

# Vietnamese Daughters in Transition: Factory Work and Family Relations 越渡期のヴェトナムの娘たち—工場労働と家族関係

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*This paper assesses the social implications of employment opportunities in manufacturing for rural young unmarried Vietnamese women. Interested in the ways in which intimate relations, identities and structures of exchange within the family are reconfigured through the migration and work experience, we interview young, single daughters who had obtained employment as garment factory workers in Hanoi. Our focus is on the ambiguities and shifting perceptions women express when coming to terms with significant changes in their everyday life.*

The study of daughters' factory work in Asia has been the subject of much anthropological and sociological inquiry since the 1970s. With the processes of industrialization and globalization creating a demand for unskilled and low skilled labor in the region, young single women had unprecedented opportunities to work for wages prior to entering marriage. Young women, primarily from rural areas characterized by underemployment and poverty, responded to the demand for millions of single female workers in various areas, such as garment, textiles, and electronics. Constructed as docile, hard working, and free of responsibility (and therefore available to work long hours), these women were often preferred to workers who were older or married. In many countries where this phenomenon has occurred, young women's waged work and migration away from home

resulted in significant social change that raised questions concerning gender, family, work, and social relations.

In Vietnam, this phenomenon has emerged following *Doi Moi*, the economic 'renovation' of the mid to late 1980s, which opened the market to foreign investment and created a need for wage labour in the burgeoning manufacturing sector. Since the new work opportunities are concentrated in new economic zones and large urban centers, a large number of workers are also migrants. This is generally the case for unmarried young women, who leave their rural villages to establish themselves near the factories where they work. In filling these positions, young women are often moving away from home for the first time. According to the 1999 census data, 4.5 million people (or 6.5% of the total population) had migrated from rural areas into the cities between 1994 and 2002 (Dang and Tacoli 2003). Over half of these migrants were under the age of twenty-five, with migration occurring most frequently among those aged twenty to twenty-four years (Ibid). Between the 1980s and 1990s, research reports indicate a reversal of trends by gender among young age groups; while males used to migrate more than females, we see later the opposite. Between 1994 and 1999, for those twenty to twenty-four years, only 40 males migrated for every 100 females, partly reflecting the development of new work opportunities for young (often unmarried) women. According to a 2001 estimate, the garment, textile, and shoe industries have employed 1.1 million workers. Nearly 80% of these workers are women, most of whom are young and single (Mekong Economics 2004).

Clearly, we are dealing with transformations that involve significant numbers of women.

### Situating Working Daughters in the Context of Vietnamese Families

Research confirms that, in important respects, sons are privileged over daughters in large part due to the patrilocal and patrilineal kinship system. A recent indication of the importance of sons has manifested itself since the mid 2000s with increasing sex ratios at birth. This trend suggests that the desire for at least one male child increasingly leads to sex selection in Vietnam (Bélanger and Khuat 2009), as it has in China since the late 1980s.

Sons are indispensable in a way that daughters are not for three reasons (Bélanger 2002a). First, they hold an intrinsic symbolic value. Some anthropologists argue that *Doi Moi* has brought about a return of presocialist funeral and cult rituals (Kleinen 1999; Luong 1993). For these rituals to be performed properly a male heir is necessary; as a result, the desire to give birth to a son is reinforced. Rydstrom argues that boys are understood as holding intrinsic value, while girls must acquire a sense of worth and value to their parents and society through socialization. In this sense, she contends, girls are perceived as “blank slates” that have to be shaped through upbringing practices, while boys’ supposed inborn value does not call for the same intensity of socialization. Second, birthing a male child symbolizes status, prestige and even legitimacy in rural communities of Northern Vietnam. Childless women and men who have not produced a male heir are looked down upon as failed ‘reproducers’. Third, sons represent future economic security since, in the existing kinship system, they are responsible for caring for their parents in old age (Bélanger 2002b).

The necessity to birth a male child also shapes family structure. Many parents who have more than two children do so because of numerous attempts to have at least one boy. Because

poverty is more acute in these large families, girls are more likely than boys to live in a household with limited resources. This research speaks to the importance of family environments and dynamics for daughters’ self-esteem and well-being. Teenage daughters from large daughters-only families who were interviewed in other studies struggled with their parents’ strong desire to give birth to a male child (Bélanger, 2002b). The family is the first place where girls experience discrimination (Croll, 2000).

Despite these indications of daughters’ inferior status relative to sons, we argue that wage work opportunities for young single women are bringing about changes in family relations and the position of daughters. While the exploitation of factory daughters has been widely documented, and our own study also indicates that workers endure very harsh and exploitative working conditions, factory work also has the potential to reposition women in families and alter gender structures. This is revealed through women’s agency in the renegotiation of power relations with other family members. Despite not always being smooth or consistent, the transformative potential of this repositioning needs to be documented alongside abusive working condition.

These processes are noted and discussed within the literature which explicitly focuses on the situation of young female workers. For example, Nghiêm (2004) shows how young female garment laborers must negotiate close monitoring by their families during visits back to their home communities. Perhaps an extension of the intensive socialization noted above, this family surveillance creates a tension between women’s perceptions of themselves as faithful, hardworking daughters and their parents’ perception that they may be too urbanized, or worse, sexually “spoiled.” In these circumstances, women find themselves having to negotiate pressure to marry as well

as parental fears that their daughters' prospects for marriage have been ruined because of their association with the city.

Indeed, because female sexuality is so closely tied to reproduction, any evidence of premarital sexuality is seen by women's families and communities as a form of deviance (Rydstrom 2006). As a result, factory work in the city becomes both an asset and a liability: women's earning power during their time in the city confers on them a new status while doubts over the morality of their urban lifestyle are always present in their interactions with other villagers.

Yet, women's agency is present to varying degrees within the analyses of those discourses, practices, and processes that affect young female workers and urban women more generally. For example, Nguyen-Vo shows how young single women, once in the city, contest the treatment of their bodies as "labouring [. . .], disposable, and not worthy of health protection" through the consumption and use of cosmetics (Nguyen-Vo 2006, 205). In this reading, it could be understood that women engage in acts of body re-signification. However, Nguyen-Vo also argues that the contemporary state discursively "manage(s) women as feminized libidinal subjects who at the same time must work to produce what the local or transnational market demands" (Nguyen-Vo 2006, 276). In this manner, state representations of women as laborers and consumers permit the appropriation of women's labor power while simultaneously reinforcing normative notions of women's femininity, and providing incentives for widespread consumption of feminine beauty products and clothing.

### Fieldwork and Narratives

This study draws on in-depth individual interviews conducted during the summer of 2003 with twenty-two unmarried women. The argument of this paper is further informed by

fieldwork conducted in the scope of a larger study on families, gender and son preference between 1993 and 2008 by the first author. The women ranged in age between eighteen and twenty-nine years, with education levels from grades nine to twelve. All had migrated from their homes in rural areas to the city to take up employment in garment factories. At the time of the interviews, the duration of employment varied between six months and five years. The primary goal of the interviews was to understand the perceptions women held of their experiences and circumstances within (and outside of) the factory, especially in terms of their family relationships.

Our study includes women from a number of villages outside of Hanoi who worked in eight state-owned factories in the city. Workers were living in shared rooms with four or five other (female) workers in dormitories provided by the employer. The rooms we visited were small, containing beds and a few personal belongings. Common cooking and bathing facilities were separate. A significant portion of workers' wages was allocated to accommodations of this kind.

Worker's schedules were rather similar across factories, with average work days of between 10 and 17 hours. Days began as early as 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. with a quick breakfast and arrival at the garment factory by 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. Work consisted of a particular and undifferentiated sewing task, with a focus on pocket seams, collars, pant legs, belt loops, or the attachment of manufacturing tags. Each woman focused exclusively on a specific area of the final product, generally shirts or jeans, for five or six hours at a time. The workday is interrupted by short breaks and lunch, which is often spent napping. During periods of low production, women returned home anywhere between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. During busy stretches they worked very late or even throughout the night. Those who are able to return home before nightfall eat dinner, take a

bath, and go to bed. Sometimes the women were not given a day off for weeks; however, during less hectic periods they spend every second Sunday sleeping, doing chores, socializing, and visiting home. In busy periods, longer work hours were not compensated as overtime.

Factory policies regarding wage distribution were discussed with a great deal of confusion and inconsistency even among women within the same factory. According to interviewees, the sum of monthly wages was dependent upon output and productivity, the level of worker, or a standard daily wage. Policies existed in many of the factories specifying a period of time (usually from 2 to 3 years) in which women were not permitted to marry after signing a contract. Regulations regarding the spacing between children also existed in factories.

Small payments were offered to new mothers for a few months, and in some cases employers guaranteed a period of time in which the position would remain open after childbirth. The penalty for not complying with childbearing policies meant a denial of these benefits or instant dismissal.

Across factories there was some variation in the policies around wages, benefits, and compensation. Women stated that the employer would compensate for significant injuries occurring on the job. For example, one case emerged in which a worker had been compensated for the loss of her fingers after an accident with the cutting machinery. While her medical bills were paid by the employer, she was not compensated for the recovery period during which she did not work. Health problems arising from poor air quality and a noisy work environment, such as headaches and breathing problems, were not compensated. In one factory, women explained that they paid a small amount (approx. 3 Canadian dollars) every month towards health insurance. This permitted women to take sick days while still receiving some portion of their

daily wage. However, in practice women were discouraged from doing so, as sick days were recorded and could result in lowering the woman's "grade" of employment and consequently, her wage.

The presence, strength, efficacy, and support of unions across factories varied only slightly.

When they existed, unions were spoken about with confusion and very little enthusiasm.

There was a general sense that they provided some formal function, yet they did not provide any consistent sense of support in women's everyday working lives.



**Women doing assembly work in a factory**  
(Photograph by Wang Hongzen)

It is difficult to establish a clear understanding of women's economic position based on the interviews. While some workers said they could only meet their basic expenses, others sent money home to contribute to household expenses or the tuition of siblings. A few indicated that they were saving money for the future, in order to open a small sewing shop of their own. Importantly, even those who were not able to save did not discuss the possibility of returning to their villages, for fear that they would be perceived as having failed or that they would be treated with suspicion. Several women described a case in which a worker faced difficulties of this kind upon her return to



the village. While returning home was not an appealing option, marriage was perceived to be the most socially legitimate path to ending employment.

## Leaving Home

We were interested in the processes by which women arranged and carried out their migration to Hanoi, as well as the reasons they offered for deciding to do so. While the women interviewed did not speak of a singular impetus for migration, common circumstances, pressures, and expectations influenced their decision. For example, most of the women that we interviewed had intended to pursue university or college studies. Because the women we studied came from communities not too far from Hanoi, vocational or university education, while not widespread, was common enough for it to be an aspiration of most young people. In rural Vietnam, higher education is the only passport to social and economic mobility; families aspire to have at least one child in higher education, and some invest substantially in order to achieve this. Educational achievements symbolically represent the best way for young women to “pay back” their parents for their care and love; failing to meet parents’ expectations and hopes is a source of shame and discouragement. In some cases, the women interviewed tried to enter university two years in a row, which represents a substantial investment by parents, who usually free daughters up from domestic and agricultural work so they can devote their time to studying. However, failing the examinations, once or twice, exacerbates the sense of indebtedness toward parents. Confronted with the impossibility of achieving higher education, the women perceived migration to obtain a factory job as an alternate way of demonstrating their ability to learn, to be independent, and to contribute financially to their family. In the case of those who did not reach grade twelve but entered the factory with a grade nine or ten

education, their parents generally could not afford the cost of completing their secondary education.

Another common motivation for moving to the city was a genuine desire for independence from one’s natal family. This generally occurs with marriage or, for a few, through higher education in Hanoi. Leaving home for marriage, however, rather than grant independence, involves the ‘transfer’ of women from their natal family to their husband’s family. The young women in the study aspired to become independent from the natal family, without the responsibility of a husband, children, and parents-in-law. Factory work in an urban area offered the possibility of carving out an alternative life course stage which could satisfy this hope.

Successful independence is also economic, meaning that one is no longer financially dependent upon one’s parents. Women who had achieved both residential and financial autonomy following migration expressed pride in no longer being a “burden” to their parents and having demonstrated their ability to stand “on their own feet.” Many narrated this as a goal motivating their departure. Dao (aged twenty-one) reflected on her move to the city and the independence that it afforded her: “I came to Hanoi because I didn’t want to be dependent upon my parents any more. I wanted to be an adult with my own wage. I now earn enough to live on . . . and to save a little . . . My parents do not have to shoulder my burden anymore . . . because I can stand on my own two feet. I am bolder now.” If the failed attempt to get a postsecondary education represented a push factor for leaving the village, the factory attracted women because it gave them a way to earn an income that would at least sustain them away from home and, therefore, relieve their sense of burdening parents.



Photograph by Danièle Bélanger

Intertwined with the desire to become independent was the attraction of the city for its urban culture, excitement, and opportunity to meet people. Women perceived the city to be a place of adventure, diversity and, most importantly, a space in which to gain familiarity with the world beyond the rural community. Women frequently expressed chronic boredom about life in the village and the feeling that there was “nothing to do at home.” Women explained that they had friends who had migrated to the city and the idea of doing the same was “exciting,” as it offered an alternative to working on the family’s land and just “waiting” to get married. Certainly, the effect of having some friends already working in the city played an important role in young women’s ability to imagine the possibility of securing a job before leaving. Indeed, women passed along their experiences to friends at home. The

stories were similar in their emphasis on novelty and change. Hue (aged twenty-seven) emphasized that she had gained “useful experience” for her future and had “expanded [and] changed [her] perspectives”. This was a feeling expressed by many of the women interviewed.

It is important to point out that the stories of migration emerging from interviews do not support research findings from some studies on other Asian countries which show that the decision to leave is made primarily by parents, and negotiations for employment are frequently made without reference to the intentions and desires of women themselves (see Wichterich, 2000, Kung 1983, and Greenhalgh, 1985). In asking women about the relational dynamics associated with their migration and subsequent employment, we discovered that parents did not take the initiative to “send” them to work; in fact, parents and families rarely encouraged daughters to leave. There was no evidence that daughters felt pressured into leaving home in order to obtain a wage or to contribute financially to their families. In fact, most interviewees did not support their family even if most of them managed to provide some help; some had food sent to them from their family to make ends meet. Although parents had some part in helping their daughters move to the city and secure employment, this only occurred after women expressed a firm desire to leave.

Some women had a distant relative with whom they could stay when arriving in Hanoi, while others had a sister or a cousin already working in a factory. The migration process was well organized, and women generally secured employment before the move.

Women, to varying degrees, engaged in dialogue with their parents about work, marriage, and the priorities for the future. Some daughters left in order to forget their failure to pursue postsecondary education; others to remove the financial burden they

placed on parents simply by their presence in the household. Other women aspired to a life in the city where they could discover the world outside the village. A common thread to the “home leaving” stories of the women interviewed was an expressed hope for a better life and future.

### **Working, Earning, and Relations of Exchange: Redefining the intergenerational Contract?**

While the day-to-day routine of work gave most women a sense of powerlessness and exhaustion, it was also work that provided many with a sense of achievement. In spite of meager wages, most women managed to send remittances back home on a regular basis. Because these amounts were very small, between US\$5.00 and \$20.00 a month, their *symbolic* value was particularly significant. Through independent living away from home and their ability to offer monthly contributions to their parents, the women demonstrated their worth and sense of appreciation. Women’s extremely low wages meant that their remittances could not support a family; in many cases they were more symbolically than materially important. The women we interviewed stressed the importance of frequent visits and remittances as forms of support to the older generation. Sang states:

I could spend all of my salary for myself, but what I really desire is to save as much as I can and send it back home to my family . . . My mother has worked hard all of her life and I want her now to be able to rest . . . One time, I went home to give my mother all the money I had saved [...] The trip back to the factory on the bus left my pocket completely empty. I asked a friend to borrow a small amount of money until the end of the month.

She explained her commitment in these terms: “Because I am single [...] I should give as much as possible. If I get married in the future, perhaps my husband will not understand why I want to give so much to my parents”. In fact, Sang was so confident in her capacity as a provider that she later said that she did not prefer a son. She further stated that, “everyone wants sons, but the fact is that daughters can give much financial assistance to families.” Others similarly sought to alter the symbolic value of daughters through their financial contributions. When considering their own future family, they voiced the idea that daughters and sons are equal, citing their own lives as examples of the unquestionable value of daughters.

Any opportunity to act on behalf of a family member or in the family’s best interests was deemed extremely significant. Some respondents had given up hope of attending school in order to seek employment and fund the education of “smarter” or “more capable” younger siblings. When asked to reflect on their forfeits, however, women expressed sadness related to their own loss, along with expressions of pride in being able to enhance the future prospects of members.



**Women factory workers relax after work,  
photo by Danièle Bélanger**

### **Negotiating a New Space within the Family**

One manifestation of empowerment and pride expressed in the narratives relates to the development of opinions that may or may not be distinct from those held by friends and family.<sup>1</sup> When expressed within relationships, empowerment manifests as the ability to formulate opinions and beliefs, and to express them to others. Kieu stated: “I feel very comfortable with myself [and] I can speak honestly and confidently about my opinions with my brother who lives in Hanoi even though we have different beliefs”. This shift was expressed frequently and deemed by women themselves to be extremely significant.

Interviewees also indicated that friends and family members had begun to give their opinions and thoughts greater consideration and respect. Thuy (aged twenty-three) states: “I definitely feel as though something has changed in my relationship with my mother. I feel that she looks at me as though I am an adult now and as though I have something to offer . . . She seems to ask for my opinions more often and she respects my ideas more.” Hai (aged twenty) offered a similar statement about her relationship with those in her rural community generally and with her father specifically: “It seems my father is more concerned about my opinions . . . he often asks what I think when trying to make family decisions . . . I also think that people from my community respect me more since I left”. Others noted that, although they had very different opinions from their parents concerning marriage, they believed that their parents would respect their decisions. Van (aged twenty-three) further explained that workers, in general, were freer to make decisions regarding marriage compared to those living at home under the supervision of their parents.

At home in the rural areas, women’s choice depends on the thoughts and opinions of their

parents, close family members, and other relatives. Sometimes it even depends on what the neighbors think. When coming here, it becomes more comfortable to choose for ourselves. If we love someone, we will choose that person despite what others say. In contrast, if we dislike someone, it is our decision to refuse him.

Interestingly, this perceived ability for greater influence within close relationships has the potential to affect women’s future marital relationships. For example, Tam (aged twenty-three) said that she would defend her own opinions if they contrasted with those of her future husband’s. It is, of course, impossible to predict whether and to what extent the women interviewed will actually be able to influence decisions made within their future families.

Nonetheless, women’s sense of having a voice in their family after becoming workers is significant. For many interviewees, premarital waged work changed their status within the family; they felt as if their parents treated them as adults. Importantly, marriage, as a rite of passage to adulthood, was, to some extent, substituted by employment and the economic and residential independence it entailed.

### **Persisting Ambiguities**

Upon becoming “factory girls,” the women we interviewed expressed concern over the ambiguity of return to their village. On the one hand, some felt more respected and esteemed; on the other, they feared being labeled “urban girls” (*con gai thanh pho*, a phrase with negative connotations) and having difficulty finding a spouse. Partly due to the uncertainty caused by their trajectory, many hoped that they could avoid going back to their village and find a spouse in the city instead. In this sense, women must negotiate contradictory discourses in such a way as to demonstrate that they are respectable, a finding which echoes the



assertion made by Lie and Lund that "women are now negotiating new female roles and identities within changing social fields and conflicting ideologies" (Lie and Lund 1994, 157). Researchers have further contended that while a woman's family could protect her virtue and honor in the past, young migrant workers must now deal with the responsibility of demonstrating this on their own. One woman, Chi (aged twenty-five) noted, for example, that she has to alter her behavior when she returns home in order to minimize suspicion. "I dress differently in the city. When I go home to visit my friends and family, I not only have to change some of the things I talk about, but I also have to make sure I don't dress up too much so that I don't stand out." Van (aged twenty-three) expands on her experience of the intersecting rural and urban discourses.

My way of life in the city is not suitable for country people. I have to completely change my way of life when I visit my home. I have to act differently than I would like to and change the way I communicate and my style of dress. In the countryside people are not skillful or clever when they speak. If I speak as I do in the city, people will say many negative things about how I am not the same girl as before.

The process of identity formation reveals itself to be fraught with tension, as women negotiate conflicting expectations and normative discourses.

## Conclusion

This short article has examined one group of women's perceptions regarding their multiple roles as daughters and workers and the implications that their migration to the city has for their familial relationships. When reading

the accounts of the hardships in the day-to-day lives of many of the women we interviewed, one wonders about the source of motivation for continuing to work in garment factories. In fact, the reasons they left home tend to sustain their determination to stay, in spite of the exploitation and exhaustion that many experience. Women who return home after only a few months of work experience shame and are labeled failures. The desire to prove to parents their ability to be independent, coupled with their hope for a better future, makes daughters determined not to return home too soon.

Women also clearly felt a great sense of pride in the fact that they were living independently, in their adoption of urban speech and dress, and in the ability to develop and express their own opinions. The fact that women were no longer depending on their families financially and in some cases were even able to make small contributions was a source of satisfaction for many. Some also believed that the technical skills and education that they had acquired would be an important means of supporting themselves and their families in the future. This point is well highlighted in the claim made by one worker that daughters could be as financially productive as sons. We note, however, that the wage primarily had a symbolic value to the extent that any small contribution was understood to represent a "giving back" and a breaking with women's dependence on their natal family.

By questioning these women about family dynamics and exchanges in relation to their migration trajectory and work experience, we were able to get some sense of both change and continuity in their responsibilities, roles, and identities as daughters. The theme of negotiation is central to this article. As we have shown, women experienced shifts in perceptions of themselves; they embraced some changes and modified others so that their families would continue to see them as being

responsible and “good” daughters. Yet, the process of oscillating between appropriate expressions of identity, as well as the uncertainty women share about the future, certainly raise questions about the sustainability of the changes women confidently discussed, and the extent to which these will influence their future relationships.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> The longer version of this paper considers formulations of the concept of empowerment at length.

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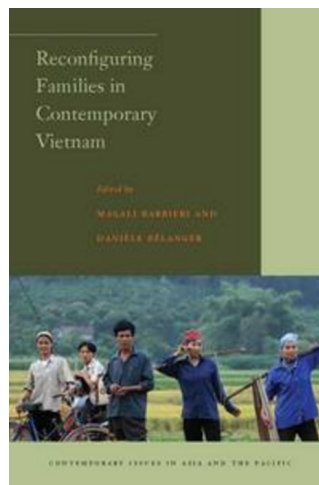
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