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# Migration journeys: The experiences of ethnic minority men and women in Vietnam – China border areas

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**Abstract.** Each year thousands of ethnic minority people in Vietnam – China border areas illegally cross from Vietnam into China to involve themselves in non-contract manual labour jobs. The research was conducted in the Lung Khuu Nhin commune, Muong Khuong district, Lao Cai province with 100 direct questionnaire and 10 in-depth interviews with migrants and local officials. All interviews were translated into local ethnic minority languages. The following explains unique experiences of both males and females at all stages of the migration process as well as its impacts on gender relations. The research highlighted gender differences in their migration journeys. Based on the survey participants' assessment, migration had both positive and negative gender impacts, in which men reported more positive experiences while women suffered from more negative effects at community, family and personal levels. Additionally, research participants stated increased family incomes. Mobility and social network were also improved. On the contrary, migration also created adverse impacts on gender relations in family and in the community as a whole.

## 1. Introduction

Globally, international migration has become an established feature of contemporary social and economic life. A growing body of research focuses on migration and gender using increasingly sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools. Scholarly research on migration has successfully brought female migration to the forefront in many disciplines (Piper, 2005) [9]. However, in an effort to make women more visible in migration researches, there is a chance that the researchers will over-emphasize the migration experiences and the vulnerability of women (Boyd & Grico, 2003; Carling, 2005 [3, 4].

Regarding the “illegal” side of migration, women are often portrayed in publications relating to prostitution and trafficking (Schrover, Leun, Lucassen, & Quispel, 2008) [10]. In this article, the author shift the focus from trafficking discourse to the other, underexplored gender issues of irregular migration. This type of migration is often chosen by the excluded and vulnerable people including the poor and the ethnic minority (Fleury, 2016) [5].

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, a review of the literature will be completed and the research context will be explained. This will be followed by an analysis of gendered experiences of ethnic minority men and women as well as their assessments of gender impacts on their relations within families and community. The paper will be concluded with a discussion of some of the main possibilities and challenges created by new pressures and rapid changes in this previously isolated



community.

## **2. Literature review: gender aspects of migration**

The literature described many aspects of gendered migration experiences and irregular migration. Migration processes were described in two ways: the physical move from one location to another (place of origin and destination location) (Piper, 2005) [9] and pre-migration and post migration stages (over time) (Boyd & Grico, 2003) [3]. The women's migration experiences were also analysed in various aspects such as the drivers of migration, gender segregation in labour migration and constraints during migration journeys. Men were often increasingly absent in migration and gender publications. Piper (2005) and Fleury (2016) suggest they met more favourable conditions than the women whilst on their migration journey [9, 5].

At the person's origin society, two main issues are highlighted: the situation of "the left behind" and the change of gender roles/dynamics as a result of migration (Piper, 2005) [9]. Women migrants were found to have stronger family ties (Carling, 2005) [4] and therefore displayed increased longing to remain connected with their place of origin. In their destination society, women often reported feeling empowered with a greater sense of autonomy and access to resources.

Irregular migration is a global phenomenon characterised by the movement of a person or group of persons from one location to another, outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries (IOM, 2011) [7]. Women do not generally choose this dangerous type of migration, however it is more prevalent in rural societies where poverty rates are high and women's social networks may encourage the behaviour (Fleury, 2016) [5]. Schrover, Leun, Lucassen, & Quispel (2008) also suggests the increased number of women involved in irregular migration is due to the feminisation of poverty<sup>i</sup> and to a lesser extent, an increase in female trafficking [10].

When arriving at their destination, women also faced additional vulnerabilities relating to forced prostitution, trafficking for marriage and other forms of violence and discrimination. They also encountered legal restrictions; limitations placed on their mobility and decreased economic opportunities. Those women who migrated legally did not face these issues as frequently.

Women's migration experiences were generally described referring to the drivers of migration, gender segregation in labour migration and constraints during migration journeys while the literature referred positively to men's experiences. It was noted that men would often disappear in the migration picture or they are portrayed as meeting favourable conditions in the migration journeys (Piper, 2005; Fleury, 2016) [9, 5].

Women were more likely to migrate if they were born into poverty, were from rural areas or lacked technical skills and higher education (Fleury, 2016; O'Neil, Fleury, & Foresti, 2016) [5, 8]. Lone migration of women was common, as women moved to enhance their economic opportunities by seeking jobs and education. In many cases, women migrate to for marriage or due to gender-based structural inequalities and discrimination at home (Piper, 2005; Fleury, 2016) [9, 5].

Migration can also have positive and negative outcomes. Fleury (2016) noted it empowered women through increased access to employment and education, decreasing gender inequality and generally facilitating a greater understanding of stereotypes and bias [5]. However, it may also exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in the case of illegal migration. In some contexts, some women and men gain more autonomy and mobility and in other contexts, discriminatory attitudes to women become stronger when they cannot fulfil their traditional roles at home.

Rather than looking at women as individuals, this article focuses on both poor ethnic minority women and men's migration experiences and its impact on gender relations. Their experiences are discussed referring to the migration mechanism itself, the type of job and salary level they gain at the destination (China) and the 'push and pull' factors for migration (these are explained later).

## **3. Research context and design of study**

Uneven socioeconomic development between China and Vietnam encourage Vietnamese people to seek new opportunities through cross-border economic activities or migration (Bélanger, Le, & Khuat,

2005). However, China and Vietnam do not have an official bilateral agreement for the export-import of workers in border areas. Labour migration from Vietnam to China is thus largely prompted by individual initiatives, although some private agents actively recruit potential workers. As it is unofficial, this recruitment is not subject to any official regulations or guidelines.

Lung Khau Nhin is one of the poorest border communes in Vietnam. It constitutes of seven ethnic minorities. According to the statistics of the Vietnam Ministry of Public Security (2015), from 2011 to 2015, more than 20 thousand people from 10 border provinces migrated to China. Among them female migrants made up 60% (Huong & Van, 2015) [6].

After snowball sampling, interviews were completed with 100 participants. Following this, more detailed 'focus interviews' were carried out with four local leaders and six male and female migrants. All the interviews were translated into local ethnic minority languages. Interview participants included 50% women and 50% men. Among them, 22% were aged 20-35 (14% male, 8% female), 75% aged 35-60 (36% male, 39% female) and three per cent over 60 (all of them women). 84% were married and 16% were widowed/divorced. Participant education level was low: 51% completed primary education, 24% had never gone to school, 23% had reached secondary education and only 2% had completed high school. 58% of the households were also from a low socioeconomic status (as per the Vietnamese Poverty Standard, 2016). Impacts on gender relations were measured through Likert scale, where impacts were reported on a scale of one to five (one = lowest, five = highest) at personal, family and community levels.

#### **4. Experiences of men and women during the migration journeys**

The research recognized gender differences in terms of migration way, migration time and frequency, types of jobs, push and pull factors as well as risks and difficulties during the journeys.

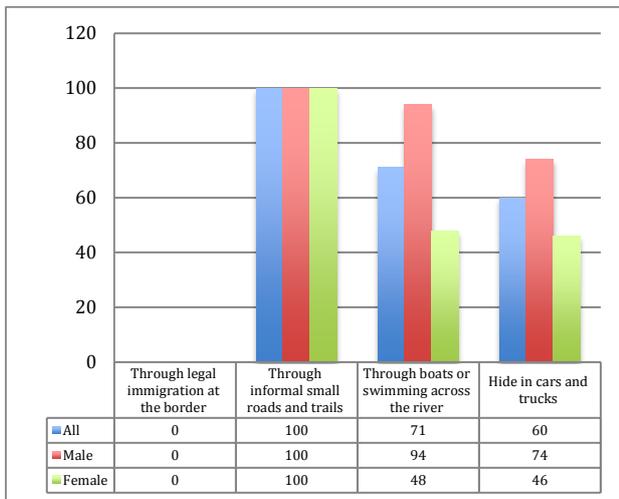
##### *Chosen Migration method and migration time:*

100% of respondents chose informal ways of crossing the border. These included small mountain paths, boats, swimming across the river or hiding in cars and trucks. Of the men interviewed, all men chose small roads and trails (100%, the same as women), boats and swimming (94%) and to a lesser extent, hiding in cars and trucks (74%). Women seemed to choose safer way when boats and swimming accounted for 48% and the remain made up for 46%. Men also travelled at different times of the year (Leisure time: 100%, Before Tet holiday: 64% and Flexible time: 78%)<sup>ii</sup>. Women also migrated during 'leisure time' (100%), before Tet holiday (58%), but were more restricted to migrate in flexible time than the men (22%).

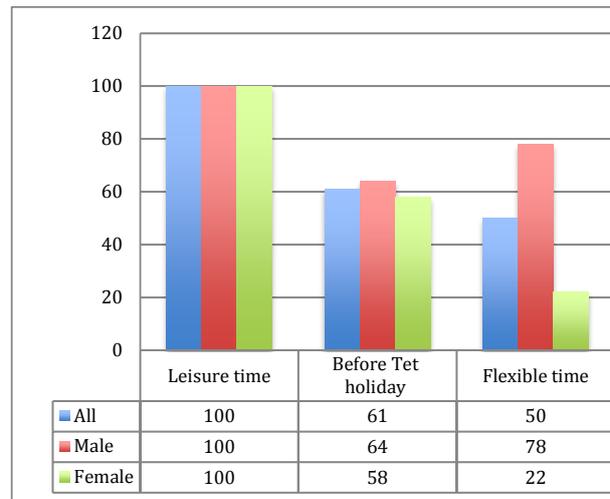
A migration story from one of the participants:

*"I have moved across China in many ways, as long as the borderland security men can not see me. I have tried many ways such as through informal small roads and trails, through boats across the river or hide in trucks"*

*(31-year-old male migrant)*



**Figure 1.** Migration methods (Unit %)



**Figure 2.** Migration time of year (Unit %)

Men’s time spent at their destination lasted longer than women (3-4 months) as their time was more flexible and they could move as needed (48% and 32% respectively). Most women chose to stay for a shorter time period (1-2 months) (50%). The frequency of men’s migration was also higher than women’s per year.

***Type of job and salary level at destination (China)***

On their arrival in China, 100% of migrants chose non-contract manual jobs. Men’s jobs included: wood transporting and exploitation, developing forests, pesticide spraying etc. Women chose jobs such as replantation, weeding, planting bananas or pines, harvesting agricultural products etc. 21% of men used to work in the industrial or service factories, however women accounted for only 4%.

The average salary in China was much higher than the minimum living standard in Vietnam <sup>iii</sup>. Men’s income per day was VND 247,000 (higher than women’s at 40,000VND/day).

Migrants always used their network in China to find jobs on arrival, and did not need to pay any fee for a broker (all fees were paid by their new employer) making migration a more attractive option.

***Push and pull factors: factors leading to migration***

100% of migrants illegally moved to China due to poverty. After harvest, they could not find work and were forced into unemployment. The impacts of climate change and natural disasters often forced migration due to loss of land (56%). More specifically, women faced additional challenges around gender inferiority, prejudice and family conflicts. They also migrated to seek a more prosperous marriage (44%).

*“My children have been married already. I want to cross the border to forget the memories in Vietnam. I had conflicts with my family.... I also want to get married with a Chinese. But my son does not allow me to do so.”*

*(62 year-old female widow)*

*“My husband has some relationships outside our marriage. I want to find jobs in China to escape from my sad situation”.*

*(35 year-old female migrant)*

*“I have seen many cases which women migrate then find opportunities to get married with Chinese. They have conflicts with family or the single women face hard life and discrimination.”*  
(33 year-old female Women’s Union official)

**Table 1.** Push and pull factors of migrations

Push Factors (%)			Pull Factors (%)				
	All	F	M		All	F	M
• Want to move	20	28	12	• High income	100	100	100
• Inferiority and prejudice	22	44	0	• Have opportunities to get married with Chinese	23	44	2
• Family conflicts	39	62	16	• More favourable living conditions	0	0	0
• No jobs during leisure after harvest time	93	92	86				
• Poverty	94	45	49				
• Climate change issues	56	58	54				

#### ***Difficulties and risks during migration journeys***

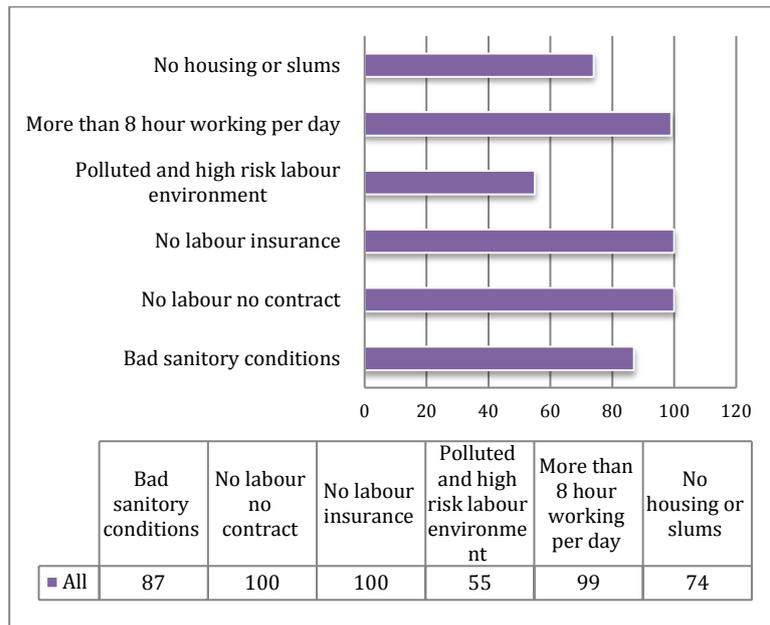
Due to the illegal nature of migration activities, migrants were not entitled to the same basic rights as they had in Vietnam or as a local Chinese citizen. They had no access to labour contracts or protection policies. Therefore migrants lived in unsanitary (55%), degraded and unsecure living conditions (74%). Nearly all (99%) participants reported they were exploited at work (long hours and hard labour).

*“I worked from 5am until night.”*

*(62-year-old female migrant)*

*“I worked for 12-13 hours per day, very hard working. I just want to earn money for my family living. I have no choice even I know that there will be risks and danger”*

*(28-year-old female migrant).*



**Figure 3.** Difficulties during migration (Unit: %)

There are also gender differences in difficulties and risks along the migration journeys that men and women confronted. Male migrants in particular, faced increased risks like being lured into gambling and prostitution (76% male and 28% female) and engaging in criminal activities including smuggling and drugs (52% of men and 14% of women).

*“I, as the loader, can earn much money (one million VND per night). However the goods were contraband. I worked at night, very dangerous and tired. If I need money in urgency, I am ready for that choice.*

*(31 year old male migrant)*

**Table 2.** Gender differences in risks and difficulties (Unit: %)

<b>Gender differences in difficulties and risks during migration journeys</b>	<b>Male (%)</b>	<b>Female (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
<i>Accidents during the transition</i>	20	6	13
<i>Accidents at work</i>	40	18	29
<i>Labour exploitation</i>	92	84	88
<i>Be treated badly by the employer</i>	78	46	62
<i>Money fraud by the money brokers</i>	46	40	43
<i>Money fraud by the employer</i>	50	30	40
<i>Being lured into marriage with Chinese</i>	2	82	42
<i>Being imprisoned by the employer</i>	22	16	19
<i>Being lured into crimes (smuggle, drugs...)</i>	52	14	33
<i>Arrested and sanctioned by Chinese authorities</i>	8	4	6
<i>Being lured into social evils (gambling, drugs, prostitution etc.)</i>	76	28	52
<i>Seek relationships outside of the marriage</i>	58	28	43
<i>No remittances sending home</i>	64	10	37
<i>Gender discrimination in terms of payment</i>	4	62	33
<i>Sexual harassment or violence</i>	2	84	43
<i>Burglary due to poor living security</i>	56	72	43
<i>High risks of human trafficking</i>	14	52	33

There are various risks and difficulties that men and women faced during their migration journeys. Men and women also experienced accidents at work (40% of men and 18% of women) and during transition from origin to destination country (20% of men and 6% of women). In addition, men tended to seek relationships outside of their marriage more than women during migration (58% of men found sexual partners compared to 28% of women). Men also carried out higher threats of involvement in crimes (52% of men and 14% of women) as well as social evils (76% of men and 28% of women). Women faced a much higher risk of human trafficking (82% of women and 2% of men), gender discrimination (in terms of payments) (62% of women and 4% of men), sexual harassment or violence (84% of women and 2% of men). Men and women both faced high risks of fraud (around 40%), violence from the employer (62%) and burglary (43%). All of them experienced labour exploitation (working for long hours and extensive manual work).

### **5. Impacts on gender relations**

The following findings focus on migration's effects on gender relations. Independent-samples (t-test) were gathered to compare impacts at personal, family and community levels between men and women. The hypothesis tested was that 'migration did bring some positives impacts on ethnic minority men and women (especially in the case of their incomes), but it also caused far more negative impacts'.

The research results show that there was a gender gap between negative and positive impacts on men and women at personal and family levels. The negative impacts had more average scores than the positive ones (positive impacts at personal level (M=2.76); at family level (M=2.35); at community level (M=2.96) compared with those of negatives one (M = 4.65, M = 2.95, M = 4.07 accordingly).

Through the respondents' assessments, men got more scores on positive impacts than women's (at personal level: M=3.56, at family level M=2.52 compared with women's scores M=2.01 and M=2.19 accordingly). There was a significant difference in the scores of positive impacts such as knowledge and capacity (p=0.0), positive personal image (p=0.0), more freedom, more power (p=0.0). Men and

women also suffer negative impacts differently. Women appeared to get more scores on negative impacts regarding feeling of guilt due to the absence from family (p=0.0), changes in roles, and feeling tormented due to more conflicts (p=0.0).

The detailed impacts are described in the table below:

**Table 3.** Respondents’ assessments on Gender impacts at personal, family and community level

(Unit: Score)

Positive impacts	Mean		Paired T-Test	Negative impacts	Mean		Paired T-Test
	Male	Female			Male	Female	
<i>Personal level</i>							
Increased income	M=3.60 (SD=0.78)	M=3.46 (SD=0.71)	t=0.94 Sig (2-tailed)=0.35	More stressed due to high workload	M=4.92 (SD=0.27)	M=4.96 (SD=0.2)	t=-8.37 Sig (2-tailed)=0.405
Increased knowledge and capacity	M=3.20 (SD=0.67)	M=2.54 (SD=1.07)	t=3.7 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***	Health risks	M=4.92 (SD=0.27)	M=4.96 (SD=0.2)	t=-8.37 Sig (2-tailed)=0.405
Positive personal image	M=2.45 (SD=1.18)	M=0.92 (SD=0.59)	t=7.91 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***	Irritable and uncomfortable	M=4.94 (SD=0.24)	M=4.98 (SD=0.14)	t=-1.016 Sig (2-tailed)=0.313
More freedom	M=3.81 (SD=0.7)	M=2.59 (SD=0.86)	t=7.38 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***	Feelings of guilt because of absence from family	M=3.96 (SD=1.1)	M=4.66 (SD=0.7)	t=-3.8 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***
More power on making decision	M=4.19	M=1.36	t=18.22 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***	Feel tormented due to more conflicts	M=3.62 (SD=1.24)	M=4.54 (SD=0.79)	t=-4.42 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***
More recognition	M=4.11	M=1.2	t=18.12 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***				
Total on average	M=3.51	M=2.13	Total on average (Both male and female) = 2.76	Total on average	M=4.47	M=4.82	Total on average (Both male and female) = 4.65
<i>Family level</i>							
Feel secure on economic conditions	M=2.48 (SD=1.0)	M=2.64 (SD=0.85)	t=-0.85 Sig (2-tailed)=0.395	More pressure on partner	M=1.74 (SD=1.04)	M=2.44 (SD=1.51)	t=-2.69 Sig (2-tailed)=0.009**
Indirectly increase the whole family’s income	M=1.08 (SD=0.44)	M=1.28 (SD=0.78)	t=-1.57 Sig (2-tailed)=0.12	Partner feeling jealous/uncomfortable	M=3.76 (SD=1.1)	M=4.04 (SD=1.9)	t=-0.94 Sig(2-tailed)=0.352
Positive family relationship	M=1.82 (SD=0.94)	M=1.74 (SD=1.07)	t=0.4 Sig (2-tailed)=0.692	Partner doesn’t like the changes in role	M=2.00 (SD=1.1)	M=3.92 (SD=1.83)	t=-6.33 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***
Partner accept changes in roles	M=4.72 (SD=0.54)	M=2.66 (SD=1.19)	t=11.172 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***	More conflicts with partner	M=3.42 (SD=1.05)	M=3.84 (SD=1.80)	t=-1.43 Sig (2-tailed)=0.158
Feel secure on economic conditions	M=2.48 (SD=1.0)	M=2.64 (SD=0.85)	t=-0.85 Sig (2-tailed)=0.395	More conflicts with other family members	M=1.46 (SD=1.13)	M=2.86 (SD=1.59)	t=-5.08 Sig (2-tailed)=0.0***
Total on average	M=2.52	M=2.19	Total on average (Both male and female) = 2.35		M=2.48	M=3.42	Total on average (Both male and female) = 2.95
<i>Community level</i>							
Community all raise income	M=3.06 (SD=1.22)	M=3.04 (SD=1.25)	t=0.81 Sig (2-tailed)=0.94	More social evils	M=4.84 (SD=0.42)	M=4.5 (SD=0.79)	t=2.69 Sig (2-tailed)=0.008**
Increase community solidarity	M=1.24 (SD=0.74)	M=1.26 (SD=0.66)	t=-0.14 Sig (2-tailed)=0.88	Public security disorder	M=4.42 (SD=0.99)	M=3.96 (SD=1.4)	t=1.897 Sig (2-tailed)=0.061

Positive	Mean	Paired T-Test	Negative impacts	Mean	Paired T-Test		
Introduce jobs to other community members	M=4.54 (SD=0.61)	M=4.61 (SD=0.6)	t=-0.83 Sig (2-tailed) =0.411	More community conflicts	M=3.38 (SD=1.48)	M=3.32 (SD=1.71)	t=0.19 Sig (2-tailed) =0.852
Total on average	M=2.95	M=2.97	Total on average (Both male and female) = 2.96	M=4.21	M=3.92	Total on average (Both male and female) = 4.07	

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

## 6. Discussion

The research highlighted that men and women had differences experiences during their migration journeys. The impacts on gender relations on men and women were also disaggregated in different scores.

Men seemed to get more mobility during migration journeys (M=3.81 compared with women's average scores M=2.59). This results also presented in the migration way, time and frequency when men tended to have more flexible choices. Men in the literature described their migration as spontaneous, casual, and independent (Carling, 2005). However, through our men's narratives, they also experienced a high level of fear and significant pressure to escape from destination authorities, due to more dangerous choices resulting from their migration.

Traditional research often frames women as the only vulnerable individuals during migration. However, this research highlighted men also face significant risks in terms of participating in potentially risky activities (illegal gambling, crime, drugs, prostitution). They also experienced more accidents during migration than women. In turn, these activities exacerbated the conflicts in family relationships. Increased stress, pressure and disputes were acknowledged in the scores above. However, men also experienced positive impacts reporting feeling generally empowered (after receiving high scores on positive images).

As previously mentioned, women certainly experienced unique and significant hardships and challenges (human trafficking, gender discrimination, sexual harassment and fraud). However, migration is the way they chose to find new lives and escape from sad memories, discrimination and conflicts at home. Besides, they generally migrated within their family context therefore facing additional torment and guilt due to resistance to their change in gender role (empowerment, increased autonomy, access to education in China); resulting in conflict with other family members.

With respect to post migration, both women and men had to work for long hours and experience discrimination as well as violence.

## 7. Conclusion

Labour migration had helped people of ethnic minorities raise income and develop their social network. However, due to the illegality, migration had caused negative impacts on gender relations at personal, family and community levels.

In this study, the sample size was small, so that it can not represent the whole irregular migration picture in Vietnam. Despite that, this research has highlighted the gendered experiences during the journeys as well as underlined the gender impacts at personal, family and community levels. In the future study, it is recommended that the gender relations can be explored more in the destination country and involve the destination perspectives such as policies, laws with the participation of local authorities in the migration research.

In fact, migration is the global phenomena that we need consider it carefully. On the one hand, migration did help the migrants raise income, mobility and social network. On the other hand, due to the situation of "illegality", migration can aggravate gender gaps and gender relations. It can cause discrimination, violence to human rights. It is important to open the legal migrant flows, which should be managed scrupulously (ActionAid, 2011) [1].

Men's experiences and their resistance to changes in gender roles need to be acknowledged more in gender and migration research. The changes and challenges in their lives caused by migration should be taken account into future study. Ideally, these gender issues can be identified and appropriate responses given by government in both places of destination and origin. This would involve, to some extent, developing programs that recognise women's contribution to the economic development (through migration and remittances), supporting both women and men to new roles, creating more gender-equitable relationships within the household and community, and improving both men's and women's access to stable and sustainable incomes and livelihoods at the origin society and through the legal migration flows. The programs should recognize rapid changes in socio-economic situation as well as in cultural values in the transforming society.

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<sup>i</sup> Feminisation of poverty: an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among women and among men.

<sup>ii</sup> Flexible Time: Migration timing is unrestricted. No time constraints. Before Tet holiday: Before New Year celebrations, occurring annually during January and February each year (dates change according to lunar cycle). Leisure Time: Occurs after one harvest (From October to April in the next year).

<sup>iii</sup> The minimum income standard is VND 2,760,000/month – equal to VND 92,000/day (2018).