

Policy Implications of the Family Strategies of Low-Income Rural-Urban Labour Migrants in their Peak Child-Bearing Years in Vietnam

Catherine Locke, Nguyen Thi Thanh Tam, Nguyen Thi Ngan Hoa

This brief summarises the policy implications of a qualitative study into the family relations of labour migrants across their peak child-bearing years. The qualitative study, summarised in Box 1, evidenced how low-income wives/mothers and husbands/fathers manage their relations with spouse and children when they have to 'go away' for work. The findings raise important considerations for those concerned about the impact of migration on poverty and human development in Vietnam over the short, medium and long term.

Box 1: The Qualitative Study and its Findings

The study focused on the life histories of 77 low-income rural-urban migrants with at least one child under 8 years of age living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh in 2008. Respondents were purposively selected to explore the range of family strategies.

Family strategies were orientated to making a better life for the family, especially the children. Although there were no rigid pathways and family strategies were subject to change and renegotiation, they included:

- *Visiting marriages or Remote parenting strategies* which trade-off the togetherness of husband/wife with keeping at least one parent and children 'living together'.
- *Strategies to make a life in the city* which involves considerable costs and difficulties in order to keep father, mother and children living together.
- *Strategies in which nobody in the family lives together and for whom the chronic family separation of both spouses and parents/children is regarded by migrants as a 'failure'.*

Migration was *about and in tension with* family roles. Whilst social norms were more supportive of men's separation from their family, women were under considerable pressure to simultaneously provide for their children *and* to care for their children. In their efforts to achieve this, women are increasingly migrating before, between and after the births of their children.

Migrants were seriously concerned about parent-child separation - emphasising the impact on parent-child relations and children's social development. However raising children in the city was extremely difficult and many absent mothers actively sustained a parenting role over short distance migrations. However, long distant migrants could not sustain remote parenting relationships and all migrants anticipated that parenting dilemmas would become more acute as children got older and had more complex needs for parental guidance.

Discriminatory attitudes and practices, against rural migrants and/or the urban informal sector, continue to restrict migrant work and social entitlements in the city. The implementation of reforms to the household registration system is often arbitrary and new economic barriers and inequalities are increasingly displacing administrative hurdles for migrants.

Despite these difficulties, migrants perceive that the period when children are 'still young' and parents are 'not yet old' represents an opportunity for migration to try to improve their families' lives.

Reducing Poverty

Low income rural-to-urban migrants effectively 'subsidise' the economic growth of the city when they retain the social reproduction of their families in rural areas. Alongside efforts to create economic alternatives to migration, action is needed to ensure that the quality, quantity, and affordability of health and education increasingly match urban standards (particularly outside the Red River Delta Province). Similarly, rather than seeing rural provisioning as in some ways policing access to higher-level urban provisioning, the evolution of social policy needs to recognise the new mobility of workers and their families.

Where labour migration means the separation of children from one or both parents, often over crucial periods of child development, this devalues rural social reproduction. There are clearly felt tensions and deficits in both mothering *and* importantly fathering and these will have *long term* impacts both on child development and on inter-generational relations. Negative impacts on children's emotional, social and moral development may well jeopardise migrants' efforts to translate increased income into better lives for their children and imperil filial relations over the long term.

The dualistic development of the economy means that low-income rural migrants, and their families if they bring them, tend to occupy whatever space is left *at the bottom* of the labour market and social provisioning in the cities. Ongoing attempts to address urban poverty need to ensure that low-income migrants (and their families) are included in these efforts and do not become entrenched as a new underclass.

Building Effective Social Entitlements for Migrants

The remnants of the Household Registration System and its logic of tying entitlements to place do *not* prevent migration even though they still incur considerable discrimination and hardship for migrants. There is a need for a redefinition of citizenship entitlements that relates to individuals and their families *wherever* they may be. Such an approach would involve the removal of barriers and inequalities to raising families in the city and developing the idea that social entitlements relate to persons *not* places and therefore move with those who need them (see Box 2).

Specific responsibility for the social protection of migrants and their families needs to be allocated to both rural and urban authorities. Further, a specialist unit may be needed to promote the needs of migrants and their families' across different sectors and places.

Box 2: Effective Social Entitlements for Migrants

Effective social entitlements for migrants include enabling children's entitlements to education to move with them as they are called to the city or sent back to the countryside, facilitating ongoing ante-natal care for pregnant workers who only return to the village at 5 months gestation, and enabling migrants to administer their paperwork without having to return to their places of origin.

The new regulation for implementing health insurance (No. 62 / ND-CP issued by GoV on 27/7/ 2009) represents an important step by ensuring that migrants can access the public health care and claim on their health insurance policies in the city without referral from their home place. But uptake of urban health care by migrants remains low because most are uninsured, because urban fees are higher than rural fees and because migrants fear the attitudes of urban health staff.

Phuc Xa People's Committee is unique in Hanoi in its efforts to support migrants, firstly, through special policies to ensure that they and their children can access education and health in the ward on the same basis as urban residents and, secondly, through working closely with NGOs on special awareness programmes for migrants on reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and trafficking. However, our data showed that even here migrants who do know about these provisions are unwilling to exercise them because they do not want to be 'looked down on'. Discrimination is a powerful brake on improving migrants' social protection and needs tackling in its own right through public education.

The years of child-bearing and early child-rearing are vital developmentally to avoiding the inter-generational transmission of poverty and for laying a foundation for social mobility. Initiatives will need to recognise the importance of distinguishing between the family strategies and social protection needs of different migrants (see Box 3).

Box 3: The Social Protection of Young Migrant Families

Rural authorities need to recognise that the situation of young left-behind children is highly atypical to that of other rural children characterised in the recent Young Lives Survey. Intermittent or prolonged separation from one or both parents and substitution of everyday caring roles, mostly by grandparents, have important implications for the support children require and for liaison with parents and carers.

Urban authorities need to understand that migrants trying to make a life for their family in the city struggle to get affordable access to appropriate education, to find suitable living accommodation, and to find good quality, affordable and flexible child-care arrangements.

Both rural and urban initiatives need to distinguish between migrant's family strategies. For instance, urban initiatives to improve the accommodation standards of migrant guest houses are likely to fail if they pass costs on to migrants who leave their families behind. These migrants are trying to maximise their savings and are more likely to invest in rural family housing. An intervention of this sort may be welcomed though by migrants trying to make a life in the city with their family - as long as costs are affordable for low-income migrants and contribute to their goal of eventually owning their own house in the city.

Migrant Worker's Rights

Initiatives to improve migrant workers' rights need to go beyond work place regulation to de-criminalise the low-income informal sector and erode the vulnerability of workers in this sector to harassment from officials and arbitrary fining and detention.

Improvements in this direction will help safeguard low-income migrants' livelihoods and savings as well as contributing to the wider goal of lessening discriminatory attitudes.

In terms of control of undesirable aspects of urbanisation, there is a need for a move away from monitoring people through labelling them as 'residents', 'temporary residents' or 'free migrants', towards a focus on tackling socially unacceptable behaviour regardless of the residential status of the perpetrators.

Supporting Gendered Family Roles

There is a need to *temper the expectations* of women's productive contributions to the household around child-bearing and early child-rearing. This is true for all low-income mothers but has special significance for low-income migrants. Low-income migrant mothers tend to enter ante-natal care late when they go home to birth, many live apart from their husband during late pregnancy, delivery and early infancy of their children, and they tend to resume work early and may leave children behind at a young age. These patterns have obvious implications for maternal and infant health outcomes, as well as for the social and emotional development of mother and child.

For many low income families a 'maternity leave' will only be practical if there is *direct productive support* to the household during this period. Current *inequalities* in the cost and quality of maternity care between rural and urban areas need attention and thought should be given to ways of ensuring that difficult pregnancies or births are *not financially disastrous* for low-income families in either setting. Systematic efforts are needed to make convenient, good quality, ante-natal and delivery care *available and attractive* to pregnant migrants.

There is also a clear need to recognise men's roles in *fathering* and in *supporting their wives* in ways that go beyond simply provisioning. These roles are important to men as well as women. Too often migrant men are forced to be away working when they feel they are needed at home because times of birth, infancy or illness are times when the need for cash is greatest. Migrant fathers regret the loss of a close relationship that comes from everyday intimacy with their children.

Future Surveys and Information Needs

There have been very substantial improvements in attention to migrants in recent national-level and more localised data collection. However, there is considerable scope to improve access to raw datasets, such as the 2005 Migration Survey. The inclusion of migration status and income level to many national and local level surveys is big improvement but *further relational information* about children and spouse is needed to comprehend the linkages between labour migration and human development over time.

In this respect, qualitative research is valuable in supplementing representative quantitative survey work. Specifically, our findings suggest the importance of looking at migration in relation to other *key transitional periods* in family life for understanding the opportunities for and constraints to inter-generational social mobility in the development-migration nexus.