

# FEMALE RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

**Thai Thi Ngoc Du, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Nguyen Thi Nhan, and Maryanne Loughry**

Women's Studies Department, Open University of Ho Chi Minh City

**Working Paper No. 16**

Gender Relations Centre, RSPAS, The Australian National University

ISSN: 1447-5952 (pbk); 1835-6133 (online)

© 2006 Thai Thi Ngoc Du et al.

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Permission should be sought from the main author; e-mail <[thai.thi.ngoc.du@auf.org](mailto:thai.thi.ngoc.du@auf.org)>

In developing nations, larger cities receive numerous migrants from impoverished rural areas and generations of migrants now make up an important component of city dwellers. Migrants have varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Our research focuses on the rural poor, who are poor peasants that have moved to the city as a means of escaping the poverty they face in the countryside. Within several generations of rural to urban migration, some migrants have integrated into urban communities, which has allowed them to escape from rural poverty. Their migration to the city has also seen them integrate with the city's middle class. In this way larger cities in developing countries have provided favourable conditions for poor migrants, not only for their integration into urban life but also for their economic prosperity.

Previous research into urban life claimed that rural poor people who leave their villages to seek a livelihood in the cities fall into the urban poor class, and their prospects do not improve. Despite this, the rural poor, many of whom have lost their access to land and a livelihood, still view the city as a means to escape rural poverty. Todaro argues that it is not the differences between urban and rural areas that is a factor encouraging migration, but rather how rural people think and feel about these differences, which motivates many rural people to migrate to the city (cited in Ross 1982:344). He suggests that the larger the differences between urban and rural areas, the larger the number of rural to urban migrants, and hence a significant proportion of rural starvation will be "transferred" into urban poverty (344).

According to the 1999 general census of Ho Chi Minh City, the rate of female migration to the city is higher than that of men (Ho Chi Minh City Office of Statistics

2000). This was also higher than the number of female migrants moving to other areas in Vietnam as 58 percent of the total number of migrants in Ho Chi Minh City were women, while nationally women made up only 45 percent of all migrants (Gubry et al. 2002). This fact is at odds with older trends, as previously more men migrated to the cities than women. The population of Ho Chi Minh City was recorded in the 1999 general household census as being 5,037,155 people. From 1994 to 1999 the number of migrants from the provinces to Ho Chi Minh City was 415,387 people and among these migrants, the number of women was higher than men (Ho Chi Minh City Office of Statistics 2000). This conforms to the growth of certain economic sectors that generally favour the employment of women labourers in Ho Chi Minh City during these five years. Female migrant workers were employed mainly in occupations suited to women workers, such as garments, food processing, services and petty trading (Gubry et al. 2002).

When writing on rural to urban migration in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century Ravenstein drew conclusions similar to the findings of our study:

Woman is a greater migrant than man. This may surprise those who associate women with domestic life, but the figures of the census clearly proved it. Nor do women migrate merely from the rural districts into the towns in search of domestic service, for they migrate quite as frequently into certain manufacturing districts, and the workshop is a formidable rival of the kitchen and scullery. (Ravenstein cited in Kelson and DeLaet 1999:3)

Ravenstein's claim shows that in late nineteenth century England women migrated from the countryside to the cities for as many different and varied reasons as the occupations they came to fill. Despite this fact, Ravenstein claimed that many studies about migration during this era typically viewed women who migrated to the cities as dependents, and consequently, women were scarcely mentioned in the studies. So that we do not reproduce this bias in our study, we reflected on the position of women in current migration patterns, and more accurately assessed the degree of their independence. In order to achieve this we had to investigate the reasons behind their decision to migrate as well as the factors that induced them to migrate. While these reasons were often economic, some women moved to the cities to reunite with family members who had previously migrated, or to escape from family ties, conditions in rural society or to seek out opportunities to be more independent.

Ho Chi Minh City is a gateway to Vietnam's participation in the global economy and the city's economy shares characteristics similar to emerging urban economies in other developing countries. For example, Vietnam's move towards a free-market economy contained within the *doi moi* framework has seen the contemporaneous existence of a formal and relatively modernised economic sector where employment requires professional qualifications, and the informal sector offering jobs to a large pool of unskilled migrants and urban dwellers. In Ho Chi Minh City's formal sector the cost of employment generation has been considerable and jobs within these industries are often inflexible. As a rule, jobs were only provided to a limited number of workers who had the appropriate qualifications.

Marked by lower productivity levels, the informal sector was highly flexible and in this state, it was capable of sustaining a large number of unskilled workers who received lower wages. Studies examining living standards and the economic development of Ho Chi Minh City show that almost 50 percent of the total urban population were mainly employed in the rapidly expanding informal sector (Thai Thi 1998). In a city of over 5 million people, such employment and growth rates were significant; the ongoing growth and expansion of this sector was tied to the large numbers of migrants, and since it favours the employment of female labourers, many women relied on the informal sector as a primary source of income generation.

Other studies have shown that in the cities of developing countries where an informal sector exists the rate of rural to urban migration was often high. Poor peasants were often attracted to the unskilled jobs and cash income this sector provided, as poor people from the countryside often had low levels of education and lacked vocational skills. The informal sector did not hinder a poor person's chance for employment; rather it attracted unskilled labourers who were preferred for low wage employment. Some studies have shown that if land distribution created wider disparities, the possibility of improving the living standards of poor people decreased and because of this, the rate of rural-urban migration increased. Furthermore, Vietnam was in a period of economic transition and so we can expect to see an increase in the number of rural to urban migrants, especially poor rural women to Ho Chi Minh City.

With regard to the issue of gender and urban poverty, the research subjects of this study were poor rural women who had migrated to Ho Chi Minh City. Our study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including surveys and a small number of interviews with female rural migrants of similar demographic backgrounds such as age, family composition, provinces migrated from and employment in the informal sector, which more or less symbolise poor female migrants.

## **Overview of the Research Project**

Our study about rural to urban migration pertaining to Ho Chi Minh City necessitated investigation into the nature and tendency of migration patterns, analysis of the key reasons for migration, the attraction of Ho Chi Minh City and the ability of migrants to integrate into the city. Along with city administrators, our research was concerned with unregulated migration (that is, migration undertaken without State placement or receipt of subsidies under Vietnam's complex KT3 system). Our work departs from other studies in the area by focusing on women migrants, and, in this way, our study identified and attempted to fill a gap in the current literature on migration in Vietnam.

Combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques, our research methods drew on two methods of social science research. For the quantitative component, we used a questionnaire that was answered by our sample size of 100 female migrant workers employed in the informal sector. The questionnaire was distributed to women living in five wards scattered along three edges of Ho Chi Minh City. This included the central district of Coâ Giang Ward, located in District One, and urban districts

surrounding the city centre, such as Ward fifteen in Bình Thạnh District, Ward ten in District Eight, Ward four in District Four and the outlying Ward fifteen in Gò Vấp District. In addition to this, six in-depth interviews were carried out with women identified from the questionnaires who all had characteristics different to each other.

This paper presents preliminary findings of our research. It sheds light on a much-maligned community and is testament to their will to escape poverty and their capacity to adapt from rural to urban settings. Our work also examined the support offered to them by informal networks established within migrant communities, employment options and choices as well as their wishes to settle permanently in Ho Chi Minh City. Our examination of the gender dimensions of migration was relevant to city management policies and for future research and projects concerning women in HEPA strategies.

## **Overview of the Literature Available on Migration in Vietnam**

Beginning in 1990, the Ho Chi Minh City Institute of Economic Research (IER) began collating studies about migrants arriving in Ho Chi Minh City. These studies have been conducted within the framework of cooperation between projects within varied United Nations organisations. This includes the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Family Planning Association (UNFPA) and the Centre Population et Développement (Population and Development Centre CEPED) of France. Overall, the studies undertaken by the IER were largely statistical and included early research carried out in 1990 (Bach Van Bay et al. 1992), and 1996 (Bach Van Bay et al. 1996; Truong Si Anh et al. 1996), examining migration, urbanisation and employment. The IER also carried out research into unregulated migration (Bach Van Bay et al. 1997), and their most recent research focused on people migrating from Cà Mau, of Long An province (Gubry et al. 2002).

Employing quantitative methods, these studies provide limited information on the migration process, concentrating on information such as demographic profiles and the social characteristics of migrants, migration patterns and the factors influencing people to migrate. They also took into account the influence migrants had on areas from which they departed and arrived, the ability of migrants to integrate into their new communities and the difficulties that they faced. While the research did not devote itself exclusively to female migrants, the statistical information contained within it is gender disaggregated so useful conclusions and general demographic information can be drawn from the data.

Apart from these studies, other works on migration include Nguyen Tan Xinh's (1997) unpublished study on female migrants living in Bình Thạnh District. Nguyen Quoi (1996) also studied unregulated migrants in Gò Vấp District. In this study, respondents were drawn from 104 households and the research methods employed were quantitative. While employing a larger sample of 600 people, Nguyen Van Tai's 1998 study of rural to urban migration examined some of the factors influencing migration. Other studies on migration and women's participation in the

informal sector of Ho Chi Minh's economy include Thai Thi Ngoc Du's collaborative work on the living and working conditions of women who lived in poorer residential areas (Thai Thi et al. 1995) and women waste pickers (Thai Thi et al. 1996) and Bui Thi Kim Quy's (1998) research report on female migrants employed in the garment industry.

With regard to unemployment figures contained in these studies, the rate is lower among female migrants than men. They also point out that male migrants can get short-term jobs, an option that was not available to most women when they first arrived in Ho Chi Minh City. They also showed men's tendency to prefer working for private businesses, while women tended to dominate the fields of petty trading or domestic work for richer families. Trông Sô Aùnh's study showed that in the past five years assisted female migrants had proven to adapt more readily to life in the city than unassisted or unregulated female migrants because, with the correct documentation, assisted migrants were able to secure a job more quickly (Bach Van Bay et al. 1996). Further, this 1996 study of urbanisation and employment patterns revealed that the development of industry in Ho Chi Minh City was geared towards industries that provided more opportunities for employment to women such as handicrafts, light industries (including manufacturing and processing), the service industry and petty trading (Bach Van Bay et al. 1996). Overall, these studies demonstrated that the number of women who moved to the city mostly for employment increased significantly after 1989. For example, comparing figures from 1984 to 1988 the number of women who decided to migrate due to economic reasons jumped from just over 24 percent to more than 36 percent of all female migrants. Conversely, the number of women who decided to migrate for reasons not related to economic matters dropped from over 71 percent to a fraction over 52 percent after 1989.

This overview shows that the volume of work on migration in Vietnam was small, especially studies which addressed the issue of gender. Further, the discipline of gender studies in Vietnam is an emerging field and a great deal of work is yet to be undertaken. Our study was one such step towards filling these gaps. Because of this, the primary source of data for our study came from fieldwork undertaken as a part of this project and the above-mentioned studies were our secondary sources.

## **Research Aims and Objectives**

Officially commencing in 1986, Vietnam's set of economic renovation policies, or *doi moi*, impacted upon the financial development and economy of Ho Chi Minh from the early 1990s. The *doi moi* reforms restored Ho Chi Minh City as the economic centre and hub of Southern Vietnam and rapid economic growth under these policies had been a stimulus for rural to urban migration. Ho Chi Minh City began to attract migrants from all of Vietnam's provinces, not just the Southern zones. Because of this economic stimulation, migration to Ho Chi Minh City was multifaceted; the city attracted both educated professionals for work in the formal sector and the poor and less educated people from the countryside for work in the informal sector. We have

already said how recent studies on migration showed that more women migrated to Ho Chi Minh City than men and our study was concerned with examining this difference as well as addressing the following issues:

- The primary objective of our research was to investigate the situation of poor rural women who migrated to Ho Chi Minh City since the onset of the economic reforms (1986). We were concerned with examining disparities between the standard of living in bigger cities such as Ho Chi Minh City and rural areas including the provinces that the women had migrated from and the lack of cultivatable land for poor people in highly populated areas.
- Socio-economic conditions in Ho Chi Minh City were also favourable to migration, as many opportunities existed for women's employment that required little to no capital. We examined how this influenced a woman's decision to migrate to the city in the search for work and looked at other factors such as a migrant's income level and general living conditions in Ho Chi Minh City.
- We also examined the employment of women in the informal sector of the economy and their strategies for dealing with city life, for example, how well did they integrate into and feel a part of the urban community?
- Another objective of this research was to examine the role of rural-urban migration in improving the living conditions of family members who remained in the countryside. Examining women's remittances and how they used their wages shows how employment improved the living conditions of their family in their homeland. Looking at migration trends raised questions related to follow-on migration, such as, how many members of a family chose to migrate? How many stayed behind in the provinces? What were the reasons behind this choice? How did women utilise friends or relatives living in the city? Most important for this research was the examination of women's self-reliance: Are they able to decide themselves to migrate, or do women feel migration to be more as a duty or burden? How did earning an income change a woman's position in the household and wider community?
- In building strategies for the socio-economic development of Ho Chi Minh City and in the design of urban management policies, of interest to city administrators is the nature of settlement patterns: Are they permanent or temporary? Another issue is the expectation of women migrants: What do they wish for and expect in the city, especially when they try to make plans that involve their family? Our study attempts to answer these questions.

## **Methodology**

As stated previously, our study was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, namely a questionnaire followed up by several in-depth interviews. Interviewees were selected from people who had completed our questionnaire.

Overall, 100 female migrant workers aged fifteen and above who were employed in the informal sector completed the questionnaire. Research subjects were selected according to the following criteria:

- Marital status (single, married, migrating alone or with their families and children)
- Migrated between 1986 and 1995; 1996 and 2000
- Even representation of employment from categories such as petty trading, handicraft production, wage earners and domestic servants

The questionnaire was comprised of seventy-three questions, covering the following:

- Demographic information
- The migration process, including reasons for migration, preparations necessary for migration, the financial cost of migrating, settlement in Ho Chi Minh City, living and working conditions, financial and social assistance, place of residence and a comparison of city and country life
- Employment, income, expenses, money sent home to their families
- Long-term living arrangements (lived in the city or returned to the countryside)
- Psychological impact of migration

In-depth interviews were carried out with six women who met the following criteria:

- Even distribution of provinces migrated from (Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnam)
- Even distribution of marital status and ages (two women were single and below the age of twenty, one woman was married and had moved to Ho Chi Minh City with her family, three women were married but had migrated by themselves). All married women that were interviewed were above the age of thirty. Topics covered in interviews included:
  - Living conditions in the countryside
  - Unexpected events or adversities women faced in moving to the city and ways that they overcame this
  - The use of social services in the city
  - Observations about their living conditions and their plans for the future

### ***Demographic profile of survey respondents***

In our study women who moved to Ho Chi Minh City during 1986 to 1995 accounted for 56 percent of the total. The remaining 47 percent of the sample moved between 1996 and 2000. Table 1 shows that over 76 percent of women who migrated from the

North of Vietnam did so in the last five years. The proportion was lower for women who had moved from Central Vietnam (50 percent) and lower still for Southern women who accounted for 45 percent of the sample who had migrated in the past five years.

**Table 1: Characteristics of female migrant workers**

Characteristics	Region			
	North	Central	Southeast	Southwest
Migrated 1986–1995	23.8%	50%	55%	
Migrated 1996–2000	76.2%	50%	45%	
% below thirty years	66.7%	50%	47%	
Level of education	7.7	5.8	6.45	5.89
Married	71.1%	62.5%	40%	
Occupation before migration	85.7% (agriculture)	32.5% (wage labour)	27.3% (handicraft production)	29.6% (wage labour)

As Table 1 shows, 21 percent of women who migrated to Ho Chi Minh City came from the Northern provinces, 41 percent from the Central provinces, 11 percent from the East, and 27 percent from the Western region. Looking at the relationship between provinces migrated from and the ages of women, over 66 percent of women who migrated from the North were below thirty. For women who had migrated from these provinces only 50 percent of the sample was above the age of thirty, and for the South the rate was 47 percent.

For 80 percent of our sample Ho Chi Minh City was the first city they had lived in, as many women came directly to Ho Chi Minh City from their home provinces. This rate increased slightly for women from Northern Vietnam, 90 percent of whom came directly from their hometowns.

The average level of education attained by female migrants was the sixth grade. Only 2 percent of the total sample had attained an education above the level of the twelfth grade. Forty-three percent of respondents had studied until the fifth grade, 4 percent of women had studied up to the third grade and the remaining 49 percent of female migrants only studied until grade two. The rate of illiteracy was a marginal 2 percent of the sample. Women from the North had the highest average level of education with most attending school until at least the seventh grade. Women from the Eastern provinces stayed in school until the sixth grade and for the Central provinces and Western Vietnam the women in our sample often dropped out of school late in the fifth grade. We found a correlation between a woman's age and her level of education. The younger the woman, the higher her level of education; and the older she was, the less education she had.

Looking at unregulated migrants, after living in Ho Chi Minh City for a period of time, most of the migrants (84 percent) remained as temporary residents without

KT3 status. Only 14 percent of women were able to get KT3 status and 2 percent were permanent residents of Ho Chi Minh City. The number of migrants from the Central and Northern provinces without KT3 classification was higher than the whole sample. Discussing housing, only 20 percent of the sample brought a house, regardless of whether they had appropriate documentation or not. Fifty-nine percent of the sample rented premises, while 15 percent of women were able to stay with relatives who lived in Ho Chi Minh City. Only 6 percent of respondents lived with their employers.

Fifty-five percent of women were married before migration (71 percent of women from the North and 62 percent of women from the Central provinces), while 43 percent of women were single (60 percent of this group were from the southern provinces). However, after living in Ho Chi Minh City, almost one-third of the total number of single women in our sample married. Table 2 shows that before migrating 49 percent of the sample engaged in agricultural work, 21 percent were wage labourers, 11 percent were engaged in the production of handicrafts and 10 percent were petty traders. Only 6 percent of women were still in school before they migrated to Ho Chi Minh City. There are some regional variations, for example, over 85 percent of women from Northern Vietnam were formerly engaged in agricultural production and women from the Central and Southwestern provinces were wage labourers and women from the Southeastern provinces earned a living from handicraft production.

**Table 2: Occupation before and after migration**

Occupation	Before migration	At present
Agriculture	49%	0%
Wage Labour	21%	18%
Handicraft production	11%	22%
Student	6%	0%
Employee	1%	2%
Small trading	10%	31%
Petty trading	0%	27%
Housewife	2%	0%
Total	100%	100%

### ***The migration process***

The reasons that led women in the sample to migrate were many and varied. Many migrated because the work available in the countryside was not enough to support themselves and their families. Over 37 percent of our sample could not find enough work in the countryside. Over 10 percent of women had no agricultural land from which they could draw a living. Another 10 percent said that the jobs available in the countryside did not pay enough. Over 6 percent of women faced natural disasters, such as flood or famine, which forced them to seek out a living in the city. Four

percent of women needed to earn an income so that sick relatives could afford the cost of medical treatment.

We asked why the women chose to migrate to Ho Chi Minh City rather than other major cities or capitals in Vietnam. Over 47 percent said that it was easy to obtain work in Ho Chi Minh City. Fifteen percent of the women came to Ho Chi Minh City because they had relatives living in the city who helped them to find jobs and accommodation. Over 12 percent chose to move to Ho Chi Minh City as they viewed the city as being more free and civilised, while the remaining 9 percent wished to try out their fortunes in the big city. Most young female migrants were attracted to Ho Chi Minh City because of the urban life, and a further 18 percent wanted to come for vocational training.

Before moving to Ho Chi Minh City, most migrants took steps to learn about general living and working conditions and opportunities for employment in the city. Some of the knowledge learnt about Ho Chi Minh City prior to their departure from their hometowns included the fact that the city is a place where jobs can be found easily (over 83 percent of respondents said this). Eighty percent of migrants knew that houses could be rented in the city, 69 percent were aware of the fact that the cost of living in the city was very high; 62 percent knew that in Ho Chi Minh City there are less hindrances about temporary residence and over 60 percent of women were provided with or introduced to employment.

After their stay in Ho Chi Minh City 54 percent of women returned home by themselves (among this number 61 percent were single). A further 31 percent of women returned with their families, and among this group 90 percent of women were married. Twelve percent of respondents went home with their relatives, while some returned with their friends or employers. As some women contacted family members in Ho Chi Minh City before they left, up to 42 percent of the sample were able to stay with relatives when they first arrived in the city. Fourteen percent stayed with their employers when they first arrived. Nineteen percent of women had to find rented accommodation when they first arrived. From this group 17 percent rented space in a shared room. This style of temporary accommodation was popular with migrants from the Northern and Central provinces and often rooms were shared with people from the same hometown. Forty-six percent of migrants got a job on arrival, 41 percent were able to secure a job within a month, while only 7 percent of respondents were employed three months after arriving in Ho Chi Minh City.

Most of the women who migrated for work in the informal sector were poor, so they do not bring much money with them. Sixty percent of the sample said that they brought less than 100,000 Vietnamese Dong (\$US 1=14,000 Dong), and more than 90 percent of the sample came to the city with less than 500,000 Vietnamese Dong. However, one woman came to the city with 3 million Dong. Most of the women found work in petty trading or wage work, which required little to no money. The preparation that women made before they left their hometown was an important factor that enabled them to migrate to the city for work.

## *Employment conditions*

Respondents said that their lives were somewhat stable, yet this response can only be viewed in light of the poverty in the countryside. Most employment was temporary and when the opportunity for a job that paid a higher wage presented itself, most women switched jobs easily. Only 35 percent of respondents had not changed their jobs since moving to the city, while 48 percent had switched jobs more than once. Overall, 65 percent of the women claimed that their present jobs were stable.

Most women felt that there were more jobs now than before. Sixty-three percent of respondents estimated that their present incomes were higher and more stable than when they first arrived in Ho Chi Minh City. On the other hand, 23 percent said that they felt no change. Only 3 percent believed that their current income was low and unstable, compared to what they earned before. Women who responded positively to their current situation reasoned that after living in the city for a while they became familiar with trading practices, were able to build up a solid customer base and had acquired knowledge on how to select goods that could be resold for a higher profit margin. Women who felt that their present situation was worse than when they first came to Ho Chi Minh City said that work had become increasingly difficult and competitive because of the arrival of more migrant workers involved in trading.

While the capital needed to cover costs was relatively small, the average amount a female migrant worker earned in one month from trade related activities was approximately 640,000 Vietnamese Dong. The lowest monthly income recorded by our study was 150,000 Dong, while the highest was over 2 million Dong. From our sample, 45 percent of respondents earned over 600,000 Dong a month. Within the various occupations, women engaging in petty trade earned a higher monthly income, grossing about 740,000 Dong and women who traded goods in the market place earned over 650,000 Dong. Women undertaking handicraft production averaged over 600,000 Dong and wage labourers received the lowest salary of about 480,000 Dong. Some of these monthly incomes show that many women were not able to earn as much as they needed, as average monthly expenses for most women was more than 500,000 Dong. Food costs came to approximately 345,000 Dong, while rent and utilities were about 130,000 Dong. Some women who earned more than this, spent the remainder on miscellaneous goods. Other women were able to save some of their earnings, which they sent back to their families in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> Of the largest amount remitted, one woman said she could send home up to 1,200,000 Dong.

---

<sup>1</sup> It was hard to reach agreement on average monthly income and expenses and the exact proportion of contributions to the family budget. Some respondents provided figures that included remittances as part of total monthly expenses, while other women did not. Some women were able to make up for the shortfall, because their family helped to supplement their low income. For some wage labourers, room and meals were included as part of their employment package and this did not form part of their total monthly expenses. However, other employers did not offer such conditions to their employees, and these wageworkers had to cover the cost of living with what they earned. Some women went into debt, borrowing money from friends and/or relatives (often with little to no interest charged), while others had to borrow from a moneylender, with interest of approximately 1 percent of the total amount borrowed calculated on a daily basis. Entering into debt, many women had to work more hours so they

Women who did not earn enough money to support themselves in the city also faced the problem of having to send money home to their families. Many families relied on the money women sent home and, so, many women in this group were bound by duty to enter into debt, so that they could fulfill these obligations or look after themselves. The level of debt among migrant women in Ho Chi Minh City that we surveyed was more than 60 percent. To send money home to their families, women often borrowed from friends or their employers. In a few cases some women had to borrow large sums of money so that they could start up a small business or engage in trade. But overall, most women (over 80 percent of the sample) only entered into small levels of debt, borrowing perhaps a few hundred thousand Vietnamese Dong or less each time. According to their own estimates, the money that women sent back home contributed about 40 percent of the total household budget. This was a very high rate of dependence, and many women said that the money was used to improve the living standards of their families, which demonstrates the sacrifice these women make.

Approximately 45 percent of the money sent home covered immediate costs, such as food and clothing, medicine, repayment of debts, schooling for sisters and brothers or their own children, or for purchasing materials for agricultural production, such as seeds, fertilisers, or water storage equipment like pumps or wells. Eight percent of remittances were used for savings or gambling, such as *tontine*. For some families remittances were sometimes used to purchase highly sought-after (but very expensive) consumer goods, such as a Honda Dream motorcycle, colour television, or electric fan. The sacrifice some women made contributed towards a higher standard of living for their families back home, for example, over 60 percent of the sample said that their family was now better off than before. However, over 30 percent said that the situation of their family had not changed and 6 percent said that there had been no improvement in their living conditions, but, rather, had deteriorated. Eighty percent of the women said that they were able to return home (at least twice) and see these changes for themselves, while 20 percent of women were not able to return home.

### ***Socio-cultural aspects of city living***

Over 85 percent of the sample said that they had been able to make and maintain social relationships with local residents. In this figure, over 30 percent of women were able to develop and maintain strong relationships and friendships with the residents of Ho Chi Minh City. This shows that most migrant women integrated easily into the social fabric of the city and held positive feelings and attitudes towards city folk. Forty-six percent of women responded that they felt local residents were kind and willing to help them. Fifty-two percent said that they felt city people to be “normal,” saying that city dwellers behaved following the principle of “each one for his own business and nobody cares.” Only two women felt that they were despised or hated by local residents. Ninety percent of migrants from the North commented that the local

---

could pay these debts back. Other women turned to gambling, for example the popular card game *tontine*, so they could win money to send back home.

people were very kind and ready to help them.<sup>2</sup> Over 30 percent of the sample were mobilised to participate in the activities of their local citizen cells and the same number of women were involved in the activities of local associations such as their local women's association. However, 14 percent of migrant workers said that they faced some difficulties undertaking temporary residence formalities.

Many women migrating to Ho Chi Minh City had the tendency to stay together in the same locality with people of the same regional backgrounds. For example, many women who migrated from the North tended to live in areas that had a high concentration of migrant Northerners who had moved to Ho Chi Minh City from 1954 and a number of people from Quãng Nam lived in Ward Nine located in District Three. In times of need and hardship, many migrant women turned to fellow migrants from regional locations similar to their own. Over 45 percent of the sample preferred to call on other migrants and their families when they needed help. Over 60 percent of all respondents sought out the assistance of their family and friends in their hometowns when they suffered an illness or were desperate for money.

Regarding entertainment, 44 percent of women participated in the varied amusements that city life offered. This included watching television (71 percent) and videos (23 percent), while 16 percent of the sample preferred to walk in the city's many parks. Faith offered in the form of practicing a religion was a consolation for un-integrated migrants as 65 percent of the women visited a pagoda or attended a church. More Northerners went to places of worship than women from the Eastern and Western zones and lastly the Central provinces. The figures for this were 90, 80, 70 and 45 percent of the sample respectively.

When asked to compare their situation with that of male migrants, most women responded that there were advantages as well as disadvantages. Women ranked their advantages over men as being more opportunities for jobs (90 percent), easier access to different types of housing (55 percent) and being more likely to be accepted and supported by the local community (30 percent). On the other hand, women claimed that the disadvantages they faced ranged from unequal pay (56 percent), less forms of entertainment and more difficulties in daily life (33 percent).

### ***Psychological aspects***

Our survey also attempted to address some of the psychological dimensions of migration for women. For this, we looked at the levels of anxiety and depression that some of the women faced, which may act as an indicator of the degree of social integration of migrant workers.

Only 11 percent of the sample showed signs of having undergone a trauma. While respondents mentioned no significant psychological distress, anxiety seemed to be a major stressor for some women. Over 23 percent of respondents said that they suffered from high levels of anxiety, while only 3 percent of the sample seemed to suffer from serious depression. This shows that while migrant women had elevated

---

<sup>2</sup> This may be due to the special character of Ward fifteen, Gò Vấp district, where many female migrant workers from Northern Vietnam live.

anxiety levels, in many cases this was not serious enough to cause serious long-term psychological trauma such as depression. Looking at some of the factors that caused women distress, there was no relationship between variables such as length of time in Ho Chi Minh City, occupation, amount of money remitted and a comparison of urban and rural living conditions with age, marital status and level of education. To comment on the character of women who decided to migrate, most were strong willed and had high levels of self-confidence.

Migrants who came to Ho Chi Minh City between 1986 and 1995 had relatively lower levels of anxiety than women who came after this period. This may be due to the fact that women who had migrated some time ago were relatively settled and possessed a more intimate knowledge of the city. This tells us that the level of anxiety a woman suffers when she migrates gradually decreases as her life becomes more stable. Another factor affecting levels of psychological distress included the type of work women were undertaking. Women who engaged in petty trading suffered from higher levels of anxiety than other migrants, but this may be due to the instability they faced in their job and the harsh working conditions. The next highest group were wage labourers, and women involved in handicraft production were the least anxious from our sample. This may be due to the fact that their jobs were stable and they worked indoors. These factors may have combined to negate the fact that women in handicrafts often earn a lower salary, which is also a factor that causes psychological distress.

Remittances were also determined to be a factor contributing to psychological distress. For this added pressure, many of the migrants who had a high rate of contribution towards household budgets suffered from high levels of anxiety. Lastly, comparing present living conditions to those of their hometowns seemed to cause some anxiety. Women who viewed migration as a positive experience and successfully integrated into their new communities did not suffer from high levels of anxiety. Conversely, women who were not able to see any benefits or rewards from migrating suffered from very high levels of anxiety.

### ***Present lives, future plans***

When asked to compare their present living conditions with their time in the countryside, 66 percent of women responded positively. Many felt that living in the city was better than the country. Most women said that they had more freedom and enjoyed their new life in the city. Twenty-five percent said that while the city was more favourable economically, it lacked compassion, and was full of uncertainty and instability. Some felt that they had to accept these uncertainties so that they could improve the situation of their family. Only 9 percent of women felt that city life was difficult and these women were prone to sentimental crises and a strong desire to return to their hometown.

After living in the city for some time, three-quarters of the female migrant workers said that they wanted to live in Ho Chi Minh City permanently. Only one-quarter of all respondents wished to return to the countryside and most single women wished to stay on in the city. Women from Vietnam's different regions responded to

this question differently: All migrants from the South Eastern zone wanted to live permanently in the city and this was closely followed by women from the North (90 percent). Over 77 percent of women from Vietnam's South Western zone wished to stay on and the lowest response was from women who had moved from Central Vietnam (60 percent). Another factor influencing responses was occupational categories, as over 90 percent of women working in handicraft production wished to live in the city permanently. This may be because handicraft work involved employment in sewing related production and women could easily get subcontracts for this kind of work in Ho Chi Minh City. Women involved in trade related work returned the next highest response (77 percent) followed by petty traders and wage labourers (66 percent). For women who said that they wanted to stay in the city, most mentioned that the economic prosperity of Ho Chi Minh City was a factor behind this decision (47 percent). Some said that they enjoyed the civilised urban lifestyle, especially the comforts and pleasures of living in an urban environment (15 percent), while 13 percent of respondents had brighter hopes for their children's future in the city, especially for their education. Some women had settled in Ho Chi Minh City, either living with their families or getting married in the city. Many women in this group viewed living in an urbanised area as a place where they could enhance their knowledge and develop their professional skills.

Women who did not wish to stay on in Ho Chi Minh City said that their family was the major factor behind this decision. These women wanted to go back home and look after their parents or be with their husband and/or children. This was because of the high cost of moving to the city, which meant that their families were not able to join them. A small number of women commented on their economic failure in the city as a reason for wanting to return home.

Concerning some of the elements behind their decision to migrate, most women said there were too many poor people in the countryside who faced a lot of difficulties. When asked why there are so many poor people but only a minority of women decide to migrate, over 54 percent of women commented that an important condition behind the decision to move to the city was whether a person had any assistance or support and guidance when they reached the city. The second most important condition was the personality of migrants (42 percent of responses). Many respondents said that women who did not dare to leave were people who still had a strong attachment to the old life style, as they did not want to move away from their family. Migrant women said that they were "timid, resigned, irresolute people" who "accepted poverty," "did not know how to earn a living," and were "not willing to accept the hardship of working in the city." Over 12 percent said that their family bonds and duties may lead a person to stay on in the countryside as their parents, husbands and children live with them in the village and, as the land of their ancestors, custom dictates that it should not be abandoned.

When asked about what kinds of assistance they believed they should get from the authorities, 25 percent of respondents said that they did not expect anything from them. Seventy-two percent said that they would like the authorities to help them to get either temporary or permanent residency permits. Women who had not been able to

get these permits felt that if these permits were granted, their living conditions would stabilise. So that they were not expelled from Ho Chi Minh City or harassed by the authorities, most women wished that the authorities would help them to find long-term, stable jobs (over 14 percent). Over 13 percent wished for financial assistance and 11 percent said that they wanted their children to be able to enter schools exempt from fees, as they were too poor to pay them. Finally, over 11 percent said that they would appreciate help in gaining housing, accessing utilities such as water and electricity, and being allotted house numbers.

## **Conclusion**

Our study has shown that since 1990 the number of women who migrated to Ho Chi Minh City increased. The primary reason for this seems to be economic and from 1996 onwards migration patterns showed that more women than men were choosing to migrate to Ho Chi Minh City. We have shown how this is because of rural impoverishment, the lack of cultivatable land for poor people in highly populated areas, the lack of employment opportunities and the difficulties faced living in the countryside.

Women who could rely on the support of their family and friends in Ho Chi Minh City were more likely to migrate than women who did not have any friends or family living in the city. Family or friends who moved from their hometowns and settled in Ho Chi Minh City played a vital role in the decision-making process. The women in our study relied on these pre-existing contacts not only as a welcoming party but also people that could help them find employment and create conditions that were favourable to them. These people played a major role in determining if a woman moved to the city or stayed in the countryside.

The migrant women in our sample cannot be categorised as people who live in abject poverty in the countryside. Our study shows that people who live in such levels of poverty do not have access to the minimum conditions necessary for migration, such as travelling expenses and the aforementioned social networks; and, as Connell states, extremely poor people who have no professional skills do not usually migrate to large cities (cited in Ross 1982:347).

Our study also shows that women who migrated to the city often did so in order to improve the living conditions of their families back home. For many women, the decision to migrate was based on the well-being of their family and not on individual motivations or desires, but was one of great personal sacrifice. Whether migrating alone or with their husbands, most women experienced the condition of being a “person with two homelands.” While migrants could earn money, almost all of them remitted this to their family living in the countryside. Though the amount of money may seem small to us, averaging out to approximately 300,000 Vietnamese Dong a month, it made up a significant proportion of household income, which allowed their family to eat better and in many cases for children to go to school.

In order to settle in Ho Chi Minh City permanently, over 76 percent of the sample gradually brought members of their family to the city. The conditions

necessary for this were long-term and stable employment, secure accommodation and household registration. Our study results show that adapting to urban life did not cause any significant psychological distress to women. Apart from elevated levels of anxiety, most female migrants adapted very well to living in a large city, and many women did not feel very isolated. One of the strong features of Ho Chi Minh City was security, which was good, even in the areas where several categories of migrants lived that the administration could not manage at all. Moreover, most female migrant workers concentrated solely on earning a living and forming strong social relationships with their relatives and friends from the countryside. The overall level of integration into the city was narrow but safe, and, because of this, most migrant women did not fall into the traps of city life.

Our study shows that these patterns of migration are set to continue as the economy of Ho Chi Minh City is growing and living standards in general continue to rise. This is in contrast to the countryside, which is in a state of decline, creating a wider gap between urban and rural areas. Because of this, Ho Chi Minh City will continue to attract migrants. In order to reduce rural to urban migration, rural development policies must be created and enacted. Non-agricultural based employment in rural areas needs to be stimulated or, in other words, rural economic structures need to be transformed. The living standards of people in the countryside need to be improved, so that people will no longer feel the need to leave the countryside in such numbers as they do now. However, such strategies for rural development will need time to produce positive results and so we feel that, for the time being, current rural to urban migration patterns and numbers cannot be reduced.

---

## References

- Bach Van Bay, Du Phuoc Tan, Le Thi Huong, Le Van Thanh, Phan Thanh Hien, Tran Thi Thanh Thuy, and Truong Si Anh. 1997. *Spontaneous Migration to Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Institute of Economic Research.
- Bach Van Bay, Du Phuoc Tan, Le Van Thanh, Truong Si Anh, and Vu Thi Hong. 1992. *Migrations to Ho Chi Minh City: Problems and Solutions*. Ho Chi Minh City: Institute of Economic Research.
- Bach Van Bay, Le Van Thanh, Truong Si Anh, and Vu Thi Hong. 1996. *Migration, Human Resources, Employment, and Urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City*. National Political Publishing House: Institute of Economic Research.
- Bui Thi Kim Quy. 1998. *A Study about Female Migrants in the Garment Industry in Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Institute of Social Sciences.
- Gubry, Patrick, Le van Thanh, and Vu Thi Hong. 2002. *Les chemins vers la ville: Les migrations vers Ho Chi Minh Ville à partir d'une zone du delta du Mékong*. Paris: Karthala & CEPED.

- Ho Chi Minh City Office of Statistics. 2000. *The Population of Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Printing Enterprise of Ho Chi Minh City Statistics.
- Kelson, Gregory and Debra L. DeLaet (eds). 1999. *Gender and Immigration*. London: Macmillan.
- Nguyen Quoi. 1996. "Free migrants in Ho Chi Minh City, the case of Go Vap District." Unpublished paper.
- Nguyen Tan Xinh. 1997. "Female migrants living on the streets in Binh Thainh District." Unpublished paper.
- Nguyen Van Tai. 1998. *Country-City Free Migration in Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Agricultural Publishing House.
- Ross, John (ed.). 1982. *International Encyclopedia of Population*, vol. 1. New York: The Free Press.
- Thai Thi Ngoc Du. 1998. *Irregular Economic Sector in Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Open University.
- Thai Thi Ngoc Du, Nguyen Xuan Nghia, Nguyen Ngoc Lam, Nguyen Thi Nhan, Pham Gia Tran, and Rekha Mehra. 1996. "Women in the collection of wastes in Ho Chi Minh City." In *Woman and Development*, vol. 1. Ho Chi Minh City: Open University.
- Thai Thi Ngoc Du, Truong Thi Kim Chuyen, Ngo Thanh Loan, and Vuong Tuong Van. 1995. *Living and Working Conditions of the Women in Poor Residential Areas of Ho Chi Minh City*. Ho Chi Minh City: Open University.
- Truong Si Anh, Patrick Gubry, Vu Thi Hong, and Jerrold W. Huguet. 1996. "Migration and employment in Ho Chi Minh City." *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 11(2):3-22.