relations was through men and women were not members of any patrilineage.

Looking at gender in the context of a shifting political structure adds another layer to this already complex picture. The situation of women in Vietnam defies many common assumptions about the correlation between gender equality and the broader society. First, modernisation and economic development does not necessarily increase gender equality; various studies have shown that since the early days of economic reform, relations between men and women within households and in society are increasingly unequal both empirically and symbolically (Beresford, 1994). It is more likely for women in the rapidly modernized Vietnam to withdraw from the public sphere into the private sphere, where many patriarchal values are maintained. Second, gender inequality does not seem to vanish with an eradication of feudalism and capitalism, for even at the height of socialism, women still did not have an equal footing with men (Hy Văn Lương, 2003). Today, as Vietnam is neither a socialist nor a capitalist country, neither rich nor poor, gender norms and roles continue to be reinforced and contested in everyday life.

In the next section, I will discuss gender roles among migrants, whose departures are almost always motivated by financial needs and the lack of job opportunities in their home communities. How do these marginalized individuals negotiate and reproduce gender as they struggle to provide for their families despite being left out of the economic development process?

### 2.2.3 Gender among Migrant Women

There is a gendered pattern to the participation of migrants in the urban labour market, particularly in the informal sector (Kabeer & Tran, 2006). The informal sector constitutes a major part of the labour force, yet its operation is mostly based on personal agreement, mutual trust and unofficial transactions. As a consequence, informal workers are not recognized, registered or regulated or protected by labour market institutions. Female migrants are mostly involved in factory work, street-vending, waste collection, services in shops and restaurants, and domestic service (Hà & Hà, 2001). This reflects the opportunities post-*Đổi Mới* for women in the new factories and export processing zones, as well as the fact that more female than male state employees were laid off after mass dissolution of state enterprises. The informal sector demands cheap labour, thus it is less gender-biased yet also less secure. It is argued that women's concentration in this sector is due to family obligations expected of women that cause difficulties in pursuing formal and vocational training (Long et al, 2000). The same study finds that women are over-represented in the younger generation (18 to 29 years of age) among migrant workers.

Similar to migrant workers elsewhere, Vietnamese women who move to urban centers to work away from home experience much mental anguish, emotional dislocation and tremendous guilt for leaving their children behind (Trương Huyền Chi, 2009). As a

woman's virtue is mostly aligned with the domestic, a failure to fulfill these care-giving roles brings about much anxiety (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2015). Migrant women often worry about their children becoming disrespectful and adopting bad behaviours during their absence and due to a lack of supervision and discipline from adults (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2014). The same study points to evidence that education attainment in migrant-sending areas has decreased over the last ten years, and some attribute this to migrant parents' perpetual absence, and thus a lack of involvement in the children's upbringing.

While research on transnational migration has consistently shown that income brought about by migration strengthens migrant women's position in their families (Belanger, Tran, & Le, 2011), findings from studies conducted among Vietnamese internal migrant workers demonstrate that gender relations are not seriously upset by either the women's absence or their new earning power. Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2014) argues that caring is not necessarily antithetical to manhood for it is part of the influential Confucian notion of masculinity, which idealizes the genteel and refined man. The income-earning, resourceful and domestically powerful woman, meanwhile, has never been alien in Vietnam, despite women's subordinate position (Pettus, 2003). Both migrant women and their left-behind husbands employ various strategies to adjust the household's caring arrangement and maintain the familiar gendered division of labour (Locke, Nguyễn Thị Ngân Hoa & Nguyễn Thị Thanh Tâm, 2012). Husbands undoubtedly assume more domestic responsibilities, willingly or not, but these new tasks are connected to a tradition of men being the protector and stable anchor for the family, especially when other members return and leave home frequently (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt

Minh, 2014). A man's constant presence at home is interpreted as a necessary and natural extension of his manly duty to look after the family's altar, a task reserved specifically for sons and not daughters. Thus, caring responsibilities taken up by men are not interpreted in light of everyday, mundane tasks typically associated with women's domestic work but rather they help to ensure continuity and stability of the household symbolic structure. For many men whose wives spend more time working in the city than living at home, acting as the main carer rather than the income earner does not necessarily imply a reduction of their status in the family. On the contrary, they live up to the ideal of manhood as the protector of the family's hierarchy, morality and its link to the ancestors. Furthermore, switching roles is seen as a temporary change (Resurreccion and Hà Thị Vân Khánh, 2007), and as soon as the woman returns home, whether for a visit or permanently, she will automatically resume cooking and cleaning (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2014). Although this stage of rural-to-urban migration can last for decades, household members frequently talk about an eventual return, implying the temporary nature of migration and the little impact it has on family structure.

In her study of a rural community in Vietnam's Red River Delta where the locals have been migrating to work in the urban waste trade for many generations, Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2014) shows that household care and livelihood activities can be flexibly rearranged to accommodate the changes brought about by migration. At the same time, the rural household reflexively opens up its spatial and social boundaries in response to broader processes of the gendered configuration of paid work and care. Caring responsibilities in many cases are shared between left-behind husbands and other female relatives, with the latter typically taking on a bigger share. Mothers, sisters or daughters

who are old enough take over domestic work left undone by an absent woman and a reluctant husband, especially when it comes to childcare or providing children with emotional support. In a study conducted among migrant households in Sri Lanka, Gamburd (2002) shows that rigid expectations of masculinity make it more difficult for husbands to adapt to their new caring roles, and consequently they tend to neglect their children or entrust them to female relatives. In contrast, migrant women often seek to maintain their presence and provide care from afar. Shopping for essential goods and regularly sending packages of milk boxes and juice cans, or school supplies are ways for Filipino domestic workers in Taiwan to extend their daily grocery shopping across national borders (Lan, 2006). Similarly, the female participants in Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh's (2014) study make sure that there are sufficient supplies of instant noodles, spices, toiletries and other essentials at home during their absence, signifying their care for others in the family while reaffirming their femininity. Frequent communication by phone or mail is another method to ease worries and anxiety caused by separation and help migrant women stay informed of news from home. For long-term rural-to-urban migrants, even though it is easier for them to visit home than transnational migrants, their absence can still result in a discernible shift in parenting style. Instead of a nurturing and gentle mother figure, some women take up the role of a stern parent who disciplines children (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2014). The shorter distance allows them more flexibility and a smoother transition from being at home to being away. While transnational migrants experience separation for the entire length of their migration with few or no visits, internal migrants can afford to go home quite frequently, thus gender roles in their families are less disrupted (Resurreccion and Hà Thị Vân Khánh, 2007).



The ability to move back and forth conveniently is an advantage, especially to mothers leaving young children at home, which explains why many rural women choose to migrate within their countries rather than to another country, even though the second option may offer a much higher return on their investment.

Consistent with other studies on gender in Vietnam, most research on migrant women to date concludes that their new breadwinner roles do not bestow new power on them. In general, women whose incomes contribute to their families are greatly respected and praised, providing that they do not abuse this delicate appreciation and continue conforming to gender norms. If a woman “acts like a husband”, she will be condemned and ridiculed (Werner, 2009). Because Vietnamese women already have an active role in handling the family budget and earning an income, migration and a subsequent breadwinner role does not seem to elevate their positions to a great extent, unlike migrant women in other countries whose new earning power significantly enhances their voice in the family (Dannecker, 2005; Piper, 2010). Migration may not necessarily benefit women the same way it benefits men, due to existing gender relations. Discussing domestic workers and their track of migration, Nguyễn Kim Hà (2007) argues:

Although women and young girls enter the labour force, they just move from their own families to other families. Although women and young girls are willing to migrate, they do not get many benefits from their migration because domestics' points of journey arrival are families. Adult women come back to their families if husbands call them back. Child domestics come back to their villages to prepare for their marriage. Overall, men benefit from the migration of women but not women themselves. The skills that young girls gain from their working experiences do not enable them to choose their partners. Bringing in some cash does not give more power to married women.

Before becoming a migrant, migrant women first and foremost are women, so they operate within the cultural sphere of gender roles shaped by both traditions and shifting socio-political circumstances. Yet once they leave home to embark on a trip to a nearby urban center in search of job opportunities, they take on another identity of being a migrant. Their experiences and decisions are then also influenced by conditions common to all migrant workers. What are some of the structural challenges migrant workers have to deal with? How are networks employed to help alleviate difficulties? And how is migration status linked with the type of domestic services offered by women? These questions will be addressed in the next section.

### **2.3 Overview of Rural-to-Urban Migration in Vietnam**

There has been an unprecedented surge in the magnitude of rural-to-urban migration in Vietnam since *Đổi Mới* was introduced in 1986. Different studies point to similar conclusions. Over half of migration cases (52.1 percent) occurred between 1997 and 1999, and two-thirds between 1994 and 1999 (Long et al., 2000). The Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) shows that between 1993 and 1998 seasonal migration increased six-fold (de Brauw & Tomoko, 2007). Of these, about three million were estimated to be undocumented rural-to-urban migrants (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, 1998 as cited in Long et al, 2000). The 1999 census shows 4.5 million people were on the move in the previous five years, out of which 1.6 million were rural-urban migrants. Initial results of the 2009 census indicate much larger numbers: 6.6 million people had been migrating in the previous five years, a third of whom to large industrial and urban centres (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2010). These figures are only rough estimations because many migrants are not documented in both the

sending and the receiving areas. Their unplanned and rather spontaneous movements prevent more accurate statistics.

As the government relaxed its control over the population and abolished the rationing system, the household registration system (*hộ khẩu*), although still in place, no longer has the same restrictive effect on individual movement as it used to (Winkels, 2012). Before 1986, citizens in the centrally planned economy depended on the state for all daily necessities such as rice, meat, garments, soap and the list goes on (Hardy, 2002). The amount of goods one household was entitled to receive was determined by how many individuals were registered in that household. Their sex, age and type of occupation were also taken into account. For example, a young male factory worker should receive more meat than a middle-aged female teacher, presuming he needed more protein and nutrition in his physically demanding job than she did. This distribution mechanism really limited movements not regulated by the state because it was difficult to navigate all the bureaucratic procedures needed to transfer one's ration card from one administrative unit to another, not to mention an unauthorized change of residence could be deemed illegitimate, to the extent that living without proper *hộ khẩu* documentation amounted to living "without the rights granted to Vietnamese citizens under the law" (Hardy 2002: 192). After the economic reform started, private trade was allowed again, so citizens were free from the constraints imposed by the household registration system as economic benefits and residence status were no longer linked (Hardy & Turner, 2000). Yet unequal regional development with most foreign investment concentrated in the major urban areas leads to a lack of income-generating activities in rural areas and a fast growing informal

sector teeming with low-skilled jobs in urban areas (Beresford, 2003). These are the push and pull factors that motivate people to leave their rice fields.

Rural-to-rural migration mostly occurs among men who originate from the Red River Delta (đồng bằng sông Hồng) in the North seeking opportunities to set up cash crop farms such as coffee, pepper or cashew nuts in the High Land (Tây Nguyên) and the South. To the contrary, rural-to-urban migration is dominated by women working in 3D (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) jobs such as street vendors, junk collectors, dish washers and domestic workers in big cities (Winkels, 2012). This type of migration typically requires little cash investment, so it is more common among families with little resources. There has also been an increase in the number of transnational migrants in Vietnam. These individuals are usually labour contractors or marriage migrants. Most transnational marriage migrants are women, while the majority of transnational labour migrants are men. However, transnational migration and rural-to-rural migration are not the topic of my research, so in the next section I will focus on the challenges faced by rural-to-urban migrants in Vietnam.

### 2.3.1 Challenges Faced By Migrant Workers

Although the household registration system has been significantly weakened thanks to the economic reform, it is nevertheless still in place and causes migrant workers major barriers in accessing infrastructure, education and public services, making them vulnerable to poverty and exclusion (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2010). The majority of migrant workers are registered as permanent residents in their home communities, and either as temporary residents in cities where they work, or not registered at all. Social welfare in Vietnam is still administered on the basis of residency, so not having the

correct paperwork prevents migrants from enrolling their children in public schools or using medical insurance in cities. Although private schools and pay-per-use medical services are available, these options are simply too costly for most low-income migrant workers. Vehicle registration, land purchase and participation in national programs for poverty reduction also require permanent registration status (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2010). In addition, a temporary resident cannot register for utility services; so many landlords take advantage of this administrative hole and charge migrants double or even triple standard prices for electricity or water. Accommodations typically rented to migrant workers are often overcrowded, unsanitary and overcharged (Karis, 2013). Consequently, the mismatch between wages and the cost of living in Ha Noi is the biggest challenge among informal workers reported by participants in Karis' (2013) study. In terms of working conditions, they tend to work without contracts or insurance, and since unions are virtually nonexistent in the informal sector in Vietnam, their labour rights are frequently violated. Complaints about dangerous working conditions, inadequate protection and lack of appropriate compensation for work-related accidents are not addressed by the authorities. To date, no government ministry in Vietnam takes responsibility for attending to their growing numbers and needs (Karis, 2013).

Migrant workers are typically seen by state agents as threats to orderliness and civility, rather than vulnerable and marginalized subjects in need of support (Karis, 2013). Campaigns to ban street vendors in the Old Quarter (khu phố cổ) of Ha Noi introduced in 2008 were rationalized in an effort to keep the streets clean and clutter-free since street vendors were accused of obstructing the flow of traffic with their baskets of fresh produce. Instead of being appreciated as a source of abundant and cheap labour,

supplying the city with its much needed human capital for economic growth, migrant workers are left on their own at best, and disdained as trouble-makers at worst. For example, urban migrants frequently face discrimination from educational and medical providers, who can selectively use residential status as a prerequisite to deny access to schools or healthcare, according to levels of supply and demand—or simply on a whim—without any consequences (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2010). Perhaps the state only refrains from banning rural-to-urban migration altogether because it is indeed one viable livelihood and helps lift the burden of tackling poverty off the state’s agenda. The situation is not too different from other developing countries in the region, where remittances represent one of the largest external sources of funding. In many developing countries, women are strongly encouraged by the government to go abroad to work and send money home since their overall volume of remittances exceeds that of foreign direct investment (IMO, 2010). For instance, in Nepal, women migrant workers, who are mostly domestic workers, contribute about half of migrant workers’ remittances or around 23 percent to Gross Domestic Product (UN Women, 2013). Although Vietnam has not yet become heavily dependent on remittances of migrant workers to keep its economy afloat, migration is helping rural families to fulfill the state’s vision of self-sufficient and economically independent households. Despite this important role, rural-to-urban migration still meets with many obstacles and lacks structural support (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh; Rigg; Lương Thị Thu Hương; Đinh Thị Diệu, 2012). To mitigate difficulties, most migrants turn to their own networks for assistance before, during and after migration.

### 2.3.2 Networks among Migrant Workers

The most common forms of networks among migrant workers are those comprised of people originating from the same community. They can be immediate family members such as parents, children, siblings or relatives and friends. According to Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2015), networks based on relationships with fellow villagers are more common among domestic workers who live away from their employers, while networks made up of workers living in one urban neighbourhood are more dominant among live-in women. Members of the second group spend most of their time confined within their employers' homes, thus their contacts are often limited to other women living in close proximity. Another form of network revolves around a recruiter, typically an older woman who has good connections with both potential employers and workers. Because she works as a middleman and arranges jobs for migrant women from one community, she is a source of support and helps the women connect with each other once they arrive in the city. Lastly, researchers have also studied networks operating in sending communities, which comprise of family members and acquaintances of migrants and how these connections continue to play a role in the duration and direction of migration (Winkels, 2004).

Findings from various studies consistently show that networks play an important role in facilitating migration, and providing support throughout the years as the pooling of resources among network members enables migrants to mitigate, and cope with, economic shocks in the destination (Winkels, 2004). Winkels (2008) points out that the majority of migrants she interviewed (81%) had connections to someone who had settled in the receiving area before moving there. A relative or a friend who has migrated previously can provide guidance and advice, which ultimately reduces the costs and risks

of moving, find a job, and access resources in the destination for new migrants (Đặng Nguyễn Anh, 1998; Care International, 1990; Winkels, 2012). In case of rural-to-rural migrants who move to engage in cash crop farming such as coffee or cashew nuts, information channelled through their networks are important sources of agro-ecological knowledge in the migrant receiving area (Winkels & Adger, 2002). Karis (2013) and Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2015) in their respective studies discuss the importance of networks for job referrals, arranging accommodations and accessing crucial information known only to long-term residents, which is especially valuable for new migrants who might find the earlier days of their journey disorienting. Karis (2013) reports that the migrants in his study identified both practical concerns and deep feelings when describing their motivations to cluster together and assist fellow villagers in Ha Noi, citing cultural responsibilities to help “cousins and neighbourhood friends”. These intangible forms of support can carry very concrete outcomes, which might lead to thriving establishments of migrant communities in Ha Noi.

Assistance also comes in the form of monetary support, either interest-free or very low interest loans, advanced on the basis of trust and personal relationships rather than collateral. Due to their temporary resident status, migrants are not eligible for loans offered by institutional banks, so access to capital is another crucial support provided by networks comprising of both non-migrants household members (Winkels, 2004) and fellow villagers who have resided in the city for a longer period (Karis, 2013). Family members staying at home frequently provide migrants with additional labour power and financial capital; they also enable migrants to leave their children behind and maintain their claims to allocated land and other assets while being absent (Winkels, 2008).



Migrants are therefore able to migrate for long periods without taking the risks of permanent relocation.

In addition to financial assistance and information, emotional support is another key benefit of networks. As already discussed in the previous section, migrant women experience severe distress and pain resulting from separation, so confiding in others who share and understand their situations provides great relief. Another less discussed aspect of networks is by forming strong bonds, migrant women can vouch for each other and reassure anxious left-behind husbands of their wives' faithfulness, thus lessen the potential stigma in their home places (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2015). A woman migrating alone is more likely to be subject to suspicion from fellow-villagers and has no one to prove her integrity. There are also (il)legal forms of support, as when rural citizens in Ho Chi Minh City mobilize provincial identities in the pursuit of jobs, bank loans, and educational enrollment by borrowing the *hộ khẩu* paperwork of a friend or a relative to enroll their children in school (Thien, 2007). These benefits of networks are similar to those reported in studies on international migration. Not only are people more likely to im/migrate to places where they have established connections with families and friends (Pantea, 2013), but they also tend to succeed and integrate to the host society better thanks to informal financial arrangement (Oh, 2007), political awareness and civic engagement (Gidengil & Stolle, 2009) or available jobs that they might not know about on their own (Hellermann, 2006).

While networks bring about many benefits, they can also present certain challenges. Although the two studies were conducted in very different times and places, one focusing on internal migrants in Asia and the other transnational migrants in Europe,

both Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2014) and Hellermann (2006) find that for unaccompanied migrant women, people in their home communities may give them more headaches than support, spreading rumours and gossip questioning their motives to leave home and suspecting their engagement in prostitution. Unsurprisingly, the same negative impact is again reported by Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2015) in another study, who argues that networks can be restrictive as migrant women scrutinize each other's behaviours and subject some members to harsh judgements. Because relocation is still considered to be a risk, more social control exercised by networks are placed on the migration of women than men (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 1998). Furthermore, by concentrating in large number in peripheral areas, dense networks of migrant workers can produce a "ghetto" effect and make it harder for members to build connections with local residents and expand their own networks. While migrant workers can benefit from their connections with employers in terms of job referral after the termination of employment, this practice is problematic to a certain extent due to an expectation of reciprocation. Nguyễn Kim Hà (2007) argues that this can be viewed as symbolic violence. On the one hand, employers could earn the reputation of kindness and generosity by introducing the migrant worker to another employer when they no longer need the service. On the other hand, they could gain their domestics' sense of debt, deference and loyalty in return. When employers assist the domestic worker to secure a job by tapping into their own networks with other urban residents, they may feel good about themselves. Consequently, this "action of kindness" obscures employers' guilt of exploitation, especially in the context of socialist ideology that promises equality for all and especially for employers who hire child domestics.

In this section, I have painted in some sweeping strokes a picture describing rural-to-urban migration in Vietnam, together with some systematic barriers and everyday difficulties migrant workers struggle with. I have also discussed how networks can be both enabling and constraining, with occasional comparison drawing from the international migration literature. In the last section of this chapter, I will focus on one particular group of migrant workers, namely domestic workers. Starting with a description of how gender inequality among women is hidden in domestic service, I will delve into a brief historical overview and the current situation of most domestic workers in Vietnam nowadays. While many problems are similar to other migrant workers in general, some are quite unique to domestic workers due to the gendered nature of this work. This section describes factors that enable and encourage the resurgence and fierce growth of domestic services in Vietnam in the last few decades. Finally, before presenting my research questions, I will explain the rationale for my study.

## **2.4 Domestic Services**

### **2.4.1 The Everyday Politics of Domestic Work**

Early feminists passionately argue that domestic work is a burden shared by women worldwide, and it holds the key to women's liberation. This second, unpaid shift keeps women away from participating in the workforce or developing to their full potential (Hochschild with Machung, 2012). If the problem of domestic work is solved, women will be free to strive towards their aspirations. This optimistic view of domestic work as a shared obstacle which unites women all around the world proves to be naïve. Instead of pushing for more involvement from men or more investment in public

services, the increased number of women working as professionals facilitates a different solution – they hire other women to do their domestic work.

This early myth of a universal experience in women's struggle to break free of housework has been criticized by Ehrenreich (2002) as a half-hearted attempt abandoned halfway because the middle-class feminist critics have to rush out of their houses in the morning like everyone else to get to work and leave cleaning jobs to some hired domestic workers. Second-wave feminist scholarship focuses on the relation between black nannies and white madams (Romero, 1992) to deconstruct the universal women's experience claimed by early middle-class feminist writing in the West. The division of labour between a woman and a man has now shifted to one between two women. Although they share the same gender, an imbalance in economic power disrupts their supposedly sisterly solidarity. It is the reproductive labour of migrant women who are economically disadvantaged that enables women in the First World to achieve the gender equality they have fought so long and so hard for (Rollins, 1985). These women in turn become employers of domestic workers; their intimate living space becomes the workplace of other women with highly standardized cleaning procedures of exact movements and tools where little autonomy for individual worker is allowed (Ehrenreich, 2002). And despite a mutual understanding of the exhausting and never-ending nature of domestic work, the mistresses might not be so nice to their employees. Verbal outbreak between two women in a relationship wracked with power imbalance happens frequently as distrust, unspoken complaint, hurtful words and unresolved tension finally burst out (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002).

Besides resembling the relationship once formed between a woman and a man, or someone who does housework and someone who pays (or provides financially, as in the case of husbands), in countries where three generation households used to be the norm and an ideal still praised by the government such as Taiwan, the modern maid-and-mistress relationship reproduces that between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law (Lan, 2002). While traditionally, mothers-in-law had an elevated status in Taiwanese households and would supervise daughters-in-law's everyday conduct in doing housework with a handful of criticism, nowadays, working women hire migrant workers not only to take up cleaning, cooking, babysitting, but sometimes also serving their mothers-in-law as though the workers are surrogate daughters-in-law dutifully complying with the older women's needs and wishes. The daughter-in-law can now evade her filial responsibilities, avoid fighting with her husband over housework, devote herself to career development and criticize the woman shouldering her care-giving tasks inside the house in a manner similar to that between her and her mother-in-law.

Because domestic work is still considered women's natural job, when a woman is paid to do housework or take care of children, the woman who pays feel like she needs to justify her withdrawal from this task and still claim her femininity. Especially for those women who do not work outside the house, this situation can lead to great tension as their husbands or mothers-in-law might judge them as not fulfilling their womanly duties. In turn, the madam will take up supervision as a new way of doing housework. In an effort to avoid being blamed for neglecting her tasks, she makes sure the domestic worker cleans well and works hard from morning to night (Chin, 1998). This struggle to reaffirm herself as both an employer who pays and a woman who is responsible for maintaining

the interior of a house often increases the workload on the domestic worker as well as provides a source of tension between the two.

#### 2.4.2 A Brief Historical Overview of Domestic Services in Vietnam

Domestic workers were a visible group in both feudal and colonial Vietnam. They usually worked for state mandarins (*quan lại*), rich families who could afford servants, and from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, French colonialists. Although these individuals had a low position in the status hierarchy, their jobs were one of very few occupations that earned an income in a largely agricultural subsistence society. The wage was either modest, or counted towards bonded debts. There were maids, servants, wet nurses/nannies, gardeners, porters and drivers. Unlike today when most domestic workers are women, in the past, both men and women took these jobs (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2015). In fact, there were more male servants than female servants in colonialist households. The relationship was more of a master-servant nature rather than that of employer-employee, so domestic workers were then often addressed by denigrating terms (*thằng hầu*, *con ở*), and were held in low regard by the general public.

When the French colonialist rule came to an end in 1954, the Vietnamese socialist government envisioned a society equal on all aspects, so servants and masters as two opposing classes were among the first to be eradicated. Indentured and bonded labour was labelled a distasteful remnant of feudalism and capitalism, i.e. backward societal structures that allow exploitative relationships to exist. Hiring a domestic helper was virtually unthinkable during the socialist era as it is a clear suggestion of elitism, so for a few decades, this practice disappeared from social life in Northern Vietnam<sup>4</sup>. Although

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<sup>4</sup> From 1954 to 1975, Vietnam was divided into two regions; each maintained its own political system. Southern Vietnam has a capitalist economy that thrived on services, so it is possible that domestic work

occasionally a poor person may come and live with his or her rich relatives and exchanged labour power for room and meals, the arrangement did not involve monetary transactions and could be brushed off under the guise of kinship support. Other rare cases of domestic help during the socialist period were found in the homes of high-profile state officials or embassies, such as cooks, chauffeurs or guards. However, these individuals were paid fixed salaries and treated like state employees, so they did not fit into the common understanding of domestic workers. Generally speaking, the country was in wartime during these decades and few private households were interested in or able to afford domestic services.

Since *Đổi Mới*, domestic services have reappeared and become a booming industry (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2015). As more and more women participate in the labour market, especially in big cities, demand for domestic help surges high. While the state promotes gender equality, it upholds traditional gender norms that praise the resourceful, responsible and enduring woman as the ideal all Vietnamese women should strive for. Therefore, discourses of gender equality have encouraged women to take up more financial responsibilities, yet they lack a similarly strong emphasis on men taking a greater share of housework. Predictably, rural women flood to urban centers to offer domestic services in exchange for a stable salary, something they desperately need due to severe un/underemployment in their home communities.

#### 2.4.3 The Current Situation

Although domestic workers have quickly become an indispensable part of the urban scene thanks to their ubiquitous presence, it was not until June 2012 that the

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existed there during this period. However, since I did not come across any studies that examined domestic work in the South during these years and it is not a focus of my study, I do not include this point in the discussion.

government officially recognized their jobs as a legitimate occupation in the Labour Code prepared by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Liu, Lê, Lê, Nguyễn, & Nguyễn, 2014). Despite this seemingly advanced step, the legal mechanism to regulate and protect domestic workers has been rather weakly enforced. Similar to the situation of other migrant workers, domestic workers have been largely left to their own devices when it comes to negotiation with employers, labour contracts or employment insurance as there is currently no formal labour management procedure for domestic workers (Liu et al, 2014). It is quite common for domestic workers in Vietnam to have no day off, no set working hours and substandard living conditions. According to a report published in 2013 by the Research Centre for Gender Family and Community Development (GFCD) and Oxfam, over half of domestic workers (61 percent) reported working more than eight hours a day and over a third (35 percent) reported working more than 10 hours a day.

Abuse is not uncommon either, with 20 percent reporting that they have experienced some forms of physical abuse and 16 percent reported either actual or perceived risk of sexual or emotional abuse during their employment (GFCD & Oxfam, 2013). Considering that 98 percent of domestic workers are women (Liu et al, 2014), who have usually internalized cultural expectations of quietness and submissiveness, in addition to their vulnerable position as migrants, most domestic workers quit the jobs rather than confronting their employers when being mistreated. Even if they want to report or file a complaint, authorities are more likely to side with the employers, who are urban residents. Child labour is another problem quite unique to domestic services, with 17.3 percent of domestic workers reported to be under the age of 18 in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh, the two major receiving areas (Liu et al 2014). Another survey conducted in



2006 by the International Labour Organization estimated that 2,162 children were employed to do domestic chores in Ho Chi Minh city alone, some of them were as young as 13 years of age. These individuals tend to be distant relatives of the employers, and since labour contracts are often arranged verbally with little or no written record, it is difficult to track the real number of child domestic workers. Other basic labour rights are frequently violated. For example, a contract is usually terminated after a worker gets pregnant (Liu et al 2014). Since it is not too difficult to replace a domestic worker, most employers just recruit a new one. In addition, no authorities would get involved to protect the rights of the pregnant worker. Another common problem is that the majority of domestic workers do not have access to medical benefits for work-related injuries or accidents, as only 10 to 15 percent of domestic workers reported that they have health and social insurance (GFCD & Oxfam, 2013). Standing in the reserve army of cheap and disposable labour, most domestic workers will simply lose their jobs once their bodies are no longer capable of cleaning or feeding a baby.

On a positive note, Vietnamese domestic workers enjoy relatively high pay compared to other unskilled workers. The same survey conducted in 2013 by GFCD and Oxfam found that domestic workers earned on average 2,800,000 VND per month (equivalent of around \$140 USD), which is equal and even slightly higher than the average salary earned by factory workers. Half of the domestic workers interviewed also reported that it was a high and stable source of income. This finding is in stark contrast to an earlier study conducted in 1998 by Phillip Guest, which states that female migrants as a group have the lowest income levels. One thing that might remain true thorough the years though: female migrants are able to save 33.3 percent of their income, the highest

rate of saving of any migrant or non-migrant group (Guest, 1998). Not surprisingly then, domestic work is increasingly viewed as a good strategy for poverty alleviation. In certain rural communities, domestic services are endorsed by local authorities as respectable options to earn an income for women. Trusted local Women's Union units even act as a part of the labour recruitment network partnering with companies based in nearby urban centers to recruit rural women.

#### 2.4.4 Different Types of Domestic Workers

There is a link between the type of domestic services and migration status of the workers who perform these services. Urban domestic workers are more likely to be employed in well-paid and secure jobs because they have more bargaining power and can take advantage of the prejudice against rural migrants as low-skilled and unsophisticated individuals. Thus, Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2010) argues that rural-urban migration plays a central role in the formation of the different forms of domestic work in Hanoi. The process of packaging and advertising domestic workers in Vietnam is not yet as advanced as other countries in the region such as Hong Kong or Taiwan (Constable, 2007; Lan, 2006), where certain ethnic groups are branded with some desirable characteristics and marketed to corresponding clientele. For example, Filipino workers are advertised as modern, good at childcare techniques and English-speaking, making them a suitable choice for families with young children. Indonesian workers, who are mostly Muslim, on the other hand, are branded as traditional, quiet and hard-working, i.e. they are competent care-takers of the elderly. Vietnamese workers are deemed to be loyal, more willing to learn Mandarin and share many cultural traits with Taiwanese employers, making them a better fit for large families. Vietnam does not yet have a large

number of foreign domestic workers due to an abundant supply from rural areas. Therefore, the most distinct difference between domestic workers is not ethnicity but rather place of origin, i.e. whether they are urban residents themselves, or whether they are migrant workers. This seemingly insignificant disparity in residence status is actually used towards the advantage of the local domestic workers.

According to Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2010), there are several forms of domestic work in Ha Noi. Live-in workers are usually rural migrants. They live in their employers' houses and are charged with all tasks in the households, from cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, doing laundry, to more intimate caring tasks such as bathing or feeding young children or an elderly. Live-out domestic workers tend to be middle-aged urban residents who have their own homes and find domestic services suitable for their age. Their tasks can be similar to those of the live-ins, yet they often have more definite working hours, which sometimes are extended without notice by the employers. The third group is junk-collector/cleaners, who are usually rural migrants specializing in trading recyclable materials, and thanks to their connections with households they often buy materials from, they can get additional jobs as freelance cleaners. Being rural women, their gender and their class status allow them to accept cleaning work, i.e. coming into contact with dirt in other people's private spheres, that deems unsuitable for men or women of a higher standing (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2013). This group likes to differentiate themselves from the live-in workers. In fact, they prefer to call themselves "cleaner", rather than "domestic worker" because of the demeaning tone associated with the second term. As the name suggests, they often focus on cleaning only without taking on other caring tasks, work for multiple employers and only stay in each house for a few

hours at a time. In addition to individual households, these workers also clean offices or corporate buildings. The last group has been least studied and they have come into existence only very recently. They are “hospital care-takers”, who are hired by critically ill patients’ families to stay with the patients day and night and provide intimate care for bodily needs and functions. Because hospitals in Vietnam do not provide such services, busy family members who can afford to outsource these labour-intensive and time-consuming caring tasks hire help instead of sacrificing their working hours. Given the nature of their jobs, this group earns the highest income and includes men as well as women. They are not domestic workers in a strict sense of the term, i.e. someone who manages a household; however, Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2015) argues that they should be included in studies of domestic workers due to the intimate care they provide to hospital patients.

The categorization of various jobs into four main types proposed by Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2010) can be problematic, because there are usually no defined job descriptions for each domestic worker to follow. Just as migrant workers adapt and adjust to the environment they find themselves in, the jobs they do can also change as they go from one household to the next. For instance, the live-out workers I interviewed are rural migrants, but they do not necessarily trade recyclable materials. While they fit in the live-outs group due to their rural origin, they only rely on domestic work for an income. Besides cleaning, some live-out workers also shop for grocery, cook meals and do laundry for their employers. In short, while this description of various types of domestic services is the most comprehensive to date, any rigid classification will betray the very

nature of this work, which is informal, fluid and always transforming to meet various demands set out by employers.

#### 2.4.5 The Comeback of Domestic Services

So far, I have presented many different elements in both past and present-day Vietnam, revolving around the topic of gender and migration and focusing on a particular group whose identities cross-cut these two areas, namely domestic workers who are migrant women. Their significance is not merely in number, although it has been argued that a visible presence of marginalized rural women in the capital city of Ha Noi suggests a return of a status hierarchy and their employment is made possible not only by class differences but also rural and urban differences (Taylor, 2004). In his excellent ethnographic study situated in the margins of Ho Chi Minh city, Erik Harms (2011) articulates the taken-for-granted discourse of distinctions between the country and the city, and how those seemingly clear-cut and straightforward distinctions make a rural district on the edge of a metropolis both a wasteland and one full of possibilities. Popular culture frequently juxtaposes city and countryside as though they are two opposite entities. Rural land and rural people are portrayed with nostalgic sentiment for purity, simplicity and the wilderness untouched by technology and other devils of modernization, yet also with a disdain for their backwardness and unruly manners. In the process, domestic workers and the not-so-subtle contrast they elicit in the context of an urban household become a sign of status which their employers are anxious to acquire and display.

Besides being a symbol of class difference in a society that not too long ago declared the demise of all social inequality, domestic workers also represent a focal point

of many converging issues. As I have explained a number of times throughout this chapter, conflicting messages promoted by the state regarding gender roles put a lot of pressure on women. Diminishing social support in the provision of basic needs such as healthcare, childcare and education goes together with a new emphasis on the household economy. Financial success is publicly endorsed as a manifestation of conjugal happiness. This creates a need for job opportunities among rural women and a demand for domestic help among urban women. In short, domestic workers are more than people who do housework for a pay. Situated in a specific context of a transforming society, their decisions and lived experiences reveal many complex layers of different forces operating in their lives. That is also the reason I chose to study this group in my research.

## **2.5 Research Rationale**

To date, there have been few academic studies focusing on domestic workers in Vietnam exclusively. According to Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2010), most existing research is of an applied nature focussing on child labour (International Labour Organization, 2006) or domestic work as a destination job (Healthbridge; Centre for Women's Studies, 2008). Other studies are limited in their scopes or methodology. Nguyễn Thị Hòa (2008) views domestic work as a means to reduce poverty for workers' families, presenting data showing a high level of vulnerability and dependency of the mostly young workers involved. Dương Kim Hồng's study is problematic because it presents findings from interviews with employers as an authentic reflection of the situation of their workers. Nguyễn Kim Hà's (2007) PhD dissertation and recent works published by Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Minh (2004, 2015) are notable exceptions. These researchers collected rich and reliable ethnographic data. The questions they explored

include employer-employee relationships, emerging class differences, and translocal care arrangement in migrants' households. This present research will add to this literature by going beyond the dyadic unit of employer- domestic worker and migrant women's immediate working conditions and concerns. Instead, I examine domestic workers as active agents in their migration process and study them within the larger social spheres of their families, networks and communities. In addition, with the exception of Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh's most recent books published in 2015, previous studies only look at the experience of live-in domestic workers and exclude those engaging in other types of services. Along with live-in domestic workers, this thesis includes the perspectives of live-out workers, which add new angles to available research on domestic work in Vietnam.

This study will also contribute to the existing literature by taking a gender-sensitive look at networks among migrants in Vietnam. Most existing research on social networks among labour migrants either focuses on the type of migrants that are predominantly male—i.e. farmers migrating to work on cash-crop production (Winkles, 2002, 2004)—or discuss issues common to all migrants in a gender-blind manner (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 1998). Focusing on rural-to-urban migrant women and their networks (especially their ties with other women) illuminates the intersection between gender and networks that might have been missed in other studies.

While Vietnam has witnessed a trend towards the feminization of internal migration, which is similar to the feminization of transnational migration, little attention has been paid to how different actors contribute to this process. International research asserts that national immigration policies, bilateral agreements and other structural

elements have direct influences on individual migration decisions (Boyd, 1989). The household registration system in Vietnam and its controlling effects on labour migrants have been well documented (Nguyễn Tâm Giang, 2007; Đặng Nguyên Anh, 2010). However, other factors such as the state and its grassroots agencies (e.g. the Women's Union, rural communities, households and individual women), and what role they play in women-led migration have not been examined to the same extent. By focusing on rural women who are frequently portrayed as lacking agency and power in their lives, I try to identify how these different forces work together to shape migration decisions.

Lastly, as noted in the previous section, Vietnamese women have enjoyed certain improvements thanks to the economic reform process. Migration for the sake of earning an income can be interpreted as an indirect consequence of *Đổi Mới*. Does it also empower women? Research on rural women who are marriage migrants has shown that their remittances raise their status and influence—so much that local people started preferring to have a daughter, instead of a son as tradition dictates (Belanger, Tran, & Le, 2011). Nevertheless, marriage migrants still act within a gender script that casts them as dutiful wives and filial daughters. Would the same effects be found among female labour migrants, who switch to a bread-winner position in their families? Since this question has not been well addressed, my study strives to provide some insights for it.

## **2.6 Research Questions**

The research questions explored in this thesis are as follows:

1. What roles do networks play in the migration of rural women? How are the nature and operation of these networks shaped by gender?



2. How does migration challenge or preserve gender roles? Does migration bring women more power in the family and community?
3. How do migrant women exercise their agency within the broader context?

Answers to these questions are explored in Chapter 4. The next chapter will outline the methodology utilized in this study.

## **Chapter 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Location**

This study was conducted during the months of July and August 2014 in Ha Noi, Vietnam. Ha Noi is the capital city with a population of seven million and a growing middle-class with disposable income. Like many other urban centers in developing countries, this city offers abundant opportunities for jobs in informal sectors that are neither recognized nor regulated by any official institutions or government agencies. Among these jobs, domestic work is on the rise thanks to increasing demands from middle-class women, who juggle full-time jobs and various family responsibilities expected of them in an essentially patriarchal society. In addition, while employing one domestic worker is becoming the norm for many Ha Noi residents, having several helpers, each with specialized tasks, is considered a sign of social status because not everyone can afford such expense (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2015). As a result, the capital city is and probably will still be the top destination for migrant workers from nearby provinces in the Northern part of Vietnam for many years to come, thus making it an ideal location to study rural-to-urban migration in the context of a developing country.

### **3.2 Recruitment Strategies**

#### **3.2.1 Individual Participants for In-depth Interviews**

During these two months, I conducted individual in-depth interviews with ten domestic workers, one focus group with seven other domestic workers and one interview with a staff member of a nongovernment organization (NGO) advocating for domestic workers' rights and better working conditions. Individual participants were recruited using snow-ball sampling, my own contacts and personal referrals made by a lady owner

of a local grocery store. This shop-owner served as an excellent gatekeeper by facilitating my entry into the field. She is popular among domestic workers and housewives who shop for fresh produce at her store or drop by for afternoon chit-chats. After listening to an overview of my research, she graciously accepted my request for help. Because she came in contact with many domestic workers on a daily basis, she was able to recruit potential participants by telling them about my research project and arranging for our initial meetings.

I decided to have a local woman trusted by the workers help me approach them instead of relying on a more formal channel such as an employment center that connects migrant women with urban residents looking for domestic help for a few reasons. First of all, I was convinced that they would feel less pressured to participate if the shop-owner they have known for years told them about my study. Although I contacted an employment center and they also agreed to spread the word about my research, I was worried that a domestic worker might find it difficult to reject someone possessing power over them. Secondly, the shop-owner referred to me as her “niece,”<sup>5</sup> which obviously helps those who agreed to participate feel much more at ease with me. I was introduced to them as a distant relative looking to talk with some people in order to complete a school project. Words such as thesis, research, interview and Master’s degree were consciously avoided for two reasons. First, I wanted to minimize the differences between myself as an educated, urban, young woman and the domestic workers who were low-educated women from the countryside. Second, I felt that academic vocabularies may sound unfamiliar and even pretentious to their ears; approaching them as a student eager

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<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese people address each other with pronouns that are the same as family nouns such as brother, sister, uncle, aunt, niece and nephew. Furthermore, it is common for people who feel close and comfortable with each other to refer to each other as though they were relatives.

to learn made our conversations more comfortable. I could have recruited participants through the employment center, but then I would probably appear as a much more distant, serious and authoritative researcher.

Besides the shop-owner's extensive networks of potential participants, I approached several domestic workers I personally knew, and they helped introduce me to others in their networks. I did not use two recruitment strategies utilized in other research focusing on domestic workers (Lin, 2013; Constable, 2007), namely putting up posters in popular public places and asking employers to invite their workers to participate. The first method was not plausible because most migrant women have little exposure to written text, so a poster is not likely to attract their attention. Furthermore, they are very cautious of plotted scams intending to exploit those in vulnerable situations like themselves, so without a human contact, they will not find an invitation to participate in a research trustworthy. Although I knew many employers of domestic workers, I refrained from using these connections because of a concern about the possibility of coercion due to real or perceived power the employers may exercise over their workers.

### 3.2.2 Focus Group

From the beginning, I planned to conduct a focus group with domestic workers who live in close proximity to each other because I was aware that most migrant women neither have access to a vehicle nor much free time. When one live-out worker (Phan) I interviewed told me that she lives on a compound with many other migrant women from the same community, I seized the opportunity and asked her to introduce me to her group. She agreed and I visited her friends in the next evening. The focus group was an informal visit that I will provide more details about in the next section.

Since participants for the first focus group were all live-out workers, I tried to arrange another focus group with live-in workers residing in one alley. I knew one domestic worker in that alley and planned to join her when she relaxed by chatting with other workers in the evening. However, due to constant rain in the summer, the women could not meet outside very often, and then many were back to their home villages for the Ghost Festival (rằm tháng bảy) in August. In the end, that focus group never took place. Despite my efforts to recruit a diverse range of participants, unpredictable weather as well as annual spiritual events limited my success. More information about my study participants is provided later in the chapter.

### 3.2.3 Interview with Organizations

In addition to migrant workers, I also reached out to various organizations such as NGOs, employment centers and women's unions. This process was much more complicated and required more formal procedures than recruiting domestic workers. Unfortunately, because I was not affiliated with a Vietnamese institution, officials tended not to seriously consider my invitation to participate in the study. While being a young woman and a student is an advantage in approaching rural women, this same social location makes me less credible in the eyes of those in the professional world.

Eventually I was able to secure one interview with the director of a NGO thanks to a personal connection. Armed with a letter of introduction signed by the Department Chair of Sociology at Western University, Canada, as well as other carefully crafted documents related to my study, I arrived at the office only to find myself being greeted by a staff member and not the director. Although I was surprised, I was happy to

interview this individual because she had more direct experience working with domestic workers.

The director of an employment center agreed to an interview but cancelled my appointments several times. Later, she asked me to contact one of her staff members, who did not return my phone calls or emails. So in the end, I could only conduct one interview with one organization. In retrospect, as I was able to approach migrant workers thanks to a very helpful gatekeeper, my attempts to recruit professionals could have been more successful had I enlisted someone who can play a similar role. However, because of my affiliation with a university abroad, there was not enough time to build connections in the Vietnamese bureaucratic sector; consequently, my invitation was less of a priority to busy professionals.

### **3.3 The Sample**

All participants in my study are women, ranging from 20 years to 62 years of age. They are from several neighbouring provinces of Ha Noi. Some have experience migrating to other places, notably Ho Chi Minh city, the largest urban center in the Southern part of Vietnam, and one used to work as a live-in domestic worker in Taiwan. Only one participant comes from an ethnic minority, but she speaks Vietnamese fluently, the rest are all ethnic Vietnamese. I did not collect information about education level, but judging from their limited job opportunities, it is safe to assume that no one has a university degree. All have some schooling and literacy skills with varying levels of capacity.

I tried to recruit participants who varied along the lines of age and type of work. However, because there are fewer young and unmarried women doing domestic work, it

was difficult to find participants who fit the criteria. This is actually confirmed by a research conducted by the Ministry of Culture, which shows that about a fifth of live-in workers are under 18 and almost 60 per cent are in their 40s and over (Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh, 2010). One young and unmarried live-in worker I approached refused to participate because her parents asked her not to talk to anyone except her employers, worrying that she may be tricked or taken advantage of by malicious people.

Below is a summary table of basic demographic characteristics of the ten participants with whom I conducted in-depth interviews. All the names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Name	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Years lived in Ha Noi	Type of work	Reason for migration	Place of origin
Mai	47	Married	4	Over 10 years	Live-in	Too many children, alcoholic husband, save for home renovation	Phú Thọ
Huong	20	Never married	0	3 years	Live-in	No job back home, can't afford high school, mother is also a domestic worker in Ha Noi	Phú Thọ
Linh	20	Never married	0	Few months	Live-in	Support grandparents, want to experience outside world, can't afford university	Phú Thọ
Mạnh	Early-50s	Married	2	2 years	Live-in	Save for retirement, abusive husband	Hà Tây
Cúc	62	Never married	0	13 years	Live-in	Physical disability (lame in one leg), no family responsibility, no source of income	Hà Tây
Chi	49	Single	1	1 year	Live-in	Only son moves away for college, need to pay for his tuition. Husband missing.	Thái Bình
Phan	36	Married	1	6 years	Live-out	Pay debt incurred by husband's gambling, buy land and build a house	Thái Bình
Kim	43	Widow	2	7 years	Live-out	Pay tuition fee for children, no job back home	Hoà Bình
Trang	Mid-30s	Widow	1	7 years	Live-out	Pay debt incurred by husband's cancer treatment	Phú Thọ
Đan	Mid-50s	Married	4	9 years	Live-out	Too many children, no job back home	Nam Định

Table 1: Descriptions of Participants for In-depth Interviews



I did not collect detailed demographic information about the participants in the focus group because that would take too much time and dampen the atmosphere. They all come from one community in Thai Binh province and are live-out domestic workers. The youngest among these seven women is 27 years old and unmarried, while the oldest is over 60 years old and has grandchildren. Most of the participants are in their late-30s and early-40s, married and have children back home. The number of years they have lived in Ha Noi varies, but overall they have similar backgrounds in terms of education level, reason for migration (i.e. lack of job opportunities in home community, acute need for cash to pay for children's education) and marital status.

The only NGO staff member I interviewed is a young woman in her mid-20s with a university degree and a couple years of work experience.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

#### **3.4.1 In-depth Interviews**

For most of the individual interviews, the grocery store owner let me use a private and quiet room on top of her store, because the workers did not feel comfortable enough to invite me to their employers' homes without prior permission, and most of them chose not to tell their employers about their participation in this study. They were concerned that their employers might suspect they would badmouth them in their conversations with me, regardless of what the workers actually said. While some researchers interview domestic workers in public places such as parks or residential playgrounds (Lan, 2006), I chose not to do so because some live-in workers indicated that their employers would not be pleased if they spoke to strangers. Some interviews with live-in workers who lived near my house were conducted in my kitchen/dining room.

The interviews were arranged to accommodate the participants' working schedule. Because live-out workers had several shifts per day, they often met me between shifts, mostly in the afternoon. Live-in workers had no definite break, so I usually hung around in the store and waited for them to come when it was convenient. Most interviews with live-in workers also took place in the afternoon, after they had finished tasks for the day and before their employers came home from work. Two women whose daughters lived with them in the city had their daughters accompany them during the interviews. One live-in worker had a napping baby girl in her lap as we talked. The interviews conducted in my house were in the evening, when the workers typically had one or two hours to chat with each other or watch TV.

All interviews started with an overview of my research. I gave all participants a letter of invitation in Vietnamese and summarized the main points in simple language. I emphasized confidentiality by saying that all personal details would be altered in the final write-up, and I would not tell their stories to other people. Then I would ask for permission to record the interview and explain that it will help me review the conversation later when I need to write my schoolwork. Except for one participant, everyone agreed to be recorded. They often had two concerns. Even though I stressed that I was a student many times, my professional-looking recorder seemed to make some participants, especially the older women, worried that I was a journalist and would report everything they said on newspaper or television in a negative light. As will be discussed later in the next chapter, fear of being a subject of village rumours and gossip was real and constant for migrant women, so they tried to avoid any activity that could attract unwanted attention. To address this worry, I repeated that I was a student looking to

complete my thesis and when the interviews were to be published, no one would be able to recognize them. Another common concern was that their stories might not be interesting enough, or they would not know what to say. To this, I replied with an enthusiastic confirmation that all stories are unique, and that I had certain questions that I wanted to explore. Generally speaking, younger women with higher education or those who have travelled more seemed more comfortable opening up during the interview.

The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to close to two hours. Understandably, some interviews were interrupted by phone calls or cut short because the participants needed to attend to some tasks or showed visible signs of tiredness. In that case, I always asked if they wished to stop, and if they said yes, I reassured them that they had helped me tremendously and they need not worry about ending the interviews early. Some conversations were somewhat less smooth than others at the beginning, again, especially with older women. Perhaps due to their limited contact with urban residents other than their employers, coupled with a stronger adherence to cultural norms that dictate what is appropriate to mention and what is not, they were more reserved in our interactions. However, as we talked and laughed, sometimes cried as stories of hardship and endurance were shared, most became more relaxed and open. Notably, one participant started with a socially approved description of her husband, but towards the end of the interview, suddenly she opened up and revealed that he is extremely abusive and described episodes of violence in detail. After each interview, I thanked the participant for her time and handed her a compensation of 100,000 VND, the equivalent of two to three hours of labour-intensive cleaning for live-out workers, or a daily wage for live-in workers, on average.

### 3.4.2 Focus Group

The focus group discussion with live-out workers took place in their shared lodgings in one evening. After Phan agreed to introduce me to her friends, she put me in touch with another woman who facilitated my visit. I did the same introduction and asked for permission to record, which was granted. The discussion lasted about two hours. During this time I posed several questions but had much less control over the flow of the conversation. Several people would offer their thoughts at once and my questions would spark different interpretations simultaneously. The participants did not take turns to speak, but I tried to pay attention to those who seemed quieter and encourage them to talk more. Instead of attempting to direct the conversation into a more formal, orderly process with me as the moderator, I took the role of a participant in their chit-chat. The discussion we had turned out to be a mix of a participant observation session and a focus group, because I managed to ask some general questions, but overall it took its own course of development.

Several times during this discussion, an older woman reminded the group that they were being recorded, especially when the younger ones started complaining about their husbands' addiction to gambling, or other notorious social issues in their home community. This older participant seemed preoccupied with the thought that they, as a group, should not denigrate the men back home, no matter how bad their behaviours were. Her reaction could be motivated by a stronger desire to uphold traditional norms, where women should preserve their family's reputation, especially in the presence of a stranger. Understandably, the participants in the focus group seemed much more relaxed than the interviewees, because they were in their own group and their familiar

environment. When the woman who I had been in touch with prior to the discussion started feeling so comfortable with me that she addressed me by “mày”, an informal and somewhat coarse pronoun that could signal either a rude attitude or a feeling of closeness between good friends, she was scolded by the older lady. I interpreted this fleeting incident as reflecting a reserved manner typical of older people, rather than a concern about me as an individual. I left a group compensation of 500,000 VND at the end of the session.

I visited this group one more time in another evening. In an attempt to “blend-in” so conversations would be exchanged the way they normally would, I played with a young boy whose mother also lived in the same compound. I did not record the second discussion, instead just jotted down some notes from memory after leaving the group.

### **3.5 Operationalization of Key Variables**

My main hypothesis as I entered the field was that migration will have an impact on traditional gender roles. As women become the bread-winners, they will be less likely to conform to cultural norms expected of them. Since “gender roles” is too broad to facilitate a meaningful discussion, I broke this concept down into various aspects, such as decision making, housework, childcare and relationships with family members and fellow-villagers. In particular, decision-making power was explored in relation to large purchases or children’s future. How remittances are used, who manages them and to what extent the women monitor their husbands’ use of remittances was another area. I also asked how domestic tasks, agricultural activities and care work in their families are handled after they have left. Questions about their husbands’ attitude and what relatives or acquaintances think about their migration, and whether they are able to decide when to

leave and when to return home, were included. For those with children at home, I asked if the mother-child relationship suffers from their absence, and whether their children end up distancing themselves or not.

The variable “migration” was examined by asking the participants to explain their reasons for going to the city, a history of their migration, and what type of work they engaged in. In most cases, this information was volunteered and even arranged into a nice life-story, so I did not have to prompt with a series of probing questions.

The interviews were all open-ended, so I was able to build on answers given by the participants and adapt my questions to their specific situations. If something was brought up by different people—for example, some migrant women mentioned neighbours and relatives who gossiped that they may engage in extramarital affairs in the city—I could ask the next participant if she shared a similar experience.

The beauty of qualitative methods is the freedom to adjust my focus as the data collection phase progressed. After one interview, I jotted down notes of observations about the interview process, which questions seemed difficult to understand, or was interpreted in a way I did not intend. Sometimes the misunderstanding was telling in itself, because it revealed a particular concern that was in the back of the participants’ minds. Questions about problems at home were intended to elicit responses about negotiation over housework or public disapproval of leaving young children in the care of relatives; yet they were almost always replied with confirmation of spousal fidelity, which strikes me as a much bigger cause of stress for the migrant women. Other times, as I became more aware of my own assumptions, I reworded and rephrased the questions, added new meanings and experimented with different ways to deliver the questions. For

instance, research I read before starting the interviews gave me an impression that the domestic workers may experience troubles in their relationships with their children. My question in the beginning was “Do your children complain about the fact that you are not home with them?” But after several firm “No”s, I quickly realized that most participants did not experience this particular problem, so I revised my question to “Do your children say anything when you leave home or when you come home?” Therefore, the questions were not fixed from the beginning. Each interview added more richness and nuances, thus the variables also evolved and became more complex.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

I transcribed and translated all recordings and analyzed them together with my notes. Themes were identified using the line-by-line coding technique. There are themes I did not mean to study, yet nevertheless were brought up in interviews repeatedly, such as the importance of networks and the systematic lack of income-generating activities in rural areas. Once identified, the themes were arranged into coherent bodies. In a sense, I followed an inductive approach. I did not have the time and opportunity to gather data until I reached saturation, as needed in grounded-theory, and I also started my interviews with some questions prepared in advance. However, during the analysis phase, I allowed myself enough flexibility to integrate the findings I did not expect into my final thesis.

### **3.7 Reflexivity**

Being a young woman growing up in the capital city, my appearance easily gave away my educational background and middle-class status. For many domestic workers, I could be a daughter of their employers, or even pass for a young employer. This power imbalance between us to some extent puts me in the middle ground. Although I am from

the same culture, speak the same language and have known many rural women well both professionally and personally, I am not totally an insider. I have never been a domestic worker myself. Yet compared with a foreign researcher who may need to communicate with respondents through an interpreter, I am not an outsider either. My positionality opens up a space filled with common understanding of shared cultural norms and underlying beliefs, which gives me access to nuances of interpretations and meanings that might not be available to a foreign researcher. Yet at the same time this middle ground also risks losing opportunities for clarification because both sides assume the other person is operating on the same level and has the same understanding of the issue at hand. For example, I could follow complex descriptions of kin relations quite well, but having grown up in Ha Noi, I was not familiar with how the city is perceived by older people in rural areas, and was very surprised to find out that a place I consider safe is not viewed in a favourable light by family members of many participants.

The choice to use qualitative rather than quantitative data is made based on three reasons. First, the research questions require intimate knowledge and reflections which often emerge during in-depth and open-ended discussion rather than a survey with fixed options. Admittedly, the interrelation between migration and gender identity or networks could be felt by the participants, but probably they have not crystallized that feeling into words or other forms of intelligible communication before someone asked them explicitly. The interview itself in this case is an act of creating a story, in which the researcher is also a co-participant in the formation of that narrative. The collection of oral histories is in practice an active and collaborative project, during which the teller constructs and presents an identity at the instigation of and from the feedback of the



collector (Gustafsson, 2015). Secondly, most domestic workers in Vietnam have a limited education. Oral communication where lived story is exchanged is the method they are most adept in. Of course a written survey could always be read aloud and explained in person but it would not allow for the richness of personal experience to be captured. And lastly, this choice of method is justified by my familiarity with and competence in qualitative research from previous involvement with other studies using a similar design.

## Chapter 4: RESULTS

### 4.1 A brief comparison between live-in and live-out domestic workers

While sharing many commonalities, live-in and live-out domestic workers differ in some major characteristics that intimately link to the social networks they develop in the city. Live-in workers have one employer at a time. They are in charge of all or most domestic tasks in their employers' households and are paid a fixed monthly salary. Live-out workers, on the other hand, maintain a list of clients that they rotate on a daily or weekly basis. Usually they are specialized in cleaning, although some also cook or do other random tasks assigned by their employers, such as bathing the family's dog or preparing meat for their food stall. Live-out workers are paid by the hour, and thanks to their working arrangement, they can share lodgings with fellow-villagers and cut down on rental expenses while live-in workers are typically confined to the homes of their employers. This flexibility gives live-out domestic workers more autonomy in their jobs, as they can arrange their own working schedules and visit their families when they want. It is generally easier for the live-outs to quit a job than the live-ins when conditions are not desirable, as they have their own places and more contacts.

While the live-in workers are more constrained in their working conditions and arrangement, they benefit from a stable salary and thus can save more thanks to free accommodation and food provided by their employers. This blurred boundary between workplace and living space, however, can compromise live-in workers' privacy and subject them to constant supervision of the employers. In the words of one live-in worker, her job is similar to "being a daughter-in-law, but serving hundreds of families (làm dâu trăm họ)," suggesting that her employer's monitoring is overpowering and resembles a

paternalistic attitude typical of parents-in-law. Nevertheless, for those who can tolerate a loss of personal freedom, their jobs are less labour-intensive than those of live-out workers because they can take longer to complete certain tasks. Mai is a live-in worker in her late-40s. She shared that becoming a domestic worker is a strategic decision because she has always known that her fragile health would not accommodate more physically demanding work, such as toiling alongside the men at a construction site or standing for long hours in a factory. Cleaning several four-story houses in a day requires great strength, yet the total earning for a live-out worker is higher, sometimes double that of their live-in peers.

Because live-out workers charge by the hour, they are under enormous pressure to find enough jobs to fill their days. If they have too much free time, the income may not be enough to cover their expenses in the city. This leads to a need to maintain and expand their networks, so they can have more contacts and find more job opportunities. As a result, live-out workers place a stronger emphasis on networks and the ability to successfully navigate the city. They also feel the impacts of their relationships with other women more strongly than live-in workers. Indeed, one live-out woman claimed that

“A fresh migrant worker always started by living in an employer’s house, because she didn’t know anything or anyone when she first came here. She must *đi ở* (live-in domestic worker with a demeaning connotation, like servant). Then, as she gradually knew her way around, met other people, she could start doing freelance cleaning.” (Focus group)

This quote demonstrates that in the mind of live-out workers, living with a family is reserved for those with little knowledge and connections in the city. It also implies a hierarchy of jobs, because freelance cleaning seems to be a more superior option for those with experiences, and more importantly, connections that help them secure enough

contracts. However, many live-in workers with years of experience may disagree, as they prefer live-in jobs for stability, a more leisure pace and sometimes strong emotional attachment to their employers.

In the following sections, I will present both the benefits and problems that networks bring about in the context of rural-to-urban migration. In particular, networks are examined as multilayered and dynamic, encompassing individuals residing in both the sending communities and the place of employment as they interact with the migrant women at various stages of their migration. In the second section, gender roles are analyzed. While the participants challenged traditional gender roles by assuming financial responsibilities for their families and upsetting the conventional arrangement of family relations due to their prolonged absence from home; in many ways, they also tried very hard to preserve these roles.

#### **4.2 Impacts of Networks on Migration**

Since migrant workers moved away from their familiar environment to a new place, networks and their importance were brought up in almost all interviews, many times without a prompt. The women's immediate families, their extended relatives and fellow villagers all played crucial roles in facilitating their move, and continued to influence their many decisions before departure, during their stay in the city, and after they have returned home. Networks are certainly beneficial, yet they can also be problematic. They are sources of tremendous support as well as tension and surveillance. Coupling with gender expectations and local norms, social pressure resulting from rumours, gossip and seemingly harmless chit-chat sometimes acts as powerful control mechanisms exerted on migrant women, who were always acutely aware that they were

potential topic of discussion for their neighbours back home. In this first section, I will discuss the role of networks in providing support for migrant workers as well as the constraints they produce.

#### 4.2.1 Networks as Support and Resources

##### a) Job Referral and Work Arrangement

All of the migrant women in my study started their first trip to the city thanks to someone they knew, such as a friend, a relative or a neighbour who happened to be a migrant, or who had some connections to potential employers. In some cases, it is a semi-professional labour-broker known and trusted in their villages who brought rural women to potential employers in the city and charged the latter a reasonable amount of commission. Domestic work is not yet a well-regulated profession in Vietnam. Unlike a few decades ago when the state planned and closely monitored all internal migration, in recent years, rural-to-urban migration has been largely driven by economic necessities and prevalent, perpetual under/unemployment in rural areas. It is not surprising that migrant women often initiated their search for an alternative livelihood, and in order to secure a job in a “strange and far-away” land, they mostly relied on their networks.

*“I was actually the first person in my village to migrate. There were some people who already left for the city in neighbouring villages, but none in mine. A lady in a nearby village was well-known in my area for bringing women to the city and connecting them to employers. I asked her about her recent trip to Ha Noi and whether it was difficult to work there. She told me the most important thing is I must be honest and a quick-learner. At that time I had four young children and very little income, so I decided to follow her to Ha Noi. I was very nervous” (Mai, late-40s)*

*“A fellow-villager introduced me to my first job. My employer’s friend knows my neighbour. My neighbour is actually from another village, she moved to my village after she got married to a man there. Going to Ha Noi to do domestic work is popular in her natal village, not in mine though. So*

*one day, she came to my house and asked if I wanted to work in the city. I have never been to the city so I hesitated, but then my employer called me at home and said I should give it a try. I agreed and we exchanged names and some information to recognize each other. My employer picked me up at the bus station.” (Chi, early-50s)*

Since their immediate networks were local and dense, as soon as one woman migrated and found work successfully, her story would be told around the villages and other women gradually followed her footsteps. It is not uncommon for mothers or older female relatives to help younger women by actively seeking job opportunities among their employers’ relatives and friends, or in the neighbourhood where they worked. One live-in worker who had stayed with one family for eight years arranged for her three daughters to work as shop assistants for the relatives of this family.

In addition to their relationships with people from home, domestic workers who have lived and worked in the city for some time started building their networks with fellow-workers in the city, especially those working in the unregulated, informal sector like themselves. Many first-time migrants found themselves lost in busy streets, unable to recall complicated names of street intersections. It could be their very first time stepping out of the village gate. The city appeared strange, a bit too lively for their taste, and confusing.

*“There were so many cars and bikes, and I didn’t know any street names. So I kept following the lady who took me here. It was a cold day too, I only had a very thin pair of sock on and my toes turned purple. Eventually we got to a place to sleep and the next day my employer came to meet me and take me home.” (Đan, mid-50s)*

Some participants were helped out by scooter-taxi drivers (xe ôm) when they got lost. These were men giving people rides for a pay and they would take the confused and tired women to employment centers dedicated to domestic work. It should be noted that the

women were often in a very vulnerable position, and fear of being trafficked or exploited was not without ground, especially in the early stage of their migration. Therefore, mobilizing resources and support from people who they know and trust is even more important.

Live-out domestic workers are essentially freelance cleaners. They operate their own schedules and coordinate anywhere between five to twenty employers on a weekly basis. It takes excellent organizational skills and wide networks to secure enough jobs and maintain a constant flow of work. In addition to existing relationships with fellow-villagers, live-out workers took advantage of all sources of information available to them in order to access more opportunities. Their days were often divided into shifts, and if one family suddenly no longer needed them and terminated the contract for some reasons (e.g. the family moved away, an elderly mother came to live with them so she cleaned for them, etc.) they must quickly fill the empty time slot with another job. Sometimes a new job came from a very loose tie.

*“The daughter of the old couple I live with recently gave birth to a baby. She hired a nurse who would come during her lunch break to bathe the infant for some extra cash. I knew the nurse was giving baths to a few other babies as well, so I asked her to keep an eye out for me in case one of those families needed a cleaner. A few days later, she called and told me one of the families she was working for was looking for a cleaner for weekday mornings, which fortunately was the same time slot I still had available. I went there, talked to the wife and got a new job.” (Trang, mid-30s)*

Kim, the live-out worker who lived with her aunt secured her first job by asking food vendors in a market if they knew of anyone who might be looking for a cleaner. When asked why she did not go to an employment center, she laughed and said it was faster for her this way. By talking to market vendors who came in contact with housewives every

day, she managed to spread words about her availability and landed a job only three days later.

Word-of-mouth is an incredible source of information about job opportunities for domestic workers searching for work. Besides their own immediate networks of friends and families, conversations with other domestic workers or neighbours of their employers sometimes provided helpful tips about potential jobs. Furthermore, owners of local grocery stores, like the lady who helped me recruit participants, could transmit messages between migrants searching for jobs and city residents looking for help. Former employers who were pleased with the service but no longer needed a worker might help spread words to their networks of friends and families as well.

Due to the nature of their jobs, live-out workers relied on supportive networks comprising of other cleaners to arrange for substitutes when they needed to go home, got sick, or simply received more cleaning jobs than they could handle. During the focus group, at least on two occasions, one participant received phone calls asking whether she was available to take a shift for someone else. Unable to do the favour, she then proceeded to call yet another woman and passed the request on. The whole group got distracted momentarily from my question and discussed among themselves who she should call and some reviewed their schedules out loud to see if they could squeeze the shift in. The group confirmed that this was a normal practice, and it usually took them just a few phone calls to find substitutes. Because someone may need to go home for a relative's funeral or wake up with flu or have an accident on any given day, having a wide network is crucial in their success as freelance cleaners.

#### **b) Accommodation**



Since all of the domestic workers I interviewed are rural migrants, accommodation was the first problem they must tackle in the city. Rental cost was a grave concern for them, partly because of the high cost of living in the capital city and partly because their agricultural activities generally generated little cash. The majority of live-in workers did not have a job ready upon arrival and must find a temporary place until they landed a job and moved into their employers' houses. Live-out workers were constantly worried about paying rent. Their solution was to pool resources and share living space with other women migrants from their villages, who were likely their relatives or friends. Typically one small room of ten to fifteen square-meters housed five to seven women.

*"It is rather crowded in here, unlike our spacious homes in the village. But what else can we do? It's better to squeeze a little bit than spending half of our monthly income on rent. Our children need money to pay for tuition, so we don't mind sharing this tiny space."* (Focus Group)

Sharing rooms helps cut down cost significantly. Moreover, those migrating for the first time often could rely on the more experienced migrants from their networks to host them for a few days, or at least guide them to places with affordable rent. Most importantly, by living in a group, the women could visit home every once in a while without paying the full rent because when one person left for home, the rest of the group still stayed in the city and divided the cost among themselves. However, this living arrangement requires a high level of mutual trust and reciprocity as concern about petty thefts was mentioned from time to time in the interviews. Therefore, the women were quite particular about who they lived with, and usually stuck to people from their own networks.

*"I wouldn't live with people I don't know. Here we are like sisters. If I go home for a few days, she can keep an eye on my stuffs. I don't have many valuable things here, but it is troublesome if*

*you are home and still need to worry about a small amount of cash you leave under your pillow here. Plus, each of us goes home for a few days every month, but the rent is divided equally so we can save a little.” (Focus group)*

Besides sharing accommodation, migrant women also benefited from their networks if they knew someone who lived in the city. Out of the seventeen workers I interviewed, only two women were able to bring their young daughters to the city and enroll them in school. This is exceptional considering how difficult and costly life in the city is. In both cases, the women are widows and their daughters are very young, but their children’s migration was made possible thanks to free accommodation provided by people in their networks. In one case, an aunt in the city whose children have grown up and moved out generously offered her place to the widow and her seven-year-old daughter. In another case, help came from an even more unusual source.

*“When I was 17, I followed a friend to Ha Noi and she introduced me to this lady’s father-in-law. The old man was bedridden. I cared for him for two years then he passed away. At that time, this lady’s older sister who lives in the South needed a domestic worker, so I moved there in 2000 to work for her. After a while, I met my husband and we started dating, so I moved out and switched to cleaning. We got married, but soon after my child was born, my husband died from lung cancer. I was heaped with a huge debt as a result of his hospital treatment. My in-laws were not supportive. Now that their son was dead, they no longer wanted me to stay with them, for fear that I will remarry and a stranger will come to live on their land. My friend at that time was working for this lady’s daughter’s parents-in-law. My friend told her employers about my situation. Words came back to this lady and her husband. They have known me for a long time then, because I cared for her father, and then worked for her sister. I am honest and respectful, so they really like me. They are very kind, they treat me as though they were my parents. When they heard that I was struggling with lots of debts and a new-born baby, they sent me some money by post, and told me*

*that I could come to live with them. They will feed me and my daughter; I just need to pay for her daycare fee.” (Trang, mid-30s)*

Trang’s relationships with one network of families were strengthened through the years as she and her friend worked for multiple people who are related by blood or by law. In her living arrangement, she earned money by cleaning houses for at least three families every weekday and charged an hourly wage. On weekends, she thoroughly cleaned the house and did laundry for the older couple she lived with, as well as cleaning their daughter’s house which was nearby, all free of charge. Although she stressed many times during the interview that the old couple were very kind and treated her like family, the free labour she provided could be understood by both parties as to reciprocate the favour within her limited means. Nevertheless, this network she entered at the age of seventeen stepped in when her own network of family and in-laws back home failed to provide support. While these urban residents were not her direct employers, their offer of free accommodation enabled her to earn a living while keeping her child in the city, something many migrant women were not capable of. This unusual support coming from weak ties of distant relatives or former employers actually proved to be very advantageous to their continued employment far away from home. Not only could they save more money, but these two widows also received occasional free childcare provided by the older women they lived with. Their daughters were sent to schools in the city, which supposedly provide a better education compared to those available in the countryside.

### **c) Emotional Support**

The focus group was held in a small room rented by the live-out workers. Seven women ranging in age from early-30s to mid-60s and I all sat on a shaky twin-size bed.

As we chatted, it became very clear to me that these women provided tremendous emotional support for each other. Some lay down on the bed, some sat against the wall. They looked quite relaxed and unguarded even though most of them just met me for the first time.

*“Working like this, we can gather in the evening and talk to each other. Live-in workers are trapped inside four walls. For us, we work hard during the day, but we are free to talk in the evening and that makes us less homesick.” (Focus Group)*

As seen above, particularly among live-out domestic workers, living with people they knew well, typically those who came from the same village, provided many mutual benefits. Apart from reduced expenses, this living arrangement also supported the women emotionally, many of whom left home for an extended period for the first time. Sharing meals was an important part of their days, and some outright declined job offers if the shift conflicted with their dinnertime.

*“I once was offered an office-cleaning job that paid quite well. But it starts at 6 p.m., after the office staffs have gone home for the day. If I took that job, I will finish around 9 p.m. I don’t mind doing extra work for some additional income, but that means I will have to eat dinner by myself. That is the last thing I wanted after a day burying my face in brooms, mops and cleaning solutions.” (Focus Group)*

While live-in workers may enjoy very smooth relationships with their employers and interact with them throughout the day, live-out workers typically work in isolation and leave immediately after their job is finished. Therefore, for the second group, mealtime with their friends was the only opportunity for socialization during the day, as one woman described: “the time when I am seen and treated as a human rather than a cleaning machine”. As they ate the little food they shared, the migrant women also reflected on their hardworking days and the problems they faced, such as a disrespectful

child in an employer's household, or a bad traffic jam that made them miss work and got their wages deducted. Most of these problems were not mentioned when they were at home in their villages, either because their families would worry and refuse to let them leave again, or that the latter might not be able to appreciate their feelings and circumstances. A tight-knit community formed with other migrant women they knew and trusted acts as an emotional buffer from which they can find understanding and sympathetic ears.

#### **d) Connections with home**

Before cellular phones became affordable, the main method of communication for migrant workers was through messengers. Whenever one person in the groups went home, that person would bring with her updates, remittances, and sometimes letters from the other women and deliver these to their families. Since migrant women typically clustered together with those from the same communities, it was quite convenient to transmit messages and send cash home. Again, only migrants belonging to the same network practiced this method, for a significant amount of savings made with sweat and tears would be entrusted to one person. In some cases, a woman might refuse to carry remittance for another migrant for fear that the latter might wrongfully accuse her of stealing by claiming to have given her a bigger amount than she actually received.

*“One time I was asked by a second cousin of my sister-in-law to bring some cash to her husband in another village. I had to reject her request tactfully. It was not because I didn't want to help her, but rather, I was afraid that either her husband or herself would claim that she has given me more money than what I gave her husband. Anyway, that has happened to a friend of mine, so I didn't want to invite any trouble.” (Huong, early-20s)*

These remittances were not only for the daily expenses of families back home. A large part of the money sent back with a migrant was contributions to various celebrations and life-events such as death anniversaries, funerals or weddings of relatives.

*“In the village, everyone is either a neighbour or a relative of everyone else, by blood or by law. If both of your parents were born in your village, and you get married to someone from there, then for sure you will be invited to all the events all year around. But you can’t just go and eat, you have to bring a monetary gift too! That’s actually my main reason for migrating, because our rice crop and chickens can’t keep up with our need for cash. And since my employers only let me go home once every three months, I rely on my friends here to take my gifts to these events. I don’t contribute much now, but for certain relatives who are close to us, if I don’t send anything, they will say I’ve forgotten my roots.” (Dan, mid-50s)*

Since their absence prevents the migrants from participating and helping in local events, a cash contribution was a way for them to fulfill their gender roles from afar. Typically, female relatives would come together and prepare food for a big event, and this free labour is considered an expression of kindness and kin support. However, the participants’ year-round commitment to domestic work and limited transportation were often cited as factors prohibiting their visit home as the occasions arose. Therefore, by utilizing their networks of fellow villagers and sending remittances together with warm wishes, they were able to make their presence felt in their home villages and mitigate the unpleasant aspects of migration.

When a person went back to the city, she also brought with her updates and messages from home. This allowed the migrants to stay up-to-date with local news and significant events, so when they finally returned or visited, they could resume their social contacts as before. During the two focus groups, between my questions the women exchanged gossip about extramarital affairs or new childbirths in their villages.

### e) Assistance with Childcare

One last positive aspect of networks is free childcare provided by supportive relatives, such as sisters, mothers or other trusted female adults. While some women waited until their children were old enough or moved away for college or university before they migrated, many others had no choice but to leave their young children at home.

*“My son lives with my older sister now. I would not be able to work away from home if he is not being cared for by his aunt. My sister knows I have a hard life, so that is her way of helping me out. My son is well-fed, and his cousin (her older sister’s daughter) is older so she monitors his doing homework every evening. My sister treats him like her own child, so I can feel more at peace.” (Phan, late-30s)*

As I will discuss further in the section on gender roles, children are a constant concern for the migrant women, so this help is very important to their decision to migrate and stay long-term in the city. In some cases where husbands gambled or drank, relatives were also entrusted to keep remittances and use them to pay debts for the migrants.

## 4.2.2 Networks as Social Control

### a) Ties with Families and Communities Back Home

Whilst networks are bountiful sources of information and support, they are also powerful tools of social control. Younger domestic workers who were in their mid-30s and below were often worried about what people back home said about them. Rumours, gossip and seemingly harmless chit-chat can create a lot of stress and family tension, especially for the pioneers.

*“Because I was the first woman to migrate in my village, people made up all kinds of stories. They gossiped that I couldn’t stand the poverty anymore and would leave my four children to seek a new life in the city. Then later, when I brought money home to rebuild our house and paid for my*

*children's tuition fee, they realized I never intended to abandon my children. But they made up new stories, saying that my husband and I did not get along well so I left for the city in order to separate from him. A neighbour told my husband everyone thought we would get divorced sooner or later."* (Mai, late-40s)

Rural villages are tight-knit communities, where everyone knows everyone's name and family history. As Linh, a live-in domestic worker in her earlier 20s put it

*"If you do something unusual, you will be the topic of discussion for years, and not only in your own village, but even those in villages so far away they don't know you personally, they will still know the rumours about you."* (Linh, early-20s)

Due to the seasonal rhythm of agricultural work, which means some short intervals of intense labour followed by long days of unstructured time, as well as a lack of newsworthy events and access to information, villagers dedicated a lot of time and energy to discussing unconventional acts such as a woman's migration to the city. Undoubtedly, the fear of being discussed by fellow-villagers at mealtime prevented many women from embarking on their journeys.

When the community collectively reacts to an uncommon event, social control is exerted in an attempt to restore things to a state of normality. Such reactions also make explicit the values and norms upheld by the collective, which remain unspoken of as long as the equilibrium is maintained. Certain gender norms were upset when a woman left home and her husband stayed behind. The networks surrounding a family, i.e. their relatives, neighbours and friends were channels through which these gender norms were articulated and vocalized. The conversations they exchanged were means of invisible but significant control.



*“When a woman leaves home, her husband is condemned by others for failing to take care of his family financially. They may not say it openly, but the assumption is if he can earn enough, his wife would not have to leave.” (NGO staff)*

Masculinity was challenged by the very act of migration itself, and it was further questioned, even ridiculed when the husbands started taking over housework and childcare tasks. It is not surprising that many men fiercely objected to their wives’ decision to migrate.

*“When my husband picked up the children’s clothes to wash them, some neighbours would stick their heads over the fence and comment out loud ‘your wife is washing other people’s clothes. And now you are washing your children’s clothes. Don’t you feel ashamed?’ He got really mad at first.” (Mai, late-40s)*

Since gender roles are more rigidly defined and enforced in rural, isolated communities, the act of migration invited unwanted attention and some very wild speculation.

*“My sisters-in-law told each other that I want an easy life free of hardship and going to Ha Noi is my attempt to escape the rural life. They never seem to get tired of gossiping about me.” (Kim, mid-40s)*

In this informal yet extremely powerful form of social control, we see an intersection between gender roles and an underlying distinction between rural and urban, in which the city is imagined as a place full of temptation and corrupt morality while the countryside is idealized as a source of purity and modesty. Many times during our conversation, Hường, a live-in domestic worker in her early-20s who left her home village more than three years ago, tried to describe the pressure this distinction imposed upon her female body. Every time she returned, she was closely observed and commented upon by fellow-villagers. As a young female migrant, Hường was very conscious of how her appearance, her behaviours and her manners were carefully scrutinized, lest any sign of change,

whether real or not, slip out. Hường received several pairs of old jeans and knee-length skirts from her employers, but she dared not wear them during her visits, because

*“Women don’t wear jeans in my village. I know in Ha Noi it is just a piece of clothing, but other villagers will take it as a sign that I have become urbanized (i.e. become morally loose and materialistic). It won’t be long before rumours spread and become something like, ‘she doesn’t actually work an honest job’, and ‘she just hangs around in the city and dresses up. She must be paid by men to be their mistress! Hard-working labourers wouldn’t care so much about their appearance!’ Their imagination really runs wild” (Hường, early-20s)*

For the older women, their morality was not called into question as frequently, but even migrant women in their late-50s mentioned that people back home joked about a possibility that they would have an extramarital affair in the city. This type of humour subtly questioned their faithfulness, and thus made the women uncomfortable and acutely aware that they were traversing an unconventional path. By leaving home and living for years in a faraway place, the migrant women challenged social norms that dictate women should be tied to their families. Their sexuality, especially for the young and unmarried women, was no longer under the surveillance of their immediate networks, so more subtle forms of control such as rumour and gossip emerged in their absence, partly because villagers lacked ways to verify their honesty and moral conducts. While some women felt the need to avoid being targeted for village chit-chat at all cost, other participants did not report experiencing the same level of collective pressure. In communities where a large number of women had migrated in search of work, the general attitude towards migration became more accepting, and thus the control exercised by networks also relaxed.

#### **b) Ties with Other Migrants in the City**

Besides a complex web of relationships with people from their home villages, once migrant women settled in their new place, they developed strong bonds with others like themselves. The networks migrant they formed with each other in the city helped reduce anxiety and suspicion directed at them from people back home.

*“Since we all know each other’s family, our husbands know we live here together, they feel more reassured. People don’t discuss us as much as they used to. They know we are just here to make money, nothing else” (Focus group)*

*“When I told my boyfriend that I was going to Ha Noi and work for a family, he got very upset and did not speak to me for a week. I don’t know why. I guess perhaps he feels my job as a servant is embarrassing, or perhaps he doesn’t like the fact that I will live in another family, especially with a male employer. But then he knew that I would work for the same family as Huong, my best friend since middle-school, he seems more okay with my leaving.” (Linh, early-20s)*

However, these same networks in the city can act as an extension of the networks back home. The participants spoke of being under constant surveillance by other migrants who could easily spread news (or made-up stories) about them to their families and relatives. Many stressed that they always keep their behaviours in check, for fear that an unintentional act may reflect badly on their conduct, especially when they were away from home and no one was there to vouch for them.

*“I never talk to men. Even when I enter a house to clean, I avoid male employers. I just deal with their wives or their daughters. Sometimes men catcall me as I walk on the street. I would try to ignore them. If a man becomes too pushy, I will swear at him, so he and other people know I am not a lascivious woman. I don’t want any impression that I play along with flirtation. Rumour may be transmitted back to my village immediately.” (Phan, late-30s)*

Non-stop self-monitoring is certainly an aspect of gender norms since girls and women are taught and expected to always be mindful of their actions, unlike boys and men who are accustomed to acting freely and much more spontaneously. These norms are not only

internalized by individual women but are also enforced by the networks of their watchful and diligent peers, especially regarding faithfulness. While whispers and comments circulated around the village could lead to familial tensions and conjugal conflicts, a vague sense of being monitored by other migrant women pushed some participants to forego job opportunities that may place them in questionable situations. During the focus group, the participants occasionally drifted into their own conversations. This example illustrates their constant concern about how they were being perceived and judged by others in their networks, and the ultimate consequences of failing to conform to gender norms.

*“Around a week ago I found this room for rent. It is very nice and cheap too. There is even a private bathroom attached to it. But I ended up not renting it, because the owner is a widower. Sometimes my fellow-villagers drop by for a visit, if they see that I live in the same house with a single man, what would they say? Even if nothing happens, there will still be rumours. You see, we rural women must always be conscious of what people might think about us, not like people in Ha Noi. Urban folks don’t seem to be interested in other people’s business as much. If a friend visits me today, the next day, everyone back home will hear about that.” (Focus group)*

Not only reasonably priced accommodation but also some good paying jobs were declined because the migrant workers felt that their reputation as moral, virtuous women might be compromised. If a participant thought she was going to work alone in a man’s presence, she would most likely find an excuse to turn down the offer even if she was desperate for cash. Not being able to earn money is worrisome, but being the subject of village gossip is a much bigger concern for these women.

#### **4.3 Preservation of and Challenge to Gender Roles**

As we have seen from the previous section, networks both enable and constrain rural women during the course of migration. Furthermore, networks interact with gender

roles and gender norms in ways that strengthen social scripts reserved for women. For several participants who were the first female in their communities to migrate in search of a job in Ha Noi, the collective reaction to their decision can be harsh. They were considered extra-ordinary, but their courage was not always applauded. Instead, the networks surrounding them exercised power and control over them by means of ridicule, jokes and gossip. In this section, I will continue drawing out the complexities and contradictions by discussing how gender roles are preserved and challenged at the same time. What is considered appropriate for a man or a woman (i.e. gender norms), is both rigid and fluid. By looking at the everyday lived experience of migrant workers, patterns of change are discerned, yet resistances to change are evident as well.

For the sake of organization, I will divide this section along a timeline: before migration, during migration and after migration. However, it should be kept in mind that for the participants in my study, migration is anything but a continuous, linear path. Most of them left and returned home multiple times over the years and their stays in the city varied greatly in length. Thus, their stories are different from international labour migrants who often leave home for an extended period of time with very limited opportunity for visits and their returning home usually signals an end to their journey. Many aspects of gender roles and norms overlap with those of networks, because while the women actively navigate multiple layers of connections, they are influenced by their relatives and friends as well. These individuals shared their beliefs and values. And last but not least, although I went in the field with knowledge gained from previous literature that women are likely to challenge traditional gender roles during and after migration, the stories I collected actually show the opposite. Previous research on domestic workers, in

particular the international migration literature (Dannecker, 2005), establishes that migrant women are often empowered by their new earnings and experiences, which in turn leads to their opposition to traditional ways (Cecilia, 1999). After all, these wives, mothers and daughters have now travelled far and long, they have earned their own incomes and lived independently in a new place. Their deviations from the norms are confirmed by the attention they received from other people, whether wanted or not. Contrary to a seemingly common-sense expectation of rebellious, financially independent women, my findings demonstrate that most of the participants actively upheld gender norms and adjusted their behaviours to live up to standards of femininity despite many changes in their circumstances.

#### 4.3.1 Before Migration

##### **a) Reasons and Motivation**

Economic necessities were undoubtedly the most common “push factor” for migration. Unequal regional development and the state’s withdrawal from the provision of basic needs such as healthcare, childcare and education leave the majority of rural households in a precarious position, having to fend for themselves while job opportunities are few and far between. Although the participants vary in age, level of education and number of dependants, their ultimate motivation for migrating is to earn money. But why do women migrate and not men?

In addition to households’ practical needs for a source of stable income, migration decisions are shaped by gender structure within each household unit as much, if not more than economic motivations. Two women (Kim, Trang) are widows, one (Chi) is technically single because her husband was mentally ill and has been missing for many

years. Cung is an older woman in her 60s and never married because of a physical disability. Linh is still young and unmarried, but her father is absent from her life. Her mother re-married when Linh was a young child and left her in the care of her fragile and poor grandparents. For these women, there has never been a question of who should migrate to earn money, because they have no one to rely on but themselves.

Still, for the rest of the participants, I asked how their families decided who should migrate. Why did their husbands stay home? Is it because there is no job suitable for men? Or are the men not willing to migrate?

*“My husband works in construction, but each contract doesn’t last very long. Sometimes he does not have any work for months. He can earn enough to pay for daily expenses, such as grocery. The children’s tuition is a big lump sum and due twice a year. If I didn’t work here in Ha Noi, we wouldn’t be able to send my children to school.” (Focus group)*

*“There are jobs for men in the city too, for sure. But men can’t save money. Even though they may earn more than us, they end up spending all their incomes. We women eat very little, we don’t buy anything for ourselves. Men, they buy cigarettes, alcohol, and when their wives are not with them, they spend money gambling, or keeping a mistress. (Focus group)*

In this explanation which was echoed by many other participants, gender differences are invoked as legitimate reasons for women to migrate. In other words, men were viewed and accepted as “big boys”. In the words of my female participants, the men in their lives tended to indulge themselves in their desires, acted spontaneously and selfishly; in contrast, women were described with motherly virtues who always put others’ interest before their own. Since I did not interview any left-behind husbands or male migrants, it is not possible to validate this viewpoint from their perspective. It should suffice to note that the women migrants in my study repeatedly used socially accepted notions of gender differences to explain their decisions to migrate. Even when typical male personality

traits were not mentioned, women's migration was explained as a result of scarce construction jobs available in local communities. Although it is true that very few job opportunities exist in rural areas, the fact that men were either not willing to take up different types of work or were deemed unsuitable for nothing else but the masculine manual labour at construction sites speaks volumes about the gendered nature of migration decisions.

For some participants, their decisions to migrate results from responsibilities that their husbands failed to bear. Phan's husband gambled away her savings from years of domestic work in Taiwan. Mai's husband was an alcoholic. Both men accumulated big debts that their wives would have not been able to pay had they stayed home.

*"My four daughters were so young at that time. The day I left, my third daughter woke up before dawn. She saw me to the bus station, crying all the way from home. She held me tight and didn't want to let me go. It still breaks my heart now to think back to those days, how I left my children behind. But I have no other way. If I had stayed, we probably wouldn't even have a roof above our head."* (Mai, late-40s)

In addition to troublesome husbands, there were aggressive husbands. Mạnh was in her early-50s, but her husband still beat her from time to time. Physical violence was an ever-present element in her marriage. She had always wanted a divorce, but strong social stigma attached to divorced women as well as a prospect of being homeless prevented her from doing so.

*"Sometimes he punches me in the eye. It swells and turns purple for a few months. One time he punched me but he missed and hit the door and broke his wrist. That's for you to see how forceful his punches are. I couldn't get a divorce because I don't have any place to go. My family refuse to take me in. They say I'm already married, so they can't let me stay. And no one in my village gets divorce. Land belongs to men, so women have nowhere to go. I have wanted to work as a domestic*



*worker since I was younger, that way I can escape my husband, but my two daughters were too small then. Now they have all got married, I babysat my grandchildren until they turned four years old, now I can finally go.” (Mạnh, early-50s)*

Mạnh endured domestic violence throughout the majority of her marriage, and now migration provided her a way out of the situation without breaking the norms too drastically. She has been yearning for a separation from her husband, but she waited long enough to fulfill her duties as a mother, and then a grandmother before finally setting herself free. Migration for Mạnh is indeed a relief.

Interestingly, migration is also a route of escape from gender expectations for the two unmarried participants. Linh and Hương both mentioned that besides earning money, living in the city helps them delay marriage, something they saw as inevitable but preferred to postpone for at least a few years. If they had lived at home like their peers, social pressure would have pushed them towards getting married because

*“It is the norm. Women in my village receive marriage proposals when they are eighteen or nineteen. Twenty-years old something is considered rather late. Those over twenty-five and still unmarried are considered permanently single. Never-married women are perceived to be unfortunate and a sign that their families accumulated bad karma in their previous life.” (Hương, early-20s).*

Most of her friends and cousins have married; some have had children when they reached the age of twenty. Hương wanted to save up some money so she can be financially independent after getting married, while Linh hoped to travel and “experience a different life” before settling down. Both aspirations are rather unconventional for young rural women in their age, so the path they chose is also very different from that of their peers. The intersection between age and migration will be discussed further in the third section.

These examples show that migration can be a way for women to circumvent their social positions as wives, widows, single older women and young unmarried women. It provides a socially approved route to destabilize gender roles without resorting to more rebellious means. While a divorce for women in unhappy marriages or rejections of marriage proposals coming from single women might be condemned or impractical within the context of rural villages, leaving home to earn money turns out to be a more culturally acceptable way to subvert the norms. Similarly, working in the city provides an alternative living arrangement for widows and never-married women, who without access to land through a husband, might have had to rely financially on their male relatives or share living space with the latter had they continued to reside in their home villages.

#### 4.3.2 During Migration

Although the migrant women were physically absent, they continued to play the roles of being a wife, a mother and a daughter from afar. As we have seen in the previous discussion about networks, they utilized various forms of connections such as fellow-villagers or more recently the use of cell phones to maintain their presence and manage their household affairs. Therefore, the amount of work they must handle was enormous. Their gender roles seemed to be upheld thanks to great efforts to care for household members despite the distance, rather than a disrupted by migration.

##### **a) Mother-child Relationship**

Children were the top concern for the majority of migrant women. Because husbands were perceived to be inadequate caregivers, mothers were always worried about whether their children ate well, slept well, and most importantly, kept up with school work. Children's education figured predominantly in many interviews as the main

motivation for mothers' migration. Kim explained that she would manage to make ends meet living at home, but she needed to work in Ha Noi to pay her children's tuition fees. In another interview, Mai said the same thing.

*"I told my employer, if I had stayed home, I wouldn't have gone hungry. I grow enough rice to feed my family. I fish for shellfish and crabs in stream and sell them in a market for extra cash. But I have no way to make enough money to pay for tuition." (Mai, late-40s)*

Therefore, mothers understandably felt anxious about their children's performance at school. Whenever I asked "What are you worried about when you are working away from home?" the participants offered very similar answers.

*"My biggest concern is that my children may misbehave. As I am here, I can't monitor them. They go to school and may hang out with bad friends. They may learn bad habits. Children whose parents are at home with them are better managed. I can't put my mind at rest when I am away from them." (Focus group)*

*"Even after my children get married, I am still worried. Because they are young, sometimes they fight with each other, then they want to get divorce. I am very worried about that. If I am home, I will be able to intervene and give them advice [on how to avoid conflict]." (Focus group)*

The second answer shows that mothers always worried about their children, no matter how old they were. We will see later on that wives thought about husbands in more or less the same way, as though the men needed their constant monitoring and support or else they would lapse back into their harmful habits such as drinking and gambling.

To address these concerns, the participants had various strategies in place to prepare for different situations. First, almost all of the mothers whose children were living at home made frequent, if not daily, calls to monitor their children's activities.

*"I ask my son to always tell his aunt if he wants to go somewhere. If he plans to do homework with his friends after school, his aunt needs to know. Say, I call home (i.e. her sister's house) and he is not there, and his aunt doesn't know where he is, I will probably panic." (Phan, late-30s)*

Phan's strict monitoring of her son's movements seemed a bit extreme at first, but it was motivated by her fear that the teenage son would imitate her husband and start gambling. Other mothers often called their children and reminded them to do their homework, or even called their teachers to check on their grades at school. Despite this tactic, many still felt that their distant supervision was superficial and inadequate without a physical presence, so they tried to compensate for this during their visits.

*"Whenever I go home, I ask my son to bring me all his notebooks and homework. I will check to see if he makes a lot of mistakes, or if his handwriting is messy. I look up his textbook for sample exercises and use them as a guide to check his homework. This activity takes up all the time I have for each home visit" (Phan, late-30s)*

Phan used to be a kindergarten teacher so she was confident in her intellectual ability to check her eight-grader's schoolwork. Other migrant mothers admitted that they could no longer keep up with the new curriculum; nonetheless, they still thought it was better if they could live at home and at least make sure their children were well disciplined by completing homework every day. Examples of migrant women whose children do badly at school were brought up throughout the focus group as the worst nightmare that could happen to them.

*"My neighbours, both of them work in Ha Noi and they make good money, but their children suffer. The children live with their grandparents, but grandparents are not good at disciplining grandchildren. They are well fed and well taken care of, but no one makes them study. Now the older child is ten years old and still can't read." (Focus group)*

To mitigate the negative impact of mothers' absence on children's development and especially academic achievement, besides regular communication via telephone, the participants also took advantage of their sporadic visits to explain to their children why they had no choice but to leave home, and that the children should study well so their

endurance of hardship would not go wasted. Some studies on Filipino migrant women report that left-behind children feel bitter towards their mothers for not living with them, and the mother-child relationship becomes distant after years of separation (Cheever, 2002). When I posed the question of potential impact on the relationship with their children, most participants did not feel that their children blamed them or resented their absence. If anything, children seemed to empathize with their mothers and strove to live up to the latter's expectation by studying hard, especially daughters. Here we can see how typically feminine traits such as selflessness were employed to explain the decision to migrate. Women leave home because it is a household strategy to ensure a future for their children in the long run; in other words, migration is a sacrifice made for the next generation. The children, on their parts, embraced this rationalization because they were raised to bear a great sense of gratitude towards parents. Huong's mother was also a migrant worker, so I brought up this question to check whether her feelings matched what other participants claimed their children thought.

*"I think my mother's decision to migrate is a good one, because at that time we were very poor and my father did not earn much. My mother just had to leave so she could feed us. I did feel jealous with my friends whose mothers stayed at home. They were cared for day and night. My friends did not have to cook or wash their own clothes. When my mother was at home, she would tell us to eat more, or if she knew we craved for something, she would work harder to buy that food for us. And no one defended me when other children bullied me." (Huong, early-20s)*

Despite all the disadvantages she suffered as a child of a migrant worker, Huong still loved her mother and deeply appreciated her sacrifice, which was often stressed as a motherly virtue. The participants believed that their children understood their decision because they took the time to explain why it is necessary to find work elsewhere and

convey a strong desire to stay home if circumstances had allowed. Thanks to their persistent efforts to communicate with children, familial ties are preserved.

Besides phone calls and in-person conversations, the migrant women also relied on their relatives for childcare. This is a positive aspect of networks that I have mentioned in the previous section. Yet, if all else fails; a contingency plan was in place.

*“If my sister calls me and says my son is gone and she doesn’t know where, I will go home right away. I will cancel all my work and ask for an emergency leave. No such incident has happened yet, but I must always prepare for the worst case scenario.” (Phan, late-30s)*

Although Phan seemed a bit over-anxious, other participants confirmed her approach is not extreme. For those with young or teenage children at home, the mothers were always willing to leave Ha Noi at a moment’s notice in order to be with their children. Indeed, a flexible schedule that allowed them to go home anytime is one of the most important reasons for working as a live-out cleaner. Perhaps this ability to be physically present for priorities such as children’s well-being helps lessen the damage of distance on mother-child relationship for rural-urban migrants, especially in comparison to their international migrant counterparts, for whom a visit home for an emergency is out of question.

#### **b) Management of Household Affairs and Remittances**

Remittances have been reported to empower migrant women to a great extent (Belanger, Tran, & Le, 2011) because they elevate the women to the role of breadwinner in their families. After all, a shift in the role of financial provider from husband to wife is widely considered a change in traditional gender roles. Thus, I conducted interviews expecting that the participants would talk about their newly enhanced position in the family and the changes they have experienced. On the contrary, the majority of women insisted that their new financial power did not alter their behaviours and relationships,

though some acknowledged that other people seem to pay them more respect and affection. However, when I probed for further details, some participants described having more say in family matters even though they themselves did not frame the changes as a reflection of their increased power; therefore there was a discrepancy between actions and perceptions. Another possibility is the women were indeed aware of their new enhanced positions; however, they refrained from portraying themselves in such light so they can still fit in the conventional view of feminine virtues. A woman who treats her husband disrespectfully because she earns more money shall be condemned for upsetting the gender hierarchy between men and women. Respecting men is a moral rule strongly internalized by rural women, something so sacred even financial power cannot alter.

*“No, I don’t feel that I have more say in important decisions now. It is not good for women to dominate their husbands, even if the woman feed the whole family and the man doesn’t contribute anything.” (Đan, mid-50s)*

Similar to migrant women and their left-behind husbands in another study (Resurreccion & Ha, 2007), who are found to engage in “doing-gender”, i.e. re-arranging care-giving tasks according to the new dynamic without disturbing fundamental gender norms, the domestic workers I interviewed also maintained that nothing has changed in the power balance between them and their husbands regarding important financial decisions such as buying large furniture or home construction.

*“If we need to buy something, we will discuss with each other, same as before. Now our children are all adults, so we may ask for their opinions as well. But mostly we still make decisions between ourselves.” (Mạnh, early-50s)*

Yet when I probed whether a purchase proposed by their husbands would be made if they did not approve, most shook their heads. In their minds, they did not want to be

associated with a stigmatized image of a controlling woman whose earning power makes her stray away from the feminine virtues of modesty and utmost respect for her husband. Such women will be a subject of ridicule for villagers; the participants reminded me times and again. They were discouraged to follow that path because the consequences would be long-lasting and very unpleasant.

The NGO staff member who has implemented a number of grassroots projects working with domestic workers across the country also arrived at the same conclusion.

*“Many women will say they haven’t changed, that they won’t be more powerful just because they are the breadwinners now. They will say that they respect their husbands all the same. They still follow the gender scripts that dictate what it means to be a good woman. However, in reality, they do have more power. I know one migrant woman who used to be considered an old spinster by her relatives and they never took her seriously because she is an older single lady. After she started sending money home for family feasts or other collective celebrations, as well as buying gifts for her family, people paid more attention to her and responded to her requests. She started giving orders to her younger brothers and their wives in family gatherings, telling them how things should be organized. She herself doesn’t recognize this change in the language of gender roles, but it is true that money talks.” (NGO staff)*

Besides spousal relationships, the participants also reflected on how other family members increasingly depended on them for financial assistance. Trang is the youngest daughter in her family but her employment in Ha Noi made her the one with most disposable income. While she rejected the idea that her marginalized position as a daughter has changed at all, the fact that her mother needed her financial support means that should she refuse to help, a lot of household expenses would not be paid for.

*“My mother now always calls me when she wants to buy something new. No, she doesn’t really ask for my opinion, because I am her daughter. She consults my brother and listens to him, but I am the one to open my wallet.” (Trang, mid-30s)*



In addition to occasional, large expenditure, the participants sent regular remittances to cover daily costs such as food, children's school supplies, contribute to various feasts organized by relatives or acquaintances at life events such as funerals, childbirths or weddings and to pay back debts. To make up for their absence, the women employed various strategies to manage this amount of money and how it is spent.

*"I don't send money to my husband because I am afraid he will gamble it away. All my remittances are sent to my older sister and she helps me pay back the debts my husband accumulated from his gambling. My son lives with my sister, and whenever I visit, I leave him some money. I ask my son to keep track of all his spending by recording them into a notebook. If he buys some pens, he should write the cost down and I will check this note in the next visit. My husband works in construction so he takes care of his own daily expenses."* (Phan, late-30s)

Asking husbands and children to take notes of expenses is a common financial management method. Some participants trusted their husbands more than Phan did and sent their remittances directly to the men back home, but even if they did not ask for financial records, some would still double-check where the money was spent.

*"I ask my husband what he spends the money on and see if everything adds up. Sometimes I go to the shops he mentions and check with them whether he did actually buy such and such. I need to monitor closely. You know men are not very responsible."* (Dan, mid-50s)

Occasionally, the total was less than the amount Dan's husband reported, but she was quite trusting and brushed it off as a forgetful moment, rather than an intentional lie. This micro-management strategy was seen as a normal part of being a wife, or women's taken-for-granted responsibilities. In this sense, migration is an obstacle towards the fulfillment of familial duties; therefore creative strategies are in place to overcome the distance. Although the women were physically absent, we see that they actively utilized their

networks and resources in order to maintain supervision over their families and daily expenses. This is both a continued performance and a slight subversion of gender roles.

The participants' monitoring efforts extended to their husbands as well. As discussed previously, the husbands in general were described with child-like personalities such as failing to delay gratification or taking others' interests into consideration. This is consistent with the general perception of men as rather undependable in tasks that require attention to details. Leshkovich (2012) studied urban female traders in Ho Chi Minh city. Her participants thus were a group geographically, economically and culturally very different from my Northern, rural participants who mostly came from a background of poverty, yet they also told the researcher that their husbands were like children who cannot be entrusted to watch the stalls in their absence or counted on to help with the business. In addition to keeping track of daily expenses, the husbands of the migrant women in my study received frequent phone calls to remind them of tasks that need to be done and not to slack off while the wives were not home.

*"I call my husband often to remind him not to gamble. Sometimes I threaten him with divorce if I find out that he engages in any gambling activities, no matter if he bets with money or not. He does get mad because he says I don't trust him, yes, sometimes we argue with each other. Recently he swears that he will never gamble again, but you never know." (Phan, late-30s)*

Phan's husband was not the only man who was addicted to gambling. The participants in the focus group also shared that their husbands may lose all their remittances in a bet "because that is what people do in our villages," so they dared not send too much cash at once. Usually, they just left the husbands with enough money for basic necessities until the next remittance. However, when I suggested that this financial control sounded like a

form of power, most participants replied that it was just a normal thing for a woman to do.

Other migrant women worried about drinking, which was another pervasive problem among the men.

*“When I am home, he drinks less. But when I am away, his friends ask him to join them, and because no one is there to call him home, he may drink for hours. He is a good natured man, but he has become an alcoholic, because he is not very good at disciplining himself” (Mai, late-40s)*

In Mai’s response, there was a trace of guilt, as though her absence pushed her husband into the arms of his drinking friends. This was not uncommon among the participants, for they internalized their gender roles as a caretaker who should be present for their families. The husbands’ excessive drinking was interpreted as a consequence of not having their wives nearby to stop them, rather than their own weakness. This finding is consistent with Rydstrom’s (1998) study about the perception of control over one’s body among Vietnamese boys and girls and how male children are not expected by adults to suppress their desires. Guilt was also evident when we talked about children, as the mothers were not present to attend to their needs and wants, while the common expectation was “men can never take good care of children” (Focus group).

### **c) Giving Care From Afar**

Again, because the participants were internal migrants, travelling home was not as difficult or costly for them as it is for international migrants. Since it was widely accepted that their husbands were incompetent replacements in care giving, the women often felt guilty for not fulfilling their gendered duties and tried their best to compensate. Some women mentioned that they refrained from spending on themselves, eating small portions of cheap and innutritious food while working long hours in labour-intensive jobs. It was

normal for live-out domestic workers to take three to four shifts a day, and during each shift they cleaned a few floors, two to three toilets, did laundry (sometimes by hand), cooked meals and completed other random tasks assigned by their employers. Yet the same women also talked about buying boxes of milk for their children, an expensive item not included in the diet of many rural children. Efforts to compensate for lack of care were particularly evident during their home visits.

*“Every time I go home I clean the house, wash dirty clothes, cook for the children, weed the rice field, so many things to do. The house is like a mess. Clothes pile up like mountains. I hardly have any time to rest. Of course there is no time to catch up with relatives and neighbours.” (Focus group)*

The above description resonated with many migrant women who took advantage of the little time they had at home to do housework, thereby reassured themselves and other family members of their continued domestic significance. Although most participants believed that their husbands and children can manage without them, especially if the children were old enough to handle some domestic tasks, they still felt anxious about the condition of their houses and the well-being of other family members. Anxiety would be further heightened when someone in the family fell ill. If the illness was serious, the migrant women always returned home to resume their role as the primary caregiver.

*“If my mother is sick, I have to go home. Even if I have to borrow money or go hungry, I still have to be with her. The most important thing when a mother is sick is her children must take care of her. My children, I can ask my relatives to look after them when I am away, but my mother is different.” (Dan, mid-50s)*

Mai had returned home for a few emergencies, such as when her youngest daughter had a fever that lasted unusually long and when her husband almost died from excessive

drinking. In one particular case, Phan returned home from Taiwan when her son entered grade one.

*“I had been working in Taiwan for two and a half years then, but I promised my son that I would return when he enters grade 1, so I kept my promise. I could have stayed longer because at that time I was finally getting a hang of my work in Taiwan, my language ability had improved a lot. But my son needed me as he started school. His grandparents can’t discipline him. When I first got home, his teacher complained that he might have to repeat grade 1. For a month I just stayed home, cooked for him, picked him up from school and taught him at home. After a month, he improved significantly and has been a good student every since.” (Phan, late-30s)*

For Phan, her son’s education was a good enough reason to terminate her contract in Taiwan, despite the fact that continuing her employment would yield significant financial reward, because her savings from just the first two years enabled her to buy a piece of land. Finally, making sure there is enough rice at home is another way to care for family members. Since many rural households cultivated rice and engaged in other seasonal agricultural activities, the participants (live-ins and live-outs alike) typically took one or two-day-leave during harvesting or transplanting periods to help out. Since their income from domestic work can comfortably cover the cost of food, this kind of productive labour took on a new and symbolic meaning as an expression of care, because it was not out of necessity but rather to help the women feel reassured that their children would not go hungry while they were away.

#### **d) Presentation of Self**

As I already discussed in the section on network, migrant women were always conscious of judgement other villagers passed on them. Whenever I asked “Do your neighbours or relatives say anything about the fact that you live in the city?” my question was always interpreted in more or less the same way. While I expected a range of

responses, such as neglect of domestic responsibilities, improvement in economic status, or comments on relationship between the participants and their children, the answer often related to spousal faithfulness. “I am honest and faithful, so I don’t care what they say” (Mai, late-40s). While extramarital affairs and the purchase of commercial sex are tolerated, even expected among migrant men (Locke, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2012), they are taboo among migrant women. In popular cultural understanding, men have sexual needs that are purely biological and must be fulfilled, but a woman’s adultery signals corrupt morality, and again, is a subject of village gossip for generations to come.

*“There are women who have affairs with men in the city. They are usually widows or divorced. As for myself, I would never dare doing that. That is very shameful. Isn’t it enough to sleep with my husband? Why would I need to sleep with someone else?” (Phan, late-30s)*

Phan’s comment suggests that a woman’s affair implies insatiable sexual needs, a “shameful” attribute no woman wants to possess. Since any small act may be interpreted as an indicator of infidelity, the participants were constantly under pressure to monitor their presentation of self carefully. Hương has been quoted earlier discussing her choice of clothes to express modesty and most importantly, to avoid the impression that she has become a city girl, or worse, that she has come to rely on her body rather than her labour to earn money. Đan talked about a neighbour whose husband was extremely jealous and physically abused his wife every time she visited home. This woman got beaten for random reasons such as being seen sitting behind a man on his scooter, who in fact was a taxi-scooter giving rides to people for money.

#### 4.3.3 After Migration

Unlike international migrants, a trip home does not necessarily signal an end to migration because many women return to their villages and stay for a few years before

leaving again. Given that all my participants were actively working in Ha Noi at the time the study was conducted, discussing gender roles post-migration was not a focus of our conversations. However, for the women who have been on-and-off their migration track for more than five years, there are many discernible patterns related to their gender roles. First, although most participants disagreed that their incomes bestowed on them more power at home or in the relationship with their husbands, many acknowledged that they seemed to receive more respect than they used to.

*“Before, some distant relatives did not want to associate with us, because we were poor. Or when I wanted to buy some meat, for example, the seller would not let me buy on credit, because she knew it will take me a long time to pay back. But now she knows I have money, so if I want to buy something on credit, she will agree right away. And relatives seem to drop by more often.” (Mai, late-40s)*

As distant relationships warmed up, the migrant women, especially younger ones, gained more confidence in their everyday interactions with others,.

*“People think I have become more mature, and since I have lived outside this village, even this province, for quite some years now, my relatives seem to think that I have gained more experiences. They even consulted my opinion when they wanted to purchase a new scooter” (Huong, early-20s)*

Nevertheless, others shared that their earning capacity can be taken advantage of by their relatives. Trang, the widow with a young daughter recounted her mother’s numerous phone calls asking for financial help and told me that as a woman, she not only felt uneasy rejecting such requests; but she also worried that relatives may interpret her refusal to help as a sign of arrogance and lack of empathy, traits often attributed to urban people, rather than a genuine lack of resources on her part. Here again, we see nurturance and compassion, which is expected in the form of financial support, were upheld as

feminine virtues the migrant women must demonstrate, even at their own expense and inconvenience.

In this section, I have shown how gender norms and gender roles are both actively conformed to and challenged by the participants. Contrary to other findings (Dannecker, 2005) where migrant women challenge traditional gender roles as they leave home and take on breadwinning responsibilities, in my study, the participants emphasized the importance of these roles and the strategies they used to perform their usual duties in spite of the distance. It is not financial power but rather unwavering efforts to live up to high standards of feminine virtues that earn these women respect in the eyes of their immediate families as well as their communities. Furthermore, because at times village rumours will spread no matter how carefully the women monitor their behaviours and appearance, family separation is actually justified by appealing to women's responsibilities for ensuring an intact family. This seemingly contradictory conclusion is best summed up in the words of Kim.

*“Family happiness depends on women. Women must try harder, work harder to make sure their family's needs are met, even if that means they need to leave home and work in the city. We women migrate to earn money to feed our children. If the children are hungry or drop out of school, the family can't be happy.” (Kim, mid-40s)*

#### **4.4 Agency and Structure**

This section will show how rural-to-urban migration is a manifestation of the intersection between individual choices and structural conditions. In other words, I consider how the domestic workers arrive at the place they are today by examining what life presents to them and what they make out of it.

##### **4.4.1 Domestic Work, Age and Level of Education**



The majority of domestic workers in Ha Noi are married, older women from neighbouring provinces. Very few young women do this job. The NGO staff I interviewed confirmed this observation. In my sample of 17 domestic workers, only two were in their 20s and unmarried. Hương was the only one among her peers who did this job.

*“If my mother is not already here and arranges for my employment, I probably wouldn’t be here now. Most of my friends are working in factories or shops. Some are married and some are in university. I am the only one under 20 working as a domestic worker in my village. I don’t tell people about my job. Why? I just don’t feel comfortable saying that. Usually I just tell them I work in the city as a shop assistant.” (Hương, early-20s)*

Linh, the other unmarried participant, was Hương’s best friend. Linh just joined Hương in the city not too long before the interview took place, and she held the same attitude towards domestic work. Linh is quoted earlier describing her boyfriend getting upset when she decided to become a live-in domestic worker. However, she observed that older women did not face the same issue. They can discuss freely among themselves the families they work for, differences between urban and rural lifestyle and the children of their employers, and no one judged them for being domestic workers. When I asked why there are such differences in how the community behave towards older and younger women, Linh found it difficult to explain but offered her reflection.

*“I think people feel that domestic workers have to serve other people, you know, like maids, or servants. It is a loss of face, a humiliation. Domestic workers have to live in other people’s houses and lose their freedom. There are many stories about female domestic workers having affairs with the male employers too. Older women who are already married don’t have to worry much about keeping face. They are already settled, so no one cares. Their priority is to feed their children. But*

*for younger women like myself, it is important to preserve our name for a future marriage.” (Linh, early-20s)*

Her explanation of keeping a good reputation for marriage prospect has a sound basis. Although arranged marriages in which a couple do not know each other's face until the wedding are no longer common, in present-day Vietnamese rural villages, mothers often gather to discuss young women of marriageable age as they look at each single woman's family background and upbringing to screen potential matches for their sons. An unmarried young woman living for several years with an unrelated family in the city is likely to attract attention, even suspicion from her fellow-villagers. Again, because female sexuality, especially before marriage, is often monitored closely, when a single woman is not within eyesight for an extended period of time, a prospective mother-in-law will ask questions. Another reason domestic work is not popular among younger women is because they have more options in terms of employment. Most factories have an age limit for their workers, thus women older than 35 or without a high school diploma often do not meet the basic requirements for factory jobs, the most common type of employment available in rural areas. In cities, shops prefer to employ young assistants for their appearance and energy.

*“Most domestic workers are older women with little education. They have fewer options to earn money compared to their younger counterparts. In addition, the mainstream society still holds stereotypical images of domestic workers and stigmatizes them. Younger women will select other jobs to avoid the stigma of being viewed as a maid or a servant.” (NGO staff)*

We can see that age and level of education are adverse factors that limit the number of employment options available for older, rural women. Although other jobs such as working in a factory or waiting table are not really more secure or better paid, younger

women opt for these choices because they are not associated with the denigrated perception of domestic work. Mạnh, a migrant woman who was also a grandmother offered another explanation for this age disparity among domestic workers.

*“Younger women still need to be home with their young children. For kids below five years old, it is best to have their mothers around. The mothers can work in a factory during the day and return home in the evening. You cannot do that if you go all the way to the city.” (Mạnh, early-50s)*

Apparently, prolonged absence required of rural-urban migrants further discourages younger women to seek this job, especially those in reproductive age or are raising young children. Once their children reach school age, level of dependency on the mothers decreases, while financial pressure from tuition fee increases. Women in their 40s and above might feel more at ease leaving home and relying on other female relatives to take care of the children. At the same time, migration is considered a solution to cope with growing strain on scarce household resources.

#### 4.4.2 Rural and Urban Divide

Another socio-political element that stimulates the outburst of rural-to-urban migration is unequal regional development. While central cities have been growing quickly, the majority of rural areas in Vietnam are left underdeveloped. Subsistence farming cannot keep up with the need for cash, yet most rural families lack alternative livelihoods to generate income. The socialist state no longer takes responsibility for basic needs, and widening class inequality puts rural people in the least favourable position.

*“There is no trade or handicraft in my village. Most people just keep a few livestock, grow some crops and live a simple life. I wouldn’t go if I have another choice. Of course I’d rather stay home with my children.” (Mai, late-40s)*

The distinction between rural and urban areas is strong and clear. Most participants confirmed that there are more job opportunities in Ha Noi due to a booming informal sector. According to Trang, the widow still in her mid-30s with a young daughter, even if she was willing to do tough physical labour in her village in exchange for a meagre wage, there was simply no such demand. As we have seen in the section on networks, the common perceptions of the capital city in the mind of left-behind families and relatives are tainted with temptation, corrupt morality and even danger, especially for rural women. Yet this romanticized representation of the village as a pure and innocent land and the city as the contaminated Other appears to be held more dearly by those at home than the migrants themselves. For many migrant women, Ha Noi is highly appreciated as their sole source of livelihoods.

*“Without the city, we would die. We won’t know where and how else we can earn money. How can we afford to send our children to school if we just keep growing rice? Rice is not profitable; meanwhile tuition fee is always increasing.” (Focus group)*

In addition to valuing the city for its opportunities, the migrant labourers were also more aware of how city dwellers view them through everyday interactions, as opposed to their relatives who only relied on speculations from a distance.

*“Some people are nice, but some people here disdain us and think of us as lowly people only suitable for cleaning. I pay attention to my appearance, so I always appear neat and clean. No matter what, some employers still act as though I were dirty. There is one family I clean once a week. Sometimes I see how they leave dishes for a few days, to the point that green mould grow on the plate. So they are the dirty ones, not me! I guess it is because I am a village woman, so they look down on me.” (Kim, mid-40s)*

In this case, the migrants’ rural origin and their frequent contact with dirt serve to normalize the hierarchy between them and their employers. As illustrated in Kim’s story,

the notion of cleanliness can be vague at times, and has more to do with her background than her actual look or demeanour. This symbolic difference apparently helps some employers to rationalize having the migrant women work in their most intimate spheres such as bedroom as well as touch and clean very personal objects such as their undergarment.

Unemployment, high tuition fee, few economic opportunities and an urban centre that only welcomes rural women with precarious jobs in its informal sector are factors beyond the control of each individual. Furthermore, uneven development leads to a surplus of labour in rural areas, which in turns results in devaluation of intimate labour, i.e. care work. The participants in the focus group brought this issue to light most clearly when they commented on how affordable their services seem urban citizens, who on the other hand, earn big amount of money doing work much less strenuous.

*“It is easy for people like you. You are educated so you get good salary. Even when your salary is not very high, at least you work in a room shielded from the elements. For us rural women, we have to sell our manual labour for money, earning just a little day by day.” (Focus group)*

Just a few decades ago, during the central-economy period, employing a domestic worker was fiercely condemned and deemed an exploitative practice typical of the capitalist class. Nevertheless, nowadays, the general public no longer holds the same attitude. Wage disparity between rural and urban areas enables even families with an average income to hire a domestic worker. While housework is still expected of women in general, it has become increasingly acceptable for urban women to pay someone else to handle these tasks for them.

*“Money is everything now. If you have money, you can buy anything you need. When I was young, if a woman did not take care of her own children, she would be criticized very strongly. But now,*

*this girl's mother hardly holds her anymore. I feed the girl, I bathe her, I share my bed with her. And no one says the mother is irresponsible, as long as she can pay for a good domestic."* (Đan, mid-50s)

In short, disproportionate growth between urban and rural areas creates both supply and demand for cheap reproductive labour. At the same time, shifting gender expectations allow women in the city to outsource care work without damaging their images as competent mothers and wives. Last but not least, an urban-rural hierarchy was invoked from times to times to justify the transfer of household tasks, in particular removing dirt, from the female employers to the female domestics, according to which the latter is naturally more suitable to handle dirt.

#### 4.4.3 Domestic Work as a Choice

However, domestic work is more than a desperate decision motivated purely by financial needs and lack of alternatives. On the contrary, many participants shared that migration for them was a strategic and long-term solution.

*"I will keep doing this until I am too old to work, until no one hires me, because I need to set aside some money in case of sickness later on."* (Chi, mid-50s)

Older people in rural areas typically have no pension because they did not have salaried jobs when they were young. In case of illness, their adult children will bear financial responsibilities. Of course many try not to burden their children by continuing to work well into their old age. For Cung, as a daughter who never married, she did not inherit or own any land. If she returns home, she will have to live with her younger brother's family, a prospect she has tried to postpone by working as a live-in domestic worker. For those with young children, they were motivated to keep working in the city so they could finance their children's education, all the way to university. Some would then save for

their children's weddings, and then it would be their turn to worry about their retirement. It is safe to say that for these women, working in the city is a lifetime career due to monetary needs associated with different stages throughout their lives. Unlike migrant workers in some other studies (Parrenas, 2002) whose continued migration is necessary because the family back home falls into the habit of receiving remittances and a consumption lifestyle; the participants in my research do not foresee an end to their migration in a near future due to a lack of alternatives in the sending areas.

However, it should be noted that domestic work is not the only job they have done or are doing. Dan, for example, migrated to Ha Noi for the first time in 2005 and she started as a street vendor selling bread, carrying hundreds of loaves in a basket on her head at a time. Then she collected recyclable materials and resold them for cash. During these years, as she established relationships with local residents, some started asking her to clean their house for payment. Gradually, she switched to cleaning full-time. For Kim, when she decided to go to Ha Noi, she did not have an employment contract ready. She just came to her aunt's house and started asking for jobs in a nearby market. Her many years working as a live-out domestic worker started rather randomly when someone offered her a cleaning job and she continued on that path. The same story happened to Mai. The neighbour she followed to Ha Noi did not have a job available for her. They stopped at a few places, one of which Mai said was a construction site; the job supposedly was to cook for the workers there. Many participants in the focus group started their stay in the city selling vegetables or flowers, then moved to other odd jobs such as cleaning cutting tables in a market, painting walls, before settling in the cleaning jobs they are doing today. Trang started as a live-in domestic worker, but over the years,

she also worked in a factory, then cooked breakfast and lunch for children in a kindergarten while providing cleaning services to a number of families.

Besides the many jobs they have experienced, many women arrive at the city and leave it multiple times as well. When Trang's husband discovered that he had cancer, they both returned home from the South and she did not resume her work in Ha Noi until her daughter turned three years old. Kim also lost her second daughter while she was working in the city, and she likewise returned home for a few years before migrating again. Mạnh said she tried working as a domestic worker when she was younger, but at that time, she could not stand being locked inside a house the whole day and she missed her children too much, so she did not try again until her children had all grown up and got married. From the interviews, it becomes clear that domestic work and migration can be separate processes. Some women migrated specifically to do domestic work, but for others, they decided that they would go to the city to earn money, but they were prepared to do absolutely anything. Their migration journey, therefore, started with other jobs and may continue with other jobs after our meetings. These two processes have often been studied as though they always go together, to the extent that the terms "domestic workers" and "migrant workers" are used interchangeably in certain research. While that can be true for many migrant women, especially international migrants, for the domestic migrants in my study, domestic work is but one of the many paths they have traversed. Some purposefully chose it, some stumbled upon it, but their experiences suggest instead that domestic work should be situated within a broader context of migration, rather than an equivalent of it.



## **Chapter 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I will summarize the main findings of the study, discuss the implications of these findings in relation to the literature on gender, networks and migration, and finally, reflect on some limitations of the study and offer several suggestions for future research.

### **5.1 Main Findings**

My first research question addresses the significance of social networks to migrant women. The findings clearly show that networks play a very important role in facilitating and maintaining migration. These networks involve myriads of relationships with friends, relatives, fellow-villagers in their home communities, as well as connections with employers, other migrant workers in the city and urban residents. Benefits brought about by networks include information spread through the grapevine about potential jobs, shared or free accommodation, and insider tips for surviving the city's hectic pace offered by experienced migrants. Emotional support provided by fellow migrant women living in close proximity is highly appreciated. Networks also help the migrant women perform their familial responsibilities in spite of the distance in various ways. For example, adult relatives take care of the migrants' children and shoulder some of their domestic tasks. Connections with home are reinforced thanks to fellow migrants who transmit news, messages, and even remittances between work and home.

At the same time, these multi-layered networks could act as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of social control disciplining the migrant women's behaviours and attitudes, and encouraging the demonstration of feminine virtues such as fidelity or modesty. Through rumours and gossip, relatives in their home communities as well as other

migrant women in the city exert pressure on individual domestic worker to constantly self-monitor their appearance and behaviours. The participants recounted being subjected to ungrounded doubts about their sources of income, motivation for leaving home, and faithfulness to their husbands. Fear of unwanted attention from their networks also discourages domestic workers from accepting job offers that might lead them to close contact with male employers or other men. Women's networks therefore reinforce rigid gender expectations.

The second question considers the relation between gender and migration. Findings from the interviews and focus group discussions suggest that gender roles were both upheld and challenged. Lived stories reveal that the relationship between gender and migration is complex. It is too simplistic to say that migration is always empowering for women, or that their new earning capacity is transformative of gender relations.

On the one hand, participants continued to embrace traditional gender roles in the family. They managed to provide care for their families and make their presence felt despite their physical absence. They made frequent phone calls to keep track of children, their daily activities, health conditions, and their whereabouts. The mothers were confident that they have maintained a bond with their children. Although the women reported feeling much emotional pain and guilt due to their inability to personally take care of loved ones, they believed that they were sacrificing for the family and that the children well understood and appreciated their intentions. The married participants often had different methods to continue their control of the household budget, such as asking their husbands to record all expenses or double-checking with merchants about payments their husbands claimed to have spent on goods. Home visits were dedicated to tidying up

the house, checking children's homework, doing laundry and working on the family's rice field. While unmarried domestic workers were generally free from concerns about husbands or children, they were held to a stricter standard regarding gentle appearance and humble demeanours. This unspoken rule was deeply internalized and honoured by the participants in my study.

While the women could no longer attend and contribute their labour in social events such as funerals or weddings, symbolic participation was manifested through gifts sent to the hosts, typically a small amount of cash. Cultural ideals of feminine traits were often cited to account for their decision to migrate. Women are believed to be more self-sacrificing and frugal; thus should be able to save more from their incomes and send home regular remittances. On the contrary, men were described as self-centered and prodigal, so they would spend most of their earnings on themselves. The participants clearly strove to live up to these gendered expectations and took pride in their efforts.

On the other hand, the migrant women also challenged gender norms in many ways. Some participants chose to migrate so they could break out of domestic violence, peer-pressure to marry early, or being perceived as a burden on their relatives. For women whose husbands were abusive, alcoholic or addicted to gambling, going to the city is a way to avoid conflict, stay safe and protect their earnings because divorce was considered an undesirable, even unthinkable option. Besides economic motivation, the young participants mentioned a wish to travel and explore life in another place, an aspiration too difficult to realize had they remained in their home villages. Widows and never-married older women migrated so they could be economically independent and resolve the problem of housing. Because land is often passed down to sons, widows and

never-married women are likely to be landless and must share a residence with their relatives. As migrant workers, these women managed to separate themselves from their troublesome husbands, delay early marriage, experience life outside of the rural villages, and take care of themselves and their children financially. Although a decision to migrate can be greeted with resistance at first and skepticism later on, it is still much less radical than a divorce and less stressful than outright rejection of marriage proposals. In other words, the participants in my study relied on this socially-approved means to subtly subvert gender expectations about the position of women in households and society without resorting to direct confrontations.

I also considered whether women's incomes altered their position and authority within the family and their community. The migrant workers surprisingly all disproved my suggestion that being a bread-winner elevates their positions. They claimed to treat their husbands with the same respect they did before migrating. Nevertheless, they also reported having greater voice in family decisions, especially when large expenditures are concerned. The women were careful not to abuse this new power, yet were willing to assert themselves if needed. They also reflected on how fellow-villagers and relatives seemed to take them more seriously and pay more attention to their opinions because they had travelled and experienced life outside the village. In other words, they were no longer seen as simple-minded women not worth listening to.

In addressing the last research question about women's agency, my goal was to connect individual stories with the Vietnamese broader social context. I found that in this transforming society where regional inequality as well as rural-urban division is rampant, age, education level and residency status all contribute to migration decisions. Having

little formal education or vocational training, together with an impoverished background, these women had few opportunities for earning a stable wage in an industrializing economy that relies on youth as a cheap and disposable source of labour. Their agency, however, is expressed in the fact that they pursued migration a strategic and long-term solution. While the women frequently referred to leaving home for the city as the only option available, the fact that some participants returned home and then came back multiple times helps us understand migration as a choice actively made. Domestic services became their means of financing their children's education, settling debts and preparing for retirement. In the context of a transitional economy that disadvantages rural women, their herculean efforts to provide for their families are admirable. The women's emphasis on education and their determination to keep their children in school is striking; especially considering that financing a child's education usually means not seeing a definite end to their hard labour and living a migrant's life. Yet it is certainly an aspiration for a better future, for a formal degree is widely regarded as a fundamental requirement for class mobility, a legitimate hope these marginalized women who are rejected by the market economy nourish for the next generation.

## **5.2 Implications of the Study**

This study confirms previous findings on the importance of networks among labour migrants for accessing information, securing jobs, settling in a new environment and arranging family care responsibilities (Đặng Nguyên Anh, 1998; Winkels, 2004; Boyd, 1989). However, it moves beyond these well-discussed dimensions of social networks and brings out an aspect that has received less attention, namely the intersection between networks and gender. Migrant women formed tight knit and supportive gender-

specific networks. Similar to Louise Ryan's (2007) study on Irish nurses in Great Britain, my research on domestic workers in Ha Noi pinpoints the different ways migrant women access ties and propinquity in terms of day-to-day support and local knowledge. However, I also identified aspects of this interesection that are less positive, namely how these networks impose gender expectations and rigid gender norms on their members. Thus, migrant women's networks are both enabling—helping migrant workers access benefits and assistance—and constraining—policing behaviours and pressuring women to live up to idealized womanly virtues. This conclusion is consistent with Hellermann's (2006) study of unattached Eastern European women migrants in Portugal and how they were scrutinized by fellow women migrants as their migration happened outside of the family unit. In addition to relations with other fellow migrant women in the receiving area, my research also includes other levels of networks such as connections in home communities as well as relationships with urban residents and shows that these added layers of networks further complicate and intensify pressure exerted on the women.

By focusing on women's experiences, I have hoped to avoid the “add and stir” approach where gender is just another variable and women are merely a supplementary group. This study deconstructs “women” as an abstract category and instead offers lived, local and personal stories told by a group of women situated in their historical context. The perspectives I present here are guided by these particular accounts, rather than general descriptions of a gender-neutral migrant. The spheres we discussed in research questions are private in their nature, i.e. the workers' homes and their working space, which are their employers' homes. The interviews and focus group also took place inside houses, be it shared lodgings, a room on top of a grocery store, or my kitchen; places

where the participants were most familiar with and comfortable in. As a result, this research draws out gender-specific aspects of the migrant's experiences. Rumours and gossip are prime examples demonstrating how their worries are centered around gender norms particular to women. Gossip, in turns, are produced and spread by women linked to each other by their common experiences, who both support and police each other's everyday decisions.

A question that has been asked repeatedly in the literature on migration is whether gender relations change significantly as women move away from home and earn an income independently from their family. Previous research has provided mixed results (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000). Greater gender egalitarianism is discerned in certain immigrant communities, yet improvements in women's position are far from universal. An intriguing finding is that domestic inequalities seem to be especially marked in instances where wives earn more than their husbands. While counter-intuitive, this is consistent with results from studies focusing on domestic violence in non-migrant families. Some feminists find that when a man feels his masculinity and domination in the household is threatened, he is more likely to use force to reaffirm his position (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999). Indeed many male participants in the National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Vietnam (GSO, 2010) confirmed this view, stating that violence is one way for some men to affirm their superiority when their manhood is challenged as their wives become the breadwinners in the family. Luke, Schuler, Bui, Pham & Tran (2007) likewise report that verbal abuse is highest in households where the wife is the main source of income.

While no participant in my study revealed being abused as a direct consequence of their higher income, except for one woman who shared that her neighbour (also a migrant) was beaten by her husband each time she returned home from the city, it was clear that they were very careful *not* to upset the gender hierarchy between them and their husbands. This finding is consistent with the notion of “doing gender” (Resurreccion & Ha, 2007). Although the participants realized that they had enjoyed more authority in family decisions, or at least acknowledged this when I probed them, they actively downplayed their enhanced status. Furthermore, migration was explained *as a natural extension* of women’s traditional responsibility to manage the family purse, rather than a challenge to it. This gender essentialist justification seems to help the women reconcile psychological puzzles and gaps between their changing situations and the static gender relations at home. Digging deep into this paradox, my study provides some additional nuance to the picture. The question is not simply whether women are empowered by migration, but how and if their significant income and potential voice in decision-making actually alters relationships in the home sphere. Most of the migrant women in my study chose to adhere to traditional gender norms and continued playing their assigned roles, at least to the eyes of an outsider. By treading lightly, they avoided abrupt transformation within their families, but there may be subtle shifts in gender relations under the surface.

This discussion of women and empowerment highlights the significance of women’s agency. Agency is clearly at work in shaping decisions to migrate. The women are not simply pushed out of the home due to economic desperation, but actively make a decision to leave. While “earning money” was always cited as the top reason for migration, the income was often used towards financing education for children, an



endeavour aiming at future social mobility rather than covering basic subsistence costs. Economic considerations intertwine with the socio-political context. Studies of transnational labour migrants repeatedly remind us of the importance of national policies and bilateral agreements that directly condition individual migration decisions between countries (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). My study shows that the same mechanisms can be observed operating at the national level. Women's decisions to migrate are shaped by broader forces and processes, including the Vietnamese state, its agencies (notably the omnipresent Women's Union), as well as the family and the rural community. Economic reform and national efforts to modernize and industrialize are also important aspects to take into account. Women's decisions are shaped by a variety of social-historical factors, and their own goals for their families. It is crucial to recognize this dynamic between what individual women can do within their particular social location, the constraints they face, but also how hard they work to overcome those boundaries.

Although the participants were rural-to-urban migrant women in Vietnam, some of their experiences are comparable to those of transnational domestic workers elsewhere, especially emotional dislocation and mental anguish resulting from long-term separation. However, the impacts of migration on the mother-child relationship appear to be rather different. Many studies on transnational domestic workers have noted that this relationship suffers and children tend to grow indifferent to their mothers, or even blame the latter for leaving them behind (Cheever, 2002; Parrenas, 2002). Vietnamese domestic workers in Taiwan struggled with similar challenges in terms of negotiating childcare and fulfilling household responsibilities (Lin, 2013). Perhaps due to the nature of internal migration, which allows the women to visit home either on a regular basis or when an

emergency arises, most of the participants in my study reported no significant change in the relationships with their children. This finding is in line with other research such as Leshkovich's (2012) study of urban women traders in Ho Chi Minh city, and Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh's (2013) study on rural migrants engaging in waste-trading activities. These studies find that although women experience pressure to be present for their children, they see their work as a sacrifice. While some children's grade reports seem to suffer from the lack of parental supervision and discipline, it is argued that these children actually fare better in earning an income later in life compared to their peers, thus questioning the assumption that parents' absence always negatively affects children. Therefore, while both internal and transnational Vietnamese women migrants miss their children and are tormented by leaving them behind, their migration status has different impacts on how they interpret their experiences.

Previous research has also suggested that migration may have a negative impact on family stability, especially on children's well-being (Nobles, 2013; Mincer, 1978) in resource-constrained areas. This study offers another insight. Many of the women I interviewed migrated precisely because their domestic situations did not fit the conventional model, especially the live-in workers. Some were widows, some were single, and some left home to escape alcoholic, abusive, or gambling-addicted husbands. Migration did not cause their families or conjugal relationships to break down; rather, an already adverse domestic sphere encouraged them to leave home in order to search for jobs in the city. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2002) discuss a similar notion of a "Philippine divorce" when women used migration to leave an undesirable conjugal situation. This finding points to a need to consider pre-migration family structure and its

impacts on migration trajectory in addition to the classic push-pull theory already well established in migration studies.

Whereas the economic framework dominates migration literature, my study goes beyond the common explanation of migration as a rational choice made by individuals who calculate the cost and benefits of moving from a resource-restrained area to a more prosperous one. While the push-pull theory takes into consideration “push” factors such as un/under-employment, poverty and fewer opportunities for improvements in sending areas, as well as “pull” factors such as readily available waged jobs and higher income in receiving areas, it tends to downplay both structural elements and individual motivations that are not purely economic. I seek to remedy this shortcoming by drawing attention to local aspects unique to recent historical development in Vietnam that may deeply influence migration decisions, namely the government’s approach to population movement, its household registration system, and most importantly, the highly unequal relationship between rural and urban areas. Furthermore, I bring into focus personal aspirations that do not fit neatly in a purely rational cost-and-benefit analysis. While the younger participants shared stories about their desire to travel and see the world, the older participants were more preoccupied with earning money to invest in their children’s education. These are driving forces behind some women’s decisions to migrate. They might be highly personal and not applicable to a large population, nonetheless they are no less valid or less impactful than concerns over financial matters or job opportunities.

### **5.3 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

My study has a number of limitations that might impact how the results are interpreted. First, in terms of sampling method, I was not able to conduct a focus group

with live-in domestic workers. As explained in chapter 3, due to difficulties in scheduling, uncooperative weather conditions and a religious full-moon festival when many domestic workers returned home for a week to devote themselves to rituals and offerings, this focus group discussion never happened. Individual interviews I conducted with the live-in workers and other research findings suggest that different patterns of networks, such as neighbourhood-based networks instead of shared origin or kinship-based networks may be more common among women doing this type of domestic services. A focus group with live-in workers may have provided additional nuance and insight into the ways in which networks are gendered, and helped draw comparison with live-out workers and how different forms of networks impact different groups of domestic workers.

A second limitation of the sample is that I could not interview families of the migrant women, especially the husbands. Given the focus of my study is on gender roles and how these roles are complied with and contested, excluding the men's voice leaves many conclusions rather one-sided. As presented in the last chapter, the men were described by their wives in an overwhelmingly negative light. As Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2014) and Hoang & Yeoh (2011) demonstrate in their respective studies, in households whose members migrate for work, care arrangement shifts to accommodate the changes. Concepts such as "translocal householding" or "doing family" imply that changes in gender roles involve men as much as, if not more than, women. Leaving out the husbands' voices prevents a more complete understanding of changes to gender roles taking place in migrant households.

A third limitation concerns locale. My study was set in the capital city of Vietnam and all participants came from nearby provinces in the North. Including domestic workers in other regions of the country would likely yield additional insights. The Southern part of Vietnam has a much shorter exposure to socialism and a different historical development. Furthermore, a few participants mentioned that domestic workers enjoy more egalitarian treatment, more respectful employer-employee relationships and, in general, are less subjected to stereotypes and condescending attitudes in the south. Available studies on Vietnamese domestic workers mostly focus on women in the North. Geographical and cultural diversity in the sample would have certainly revealed new and interesting findings.

The fourth limitation is the operationalization of my main variables. Gender roles and gender norms are very broad constructs that could be interpreted in many different ways. To assess what these concepts mean to the participants was not easy, and to find out whether being a migrant and a domestic worker influences the ways they perform their gender roles was even more challenging. It is not possible for one single study to exhaust all different interpretations of gender roles. Therefore, in my study, I broke down gender roles into several sub-variables, i.e. power in decision-making at the household level, control of family budget, relationship with spouse and children, care arrangement and domestic tasks typically fulfilled by women, and financial or labour contribution to household production and communal activities. Other aspects of gender roles and gender equality that have been studied by other researchers but were not included in my study such as relationships with other relatives (e.g. mother and daughter-in-law), access to capital through kinship-based networks (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, 2010), daughters' ability to

reject marriage proposals and remain single (Belanger & Khuất, 2002) and political participation (Werner, 2009). It should be noted that while these studies examine diverse elements of gender equality, they do not focus on migrant women. Their samples typically consist of non-migrant women. Therefore future studies that consider the intersection between migration and gender equality should pay attention to different aspects of gender relations.

Due to the limited scope of this research, it is harder to draw conclusions pertaining to macro forces such as globalization and capitalism. The participants' stories suggest a possible parallel between the situation of transnational domestic workers and those of internal migrants in Vietnam. While capitalism and globalization have often been used to account for the flow of labour migrants from developing countries to more developed ones (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002), it is rather astonishing that similar findings emerge from this research, which was conducted with rural-to-urban migrants in a country that has not yet openly embraced capitalism and the free market. My study shows that the global chain of care might be absent, but similar processes are active at the national level. Instead of the market, Vietnamese women are under pressure from the state to be productive and financially sufficient citizens. The process of globalization may not operate within one country, but there is rampant social inequality between rural and urban areas to create the same effects. These are interesting processes taking place at the local level that should be examined further. A study with a larger sample and more diverse methods may be able to shed light on this potential connection.

Lastly, because spoken words were the only form of data I collected, there are certain ambiguities in how the data can be interpreted. Specifically, when probed about

how their new earning power influenced their positions in the family, most participants replied with a culturally appropriate answer: namely, that despite their incomes, they still respected their husbands and all important decisions were discussed between husband and wife until a consensus could be reached. However, a follow-up hypothetical question that asked whether the husbands could buy something without the wives' approval revealed that the women indeed had more say in financial decisions. Because I had to rely on what I was told, it is unclear whether the participants really were not aware of their new power, or whether they were not comfortable voicing it aloud for fear of judgement. In other words, this disparity between what actually happened and what they said happened could be explained as a lack of available gender discourses that the women can use to make sense of their situations, or an effort to bridge the gap between reality and ideals of femininity. The women might sincerely not know about the changes, or be familiar with a culturally appropriate way to describe them. Perhaps they might be perfectly aware of the adjustments, but brush them aside so they could appear to me, a stranger, as virtuous women who live according to cultural expectations of humble and respectful wives. The feminist standpoint theory argues that researchers should always assume the standpoint of their informants, instead of searching for an objective reality that does not exist (Harding, 2004). This position ultimately suggests plenty of room for speculation, because it is not always clear how researchers are supposed to interpret what they were told. Stories are motivated by multiple emotions and cultural scripts that are available to story-tellers and these motivations can be obscured from researchers, even a partial insider like myself. Had I been able to collect different forms of data, such as

participant observation, or quantitative measurements in a survey, cross-checking could have been a possibility, thus increasing the study's rigour and credibility.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Although both seasonal migration and domestic services existed in Vietnam in the past, these two phenomena have expanded massively in the last few decades and thus acquired new meanings in everyday life. An intersecting point between the two social processes is the fact that rural women are the largest group among seasonal migrants as well as domestic workers. Furthermore, rural women are also one of the most disadvantaged populations, adversely affected by various socio-economic policies that aim to stimulate modernization and development for the nation. On the one hand, they face double jeopardises as *rural* citizens and *female* citizens in a patriarchal society that prioritizes its cities over the countryside. On the other hand, rural women are strongly influenced by state gender discourses as they have been considered the main audience of various socio-cultural campaigns targeting households. These discourses place an incredible amount of pressure on them to be great caregivers and reliable financial providers at the same time.

The position of female domestic workers who are rural-to-urban migrants therefore reflects individual struggles to meet social expectations as well as broader historical changes. This thesis has explored how ordinary and often marginalized rural women juggle, redefine and reaffirm their identities when gender norms and their everyday realities as migrants come into conflict. It also looks at how they navigate complex social-historical circumstances, and constraining gender roles, to earn a living



not only for their own benefit, but to secure their children's futures, and to help their families.

I argue that relationships with other women both facilitate their moves to the city and mitigate the difficulties arising during their stay. However, these gender-specific networks also produce rumours and gossip, which force the women to constantly monitor their appearance and behaviours to fit gender expectations. Similarly, my findings show that the migrant women overcame many obstacles to fulfill on-going responsibilities for their children, husbands and extended families despite physical distance. Nevertheless, their pre-migration conditions suggest a possible link between household structures that deviate from social norms and their moving away for work. The data also reveal certain improvements in the women's status, showing that migration may have a positive effect on gender relations within the family and community of the migrants.

Their stories are placed within the context of a post-socialist country undergoing rapid social and economic changes. Growing feminization of internal migration and a quick expanse of domestic services in Vietnam have become topics of interest for academics recently. Since gender equality is frequently used as an indicator of a society's success in ensuring its members' well-being, this case study adds a timely contribution to the assessment of Vietnam's current situation, as well as the fields of migration studies and gender studies.

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## **Appendix A: Letter of Information for Interviews**

**Project Title:** Labour Migration and the experiences of domestic workers in Viet Nam

**Primary investigator:** Professor Tracey Adams, Department of Sociology, Western University

**Co-investigator:** Van Nguyen, Department of Sociology, Western University

### **Letter of Information**

#### **1. Invitation to Participate**

You are being invited to participate in this research study exploring the impact of migration on you as a woman, your family and your relationship to your family because you are a domestic worker who has been working away from home for at least two years.

#### **2. Purpose of the Letter**

This letter is yours to keep and the purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding your participation in this research.

#### **3. Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this project is to examine how migration affects women, their family and their relationship to their family, as well as how domestic workers experience and negotiate issues resulting from their absence from home.

#### **4. Inclusion Criteria**

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are: 1) Female above 18 years old, 2) A domestic worker from rural areas, and 3) You have been working away from home for at least two years.

#### **5. Exclusion Criteria**

All male domestic workers, female domestic workers who have not migrated to take up their jobs and female domestic workers who have been working for less than two years are ineligible to participate.

## **6. Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about your experience as a domestic worker in the city. In particular, we will discuss how you deal with conflict resulting from other people's expectation of you as a woman (e.g. childcare, homemaker) and the fact that you are not living at home. The interview will be audio taped or I will take notes if you are not comfortable with being recorded. The interview will last approximately 1-1.5 hour.

I might ask you for a follow-up interview near the end of the study if your schedule and workload allows and you are interested.

If you are comfortable with writing, I would be very grateful if you could keep a journal for two weeks detailing your experience following the themes we discuss during the interview. The audio taped interview will also be transcribed and translated by myself. Same steps will be taken with other notes and your journal. I will be using pseudonyms in the transcript of the interview, as well as in the research thesis generated from the data.

## **7. Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

## **8. Possible Benefits**

You will be compensated for your time and have an opportunity to reflect and share your thoughts with me. Furthermore, information gathered from your participation in this

study may help in providing better understanding of the experience of female migrant labourers.

### **9. Compensation**

You will be compensated 100.000 VND (\$5 CND) for your participation in this research if you participate in the interview. If you keep a journal for two weeks, since this activity will take some more time, you will be compensated for another 200.000 VND (\$10 CND).

### **10. Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time, with no effect on your employment status or future opportunity.

### **11. Confidentiality**

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. If the results are published, your name will not be used. If you choose to withdraw from this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from our database. While we will do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so.

### **12. Contacts for Further Information**

If at any time you have further questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, please contact me Van Nguyen (co-investigator) at [phone number] or via e-mail [email address].

### **13. Publication**

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of potential study results, please give me your address where a hard copy can be mailed to you.

#### **14. Consent**

If you agree to participate in this research project and accept the conditions outlined above, please sign the attached form and return it back directly to me before the interview. Oral consent where your understanding of the study and your rights as a participant is clearly stated is also acceptable.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Van Nguyen (Co-Investigator)

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

### **List of Questions for Semi-structured Interviews and Focus group with Domestic Workers**

1. Please tell me about yourself (name, age, marital status, number of children)
2. How long have you been working as a domestic worker?
3. How did you start? Did your family support you in your decision to migrate?
4. How many employers have you worked for? Can you tell me why you quitted working for previous employers? (e.g. end of contract, family issues or conflict with employers)
5. How often can you go home? How long do you stay home each time? How easier it is for you to get a break and go home when needed?
6. Does your family ever complain about the fact that you are not home? If they do, how does that make you feel?
7. Who takes care of your children when you are away working? Do you have any worries about your children at home? How is your relationship with your children now?
8. How often do you talk with your spouse? What do you often talk about?
9. What are some other responsibilities you used to take that are now taken by your spouse or other relatives?
10. Do you think women should stay home if they are able to do so?
11. Are there some women that should not migrate to work? Who and why?
12. How important your economic contribution is to your family? Do you pay for the food, basic costs or perhaps your children's tuition fee?

13. Has the relationship between you and your spouse/other relatives changed since you started working in the city? How?
14. Do you feel like you have more influence over family decision-making in your family now as you are contributing more financially?
15. What are some common problems you have at home that you are not able to handle as efficiently as you would like because of your absence?
16. How long do you plan to work in the city? What keeps you motivated to work here?
17. Do your relatives take over the tasks (child-rearing, home caring, etc) that you used to do?
18. Do you have any concerns about the fact that you are away?

**List of questions for staffs of NGO**

1. What do you think about women who migrate to work as domestic workers? Why do you think certain women choose to do this job and others don't?
2. In your experience working with domestic workers, what problems do you notice they usually face?
3. How are relationships with their children and families affected by migration?
4. How do these women change during and after their employment as rural women migrate to the city? Do you think they are empowered or not?
5. Are older women more likely to work as domestic workers than younger ones? Why?



## Appendix C: Ethics Approval



**Western  
Research**

Research Ethics

Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Tracey Adams  
**Department & Institution:** Social Science/Sociology Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 105472  
**Study Title:** Labour Migration and the experiences of domestic workers in Viet Nam  
**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** July 31, 2014  
**NMREB Expiry Date:** December 31, 2014

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Questions for professional staffs	
Letter of Information & Consent	LOI & consent for staff members	2014/06/13
Letter of Information & Consent	LOI and consent for focus group	2014/06/13
Letter of Information & Consent	LOI and consent for domestic workers	2014/06/13
Other	References	
Recruitment Items	Recruitment poster - domestic workers	2014/06/13
Revised Western University Protocol	Revised protocol	2014/07/04
Instruments	Interview questions - July 4	2014/07/04
Response to Board Recommendations	Response to Board and Administrative Recommendations	2014/07/04
Instruments	Focus group questions	2014/07/04

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the HSREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of HSREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.



*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

## Curriculum Vitae

### Nguyễn Hồng Vân

<b>EDUCATION</b>	<p>University of Western Ontario          London, Ontario, Canada          Master of Arts – Sociology          Collaborative Program Ethnic Relations and Migration          2014 - 2015</p> <p>Trent University          Peterborough, Ontario, Canada          Bachelor of Arts – Sociology          Minor in Cultural Studies          2007 – 2011</p>
<b>HONOURS AND AWARDS</b>	<p>Western Graduate Research Scholarship          2014 – 2015</p> <p>Western University Faculty of Social Science Recruitment Scholarship          2014</p> <p>President’s Honour Roll – Trent University          2010 - 2011</p> <p>Trent University Undergraduate Continuing Students Scholarship          2008 – 2011</p> <p>International Award at Trent University          2007 – 2011</p> <p>Trent University Entrance Scholarship          2007 – 2011</p> <p>Dean’s Honour Roll – Trent University          2007 – 2011</p>
<b>RESEARCH EXPERIENCE</b>	<p>Research Assistant for Dr. Ngo Van Hieu          Faculty of Social Work – University of Calgary, Canada          04/2013 – 08/2013</p> <p>Research Assistant for Dr. Lelia Green          School of Communications and Arts – Edith Cowan University,          Australia          02/2013 – 06/2013</p> <p>Research Assistant for Dr. Steven Saxonberg          Sociology Department – Dalarna University, Sweden          01/2013 – 08/2013</p> <p>Researcher at the Families and Communities in Transition Project</p>

Penn State University, United States  
10/2012 – 04/2013

Research Assistant for Dr. Van Nguyen-Marshall  
History Department – Trent University, Canada  
06/2009 – 09/2009

**TEACHING  
EXPERIENCE**

Graduate Teaching Assistant  
University of Western Ontario, ON, Canada  
2014 – 2015

**PUBLICATION**

Lelia Green, Van Hong Nguyen., (2013) Cooking from Life: The  
Real Recipe for Street Food in Ha Noi, Media - Culture Journal