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**Gender and Agency in Migration Decision Making:
Evidence from Vietnam**

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INTRODUCTION

The growing influence of feminist approaches to migration research in recent decades has provided new insights into migration processes. While migrants often appear through conventional economic approaches as genderless agents responding to macro-level socio-economic changes in a relatively homogeneous way, feminist studies show that socio-cultural factors, especially the migrant's gender identity and the prevailing social norms, shape his/her migration experiences (Chant, 1991; Gisbert et al., 1994; Lawson, 1998; Tacoli, 1999; Hampshire, 2002). They also explain how cultural expectations and economic opportunity associated with gender structure migration and its impacts upon society (Curran and Saguy, 2001: 57). Gender, according to De Haan (2000), is central to understanding social phenomena and social change and it is also the most important form of social differentiation that influences migration. Being a man or a woman influences one's perceptions of rights, obligations and legitimate behaviour in relation to other people as well as the way their migration is strategised within the household. Furthermore, evidence from Latin America suggests that intra-household dynamics, particularly the gendered division of labour, play an important role in determining who migrates (Chant, 1991; Lawson, 1998: 40). Gender norms have been found by Hampshire (2002: 25) to be the most important determinant of migration behaviour among many other factors influencing migration behaviour in the *Sahel* such as village identity and social networks, ethnic identity and generation. This paper attempts to contribute to this expanding knowledge about gender and gender relations surrounding migration processes by looking into how one's gender identity and social norms and expectations associated with it influence his/her ability to exercise agency in migration decision making. Through the case study of a village community in Northern Vietnam, it will demonstrate that migrants' agency and the choices they make during the migration process are shaped by their identities as men and women.

The paper will first provide an overview of migration in Vietnam highlighting migration flows from rural areas. The methodological notes that follow will outline the research design and introduce the study site and sample. The paper will then present and discuss empirical results from the case study of *Thang Loi* Village that demonstrate how gender structures individual agency in migration decision making.

MIGRATION IN THE POST-DOIMOI VIETNAM

The *Doimoi* (renovation) economic and structural reforms introduced in the late 1980s have significantly shaped the trends and patterns of migration in Vietnam (Guest, 1998; Ha and Ha, 2001; Dang et al., 2003). The relaxation of the *hộ khẩu* system plus the proliferation of employment opportunities in large cities in the last two decades have transformed the overall volume and patterns of migration. In the countryside, the shift from the collective to household agricultural production and the modernisation of agriculture that followed made a large section of the rural labour force redundant. It is estimated that one-fifth of the population in rural Vietnam is considered to be surplus labour and an additional 1.1 million (net) people are entering the labour market each year (Dang et al., 2003: 4). Income from agricultural activities alone is no longer sufficient to provide for basic household maintenance needs as the population pressure on land increases. Farming households are forced to look for additional sources of income outside the agricultural sector and readjust their resource allocation strategies accordingly. According to the last census data, between 1994 and 1999 nearly 4.5 million people, or 6.5% of the population over five years of age, changed their

place of residence (GSO, 2001). More than half of the migrants were under the age of 25 and women accounted for a much larger proportion of migrants than in the 1980s (GSO and UNDP, 2001: i). However, the actual number of internal migrants is significantly higher than that as the statistics does not include short-term, seasonal, unregistered movements and movements in the 6 months preceding the census date (GSO and UNDP, 2005: 8).

According to the 1999 Census, migration to urban areas accounted for over 53 percent of the moves¹ (GSO and UNDP, 2001). Given the rapidly increased disparities in incomes and living standards between urban and rural areas, it is unsurprising that rural-urban migration is the major stream of population movement in Vietnam. Per capita income in rural areas of the Red River Delta (RRD) is more than five times lower than that in neighbouring Hanoi (Dollar and Litvack, 1998: 22). Hanoi in the North and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in the South are the main magnets for internal migration flows and rural-urban migration has been the major cause of rapid urbanisation in these two cities during the *Doimoi* period.

The expansion of the private sector in recent decades has provided rural migrants with much better access to the urban labour market. The impressive growth of the labour-intensive manufacturing industries has important effects on the labour market in Vietnam. Textile and garment (T&G) exports achieved a remarkable average annual growth rate of 29 per cent from 1991 to 2000 (Nadvi et al., 2004). This industry is also the top employer of manufacturing workers throughout Vietnam with at least 550,000 workers in 1999, the majority of whom are young and single rural women (Tran, 2004: 136). Rural migrants, the majority of whom have neither adequate education and skills nor personal connections for entry into formal economic establishments, have also benefited from the expansion of the informal sector. They often move on a temporary and seasonal basis and are more likely to be self-employed in petty trade and service, which are beyond the reach of labour protection laws (Abrami and Henaff, 2004: 120). Although *hộ khẩu* is no longer linked to provision of employment, food and services, it continues to restrict migrants and their families' access to basic services such as health and education.

Rural-rural migration in Vietnam since the *Doimoi* period is of a spontaneous nature. The allocation of land to the household together with secure land use rights and the relaxation of the *hộ khẩu* system provide farmers with the new-found freedom to move to other rural areas with greater land resources and a more favourable environment for farming. Some of the most attractive destinations for spontaneous rural-rural migrants in the post-*Doimoi* period are the government designated destinations in the New Economic Zones (NEZs) programs - the coffee-growing provinces in the Central Highlands and the Southeast. These regions are endowed with an abundance of arable land and a natural environment suitable for developing high-value industrial crops such as rubber, coffee, tea and mulberry leaves (Do, 1998: 229). Migration during this period shifts from being merely a coping strategy to a wealth accumulation strategy and a response to better economic opportunities at the destination (Winkels, 2004: 105). Migrants often move together with their families on a long-term or permanent basis.

¹ The official statistics just account for the registered movements while large numbers of temporary and seasonal migrants do not register their moves with local authorities

Those provinces in the RRD with the most acute population pressure on land and the resource-poor central region have seen the largest numbers of out-migrants in recent years (GSO and UNDP, 2001: 39). In a survey conducted in 1997, almost 60 percent of the immigrants in Hanoi were from provinces in the RRD and an overwhelming number of seasonal migrants in Hanoi (82 percent) were farmers from the adjacent provinces (MOLISA, 1997: 17; Guest, 1998: 10). Seasonal migrants were mainly young married or unmarried men moving to Hanoi during the agricultural slack season searching for heavy manual jobs. With limited arable land and a rapidly expanding population, migration has been and will still be one of the most important livelihood options for farming households in the RRD Region in the years to come.

International migration in the form of labour export is becoming increasingly important in Vietnam. It was estimated that around 500,000 Vietnamese migrant workers working abroad were remitting home around US\$1.6 billion annually by early 2008. According to the Overseas Labour Management Agency, Vietnam exported 85,000 workers in 2007 with Malaysia and Taiwan being the most important destinations (VietnamNetBridge, 2008). Only 36 percent of Vietnamese migrant workers, most of whom are men, have technical qualifications (Kabeer et al., 2005: 20-1). Men often work on farms or industrial estates while women are more likely to be found in the manufacturing industries, personal and social services. The number of female migrant workers almost doubled within the period 1992-2004, accounting for 54 percent of the total migrant workers overseas (VASS, 2005).

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

*Thang Loi Village*² is broadly typical of the Red River Delta: although two-thirds of villagers are primarily dependent on agriculture and local off-farm activities, labour migration is becoming increasingly important as a strategy for diversifying livelihoods. Migration patterns of local people are relatively diverse in terms of destination, duration, employment as well as migrants' socio-economic profile. Most of the movements, which are predominantly spontaneous in nature, are made possible through migrants' informal social networks. Focusing on a single village enables an in-depth exploration of the research topic that can provide more nuanced insights into reality. The research draws primarily from narratives of a randomly selected group of migrants and their household members. The qualitative methodological approach helps to understand complex dynamics and relations interwoven in the migration decision-making process that cannot be uncovered by numbers. The approach also allows for it to be described in the words of the researched.

The village is located in Thai Binh Province, 116 km south-east of Hanoi. It comprises hamlets 8, 9, 10 and 11 and is the biggest of four villages in Nam Cuong Commune. The village's population in 2005 was 2,215 people in 668 households (Le, 2005). The per capita agricultural land is 512 m² and the average household size is 3.3 persons. Although agriculture remains an important source of income for local people, there are virtually no households working exclusively in agricultural production. Farming is now considered a sideline activity mostly done by women (CPC, 2004: 3). The main crop is irrigated rice, harvested twice a year. Rice farming is not as profitable as other off-farm activities and yet most of the local households still hold on to it as security against economic uncertainty. Given the limited area of cultivated land allocated to each household, there is little room for

² To protect research participants' privacy, all their names and the name of the research site have been changed.

crop diversification. Incomes from agriculture are insufficient for household subsistence and local people are forced to look for supplementary income sources elsewhere. Other local activities such as handicrafts and wage labour can attract only women for the low incomes they generate. The average wage from these activities is from 350,000 to 500,000 VND per labourer per month (CPC, 2005: 2). Labour migration, hence, becomes a desirable option for many local households.

This paper focuses on movements made on migrants' initiative without any formal support from state institutions, known in Vietnam as 'spontaneous' labour migration. Unlike state planned migration, spontaneous migration represents a livelihood choice made individually or collectively within the household context, arguably allowing more room for the examination of the household decision-making process. Although not every migrant in the research was initially motivated by economic factors, they were all engaged in income-earning activities at the destination.

Table 1: Primary Respondents' Main Characteristics

Respondents' characteristics		Men	Women	Total
Migration status	Former migrants	12	9	21
	Current migrants	44	15	59
	Prospective migrants	1	3	4
Marital status	Married	37	11	48
	Single	19	14	33
	Widowed	0	2	2
	Divorced	1	0	1
Age	Minimum	19	18	18
	Maximum	65	66	66
	Mean	33.5	33.5	33.5
Average schooling (year)		8.8	8.4	8.6

Source: individual interviews with primary/secondary respondents in migrant households

After conducting a census of households and individuals who had ever migrated or who were planning to migrate, I selected 84 primary respondents who had ever migrated or were planning to migrate of whom 27 were women (Table 1). For the purpose of data triangulation, I also interviewed a second person from their household in 39 cases and I refer to these as secondary respondents. The secondary respondents were selected because they played an active role in the primary respondent's migration decision-making. The secondary respondents might be non-migrants or migrants themselves and they were identified through interviews with primary respondents. Primary and secondary respondents were interviewed together or separately depending on their availability and specific circumstances. In two cases the primary respondents were international migrants to Taiwan and would not be returning before the end of fieldwork and so only their household members (the secondary respondents) could be interviewed.

GENDER IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN MIGRATION DECISION MAKING

Respondents' accounts of migration decision making were examined in four separate categories: single women, married women, single men and married men. These categories were then used to explore similarities and differences in the extent to which they could exercise agency in the decision-making process and the patterns of household decision making that they experienced. Analysis of empirical data from *Thang Loi* Village shows that the majority of migrants in the sample played an active role in decision making about their movements. However, four different patterns of household migration decision making were identified: consensual, uncontested, negotiated and conflictual (Table 2). This classification was based on the extent and nature of household members' participation in the decision making about migration. In the 'consensual' cases, for example, household consensus was obtained prior to migration whereas respondents in 'conflictual' cases reported conflict or disagreement between two or more household members over one's migration choices. In a small number of cases, migrants made their decisions without the involvement and opposition of other household members and they are referred to as 'uncontested' cases. Lastly, the migrants in 'negotiated' cases initially experienced conflict of preferences with their household members but managed to resolve it through negotiation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these four patterns are a simplified classification of reality which is not always clear-cut. There are in practice some continuities and some cases that 'fit' each pattern better than others.

Table 2: Migration Decision-making Patterns

Migrant group	Consensual	Uncontested	Negotiated	Conflictual	Total
Single women	7	1	2	4	14
Married women	10	2	0	3	15
Single men	15	0	0	3	18
Married men	32	1	0	3	36
Total	64	4	2	13	83

Source: individual interviews with primary/secondary respondents in migrant households

The respondents' decision-making experiences seem relatively homogeneous with three-quarters of the migrants belonging to the 'consensual' decision-making category. Respondents' testimonies indicated that gender and marital status were the most significant factors differentiating women and men's experiences in migration decision making. Marriage indicated an important shift in men and women's status and decision-making dynamics in their households. Couples often moved out of the parental home and set up their own nuclear households as soon as possible after marriage, which also meant their statuses changed from dependents to heads of households. For single people, decision making about their migratory movements often concerned inter-generational relationships while horizontal ties between husband and wife played a central role in migration decision-making of married couples. Gender as a core aspect of social identity, on the other hand, shaped women's and men's perceptions of legitimate behaviour as well as subjective evaluations of their options, needs and interests. Differences in these perceptions and evaluations had direct implications for the choices they made.

Gender Identity and the Rationalisation of Migration Choices

Men in contemporary Vietnamese society continue to be seen as breadwinners while women's identity is associated with reproductive duties of mothers and wives despite their important economic contributions to the household (Franklin, 1999; Dalton et al., 2001: 9; Kabeer et al., 2005: 8). This was evident in the case of Quang Trung Village where the majority of labour migrants were married men who were responsible for earning cash incomes when agricultural activities could no longer cover the household's basic needs. The question of who in the household should migrate rarely arose because men's labour migration was often taken for granted by members of households. Women's primary responsibility for childcare and other reproductive duties, on the other hand, meant that migration was a less desirable option for them. Their migration was often possible only when another female member of the extended family could take on their responsibility for reproductive duties. With very few exceptions, men found it unacceptable that they should take over their wives' role in farming and reproductive work so that women could migrate. It did not only go against the traditional gender expectations and beliefs that they adhered to but might also subject them to ridicule and humiliation for failing to live up to the social expectations of them as heads of the households:

“There are cases where the wife migrates to work while the husband stays at home because those men are unable to make money. They are just losers. That's why they let their wives migrate. I think a man should be the provider for his household. He has to do the most difficult work for his family. Only a loser accepts to stay at home cooking and taking care of children while his wife migrates”

Thong, male, aged 37,
migrant – construction worker in Hanoi

These different notions of gender roles associated with men's and women's identities were manifest in the way their migration choices were rationalised. The decision to release male labour from the farm in order to pursue labour migration rarely met opposition from other household members. Migration meant living and working away from one's family for extended periods as well as the possibility of facing multiple social risks and dangers in an unfamiliar environment. No matter how hard and demanding they were, farming and reproductive tasks were done in an environment one had known for his/her whole life and where the support of social networks was readily available. Given the hardship and risks involved in labour migration, it was expected to be done by the male 'protector' of the family who himself was under pressure to conform to the notions of masculinity. To have a husband capable of earning cash off-farm makes a woman proud because a 'worthy' man is the one who can do 'grand' things while farm work is certainly not seen as one of them. A male respondent stated in an individual interview that he did not work on the farm anymore because his wife loved him and wanted him to stay off the rice fields. Below was his young wife's explanation in a separate interview:

“I don't want my husband to do trivial work. I just want him to make money...Men have to do men's worthy work”

Tham, female, aged 25,
wife of a migrant factory worker in Malaysia

When asked why the man but not his wife migrated, many male and female research participants simply responded that their household situation was *'not so bad'* that the woman had to go. Women's migration appeared as the last choice of many households in the community. Similar perceptions of gender identities and roles have also been found in many other cultures where patriarchy prevails. In her study of Bangladeshi women's decision to take up factory employment, Kabeer (2000: 99) found that a major constraint to their doing so is that it could be taken to constitute a very public statement about men's ability to fulfil the traditional roles of the protector and provider for women in the family. As in Bangladesh, women's engagement in labour migration in the researched community was seen to reflect the man's poor capacity to fulfil his role as the breadwinner of the household.

Perceptions of gender identities were elucidated in the accounts of migration decision making provided by migrant domestic workers to Taiwan and/or their family members. Migration to Taiwan was more controversial than other types of migration that local women engaged in because of the substantial incomes it generated as well as the risks involved. By consenting to his wife's migration to an unknown place and working under the control of complete strangers, the man could risk exposing her to social risks detrimental to her psychological and physical well-being. He is then seen as failing to live up to social expectations of him as the breadwinner and protector of the family. This is one of the reasons Dong, whose wife migrated to Taiwan to work as a domestic servant, was ridiculed by some people in the village. He was criticised and even despised by some male respondents for swapping the role of the breadwinner with his wife, taking over her reproductive duties and thereby compromising his status as the household head.

"Many people tried to provoke him. They said that they would never have let their wives migrate to Taiwan if they had been him and that he should have migrated, not his wife. But he is not a daring type and he would never travel that far. It's all because of money that she had to go"

Dong's mother-in-law, aged 55, non-migrant

The role of a mother and housewife tied to women's identity means they are often judged by the quality of reproductive work and childcare. By engaging in labour migration and leaving reproductive duties to their husbands, many female migrants were afraid that they would be branded 'greedy' for putting economic benefits above the interests of their children and families. Diem, a seasonal migrant to Binh Duong, cut her last trip short for the fear that other people would think her husband and son, who was getting married soon, were neglected because she was running after money. Hanh opted for seasonal instead of long-term migration despite high returns from junk trading in the South for a similar reason. She was afraid that people would despise her for leaving her two sons behind and not giving them proper care, especially after their father's death. In another case, Ly cancelled her trip to Taiwan despite having paid for her language course because her youngest child fell sick. *'What other people may say'* about their capacity to fulfil the role of mother and wife was not the only concern for prospective female migrants. Women themselves saw their failing to provide the best care possible for their children and husbands as a threat to their self-esteem. While acknowledging the benefits that migration might bring to their households and themselves in both economic and social terms, many female non-migrants in the study still chose not to migrate because of their reproductive duties at home. They could not leave children in the hands of their husbands or other relatives. Childcare was not only a contractual obligation that women were bound to fulfil but also an emotional matter for them. Female migrants like Cuc and Hanh reported spending nights thinking about the children they

had left behind. Worries about their children were the reason why they just made short migratory trips on a seasonal basis.

Men and women of the same age cohort had different priorities and hence experienced very different or even contrasting household reactions to their migration decisions. In contrast to their male peers whose priority was to set up a solid economic foundation for the future, it was more important for young girls to get married and become good mothers and wives. These expectations had a pronounced influence on the way girls experienced decision-making about their migration. Their marriage prospects were the main concern and also the source of conflict between the migrants and their households. While the migration of men in their 20s was often encouraged for its economic and social benefits, it was seen as depriving their female counterparts of a chance to find a good match before it was too late. Young female migrants from the researched community often returned home for good when they reached the right age for marriage. A similar tendency was observed in China where the lack of urban residence renders rural women among the least desirable in the urban marriage market which makes labour migration often a short-term strategy for them (Fan, 2003: 27). Labour migration of young and single women was accepted because of its short-term economic gains but both the migrants and their household members only saw it as a temporary livelihood strategy.

These distinctive gender roles are not the only factors explaining why women's labour migration is undesirable in the researched community. As we have seen in some other parts of Asia (Kibria, 1998: 13, 16), women's labour migration is often discouraged for concerns about their sexuality. Women are perceived to be not only vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse but also easily deceived due to their credulous and 'soft' nature. Social risks detrimental to their reputation and fidelity are inherent in labour migration because they are believed to be more likely than men to be tricked into vices and 'immoral' relationships. Sexual anxieties, jealousies and concerns about the woman's fidelity were dominant issues in the decision making over women's migration.

“Once we are out of the country...I feel...once we move into their house, eating and living with them, they can do whatever they want to us ...Not many women around here migrate abroad because people would gossip that they would become the second or third wife of the employer”

Hanh, female, widow, aged 38, seasonal migrant

These common perceptions about women's sexuality were supported by the stereotypical portrayal of female migrant workers on the mass media. Stories about domestic workers, female workers in industrial zones and in the service sector being sexually abused, forced into prostitution, or victimised by their employers are published frequently in newspapers and magazines. The main reasons for women's non-migration reported by both migrants and non-migrants in the study were fears about possible social risks they had to face and the tainted reputation for themselves and their families upon return. Although no actual occurrences of abuse and violence against local female migrants were reported by the respondents, stories published on the media were often quoted in support of their migration choices.

Although virginity was still important for young girls, it did not appear as the most important concern of their households during the decision-making process. However, this could have been due to the strong social networks that they were dependent on at the destination. Most single women in the sample migrated with the help of close relatives who also acted as their

guardians away from home. Migration could be an attractive socio-economic opportunity for the girls as long as their guardians were capable of keeping them away from social risks. Apart from concerns for their safety and reputation, the mobility of young single women was also restricted by the view of women as being dependent on their husbands. Married women, in the words of a female migrant, ‘*should always follow their husbands*’. Many households in the researched community did not want their daughters to migrate and marry someone from another place for the fear that they would ‘lose’ them and not be able to see them as much as they wanted in the future. The mother of a young female migrant - Mui - forced her daughter to return home when she was starting a relationship with a young man from a central province because she believed that Mui would be dependent on her husband after marriage. She would not be able to visit her parents without her husband’s permission and she would have to follow him wherever he went. The possibility of marrying someone from a different place was not a concern for families of male migrants because they would be heads of households and able to decide where to live.

Gender Identity as a Social Structure Enabling and Constraining Individual Behaviours

One’s perceptions of legitimate behaviour are influenced by gender norms and expectations associated with his/her social identity. Men’s and women’s different social positioning affect the way they choose to act in household decision making. The majority of women in the sample made decisions to migrate in consultation with other household members or even with extended families in some cases. Other household members, particularly the husband if the migrant was married and parents if they were not, took an active or even decisive part in the decision-making process. Household consensus was essential in women’s migration and the failure to obtain household consent would result in their giving up of the migration intention. Whether they were married or not, women in cases of conflict had to negotiate with and persuade their household members before migration could take place. In contrast, all the three men with conflictual decision-making experiences in the sample went ahead with their migration decisions against strong opposition of their wives. Only one man in this group reported that he had tried to persuade his wife to let him go.

Men’s accounts of their migration decision making in general were not as detailed as those of their female counterparts. One reason could possibly be that their labour migration was not so problematic and hence their experiences were easier and more straightforward. However, individual testimonies also suggested that the traditional decision-making power of male patriarchy was taken for granted by both the men and their household members. There was simply not much negotiation and discussion taking place in many cases. Consensus was important but not a precondition for migration.

“My wife lets me go wherever I want. I have to migrate to make money. She also knows that there is no use to argue with me about my decision because I would not change my mind”

Diep, male, aged 45,
migrant – construction worker in Hanoi

In another case, Xuan – the wife of a migrant construction worker in Hanoi – wanted her husband to return and work closer to home so that he could help her with childcare and other heavy farming tasks when needed. Nonetheless, she had never tried to persuade him to return home and let him choose what to do:

“The man makes decision because he is the head of the household. How can I keep him home? How can I tell him to stay? He is the head of the household. I can only comment on his decision sometimes but cannot make him go my way, right?”

Xuan, female, aged 32, non-migrant

These differences between men and women’s behaviours show how persistent the traditional power hierarchy in the Vietnamese household is. Women are expected to respect and defer to men’s power. Their failing to do so is seen as violation of the accepted codes of gender propriety, which would lead to serious impact on conjugal relations as well as their own well-being. While the man’s disregard of other household members’ preferences in decision making could be easily tolerated, a woman behaving the same way would not only tarnish her public image as a dutiful mother and wife but also be seen as undermining her husband’s status as a mighty head of the household. The anxiety about what other people may say acts as a constant reminder of the need to conform to norms (Kabeer, 2000: 357). Making important decisions in the household is not only the right but also the responsibility of the man. Some women interviewed in the study found it completely normal that men made decisions to migrate without consultation with them because it was ‘*men’s affairs*’ or ‘*men know best what they should do*’³.

Testimonies of male migrants often showed that migration decisions were made by themselves but their household members’ accounts sometimes proved otherwise. The usually taken-for-granted roles of men as household heads and decision makers made any direct challenge to their authority unacceptable. Women in cases of conflict, therefore, tended to avoid open confrontation and tried to find other ways to make their points. Women’s attempts to reassert their preferences in the decision-making process were often made through quiet and hidden renegotiations. The wives of two international labour migrants in the sample Sau and Trac for instance, appeared in the men’s testimonies as passively accepting their husbands’ migration choices. Other interviews with their household members and relatives, however, showed that the women actively tried to reassert their priorities and preferences in their own ways. By creating tension in the household, they hoped that the men would be disheartened and change their minds. In another case, fearing that her migrant husband would have affairs, Truc followed him to the South where he was working as a junk trader despite his repeated attempts to persuade her to stay home. Not only Lam – her husband – but also Truc herself believed that decision-making authority in the household rested with men and women should accept all their decisions. She nonetheless made her own migration choices against his wish. Instead of openly protesting against his request for her to stay behind, Truc kept quiet and accompanied him every time he travelled down south.

Evolving Identities

Feminist studies see social identities as dynamic and constantly evolving social constructs rather than fixed definable individual characteristics (Silvey, 2004: 498). They emphasise their constructedness and the ongoing nature of this process. While such identities as gender, class, kinship and ethnicity tend to be static and are likely to remain unchanged over the course of one’s lifetime, norms, beliefs and values constantly evolve along with new individual experiences and changing circumstances (Jenkins, 1996; Kabeer, 2000: 23). This changing nature of individual identity implies constant revisions in the way the individual

³ Interview with Thin – wife of a migrant construction worker in Hanoi

sees him/herself within the social context to which s/he belongs and the notions of social expectations and obligation that contribute to regulating their behaviours. In *Thang Loi* Village, men and women who had already migrated several times at the time of the research provided different accounts of migration decision-making at different points in their lives.

Men, for instance, experienced significant changes in their ability to exercise agency in migration decision making along with shifts in their social positioning and new migratory experiences. The examples of Thong, Sau and Tho illustrate how different their ability to make migration choices was before and after they got married. Marriage meant a change in the men's status from being dependent on their parents to being the head of their own household and able to make decisions on their own account. They migrated for the first time at a very young age and planned to settle down permanently at the destination. The abundance of arable land and a great potential for industrial crops in *Daklak* – their first destination – together with the support of their siblings made settlement a very attractive choice. However, the men eventually returned home for good after failing to obtain consent from their parents. They were expected by the family to live with and take care of their parents because all other siblings had got married and moved out of the parental home. Sau later admitted in the interview that he regretted that he had submitted to his parents too easily and that he would have been much better off now had he been more persistent in his settlement plan.

The men's accounts of decision making over their subsequent migration offered a completely different picture from the accounts of their first moves. Two of the men who had made several migratory movements were still living in the same house with their parents at the time of the interview. The men reported minimal parental involvement but clear spousal involvement in their household decision-making about migration, even in the conflictual case of Sau. All Sau's migratory movements after marriage were opposed by his wife, who wanted him to find a job closer to home so that he could help her with childcare and other reproductive duties while she was working in a garments factory. Sau's parents kept themselves out of the conflict and let him and his wife resolve the problem by themselves. Similarly, Tho and Thong reported that they and their wives made decisions to migrate without consultation with their parents. Changes in the men's migration decision-making experiences were due not only to their awareness of their new role as well as rights and obligations associated with it but also their parents' recognition of their new status as heads of their own households. The shift in social positioning following the marriage entailed revisions in the way the men saw themselves in relation to other people, which, in turn, influenced their ability to exercise agency in the decision-making process.

Migration itself is capable of inducing changes in one's perceptions of acceptable behaviour in decision making. Trang, for instance, gave contrasting accounts of decision-making about her successive migratory movements. When she migrated to Son La Province for the first time at the age of 14, she could not decide when to visit home or what to do with her earnings. All Trang's wages were sent straight to her parents by her employer and she was not allowed to visit home during six years in Son La. She played a relatively passive role in decision making about her first move. All decisions related to it were made by her parents and the aunt who she was working for. Nevertheless, Trang assumed the right to make her own choices about subsequent migratory movements to Hai Phong and Son Tay. She decided what to do with her income and did not send remittances home. Her parents were against her decision to continue labour migration at the time of the interview but Trang remained defiant. Although

they were extremely unhappy about her decision, Trang knew that they would accept her choice as they had done previously and decided to go ahead.

Like Trang, other young men and women in the study were socially and economically dependent on their parents before leaving home for the first time. Many men in the sample reported important parental involvement in the decision making about their first migratory movement. Parents influenced their migration choices such as where to migrate to, where to live and what kind of job they should do at the destination. The primary concern was young men's exposure to social vices, especially drug addiction. This explains why their first destinations were often selected on the basis of the strength of the household's social networks there. Their accounts of the subsequent moves, however, showed very little or no parents' involvement in the decision-making process. Tuan, Hieu and Chin, for example, reported that they made subsequent migratory movements without consulting or even informing their households. The first migration experiences together with the young people's ability to earn their living and/or to make economic contributions to their households for the first time led to significant changes in the way they perceived their rights and obligations in relation to other household members. Economic independence also allowed them greater power in household decision making in order to bargain for their interests and preferences.

CONCLUSION

Disaggregating migration decision-making by gender and marital status reveals the different ways in which gendered social identity shapes men's and women's agency around labour migration. Regardless of their marital status, men generally have found it easier to assert their preferences and interests in migration decisions be it a household or individual livelihood strategy. The common perceptions of them as breadwinners as well as the gendered divisions of productive and reproductive work in the household made their migration an easier and more favourable option than that of women. This not only allowed them more freedom and independence in decision making about migration but also made household conflict over their choices less likely to happen.

The fact that women's migration is an undesirable option for rural households due to their traditional reproductive roles of mother and wife as well as concerns about their sexuality and safety appears to be common throughout the developing world (see e.g. Chant, 1991; Lawson, 1998: 40; Fan, 2003: 39). It explains why female migrants in the study had to invest more efforts in order to obtain household consent to their migration. In general, co-operative outcomes in household migration decision-making appear to be more important for women than men, which according to Kabeer (2000: 161), is because women have more to lose from the breakdown of family relations than men do. Marriage is nearly universal in Vietnam and divorce carries stigma for women who rarely are able to remarry. Indeed, the threat of divorce was often used by men in cases of conflict in *Thang Loi* in order to dissuade their wives from migration. Wives of prospective male migrants, by contrast, often resisted their husbands' migration in passive ways. The breakdown of family relations not only means the loss of male guardianship and a tainted reputation for women but also negatively affects their children's and their own welfare. That explains why decision-making experiences of women in the study were characterised by active co-operation between household members and migration rarely took place in the absence of household consensus.

Despite concerns about their sexuality and marriage prospects, unmarried women enjoyed more freedom in making choices about their migration than their married counterparts. With very few exceptions, all unmarried women in the study played an active and conscious role in the decision making process. On the other hand, one third of the married women migrated on the initiative of their husbands who also decided the destination, duration of their stays and employment at the new place. The rest of the group reported important involvement of other household members, especially their husbands, in migration decision making and unlike the single women, none of them could move without household consent. Apart from marital status, age and life cycle stage were also important factors affecting individual agency in migration decision-making. Young single girls and middle-aged women were apparently allowed more freedom than young wives in deciding about their migratory moves. Likewise, married male migrants made their migration decisions with little or no consultation with other household members while involvement of household members (especially the mother) in decision-making about migration was reported by many young single men when they first moved.

The concept of agency is intrinsically linked with that of power, meaning not only the ability to choose but also the ability to choose otherwise (Giddens, 1984: 9). Kabeer (1999: 438), meanwhile, points out that agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power: (i) it refers to people's capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others; and (ii) the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others. In *Thang Loi Village* women's awareness of their roles and identities as mothers and wives not only curtails their ability to pursue their preferences and interests in household decision making about migration but is also used by men as justification for their not wanting wives to migrate for work. On the other hand, the common perception of men as breadwinners gives them the power to make migration choices on their own account even if they go against the preferences of other household members. This is not to say that labour migration is considered by local people as a privilege mostly available to men. On the contrary, migration in many cases was an involuntary option that men chose to undertake in order to fulfil their roles of household providers. They, too, decided to engage in labour migration under the pressure to conform to notions of masculinity and social expectations associated with the roles of husbands and fathers in the family.

The study has demonstrated that the pressure to conform to norms of gender roles and identities plays an important role in men and women's decisions to migrate or stay. Different notions of masculinity and femininity also mean that men and women do not play equally important roles in decision-making about labour migration, even when it is a household strategy. They refer to the locally-accepted norms as guidelines for their conduct as well as to justify their behaviours and choices in the migration process. These findings once again underline the importance of incorporating gender in migration theories and empirical studies.

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