

This policy brief summarises the findings of a qualitative study into the family relations of labour migrants across their peak child-bearing years. It evidences how wives/mothers and husbands/fathers manage their relations with spouse and children when they have to 'go away' for work. These strategies and dilemmas have implications for the impact of migration on the wellbeing both now and over the longer term for Vietnam.

We focus on low-income rural-urban migrants who have at least one child under 8 years of age and our analysis is based on 77 in-depth life histories collected in 2008 from two localised sites with high numbers of migrants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh cities (see box 1).

Box 1: Contrasting Sites and Purposive Sample

The barriers to migration and conventional gendered expectations about family roles were stronger in Hanoi, where migration is mostly short distance circular migration from the Red River Delta. These constraints were lesser and wages were higher in Ho Chi Minh, which draws migrants from all over the country as well as from the nearby Mekong Delta. Migrants here include short and long distance circular migrants as well as those trying to settle in the city.

In order to explore varying family experiences we selected men and women migrating with their spouse, those who had left their spouse behind, those whose spouse was migrating elsewhere, and those who had experienced marital disruption (which we defined as estrangement, separation, divorce or the death of a spouse).

Dynamic family strategies

Migrants understood their going away to work as an effort to make a *better life* for their family, and particularly for their children. We found that migrant family strategies were *varied, changing and open to renegotiation* in response to changing circumstances.

We grouped migrants' current family strategies into three broad categories (see box 2). However, these categories are *not* rigid pathways and individual migrants and their families may switch strategies at different points in their lives.

The categorisation of family strategies does not have straightforward implications for whether migration is empowering or dis-empowering. Both male and female migrants experienced *varying degrees of agency and compulsion* these categories.

Our evidence confirms that *women are increasingly migrating before, between, and after the births of their children.*

Box 2: Categories of Family Strategies for Migrants

Visiting marriages or Remote parenting

The pattern of husband leaving behind wife and children is well established. However, in some families it is wives who migrate leaving behind husband and children. Other couples migrate together leaving children behind with grandparents. All these strategies trade-off the togetherness of husband/wife with keeping at least one parent and children 'living together'.

Making a life in the city

Many migrants to Ho Chi Minh, particularly those coming from places other than the Red River Delta, saw the city as offering a better upbringing and better opportunities for their children. Migrants trying to make a life in the city negotiate the considerable costs and difficulties associated with raising children in the city and prioritise father, mother and children living together.

Nobody in the family lives together

These migrants have husbands/wives who migrate separately from them, going to a different destination or living elsewhere at the same destination, and leave their children behind. Chronic family separation of parents and children for extended periods of time is regarded by migrants as a 'failure'.

Sharply gendered experiences

For both men and women migration is *about* as well as *in tension with* fulfilling their family roles.

Whilst social norms provided *strong moral authority for men to migrate* for work, these migrant men did not correspond to the negative stereotype of 'errant husbands' and 'negligent fathers'. Many migrant men saw themselves as '*good*' fathers/husbands (working hard, sending regular remittances and visiting often) and they regretted their remote relationships with left-behind children.

It was harder for female migrants to reconcile 'going away' to work with being the mother(s) of young children. Migration for many women involved '*sacrifice*' of their *everyday relations* with their children. However this sacrifice was in itself seen as *doing both parenting work* (by providing for their children) and *conjugal work* (by 'helping' their husbands build an economically stable family).

Double-standards meant that being a 'good' migrant did not preclude sexual infidelity for male migrants but most stressed that they had little money or energy to indulge in commercialised sexual relations (unlike wealthier or younger men). In contrast, a

husband's confidence in his wife's sexual fidelity and modest behaviour was *vital* for managing the strains involved in temporary marital separation. Living with female villagers in the city ensured that women were both 'safe' and under close surveillance.

Concerns about family separation

Those who left children behind were confident of their education, health and nutrition but had significant concerns about *children's social and moral development*. In particular parents linked the absence of *everyday* parental care of children to their inability to develop appropriate affection and intimacy. This concern related to both *fathering and mothering* but was more severe where mothers or both parents were absent. Parents worry that their children will not develop proper *sentiments* for them, potentially jeopardising filial piety over the long term.

Migrants anticipated the parenting dilemmas involved with migration as becoming *more acute* as children got older. Older children need mothers, especially for girls, and fathers, especially for discipline, to support their study, supervise their leisure time, and to give them appropriate guidance over behaviour, marriage and work choices.

Short-distance female migrants are able to *remote parent* by visiting regularly to 'take care' of children and by careful preparation and delegation of caring roles in their absence. However, long distant female migrants who face prolonged separation from young children can *not* sustain remote parenting. Migrant men in families where 'nobody lives together' felt a deep sense of *failure* as husbands, fathers, and sons (see box 3).

Box 3: Parenting Dilemmas

"If I want to provide for them, I have to migrate. But when I migrate, I cannot take care of them" Linh, female porter in Hanoi, short-distance.

"I don't know about [my children's] childhood because I was often far from them" Kieu, junk trader, Ho Chi Minh, long-distance.

"Once we are migrants we cannot balance the responsibilities... I haven't stayed with [my son] at home for a long time" Thuat, male mason coolie, Ho Chi Minh, long-distance.

"I feel that I am so useless that I cannot do anything for my wife and daughter" Hung, male bricklayer, Ho Chi Minh, long-distance.

Whilst concerns about parental separation were greatest, migrants also worried about the impact of prolonged separation on *the understandings between husbands and wives*. Whilst migration undoubtedly strained marital relationships, it did *not* play into divorce or separation in any straight-forward way. Indeed migration seemed to be as much a response to marital failure or infidelity rather than the other way around.

Underlying insecurity and institutional constraints

Dualistic economic development, in part a legacy of centrally-planned socialism, and the renovation process have perpetuated rural-urban differentiation. Migrants subsidise urban growth by the lower costs of their (social) reproduction in the countryside. Although the household registration system is gradually being reformed, the implementation of the reforms are often *arbitrary*. In this sense *economic barriers and inequalities are increasingly displacing administrative hurdles* for migrants (see box 4).

Box 4: Barriers and Inequalities

For those in visiting marriages/remote parenting, or for whom nobody in the family lives together, the absence of effective social protection and income earning opportunities in the countryside are key drivers of their migration. Despite their 'miserable lives' spent working in the city, their fundamental rights remain in their home place and the standards of health, education and nutrition that they and their families enjoy remain at best rural ones.

Those trying to make a life in the city negotiate the difficulties of needing money 'everyday' and of constant attentiveness to ensure children 'do not get spoiled'. Without the help of the extended family, migrants making a life in the city need endurance and some are more flexible in their interpretation of gendered parenting roles. The lower entry barriers, higher wages and greater development of the private sector in Ho Chi Minh appear to make these difficulties more negotiable for some migrant parents than for those in Hanoi. However finding a permanent home is essential if they 'want to change the conditions of their life'

Efforts to make critical savings in the city (for basic family subsistence, to start up a rural business, save for house-building, or repay debts) are hampered by the borderline legality of most migrant informal occupations leading to harassment, the confiscation of tools of work, arbitrary detention and 'fines'.

Discriminatory attitudes and practices, some of which are directed against rural migrants, others of which cut against the urban informal sector more broadly continue to restrict migrant social entitlements in the city.

Conclusions

The costs of this migration are *strongly gendered* in terms of migration experiences and fulfilment of social identities. The family dilemmas of these migrants have potentially severe consequences for them, their children and society in general.

For these migrants having a young family appears to represent a '*window of opportunity*' for migration to try to improve their families' lives. However, those in visiting marriages/remote parenting, or for whom nobody in the family lives together, may endure a lifetime of chronic family separation and those making a life in the city may join the ranks of the urban poor.