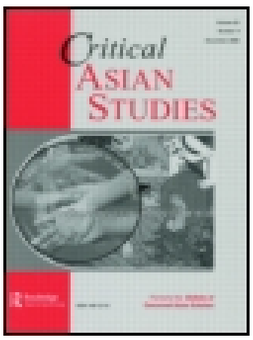

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Gender, labor migration and changes in small-scale farming on Vietnam's north-central coast

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the narratives of women and men who have domestic or international migration experiences, this study explores the gendered impacts of migration on small-scale farming in rural Ha Tinh province in Vietnam. The paper investigates men's and women's migration experiences, their influence on agricultural production, and impact on their livelihoods after migration. The findings show that households use various strategies to sustain agricultural production in the absence of some members. Women's increased economic independence through labor migration has not necessarily lead to their increased management roles in agriculture, but they are increasingly challenging stereotypical images of rural women. While migration can be a catalyst for men to transform their livelihoods, it can also widen gaps in social and economic statuses among men.

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Feminization of agriculture; feminist social theory; root crops; agroforestry; Southeast Asia

Introduction

In many rural areas of Southeast Asia, seasonal labor migration has been an integral part of livelihood strategies for both men and women farmers.[1] Destinations and periods of migration are, however, rapidly changing, along with labor demands for specific gender and age groups. These influence rural women and men farmers' gendered identities, desires, and patterns of consumption and investment.[2] Farming strategies, such as mobilization of family labor, scale of investments, and choices of crops and technologies, are also rapidly changing. In addition, opportunities for migration are highly unequal, leading to varied consequences for different social groups. Studies on agrarian change confirm that people from rural areas are often integrated into global and national labor markets in adverse terms, reinforcing existing class hierarchies.[3] From a gender perspective, a growing feminized labor market opens up employment opportunities for women, but

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[1]Rigg 2007; De Brauw and Harigaya 2007. Migration in this study includes both domestic and international destinations. We use the term "migration" broadly to reflect the study context, including circular and temporary migration, engaging in off-farm or on-farm jobs, and being away from one's own village for a short term (a few months) or going abroad for a long period (a few years).

[2]Yeoh 2016; Jacka 2018.

[3]Breman 2007; Sunam 2017.

can reproduce a hierarchy of gender between men and women at a global level, as women are often concentrated in unskilled sectors, which provide relatively low wages and low occupational mobility compared to their male counterparts.[4] However, not all men evenly benefit from male prestige in the global labor market. Men from poorer and less privileged backgrounds are also exploited in more dangerous and lower paid labor sectors.[5]

What are the implications of ongoing unequal and highly gendered labor migration for small-scale farming in rural settings? Studies of the impact of migration on agricultural labor in East and Southeast Asia have shown that off-farm employment is increasingly available for specific gender and age groups, leading to apparent trends such as the feminization of agriculture,[6] the feminization of migration,[7] and the aging of farming populations.[8] In places in which alternative income sources are widely available, small-scale farms are intentionally left with limited or no investment by farm owners, which is logical for smallholders. As such, agricultural development planning may no longer fit with a rapidly changing labor situation for smallholders who depend heavily on labor migration.

This paper examines three interconnected questions. First, how do men's migration experiences influence household decisions on farming investments and practices? Second, how do women's migration experiences influence household decisions on farming investments and practices? And finally, how does male and female migration lead to different outcomes in agriculture investment within the community?

Exploring farming alone is insufficient to understand the processes of and reasons behind changes in rural lives. Livelihood approaches have brought a fresh way of framing agriculture as part of diverse livelihoods that include labor migration.[9] However, livelihood approaches do not adequately explore gendered agency and the role of power in situations in which reproductive activities play as important roles as do productive activities.[10] To address this issue, feminist scholars have included gender and social relations in their analyses of labor migration. Their studies reveal that rural women and men are not passive victims of a global capitalist economy but active agents who respond to change and whose personal agency significantly influences their migration choices, lives and livelihoods, as well as gender norms and relationships.[11] While a rich body of literature explores migrant workers in destination communities and so-called "left behind" women and men in migrant-sending communities, research on the gendered implications of migration on small-scale farming is relatively limited, a gap this study addresses.[12]

In the next section, we frame gender and migration by drawing on feminist social theories and critical analyses of gender in migration studies. After this, we outline the research context and describe our methods. We then describe and discuss our findings by drawing

[4]Lutz 2010, 1652.
[5]Ye 2014.
[6]Wu and Ye 2016; Bacud et al. 2019.
[7]Elmhirst 2007; Yeoh et al. 2018.
[8]Rigg et al. 2020.
[9]Ellis 2003.
[10]Zhang and Locke 2010; De Haan 2012.
[11]See Silvey 2006; Huijsmans 2014; Nguyen 2014a, 2014b.
[12]But see Lukasiewicz 2011 and Jacka 2018.

on our respondents' narratives, link these to existing scholarship, and note the implications of our results for agricultural development projects in rural settings where migration is booming.

Framing the discussion of gender relations, migration, and rural farming

This paper builds on feminist social theories that view migration in the global South as a gendered process.[13] This approach includes negotiations over and changes to both productive and reproductive activities in its analysis, providing researchers a fuller picture of changing lives beyond the economic aspects of labor migration. We understand gender as the power relations produced through everyday practices, language, and communication which generate a discursive and pervasive notion of power.[14] This power is changeable, as practices change both intentionally and unintentionally.[15] Migration scholars have paid particular attention to this point, as migration decisions influence and are influenced by gender roles and practices, and gender identities are often contested, both in migrant sending and destination communities. In the early 1990s in Vietnam, when women started migrating to Hanoi, they were often viewed as sex workers by their neighbors at home.[16] However, this stigma has not prevented women from migrating for work reasons. Instead, women and men have reinterpreted gender identities and negotiated gender roles within their families, through which some aspects of gender norms and relations have changed. Power based on gender plays out with other forms of power and hierarchy, such as class, ethnicity, and age. This intersectionality of social positions is an important aspect of migration studies, as migration decisions and experiences are shaped by migrants' social positions.[17] Power dynamics operating through intersectionality take place for both women and men.[18] Migration studies reveal that male migrant workers often occupy marginalized positions in both their places of origin and destinations. The exploitation of low-skilled, low-paid workers means that migration does not necessarily transform the hierarchy of men at the national and global levels, although it can help improve their social status at home upon their return.[19]

The ways men and women negotiate with family members over migration and remittances are highly gendered. Generally, men in Vietnam are expected to provide for their families and make important household decisions. The actual degree of men's bargaining power is closely associated with their incomes and material wealth, such as ownership of a house and land.[20] Sending remittances to their families can therefore possibly increase a man's bargaining power within his family and raise his social status in his home community. Women's bargaining approaches are different, as they are expected to follow social norms that define what a mother and/or a wife should be and should do in a given cultural context.[21] Women are expected to self-sacrifice for their families,

[13]Silvey 2006; Elmhirst 2007; Huijsmans 2014; Nguyen 2014a; Jacka 2018.
[14]Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990.
[15]Connell and Messerschmidt 2005.
[16]Nguyen 2014b, 1395.
[17]Bastia 2014; Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017.
[18]Hearn 2011; Sinatti 2014.
[19]Osella and Osella 2000; Ye 2014; Sinatti 2014.
[20]Werner 2008; Horton and Rydstrom 2011.
[21]Whitehead 1981; Kabeer 2000.

endure difficulties to sustain family harmony,[22] play caring roles, and obey all men and older women.[23] While women are also expected to earn income to some extent, being the major breadwinner can upset family harmony and solidarity. To avoid this, migrant women who become the main source of their family's income ensure this is temporary[24] and reassure their husbands who have remained at home.[25] Women may pretend to be weak and poor even after they gain economic power to avoid threatening existing gender and class hierarchies.[26] Women thus seize opportunities and carefully negotiate their positions without directly threatening the existing patriarchy.[27]

What are the agricultural implications of these complex and dynamic gender relations surrounding labor migration? The literature on labor migration in Asia reveals that women's roles and societal expectations of women are changing, and gender roles and relations in farming communities are highly diverse. "Left behind" women in Quezon, the Philippines are increasingly venturing into agricultural work, previously a man's domain. They utilize remittances from their husbands to purchase additional land to cultivate cash crops such as coconut trees. Other women invest their husbands' remittances in pigs or vegetable growing, both of which are part of the female cultural domain and, therefore, less challenging to gender norms. Although these women are not entirely free to make economic decisions (as they must negotiate with their husbands from afar and in some cases their fathers-in-law or their brothers-in-law), the evidence shows they gain new skills, knowledge, and power.[28]

In other contexts, women who remain at home must assume additional agricultural burdens on top of their domestic responsibilities, with limited mobility and resources.[29] Men's absences therefore do not necessarily lead to women taking over male management roles in agriculture. Situations are different for men who remain at home when their wives become migrants. In their study of Thai Binh, Vietnam, Lan Anh Hoang and Brenda Yeoh found that some migrant wives who work in Taiwan do not send remittances to their husbands, but to their maternal families, a strategy aimed at controlling their money. Their husbands cannot complain about this strategy, as men are supposed to be the primary providers.[30] In another study of Vietnamese migrants, this one in Nam Dinh province, Bernadette Resurreccion and Ha Thi Van Khanh describe how women often migrate domestically to Hanoi and invest their remittances in their children's education as well as agricultural production (e.g. rent of machines and irrigation taxes). However, gender roles are not radically threatened as migrant women frequently return home, thus maintaining their social status as mothers and wives.[31] On the other hand, in her research on labor migration in Henan, China, Tamara Jacka shows a clear shift in woman's social and economic roles, as they typically migrate for work with their husbands, leaving their children at home with grandparents. Married women who remain in their villages are no

[22]Pettus 2004.
[23]Schuler et al. 2006.
[24]Thao and Agergaard 2012; Hoang and Yeoh 2011.
[25]Resurreccion and Ha 2007, 220.
[26]Leshkowich 2001. According to Jackson 2000, 20, "care by women is not only cooking and cleaning but seems to extend to care of male confidence."
[27]Devasahayam et al. 2004; Nguyen 2014a.
[28]Lukaseiewicz 2011.
[29]Graham et al. 2015; Wu and Ye 2016; Nurick and Hak 2019; Pattnaik et al. 2018; Bacud et al. 2019.
[30]Hoang and Yeoh 2011.
[31]Resurreccion and Ha 2007; see also Nguyen 2014b.

longer respected in their community, and owning agricultural land is no longer important for men. Instead, they invest in houses with luxurious furniture, which are symbols of success. Only a few villagers have continued farming by consolidating land, which has facilitated mechanization and commercialization of agriculture.[32]

Methods and research context

We conducted seven days of fieldwork in March 2019 in a coastal district farming commune in Ha Tinh province. We had previously worked on agricultural projects in this district, including in the commune we focus on. At the time of our research most households in this commune had at least one member working as a migrant worker. The commune consists of nine villages and the total population is approximately 6,000, according to key informant interviews. Interviewees were selected from three out of nine villages in the commune. We used an array of methods, including participatory videos, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Videotaped topics included gender-based challenges in agriculture, perceptions of climate variability, migration opportunities, and opinions on the future of agriculture in their community (Table 1).

We selected participants for focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in consultation with village leaders, who knew individuals' migration experiences.[33] Four focus group discussions were organized based on gender and age. We selected participants with various family backgrounds to get diverse opinions about motivations for farming, reasons for migration, livelihood options, the history of migration in the area, and changes in farming practices. In-depth interviewees represented various socioeconomic, gender, and age groups. However, because commune residents in their twenties were largely absent due to either off-farm work or labor migration, it was not possible to balance respondents by age. Similarly, we include fewer women than men who had had migrant experience. Finally, all participants in this study have been given pseudonyms (Table 2).

The research context

Ha Tinh province is Vietnam's third largest source of migrant laborers working in foreign countries, and sent 11,194 people abroad in 2016.[34] It is also one of the largest sources of domestic migrant labor. According to official statistics, fifty-six percent of provincial households had at least one family member who worked outside the province in 2010.[35] Unlike other regions where rural-urban migration is decreasing as local employment opportunities increase such as the Red river and Mekong river deltas, the rate of domestic migration on Vietnam's north-central coast has continued to increase.[36]

[32]Jacka 2018.
[33]Some of our respondents had previously worked abroad illegally. To protect their privacy, this paper avoids describing the name of the villages and personal identifying information. In Vietnam, it is necessary to arrange interviews with respondents through local government representatives at the commune and village levels. We are aware of the limitation of this sample selection method, but this was unavoidable.
[34]IOM 2017, 26.
[35]Nguyen et al. 2017.
[36]Luong 2018.

Table 1. Study participants.

	Men	Women	Total
Participatory video	2	2	4
Key informant interviews[a]	2	1	3
Focus groups (above 35 years old)	6	6	12
Focus groups (under 35 years old)	6	6	12
In-depth interviews	7	5	12
Community event	12	26	38

[a]Village leader, Farmer's Union leader, and Women's Union leader.

Table 2. In-depth interview participants.

	G	Age	[b]Status 2019	Destination	Work during migration	Work after migration	Duration
1[a]	M	40s	Well off	Angola	Multiple	Farm and business manager	6 years
2[a]	M	40s	Poor	Angola	Carpenter	Gas and mattress salesperson	1 year
3	M	40s	Middle	Angola	Mainly construction	Abroad again	4 years
4[a]	M	30s	Near Poor	Malaysia	Mechanic	Fishing boat crew	5 years
5[a]	M	40s	Poor	Malaysia	Multiple	Farm labor	6 years
6	M	40s	Middle	Malaysia	Factory	Farm and business manager	3 years
7[a]	M	20s	Near Poor	Laos Ho Chi Minh	Construction Factory	Truck driver (collector)	2 years 6 years
8	F	60s	Poor	Angola	Cooking	Maid in Hanoi	2 year
9	F	40s	Middle	Saudi Arabia	Maid	Coffee shop owner	2 years
10	F	40s	Near Poor	Saudi Arabia	Maid	Farm manager	2 years
11[a]	F	50s	Poor	Ho Chi Minh and others	Maid Cook, farm labor	Labor migration	8 years
12[a]	F	30s	Near Poor	Ho Chi Minh	Factory	Farm and business manager	5 years

[a]Cases in which respondent's spouse joined the interview in the second half.
[b]According to respondents' own perceptions, relative to other households in their village.

According to our informants, international migration has increased since the 2000s. Brokers visit villages to recruit men and women and help complete migration procedures. Initial costs, including air tickets, visas, and commission fees, vary depending on expected incomes in destination countries. These range from approximately US$1,000 for Southeast Asian destinations, to between US$3,000 and US$5,000 for Sub-Saharan African and East European destinations, to as much as US$10,000 for employment opportunities in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. People often pay these fees by securing a bank loan or by borrowing from relatives.[37] Most labor migrants remain abroad for between two and six years.

Domestic migration for work is also very common in the area. Men and some women work in the construction sector in cities and coastal industrial zones. Men have the option to work in the nearest foreign-invested factory, which is a two-hour journey by motorbike. Younger men and men who do not own much land usually choose this option. Women work as laborers on coffee plantations, domestic helpers for wealthy urban families, or restaurant cooks in cities (Table 3).

[37]Women who take domestic jobs in Middle Eastern countries do not incur any initial costs, as those are covered by their employer.

Table 3. Changes in labor migration.

	2000–2009	2010-
Migration trends	Young men started leaving their villages after high school	Each family has a member whose main income source is labor migration
Major gender and age groups	Young men, married men	Young men, young women, married men, married women
Major domestic destinations	Ho Chi Minh city (factories), Central Highlands (coffee, forestry)	Coastal industrial zones, Ho Chi Minh City (factories), Hanoi (service sector)
Major international destinations	Malaysia, Laos, Sea (fishing boat crews)	Angola, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Middle East, Europe

At our research site, apart from rice grown for home consumption, households who own more than two hectares of farm land typically invest in agroforestry, such as pulp, timber, tea, and fruit production.[38] Households with limited farmland diversify their production with crops that do not require large financial investments, such as sweet potatoes, cassava, and groundnuts. Pig farming is relatively common among all households.

Farm management during male out migration

Mr. Tien, who is forty-three, lives with his wife and two young children in a recently renovated, large house that is considered a symbol of migration success. He went to Angola in 2012, using a US$5,000 loan, half of which he borrowed from a bank and paid back in eighteen months. Before going to Angola, he replaced the rice, cassava, maize, sweet potatoes, and groundnuts he usually grew on his six hectares of land with acacia trees. These require four years of growth before they can be harvested for pulpwood, and require little labor input while growing. His strategic shift from conventional crops to acacia trees allowed his wife to manage their land during his absence. He returned from Angola in 2016 when the acacia trees were ready to harvest. He spent the money he earned in Angola on a truck, a hut for his wife to use for raising pigs, and house renovations. At the time of our interview, he was about to hire laborers to plant acacia again and then go to work in Eastern Europe for four years.

Similarly, Mr. Nam, forty-nine, worked in Angola for six years and returned home in 2017. During his absence, his two brothers managed his three hectares of land. After his return, he established a small construction company with two friends with whom he had worked in Angola. He said, "Angola was my vocational training. Now I apply it to Vietnam." Meanwhile, he has a crop of acacia trees, worth VND 200 million (US $8,600) at harvest, on his land. He also has planted 100 orange trees.

Another respondent, Ms. Hang, thirty-eight, is the interim head of her household as her husband has been working in Malaysia for six years. The couple previously had worked in a factory in Saigon. They used their savings from that work to build a house and fund his travel to Malaysia. In her husband's absence, Ms. Hang manages their two hectares of land, hires laborers, rents farm equipment, and runs her own grocery store. She grows rice, groundnuts, green beans, maize, soybeans, and cassava, and recently started growing acacia. She told us, "When we used buffaloes for ploughing, we needed male laborers,

[38]In Vietnam, areas are divided administratively into provinces, districts, communes, and villages. Our research was conducted in three villages within a commune.

but now the money can solve it as machines are available." When her husband returns, she plans to focus on her grocery business.

Two other respondents have had very different experiences. Mr. Long, forty-nine, lives with his wife and two teenage boys. His family resettled in this commune two decades ago when his land in his former village was appropriated by the government as part of a dam construction project. He only received two hectares of hilly, unfertile farmland as compensation, on which he and his wife grow a single yearly crop of cassava. Mr. Long previously had worked on a rubber tree plantation, but this shut down after a large typhoon destroyed most of the trees. He then decided to borrow money (approximately US$775) from a labor broker to fund his journey to Malaysia, where he lived for six years, including the last year in prison for being undocumented. He also was cheated by his broker, who paid him only half of his salary, and, as a result, he took two and one-half years to repay his loan. Only after he had left his formal employment and worked illegally was he able to save for remittances. During his absence, his wife continued to grow cassava on their land with support from her brothers-in-law. She also worked as a farm laborer to feed her family. In our interview she recalled this six-year period as "the most difficult time in my life mentally, physically, and economically, as I was even not sure if my husband was still alive [when he was in prison]."

Another informant, Mr. Quan, twenty-eight, only has 0.2 hectares of land, on which his family grows rice, groundnuts, some vegetables, and sweet potatoes. He spent seven years in Saigon working various jobs, including construction, washing motorbikes, and selling goods, only returning home during planting season. His remittances helped his family survive. He then went to Laos for two years, where he found construction work in a Chinese industrial zone. During that time he was able to save enough money to buy a truck. During his absence, his wife looked after their three young children, including a new-born baby, and asked for help with their land from her husband's male cousin.

The above stories show that the absence of male labor does not automatically feminize agriculture nor reduce productivity, especially for those who have some savings. In those cases, wives who remained at home used their husbands' remittances to run businesses. On the other hand, households with limited resources remained dependent on crops such groundnuts, sweet potatoes, and cassava for their livelihoods, using their own manual labor.

Women's migration experiences and their influence in agriculture

Oanh, forty-six, spent two years working in Saudi Arabia, leaving her husband to care for their three sons, who at the time were ten, fourteen, and fifteen years old. Her husband, a carpenter, chose not to migrate for work. The family grew rice, cassava, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, and vegetables on their two hectares of farmland. She thought that going to Saudi Arabia was her only option for moving out of poverty, explaining,

> If I was just a farmer like many other women in this commune, my family could survive but could not get rid of poverty forever. Going to Saudi Arabia was the only way for women like me [uneducated, married and from a rural area] to transform my life.

She saved VND 200 million (US$8,600) during her two years in Saudi Arabia, money they used to renovate their house, pay one of their son's hospital bills, and invest in their land. Her husband purchased acacia trees, while she started to raise pigs and brew rice

wine. All final decisions on crop and livestock investments were made by her, but she let her husband deal with the acacia trees and house renovation. She explained, "He coped with many difficulties during my absence, in particular managing domestic work, and therefore he should be rewarded for that."

In contrast to Oanh's experiences, Hang, aged thirty-eight, and her husband migrated domestically, working together in a Saigon factory for five years after they had married in 2002. This experience shaped her views of personal fashion, appearance, consumption, and livelihood. Although she has returned to living full-time in her rural village, her life is now different. She owns a grocery store, which she funded with her savings and has maintained with her husband's remittances from Malaysia, where he now works. At work she wears cosmetics and dresses smartly, as she does not want to be viewed as a rural farmer. When she is doing agricultural work, she covers her face and body to avoid the sun. She plans to expand her grocery store after her husband returns home and is interested in opening an on-line shop.

Similarly, Phuong, aged fifty-six, started working in Saigon in 2012 after her husband became seriously ill and could no longer work. She asked her husband's brothers to look after the family land and left her teenage daughter to care for her husband. Phuong has worked as a maid, cook, and cleaner in Saigon, and seasonally picks coffee on plantations in the central highlands. By 2018, her husband had fully recovered and started working their land. Phuong, however, has continued working in Saigon. She told us that she did so to pay for her daughter's school fees. However, she also said that what motivates her is that city life is interesting. She has learned about the lives of urban women, such as ways of dressing, cooking, consuming, and saving, and gained self-confidence. She explained, "I did not know how women in urban areas earn, spend, and save money. It was a real eye-opener for me. I am getting old, but I want to work in the city as long as I have good health."

Our last example questions assumptions about older women in rural areas. Giang, aged sixty-two, is a widow with three children. Since her husband died when she was in her thirties, her brothers-in-law have been the de facto owners of her husband's land, which means she has had to support her children by working as a hired agricultural laborer and raising pigs. She traveled to Angola in 2014 for work when her children were in high school. In Angola, she was a cook for Vietnamese workers, grew vegetables, and worked on construction sites. She used her remittances to pay her children's school fees and their living costs, and recently spent part of her savings on a cow as a gift for her daughter, who at the time was soon to be married. After returning from Angola, she decided to work in Hanoi as a maid. Her primary motivation for not retiring is that she wants to be economically independent and not bother her children. As one of her sons lives in Hanoi and the other in Saigon, she only returns to her village every three to four months to maintain her house.

These stories show that women's experiences of moving away from their rural homes change their perceptions about their lives and livelihoods. Like male migrant workers, these women have pursued their own interests.

Livelihoods after returning

In the study commune, men's power within their families and in society is closely associated with their degree of material wealth (e.g. owning a house, truck) and occupations.

Engaging in conventional farming (e.g. rice and low-value cash crops) by their own manual labor is no longer considered a respectable occupation for working aged men. Labor migration is believed to be the first step in achieving social status. Among our seven male respondents, five had used their savings from migration for building or renovating houses and/or purchasing a truck. Labor migration helped some men to increase their social status very quickly, such as Mr. Nghia and Mr. Nam. For others, this took a long time.

Mr. Kien, for instance, moved to Malaysia for work in 2001. Upon his return to the commune, he married, built a house, and opened a mobile phone shop, while his wife, who is a pharmacist, opened a pharmacy in their house. In 2012, he inherited land from his father. However, his farm plots were scattered in different areas, so he exchanged some plots with his neighbors to consolidate five hectares. In 2017, he hired laborers to plant acacia trees. When the trees are ready to be harvested in 2021, he expects to earn VND 100 million (US$4,300). Mr. Kien and his wife's regular income from their shops have enabled this long-term investment in farming. He said, "When I graduated high school, I did not want to be a farmer like my dad. If I had not gone to Malaysia, it would have been difficult to invest in agriculture in this way."

Similarly, Mr. Quan, who had worked various jobs in Saigon for ten years, eventually found work in Laos. When he returned home he used a loan from a private money lender to purchase a truck. After more than ten years of difficulty as a casual laborer for the survival of his family, truck driving is a job which he feels proud of, as he is independent and can be close to his family. His monthly income averages VND six to ten million (approximately US$260 to US$430), and he intends to repay his loan in 2020.

Some men, however, had unfortunate migration experiences and have not been able to improve their socio-economic conditions. Mr. Viet is a carpenter and only owns enough land for a small vegetable garden. He found work in Angola but had to return to Vietnam after one year after the currency exchange rate fell almost fifty percent. After his return he reopened his carpentry workshop, but he had lost his regular customers and did not have the money to hire workers. To compensate for his reduced income, he and his wife started selling mattresses and gas for cooking, which earns them enough to survive. His old wooden house is a symbol of his failure as a labor migrant, a point he mentioned three times during our interview. Similarly, Mr. Long, who had worked in Malaysia, invested in six buffaloes after his return home. However, one day, he was injured while pulling the buffaloes and required an emergency operation. He sold the buffaloes, and was incapacitated for a year. Since then he has worked twelve hours a day in a factory in the province, a job which requires four hours of daily commuting. Last year, he finally was able to invest in acacia trees on one-third of his land, as his children had finished school and he expects to have some additional income from them in the coming years. On the rest of their land his wife grows groundnuts, soybeans, and rice.

Women migrants have different pathways to improving their lives and different influences on agriculture compared to men migrants. Women respondents invested their earnings in various ways for their economic independence and to ensure long-term security, including intergenerational investment from mother to daughter. As discussed above, Ms. Giang bought a cow for her daughter. She wanted her daughter to have an asset so that she does not need to be fully dependent on her husband. Similarly, Ms. Phuong has used her earnings to pay for her daughter's school fees. She told us that her daughter

was the only student in her secondary school class who had continued on to a university, and she is very proud of this. Other women invested their savings in their own businesses. Ms. Loan opened a coffee shop, while Ms. Hang runs a grocery shop.

Ms. Oanh, who previously worked as a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia, has invested some of her savings in raising pigs and brewing rice wine. In her husband's absence Ms. Hang has chosen to plant long-maturing crops and hire machines to reduce needed manual labor so she has time to manage her grocery shop. Ms. Phuong has continued to work as a labor migrant even after her husband recovered from illness. These women have chosen diverse pathways to improve their lives. Although we have presented a limited number of cases, these demonstrate that all women do not choose to work in agriculture when given alternatives.

Discussion

Literature on labor migration suggests that male migration may lead to increased burdens at home for women and reduced agricultural productivity.[39] In this case study, we did not observe such a general trend. Women who remain at home when their husbands migrate for work do not necessarily bear additional labor burdens. If families plant longer-maturing crops with low labor demands, such as acacia trees, male relatives are available to take care of their land, or if money is available to rent machinery or hire laborers. For families with limited land holdings or financial resources, the situation is different. Spouses who remain at home compensate for the shortage of agricultural and household labor by drawing on family members' labor, regardless of gender.

We found no clear trend of a feminization of agriculture among the households we observed that included male labor migrants. Instead, our findings support critics of this feminization approach, who note that it tends to view women as one unified category, generalize gendered trends, and overlook diversity among women.[40] The literature also shows that, in some contexts in which gender norms are relatively relaxed, male absence can lead to women's increased control over agricultural management.[41] For example, Mr. Tien controlled his acacia trees while absent for work and Mr. Nam's brothers controlled his, not his wife. Although Ms. Hang managed her family's land during her husband's absence, this was a temporary role, and her focus was on managing her grocery store. The literature also argues that migration may discourage smallholders from continuing to farm. In this case, however, family farmland remained important for men of all economic standing, albeit for different reasons. In the past, labor migration was supplemental to agricultural production, and both men and women were usually at home during the peak farming seasons. Now, agriculture is aligned with both the migration cycle and non-agricultural business cycle. This situation is different from that in provinces close to Hanoi, where women migrants frequently return to their village for agricultural and domestic work.[42]

Second, this study highlights women migrants' agency, negotiations over gender roles, and their use of remittances. Gender roles are flexible and women adapt to new roles as

[39]Graham et al. 2015; Wu and Ye 2016; Nurick and Hak 2019; Pattnaik et al. 2018.
[40]Chant 2006; Bieri 2014.
[41]Lukasiewicz 2011.
[42]Resurreccion and Ha 2007; Nguyen 2014b.

breadwinners at various life stages. Yet women's migration does not necessarily bring about a transformation in patriarchal gender relations, because of strategic negotiations to maintain family harmony.[43] Ms. Oanh chose to let her husband manage their acacia trees. By doing so, her husband achieved a certain social status as a progressive male farmer, and existing patriarchal gender norms that mandate women to be dutiful, sacrifice for their families, and respect their husbands were sustained.[44] However, this can also be interpreted as an example of women's "secret agency,"[45] an unthreatening approach to pursue their own interests without conflict.

In contrast, Ms. Hang, who used to work in Saigon, ran her own business and hired agricultural laborers to work the family land in her husband's absence. This can be viewed as an example of the transformation of gender relations in the sense that she created a new gender model of being a female farm manager, which challenges the existing gender norm that men manage family land. The stories of Ms. Phuong and Ms. Giang question stereotypical perceptions that old women remain at home as unpaid labors and caregivers. These two women spent their savings on their daughters rather than their sons, although it is usually sons in Vietnamese culture who are supposed to care for parents. Similarly, Tamara Jacka points out that in the past, the safety net in rural China for women entailed the exchange of unpaid labor (care work) for being cared for in their old age. This assumption no longer holds in migration settings in which household members are mobile and dynamic.[46] Earning income and investing in their daughters as well as sons is a new way of ensuring long-term security for women in rural migration settings in countries such as China and Vietnam. Although women's earnings are less likely to be invested in agriculture, this does not mean that women are not interested in using their remittances for investing in agriculture. With increasing female labor migration, it is important for agricultural planners to offer spaces for women to invest in new crops and livestock so that they can take the lead and have control.

Finally, we have examined diverse processes in which male and female labor migration has led to different outcomes. Some economic survey data in Vietnam shows that remittances from labor migration are effectively used for improving rural agriculture,[47] but this data masks variations within communities in terms of choices and experiences. In this study, one-time international migration for work by both women and men generates capital to invest in housing, agricultural production, and other businesses. In some cases, men's remittances were also used for facilitating women's management roles in both agricultural production and non-agricultural businesses. This shows that women can become economically independent through remittances if their husbands have sufficient incomes. These cases may contribute to transforming gender roles and relations in this commune. In some cases, however, a family's economic situation has worsened after male migration. For example, both Mr. Viet and Mr. Long had to engage in physically intense and dangerous work after returning home. Their failure as migrant laborers also jeopardized their self-worth, as other men demonstrated their success in migration by renovating their houses or buying trucks.

[43]Thao and Agergaard 2012; Hoang and Yeoh 2011.
[44]Resurreccion and Ha 2007.
[45]Leshkowich 2001, 9.
[46]Jacka 2018.
[47]Huy and Nonneman 2016.

Wealth accumulation through labor migration is thus diverse, contributing to the reproduction of gender relations as well as social class differences.[48] While women's empowerment is a major gender strategy in agricultural development across the world, and is very important, this study reminds us that not all men benefit from patriarchy. Supporting men in disadvantaged positions is as important as supporting women. Hence, agricultural innovations with short-cycle and low-investment crops and practices are required for the poor. The value of innovation should be assessed by adoptability for those specific populations rather than by the degree of increased yield and income.[49]

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[48]Ye 2014.
[49]See for example, Taylor and Bhasme 2019.

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