

From Farmers' Daughters to Foreign Wives: Marriage, Migration and Gender in Sending Communities of Vietnam

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Since the mid 1990s, increasing numbers of young Vietnamese women have married internationally, left Vietnam, and migrated to their foreign husbands' country of residence. While some women married members of the Vietnamese diaspora community or men from Europe, Australia, and North America (Thai 2008), most marriage migrants during the 1995–2009 period married Taiwanese and South Korean men. Estimates are that approximately 110,000 Vietnamese women have married in Taiwan and 25,000 in South Korea. In these two destination countries, Vietnamese women are the second largest group of female foreign spouses, following women from Mainland China (Belanger, Lee, and Wang 2009). In communities of origin, marriage migration tends to be a 'location-specific phenomenon' due, in part, to personal networks, but mostly to the recruitment strategies of brokers and matchmaking agencies who largely control this migration (Wang and Chang 2002).

The aim of this paper is to explore the significance of this recent migration for gender in the marriage migrants' communities of origin. How migration might or might not contribute to reconfiguring gender in Asia has been the subject of recent inquiries that examine migration as a factor of social transformation. Studies investigating the nexus of marriage, migration, and mobility have taken place in the context of Asia's increasing share of women among its international migrant population, a phenomenon usually called the 'feminization of migration' (Castles and Miller 2003; Hugo 2005).

Gender, as a structuring element of the entire process and experience of migration, has been examined from various angles. Many studies on sending areas of Asia focus on the impact of male or female labour migration on migrants themselves and on household members 'left behind'. In this paper, we examine a migration flow with different characteristics than labour

migration: most migrants are young women in their late teens and early twenties who become permanent residents after migrating. They have the legal right to work, can apply for citizenship after a few years of residency in their destination country, and are parachuted into a 'local' family through their international marriage, unlike other migrants who tend to live in enclaves with members of their own ethnic communities at their work place.¹

In this study, we focus on how this migration alters the gendered positioning of migrants in the eyes of their families and other community members. We consider changes experienced by men and women in the migrants' home communities—the so-called 'left behind.' Our analysis relies on a study we conducted in 2007 in three southern communities of Vietnam that are notorious for having sent large numbers of migrant wives to Taiwan and South Korea over the past decade. A survey of four hundred households and thirteen qualitative interviews was collected to explore community members' perspectives on how marriage migration affects the social fabric of their families and localities. We document how study participants attributed the repositioning of four groups of individuals to marriage migration: (1) migrants themselves, (2) women living in migrant households, (3) young village women, and (4) men of marriageable age. These data thus give a voice to migrant families and other community members (non-migrant families and leaders) in their roles as 'actors of change,' rather than 'subjects of change.' As such, this paper puts migrant families and other community members center stage in assessing how migration impacts on them and their localities.

Our findings point to an overall significant impact on gender and power relations within households and on the local marriage market. Narratives and survey results suggest that remittances significantly increase emigrant daughters' status and power in their native households, even while living abroad. Results also indicate that increased opportunities for marital options (local or international), upward socioeconomic mobility, and international migration provide young single women and their families with enhanced bargaining power in local marriage transactions. In contrast, young men, particularly those deemed to have little value on the marriage market, find themselves disadvantaged and experience marriage migration negatively. A woman's migration for marriage does not change or benefit her sisters' position in the migrant household; however, migrants' mothers are likely to hold power over remittances and their use. Overall, the 'gender balance sheet' of marriage migration on sending communities results in positive changes to gendered power relations for young women and negative changes for young men. This leads us to argue that marriage migration has the power to reconfigure gender in sending localities, particularly in communities that send large numbers

1 This is particularly the case for factory workers. Domestic workers also live with 'local' households.

of migrants.

Gender, Migration, and Social Change in Sending Communities

This research draws from a body of literature putting 'gender' squarely on the shoulders of migration studies. The gendered nature of migration is situated within a gendered political economy and a global patriarchal system (Piper and Roces 2003), which, in turn, creates transnational gendered spaces (Danneker 2005). Gender is a constitutive element of migration because 'gender permeates a variety of practices, identities, and institutions' (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, p. 117). The conceptualization of migration as a factor of social transformation is also central to this study (Schuerkens 2005). Social change brought about by international migration includes the reconfiguration of gender relations and norms (Danneker, 2005, 2009; Rahman, 2007, 2009). Although international emigrants and immigrants may only account for small proportions of national populations in Asia, the local impact they have on gender and other aspects of social change can be significant.

Also informing this analysis are recent debates about the relationship between migration and development. Piper (2009) calls for a more comprehensive 'social perspective' departing from the prevailing one largely focusing on remittances and the economic impact of migration. She argues that recently there has been a shift from examining 'the impact of migration on development' to exploring 'migrants' contribution to development' (Piper 2009, p. 94). The effects of migration on the social fabric of origin countries falls under the 'social development approach to migration' (Ibid.). In this analysis, we use this new lens and focus on the migrant households' and communities' experience with emigration, an approach adopted by Rahman (2009) in a longitudinal study on how labour migration impacts sending communities in Bangladesh.

Researchers have studied changes in household gender relations resulting from international migration using three indicators: (1) the gendered division of labour, (2) women's participation in decision-making, and (3) women's role as family heads (Rahman 2007). The purpose of these studies is largely to scrutinize whether out-migration of male relatives and remittances plays a part in empowering and emancipating women who remain at home.

With respect to the gendered division of labour, empirical evidence shows that women who stay behind are more likely to take on additional productive roles, which were carried out by their husbands prior to their migration. Women are no longer perceived as being passive and dependent on male relatives, but as being more active and autonomous in the management

of family affairs (see, for instance, the studies of Go and Postrado 1986; Gulati 1986; Rahman 2007).

A number of studies assessing women's role in decision-making have documented increased power over family resources, especially overseas remittances sent home by male relatives. Hadi's study on Bangladesh (2001) reveals that flows of remittances from overseas tacitly undermine the traditional domains of men, while significantly modifying gender roles and, hence, women's decision-making capacity. Remittances provide women with direct access to resources and greater control over spending that subsequently enables them to change their position. Evidence from existing literature also shows that the capacity to control remittances enables left behind wives to ease their physical labour burden by hiring other people to do certain domestic and farm work (see the review by de Haas 2007). Overall, in the absence of a husband or other adult men, women seem to enjoy increased freedom and autonomy in managing their households (Rahman 2009). As a result, this may help women develop new interests and discover hidden potentialities (Go and Postrado 1986). In the contexts of countries, like Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines, evidence indicates that women experience enhanced self-confidence and personal growth both inside and outside the household (Arnold 1992).

Notwithstanding, contrary evidence in the literature challenges the gender equalizing effect of migration. Although women gain some autonomy through their participation in family decision-making, control over the use of remittances, and their family headship, these increases in power might be temporary. Despite the long distance, male migrants can still control the use of remittances, as well as important decisions within the households. Some research suggests that gender relations revert back to what they were prior to migration as soon as the men return home (Arnold and Shah 1984; Arnold 1992; de Haas 2007; Hadi 2001). Taking the multiple roles and additional responsibilities of temporary household head, decision-maker, and primary family labourer does not necessarily mean that women's reproductive role is reduced or eased; rather, the physical and emotional burdens might be greater for them (de Haas 2007; Go and Postrado 1986; Rahman 2009).

Few studies have examined the impact of female migration on sending areas. One study on Filipino women migrants indicates that men remaining home in the country of origin do not take on the roles that female emigrants left behind. Instead, these roles become a burden placed on the shoulders of other women in the migrant family (Asis 2001; 2003). Danneker (2005; 2009), a strong advocate of migration's ability to redefine gendered power relations, discusses how international migration opportunities in the manufacturing and service sectors have

challenged gender norms and initiated transformations of gender relations in Islamic societies, like Bangladesh. Because many employers prefer female workers, the demand for women migrant workers puts pressure on societies to accept the idea that women can migrate and cross borders without male guardians. Danneker discusses transnational influences that result in 'the transformations and renegotiations of gender relations' (2005, p. 657). She further argues that "transformation of gender relations is an intrinsic part of the global and regional migration movements and that it is still neglected by much of the mainstream literature on migration, as well as by policy-makers worldwide" (p. 658). The present analysis contributes to filling this gap.

Gender change can emerge from shifts in marital practices and opportunities provoked by emigration. Observations in the context of India show that single men who have worked in the Middle East are considered to be 'at a premium' and 'prized bridegrooms,' compared to the local men, because of their higher earnings and prestige within the community. At the same time, these men's criteria in choosing their partners are also subject to change. For instance, bachelor migrant workers are less interested in the practice of dowry; rather, their potential brides' family status, education, and appearance seem to be of more importance to them (Gulati 1986). Extending these findings to women 'left-behind' in migrant households in rural Bangladesh, Hadi (2001) finds a rejection or reduction of dowries in marriages among migrant families. Moreover, male migrants' agency in choosing their own marriage partners is also documented in the context of patriarchal Asian societies. Being less financially dependent on their parents, due to out-migration and foreign earnings, single men are more likely to refuse the traditional practice of arranged marriage (Rahman 2009).

This robust body of research on the relationship between migration and gender in migrants' communities of origin in Asia relies on the labour migration of men and, to a lesser extent, women. The phenomenon of marriage migration—a female-dominated migration flow whereby the mode of entry is family reunification and not a work contract—has mostly garnered studies on processes in receiving countries (see for instance Wang and Bélanger 2008; Lu 2008; Lee 2008; Wang 2007). In Vietnam, labour migration is celebrated as a development strategy, while marriage migration is criticized for being 'trafficking' or 'women's commodification'; migrants themselves are labelled by state voices as the 'shame of the nation' and 'undutiful daughters not fulfilling their duties towards their country and families' (Belanger, Khuat, and Wang 2007).

Departing from these negative accounts stands a body of recent research putting marriage migrants forward as 'agents' of their own lives, as opposed to victims of trafficking (Constable 2005; Nakamatsu 2005), and criticizing how the labels of 'marriage migrants' or 'foreign

brides' overshadow women's lives and contributions as workers and citizens in destination countries (Piper and Roces 2003). Hugo and Nguyen (2007) documented some of the positive aspects of marriage migration for sending households from Vietnam, but did not examine its significance for gender and family relations.

The Study

This study aimed at documenting the impact of cross-border Asian marriages and migration on the social development in the origin communities of migrants. We collected data in August 2007 in three rural communes of Thot Not District in Can Tho City (Mekong River Delta region, Southwest of Vietnam). We chose this area because large numbers of marriage migrants left this region over the past decade. Commune-level marriage data were available for one of the three communes. Of a total of 1117 marriages that took place between 1999 and 2003 in this commune, nearly one half (45%) were with a foreign groom (mostly Taiwanese). Still in the same commune, an additional 765 women migrated abroad (the total female population 18–35 was 3,125 in 2008) following their marriage to a foreign man between 1999 and 2006. There is no other significant flow of international migration from these communes but some male temporary and circular migration to nearby urban areas and to the city of Ho Chi Minh.

We conducted a survey with 250 marriage migrant sending² (referred to as 'migrant households' thereafter) and 150 non migrant households (control group). Migrant households were defined as having a daughter who left the community following her marriage to a foreign man from Taiwan or South Korea and is currently living in one of these two countries. Because migrant households are concentrated in certain hamlets,³ we chose three to four hamlets in each commune with the largest number of households with women married to East Asian men. In each selected hamlet, based on the lists of households provided by local administrators, we randomly selected the households who have one or more migrants and those who do not. From every household included in the sample, one adult respondent (usually the father or mother of the migrant) was selected.

We designed two questionnaires. The questionnaire designed for migrant households included detailed questions on (1) general information about the household demographic

2 A household was defined as the individuals sharing a residential unit. It is generally composed of married parents and children. In some cases, parents of the husband or the wife live with the married child and his nuclear family.

3 Hamlets are subdivisions of communes.

and socio-economic characteristics, (2) information about the migrant and her international marriage, (3) assessment on the impact of marriage migration on the household, particularly information about remittances (amounts, frequency of reception and the use), and (4) information on the household's living conditions. The questionnaire designed for non-migrant households is shorter and includes: (1) general information about household demographic and socio-economic characteristics, (2) attitudes towards migrant households, and (3) the household's living conditions.

We also conducted thirteen in-depth and three focus group interviews, reaching a total of thirty seven villagers. Individual interviews were conducted with mothers, and younger sisters of marriage migrants and local political leaders; focus group discussions were conducted with representatives of non-migrant households and young and single local men and women. The fieldwork also involved participant observation of community and household relations and informal discussions about cross-border marriages and migration. The present analysis is informed by all data collected, although we particularly bring forward our qualitative evidence.

The Reconfiguration of Gender

The emigrant daughters

We documented elsewhere that more than 90 percent of migrant households received remittances from their emigrant daughters during the twelve months preceding the survey,⁴ and these amounts contributed significantly to the household's income (Bélanger and Tran 2009; Tran 2008). Women's financial contribution led to a reconfiguration of power and gender relations within migrant households. In particular, migrants actively participate in decision-making, as expressed by this mother of an emigrant:

Before, when my daughter did not earn any money, I never asked her anything. I used to make every decision on my own.... Now, since she is the one who supports the whole family, I have to discuss with her about family affairs, such as buying valuable furniture, building a house, organizing a wedding for my son or opening a small shop... Thereby, she will send money to me (Hoa, aged forty-eight years).

Daughters married abroad not only participated in decisions associated with the economic

⁴ The survey analyzed by Hugo and Nguyen based on a larger sample of households reported that 88% of households received remittances from their daughters (Hugo and Nguyen 2005, p. 382). This study also reported a significant impact of remittances on total household income.

welfare of the family, such as purchasing land, buying expensive household assets or building houses, but also exerted some authority in social aspects of family life, including education, health, and the marriages of other family members. Cuc, an emigrant spouse's younger sister, expressed her appreciation of her sister's sacrifice and investment in her schooling:

Interviewer: In the past, did your family refer to your sister's opinion regarding family affairs?

Cuc: Rarely.

Interviewer: What about now?

Cuc: We often ask her about my schooling [...] She said if I still want to continue my schooling, she will create good conditions for me. My family used to face a lot of economic problems. My sister had to sacrifice, so we did not have to drop out of school [...] She encourages me to study well at school so that I will be able to be independent in the future (Cuc, aged twenty years).

Another example of the empowerment of daughters, with respect to the marriage of family members at home, is seen in the statement of a mother of an emigrant:

Interviewer: Did you refer to your daughter's opinion regarding your son's marriage?

Ai: Of course. We discussed together. It was all her money that we spent to celebrate her brother's wedding. Certainly, my son could not have gotten married without her money (Ai, aged fifty-nine years).

Emigrant daughters gained some power, through their involvement in family decision-making and also through their control over the use of remittances in their families of origin, as described by Tham and Ai:

If my Mom wants to buy something valuable, she will ask for money as well as get permission from my sister (who married abroad) ... If my sister does not agree, my Mom will have to think again and consider buying another thing instead (Tham, an emigrant spouse's sister, aged eighteen years).

Normally, if I need to buy or do something using her money ... or give some money to her brother, I will ask her (the emigrant spouse) so that she won't wonder why I use

up the money ... Sometimes she tells me to buy what I don't want and says no to what I want to buy ... If I spend to buy something for myself, she never allows it (Ai, an emigrant spouse's mother, aged fifty-nine years).

The accounts of non-migrant households and other local people gathered through focus group discussions confirmed the widely-held conviction that emigrant women have influences in their natal families. Focus group participants made reference to the remarkable change in the position of daughters as a result of their international marriage—from powerless to empowered—with statements, such as “now since the daughter sends home a lot of money, everything must be approved by her and everybody in the family has to obey her”; “having money means having prestige and authority”; and “if the family wants to buy or do something, they have to phone her to ask for money.”

In some cases, emigrant daughters who failed to send remittances were put down by their family members who resented not receiving money like other families:

Participant #2: There is one case just close to my house. The poor family married their daughter to a Taiwanese man ... When receiving the daughter at the station many years after she left, the mother anxiously inquired to see if she had brought anything home. But when her daughter said that she did not bring any money home, the mother did not speak to her anymore. The daughter thought that, since she did not have money, her mother treated her like that. Thereafter, she went back to Taiwan and did not send any money back home for six or seven years (FGD with non-migrant households).

The accounts from focus group discussions pointed to various manifestations of intergenerational tensions. Tense relationships may result from emigrants' perceived disrespectful attitudes towards their parents and relatives at home.

Participant #3: I know there is a conflict, a conflict between a father and the woman married to a Taiwanese man. When she had money, she came home for a visit. She just indulged in play. Her father tried to admonish her, but she did not listen to him. When she had an argument with her father, she even said that only thanks to her, her father can have money to spend. She then told him that she would not send money back anymore after going back to Taiwan. I find that some women who have money treat their parents, siblings and family clan badly (FGD with non-migrant households).

In addition to the situation described above, familial tensions can also stem from the lack of appreciation and careless use of remittances among family members in the source country, as in the following example:

Participant #9: I know some women who cried a lot when they visited their home. They asked whether the parents knew that they were over head and ears in work in the place of destination in order to earn enough money to send home ... those remaining at home did not appreciate how difficult it is for them to make and send these earnings back home. Some families do not work anymore; they just play and spend the remittances unwisely. They never care about saving money... I feel pity for these women. They keep on crying (FGD with non-migrant households).

We documented elsewhere how remittances often led to dependency for daily expenditures, low demand for work, and higher levels of consumption among family members of migrant households (Bélanger and Tran 2009; Tran 2008). These negative consequences of remittances may create pressure on women to remit more over a longer period of time. Consistent with what Rahman (2007) found in his research on male Bangladeshi temporary migrant workers in Singapore, there is a belief among some remittance-receiving households that 'foreign earnings' are easily earned and, therefore, can also be easily spent.

Overall, remittances resulted in the enhanced status of migrants, but those who failed to send enough money home were sometimes rejected and conflict among family members resulted. Since over 90% of the 250 households we surveyed had received remittances, our sample suggests an overall positive impact of remittance-sending on the migrant's position in her household of origin.

Migrants' post-migration status did not only depend on remittances. As we describe below, migrants serve as role models for young single women who aspire to be as worldly and modern as emigrant spouses living in wealthy nations of the region. Since status is associated with being a resident or citizen of a developed country, in these cases 'living in South Korea' or 'being married in Taiwan,' also contributed to these women's position at home.

Women in migrant households

While international migration and remittances empower some emigrant women, do these also challenge patriarchal gender relations within the family of origin and, hence, serve to empower other female family members at home? To address this question, we studied non-

migrant women's power to make major decisions regarding family affairs and the ability to control the receipt and use of remittances sent by their female kin (largely the migrant's mother and sisters).

In the survey, we asked respondents from migrant households to compare the role of emigrant women and other women in the family on decision-making before and after the migration. As indicated in Table 1, the perceived change in the role of women in decision-making was much greater with respect to the role of the emigrant woman than the women staying in the household.

Table 1: Assessment of Household Women's Role in Family Decision-Making since the Marriage-Migration of A Household Member

	Emigrant women	The other women at home
Better/Increase	32.9	10.9
No influence/The same	61.6	85.6
Worse/Reduce	5.4	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Individual in-depth interviews conducted with the mothers and sisters of emigrant women reveal that remittances were largely received and controlled by the mothers and fathers, but not the sisters. For example, the following interview with Van, a younger sister of an emigrant spouse, reflects this:

Interviewer: Who mainly receives remittances sent by your sister (who married abroad)?

Van: My Mom is the one who receives and keeps money.

Interviewer: Who mainly makes decision on spending remittances?

Van: My Mom often consults my Dad, for example, regarding buying a motor scooter. But the main decision-maker is my Mom.

Interviewer: Does your Mom often refer to your opinion regarding family affairs?

Van: Rarely. For example, if my Mom wants to give some money to me or my brothers, she will have to call my sister. Then when my sister agrees, my Mom just decides (Van, aged eighteen years).

To a survey question on who controls remittances sent home, 40 percent of the households responded that it was a female family member, and 55 percent said a male family member. Results from interviews suggest that female family members were mostly senior women, generally the mother of the emigrant spouse.

Interviewees also discussed how migrant families' female members, especially sisters, have an increased workload, as a result of marriage-migration. In the absence of her sister, for example, Cuc stated that she had to take on additional domestic work, which was previously done by her migrant sister:

My sister (who married abroad) used to work half a day and helped my Mom with housework in the rest of the day. She was very dutiful and diligent [...] When she left, my family had to reorganize everything. My siblings are already married and live away from home. Now only my Mom and I live here. Therefore, I had to take responsibility for what my sister did before such as cooking, cleaning the house, and helping my Mom with her small shop (Cuc, aged twenty years).

In sum, control over remittances followed intergenerational power relations according precedence to seniority. Young women remaining at home, mostly sisters of the emigrant women, did not seem to benefit from their sisters' emigration as far as household life and work were concerned. They usually had to fill in for the absent sister; whereas, if their sister had married locally, she would have been able to provide in-kind help, but certainly not as much economic support.

Young single women

Narratives collected reveal that sisters of emigrant women have a strong desire to marry abroad. For example, Van and Tham, who had recently graduated from high school, preferred marrying a Taiwanese man over other options:

Sometimes I told my sister (who married abroad) to find someone suitable for me because I can live close to my sister, help my family and broaden my vision as what she has done [...] I also told my mother that when I am old enough and have enough conditions, I will go abroad like my sister (Van, aged eighteen years).

I would rather marry a foreign man because I can help my parents more [...] I would like to go abroad [...] But I haven't met any suitable one yet. I will marry and go soon thereafter. My sister also wants me to marry a Taiwanese man like her so that we can stay side by side (Tham, aged twenty years).

Perceived successful international marriages contributed to the increasing desire among single village women to marry abroad. These women idealized their sisters' international marriages and believed that their sisters were experiencing gender equity. They envisioned their sisters' lives as being modern and worldly:

I feel like my sister is prettier, fatter [positive attribute] and dressier than before. She told me she has traveled to many beautiful places [...] I wish I could do the same as her in the future (Tham, aged twenty years).

Likewise, the following quote from the interview with Cuc suggests that she acquired positive perceptions of foreign husbands from her sister and started to imagine a promising life abroad:

I miss and worry about her (the sister who married abroad) a lot, but I feel happy for her, since her dream has come through [...] I prefer foreign men because my sister told me that they care more for the family. In addition, I can learn a lot of new things: a new foreign language and a new lifestyle (Cuc, aged twenty years).

Women's international migration transforms marriage prospects for young women in migrant households, in particular, and for local women within the community, in general. In other words, marriage migration of female family members may create a so-called 'snowballing, imitation effect' (Palriwala and Uberoi 2005, p. xviii) among women at home. First, the higher family social and economic status of migrant households opens up better marriage prospects for their young female kin. Sisters, as well as parents of emigrant women, now tend to have higher expectations when choosing potential grooms. Households receiving remittances may experience socioeconomic mobility, which allows them to consider better positioned potential husbands for their other daughters. For example, Van, whose sister married internationally, expressed how she wanted her prospective husband to be:

Most importantly, he has to have a stable job [...] He doesn't need to be handsome. It will be far better if he comes from a well-to-do family so that I will be able to help my family ... His family must not be worse than mine [in terms of social and economic status]. I don't know whether I will be able to support my family as much as my sister has done or not (Van, aged eighteen years).

Van's criteria for her prospective spouse indicated that she valued employment, financial security, and a similar social status. Likewise, when asked if she had to choose a groom for her daughter, would she prefer a Vietnamese or a Taiwanese man, Ai, a mother of an emigrant spouse, expressed her desires:

If my daughter wants to marry a local man here, I will only allow her to marry if her potential husband is decent and a little bit well-off; otherwise, I prefer a Taiwanese son-in-law (Ai, aged fifty-nine years).

Another mother, whose daughter married abroad, described how her two marriageable-age daughters were becoming more fastidious than before:

Besides the one who married abroad, I have two other daughters aged twenty-three and twenty-four, who are working in the factory. They all told me that they want to marry foreign men. They insist on not marrying Vietnamese men. People have introduced one of the two to a traffic police officer, who is said to have the rank of second lieutenant, but she still refused [...] I guess, in the past, since my family was poor, they might not have dared to be picky like that (Tham, aged fifty-nine years).

At the community level, international marriage migration thus gains momentum and becomes a legitimate life-course option. The widening of marital options (international or local) and the favourable marriage prospects for women marrying locally are linked to economic and demographic changes brought about by the migration. Women in our study sites have many opportunities to marry, but men do not. This transformation is reflected clearly in the following group discussions:

Interviewer: What are your criteria in choosing a prospective husband?

Participant #5: His job has to be decent and stable ... His family has to be well-off as well.

Participant #1: Now our criteria for potential husbands must be higher. In the past, men who did not have any job still could find wives. But now women hardly accept those who are poor and unemployed. Brides can be unemployed, but grooms must have a job (FGD with young single local women).

Participant #9: Now women are more valuable. No matter how illiterate and poor you are, you can easily marry a Taiwanese man.... Women can choose either marrying foreign men or Vietnamese men.... In our village there are nearly no spinsters left. The majority of young, beautiful women have been already selected by foreign men; whereas, the rest married to Vietnamese men.

Participant #8: In general, women today have rights to choose husbands. If they marry Vietnamese husbands, they have to select those who have money or jobs. It is better to marry a Taiwanese man than have a poor Vietnamese husband (FGD non-migrant households).

The relative scarcity of young women, relative to men, has transformed power relations in marriage transactions. Young women and their parents began to contest local marriage practices by bargaining a higher bride-price (or 'indirect dowry') for themselves and their families if marrying local men because the payment provided by the groom's family is used for the new couple to start a household. They did not have power to do this prior to the emergence of international marriage migration. Study participants commented on the recent escalation of the bride-price and wedding cost for the groom's family. For example, Tham explained in details about the increasing bride-price in her commune:

The bride's family now might ask for a higher bride-price. For example, they require two taels of gold,⁵ rather than one [...] In the past, the bride's family used to accept any bride-price provided by groom's family. They never required anything (Tham, aged twenty years).

Tham further emphasized that the availability of Taiwanese grooms and the perceived high value of local women have pushed up the amount of bride-price. Another dramatic account in this regard was offered by one participant in our focus group discussion with non-migrant households:

Participant #9: Some uneducated men had to go to remote areas to find wives. Some of my nephews did so. My nephews could not marry local women here because the requirements of brides' families were so high [...] In this area, it costs men about three

⁵ A tael is equal to 37.5 grams. Gold is given as a form of asset that can be cashable in case of hardship. It is also a marker of status. In the past, gold could be used as a currency for trading and purchasing.

or four taels of gold for a man to get married. With little money, men have difficulty in getting married. Moreover, women here no longer accept uneducated men (FGD non-migrant households).

Young single men

Another frequently mentioned reason for the preference for foreign husbands among many local women is the negative perceptions of Vietnamese men. Local men were frequently categorized as being ‘men of pleasure,’ ‘drunken men,’ ‘irresponsible men,’ or ‘violent men’ by study participants. Women compared opportunities offered to them when marrying foreign men and local men. Cuc’s portrayal of local men echoed those of others:

I would rather marry a foreign man than a Vietnamese guy... Well, Vietnamese men here often play and drink alcohol a lot. They never care about the family. They even beat their wife and children when they get drunk... Frankly speaking, if I marry a foreign man, I can have a better life and help my family as well (Cuc, aged eighteen years).

From the view of an older generation, Tham—mother of an emigrant spouse—also expressed her discontent with local men:

My god! Vietnamese guys only know how to indulge in pleasure and engage in drunken merrymaking all the times, but don’t know to earn money. They even beat their wives and children. Therefore, women here are utterly discontented with them (Tham, aged fifty-nine years).

Taken together, women’s international migration through marriage reinforces the desire to marry abroad and transforms marriage prospects among local women. This, in turn, has challenged pre-existing gender relations and increased women’s position at both the household and community levels. To study villagers’ perceptions about whether international marriage migration of local women has any impact on marriage of local men, we asked one question on this issue in the questionnaires for both migrant and non-migrant households. As shown in Table 2, among 400 households, more than half reported that local men faced difficulties in getting married and, unwillingly, had to search for a wife outside the community (endogamous marriage for men was preferred in the study communities).

Table 2: Assessment of the Impact of Female Marriage Migration on Marriage of Local Men

	Number of cases	Percentage (%)
No influence	194	48.7
Had difficulty in getting married	147	36.7
Had to find a wife outside the community	53	13.3
Other	6	1.3
Total	400	100

Individual interviews and group discussions indicate a common experience among many respondents of the increasingly tight marriage market for local men. Our accounts from focus group discussions with single local men expose feelings of depression due to a massive out-migration of local women and reveal their anxiety about their limited marriage prospects.⁶

Participant #1: I feel really sad. Almost all young pretty local women have already married abroad. We—poor men—really have difficulty in getting married. I sit ‘on the shelf’ (I am getting older and remain unmarried) ... Many of my friends fall into such an ironical situation like that. Many of them had to find wives in Dong Thap or An Giang Province or other proximate communes. I am also thinking about that.

Participant #4: Women here, honestly ... for example, since I am poor and don't have a stable life, of course, no one wants to marry me. They speak frankly to me because my life is not stable and I cannot provide for them, they would rather marry foreign men in order to have a better life and support their family as well. There is no need for them to work hard if they do so ... Meanwhile, Vietnamese husbands here can only earn little money every month ... As a result, we—Vietnamese men—have to accept that bitter truth ... Many of my friends fall into the same situation as me (FGD with single local men).

As revealed in the above quotes, the dramatic increase in female out-migration has led to higher expectations of prospective grooms' economic and employment status. The higher bride-price is making it more difficult for poor men, who are perceived to be inferior and undesirable, to marry. Particularly striking is the perception of a twenty-six year old man who described himself as being ‘on the shelf.’ The alternative strategy is to seek ‘cheaper’ wives in other areas, generally remote areas, where young women are still available and little, or no, bride-price is required:

⁶ Hugo and Nguyen reported a similar sentiment expressed by single men of their study site. See Hugo and Nguyen 2005, p. 384.

Participant #6: In the past, women used to be “left on the shelf.” Now this situation often happens to men. We don’t have women to marry; more men here tend to be left “on the shelf” ... Some have to go to the mountain to find wives, for example Uncle Tu’s son.

Participant #5: They (local men) say women who are greedy for money marry foreign men. Since they are poor, no one wants to marry them (FGD with young single local women).

Migrant households face a contradictory situation; daughters marry foreign men and parents face difficulties in finding brides for their sons:

Sometimes I also think, for example, it will be difficult for me if I want to find a wife for my son, since it seems that all of the women here have already married foreigners. Perhaps women are still available in other communes (Ai, aged fifty-nine years).

One local leader expressed concerns about transformations in the local marriage market and talked about the imbalance in sex ratios within the community:

For me, I am a little bit worried about the phenomenon of international marriage migration. Because many women marry abroad, there seems to be an imbalanced sex ratio in our commune. Men are becoming redundant, while there is a lack of women. As a result, men are facing difficulties in getting married. For example, those whose families have difficult situations cannot find any wife (Phuong, Commune official of Justice Office).

Vietnamese men in our study sites are experiencing a ‘marriage squeeze’ just as Taiwanese and South Korean men ‘importing’ foreign brides are. Similar to what Davin (2007) pointed out for the case of China, the deficit of potential brides, together with the value transformations (such as high expectations of the educational levels of grooms and demand for a high bride-price among women), reduces the likelihood of marriage among men. Vietnamese men in the community we studied did not have the possibility of finding a spouse in the transnational marriage market (Palriwala and Uberoi 2005); rather, they were only able to find wives in other nearby areas within the country, usually in poorer communities than their own.

Sons and daughters redefined

The gender 'accounting' of the impact of marriage migration on the local communities studied emerges powerfully in villagers' assessment of the relative value and status of sons versus daughters. Study participants suggested that son preference has weakened because daughters have the possibility to migrate internationally and support their parents:

Participant #3: In my opinion, daughters nowadays are preferable than sons just because daughters can marry Taiwanese men and help families economically. Sons are more interested in playing than helping families.

Participant #2: That's true. Now having daughters is more profitable (FGD with non-migrant households).

Both villagers and local authorities in the communes studied reported the perception that females were preferred, as described by Hue:

Recently, local parents tend to prefer daughters than sons, since daughters can earn money and support the family more (Hue, President of a commune Women's Union).

Despite discussions about the benefits of having a daughter because of their ability to support their parents, sons' symbolic value continues to be cited by peasants:

Participant #6: From my point of view, daughters married abroad reside away from home. They earn money and send money to support their families. But sons are still needed to maintain the continuity of the family line and take care of parents at home. This must be equal. (FGD with non-migrant households)

These statements indicate that important social change is taking place with respect to the value of daughters relative to sons (see also Bélanger and Pendakis 2009). First, Vietnam has a well-documented preference for sons, recently confirmed by the increasing female deficit (increasing of the sex ratio at birth, number of men relative to women, see Bélanger and Khuat 2009). In contrast, migration opportunities for young women, either internal or international, reposition the position of daughters in families by improving their status, mostly because of their financial contributions in the form of remittances. As a result, social constructions of daughters and sons are shifting and daughters are more valued than in the past.

In sum, the emerging desire for a daughter expressed by our study participants, linked to their opportunities for international migration, points to the potential for migration to transform social constructions of the value of sons and daughters.

Conclusion

In this paper, we contribute to the evidence suggesting that the international migration of women can be a powerful element in transforming gender and power relations in sending communities. Despite marriage migrants' contribution to their communities of origin shown by this study and by Hugo and Nguyen (2007), they fail to be recognized as agents of development and social change by the Vietnamese government. Labour migrants leave their families with heavy debts contracted to cover high pre-departure fees; in contrast, those we interviewed in marriage migrant-households rarely had to pay anything for their daughters' migration. These migrants' potential and real contributions are thus considerable, particularly because these women benefit from better citizenship rights and social protection than migrant workers.

It could be argued that women's strong sense of responsibility towards their native family and sustained efforts to send remittances reproduce gender inequalities and daughters' subordination. Despite this potential interpretation, social change at the local level is significant and strongly suggests that migration seems to favour women over men, particularly poor, young men who suffer the most from this migration.

The impact on the local marriage market and the strategies that young men and their families will have to deploy to find a spouse indicate a phenomenon echoing the 'global care chain' that we could call the 'global reproductive chain,' whereby the 'wife deficit' in one zone will create a migration flow in another. We could envision chains of marriage-migration to make male marriage possible; meanwhile, women's mobility is increased with all its potential risks and benefits.

This study is limited in various ways. First, we cannot assess the role of other types of emigration from the village (for instance internal migration to urban areas) on the social change documented. Second, our study was only conducted at one point in time, and we asked study participants to think retrospectively when assessing changes following the wave of marriage migration from their communities. This approach could introduce biases due to inaccurately estimating the impact of migration. Third, we focused our analysis on communities particularly affected by this migration flow. Others with fewer migrants are likely to experience less change or none at all. Nevertheless, despite these study limitations, the voices of migrants'

parents, sisters, and brothers indicate that villagers interpret the phenomenon as having a very significant impact on village life, family and gender relations, the marriage market, and marriage transactions. This alone is valuable, since it will likely inform family decisions with respect to future migration and marriage.

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