BREADWINNING WIVES AND "LEFT-BEHIND" HUSBANDS:

Men and Masculinities in the Vietnamese Transnational Family

LAN ANH HOANG
University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
BRENDA S. A. YEOH
National University of Singapore

This article explores an aspect of women's transnational labor migration that has been understudied in many labor-sending countries: how men experience shifts in the household labor division triggered by women's migration. In so doing, we shed light on the diverse ways notions of masculinity and gender identities are being reworked and renegotiated in the transnational family. Drawing on qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with carers of left-behind children in Northern Vietnam, we show how men are confronted with the need to take on child care duties, which have traditionally been ascribed to women, while at the same time being under considerable pressure to live up to locally accepted masculinity ideals. We provide interesting insights into the changing family structures and dynamics in Vietnamese society where patriarchal norms continue to exert significant influence on different facets of life.

Keywords: *transnational labor migration, gender, masculinities, fatherhood, Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we look into the various ways masculinities are being redefined in transnational families where women migrate for work over extended periods of time. Transnational labor migration is undoubtedly a life-changing event for the family—the physical absence of a family

AUTHORS' NOTE: *Lan Anh Hoang, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia Email: lahoang@unimelb.edu.au*

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member for long periods compels the family to reorganize its strategies, structures, and relations during the migration process. Changes and adjustments that both the migrant and the left-behind family go through are even greater when the woman migrates and thereby assumes the breadwinner's role that has traditionally been ascribed to men. While economic and sociocultural implications of female transnational labor migration have been scrutinized in migration scholarship worldwide (e.g., Asis, Huang, and Yeoh 2004; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Parrenas 2005; Piper and Roces 2003), the vast majority of this literature is focused on women migrants. Much less is known about how men cope with the absence of their wives, especially when they shoulder the reproductive duties left by women. The exclusive focus on women coupled with the "neglect" of men in the migration literature has been pinpointed by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1999, 566) as a key factor inhibiting our ability to theorize "about the ways in which constructions of masculinity and femininity organize migration and migration outcomes."

Connell (1995) suggests that to understand masculinity, we must study changes in social relations that include child rearing, employment, sexual relations, and the division of labor. Through our examination of the (re) construction of masculinities in the division of labor, particularly child care, within the Vietnamese transnational family, we aim to contribute to the general discussion on men and masculinities that has been more or less centered on Western gender perceptions and discourses. Masculinities vary from time to time and place to place, and even within the same times and places, and not all forms of masculinity are culturally valorized in the same way because gender is always cross-cut by other forms of social divisions such as race and class (Connell 1987; Edley and Wetherell 1995, 208; Edwards 2006, 104). Furthermore, masculinity and femininity are relational terms, often defined in opposition to each other, and definitions of masculinity are reactive to changing definitions of femininity (Brittan 1989, 181; Kimmel 1987). In various parts of the developing world, the unprecedented surge of women's transnational labor migration is giving new meanings to femininities and masculinities. When women take on a new role as the family breadwinner, notions of masculinity are also subject to change.

MEN, MASCULINITIES, AND WORK

Connell (1987) argues that gender relations are organized by gender structures such as those of labor and power that situationally constrain the play of practices in different spheres such as work, home, and community.

We find this a useful framework for our analyses of men and masculinities in this study. As families are central agents of social change, knowledge of changes in the family division of labor is critical to understanding shifting gender ideologies in society. Focusing on men in the domestic sphere is particularly interesting because in many societies, there is an unwritten and enduring gender boundary between public and domestic spheres occupied by men and women respectively (Adams and Coltrane 2005, 231; Taga 2005, 130). The gendered division of labor that attaches the breadwinner's role to men and the caregiver's and nurturer's roles to women continues to shape gendered spheres in powerful ways. In what follows, we delve deeper into connections between masculinities and productive work on one hand and masculinities and reproductive work on the other to understand how men's roles in different spheres relate to their identity formation.

Masculinities and Productive Work

Masculinity is often referred to as an ideology of power and domination (Brittan 1989). Transformations in identity and status that women experience as a result of their labor migration pose threats to men's power in the domestic sphere, a position made possible by virtue of men's ability to provide for their families through paid work. To be a man implies that one has to be a breadwinner (Brittan 1989, 84). Studies on men and masculinities emphasize productive work as the most fundamental foundation of masculinity identity. According to Connell (1995, 33), the "cultural function of masculine identity is to motivate men to work." Fuller (2001) found that work was the main basis of adult masculine standing and self-respect in Peru, a finding that concurs Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz's (2004) observation of Mexican migrants in California. The centrality of work in masculine identities is prominent in Asia too. Elmhirst (2007, 230) notes that in Indonesia, successful masculine identities relate closely to success in providing for the family. In the Philippines, men are metaphorically referred to as "the pillar of the home," signifying both the metaphorical importance of the man who makes the home stand and the material contributions he is expected to make to the family (Parrenas 2005, 57).

Although women do as much or even more work than men, it is men's work that is accorded higher status. It is the type of work, and the social relations in which the work is embedded, that matters (Connell 2005, 78). While a large part of women's work takes place within the confines of the household, men's work is almost exclusively done in the context of the commodity economy (Holter 2003). Returns on men's labor are materialized in

money form while returns on women's labor in the domestic sphere are usually of an intangible nature. Money has been found in various cultures to be an important sign of economic success and masculinity (Hacker 1957; Osella and Osella 2000; Thai 2008). Structural changes in the global economy, however, have led to greater participation in paid work by women as well as increased under- and unemployment among men. This has severely undermined if not displaced men's identities as family providers (Cleaver 2002, 3; Edwards 2006; Kabeer 2007).

Masculinities and Reproductive Work

As much as masculinity is defined by what men do, it is just as powerfully defined by what they do **not** do, as well as the ways they do labor (Edley and Wetherell 1995, 121). Doing household labor is equated with doing gender: women do it and men do not (Adams and Coltrane 2005, 240). Men's identity is structured by their participation or nonparticipation in domestic work and child care. While it is common in most societies that women are expected to take a share in providing for the family through their engagement in paid work, similar expectations of men concerning reproductive work are not so strong. Caregiving in particular remains women's work because, as argued by Gerstel and Gallagher (2001, 213), not only do women spend more time providing care but men's caregiving is also contingent on women. This, however, does not mean that women do all the work. In fact, the idea of the excessive labor burden of women expressed in the term "triple roles" in Gender and Development (GAD) approaches has been criticized as oversimplified (Cleaver 2002, 13). Men do engage in domestic work and child care but when they do it, it is often considered as "helping out."

However, gender norms and practices pertaining to family division of labor are not uniform across different cultures, social classes, and ethnic groups. It has been pointed out that the extent of men's participation in domestic work and the notions of masculinity associated with it vary depending on where they live and the class to which they belong. Generally, men from poorer and less privileged groups are least able to live up to hegemonic models of masculinity that exclusively assign them to breadwinning in the public sphere (Kabeer 2007, 52). When facing a decline in their economic options, men are forced to define their gender identities in new ways. Indeed, Gutmann and Vigoya (2005, 117) found that it was not rare for men in Mexico with lower educational achievement and few economic resources to care for small children while child care in families of

upper classes was mostly performed by maids and nannies. It has also been argued that the smaller the wage gap between partners, the more willing men are to participate in domestic work, and the more authority status women have (George 2005, 27). However, this is somehow contradicted by research in Russia and the United Kingdom that shows marginal change in men's contributions to housework when they become unemployed or economically inactive (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004; Waddington, Chritcher, and Dricks 1998).

Problems such as marital and domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse have been associated with men's failure to cope with the erosion of power due to their inability to bring home an income (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004: 196; Kabeer 2007, 52). Even when women take on breadwinning roles, men may feel reluctant to increase their share in domestic work and child care for the fear that their sense of masculinity and self-esteem would be compromised. Worse still, women's labor market participation may threaten men's identity to the point that the latter completely reject household chores (Parrenas 2005, 58). Men, as observed by studies, for example, in the Philippines (McKay 2010; Parrenas 2005), may be willing to do a greater share of domestic and care work if their masculinity is more intact and made secure by their financial contributions to the family.

MEN AND THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOR MIGRATION

Recent increases in women's labor migration from developing countries has drawn greater attention in comparison to men's migration; the former transgresses gender boundaries while the latter does not. Of particular importance are questions pertaining to how the void women leave behind in the domestic sphere has been filled. In a number of contexts, it has been found that although men rarely become full-time caregivers of children, the prolonged absence of women indeed pushes them toward taking a larger share of domestic work and care—albeit on an ad hoc and temporary basis (Asis, Huang, and Yeoh 2004; Chantavich 2001; Gamburd 2000). In Bangladesh, husbands who take on household chores in the absence of their migrant wives often do so with the help of older children (Afsar 2004). In Sri Lanka, Gamburd (2000) observed that men actually did more domestic and care work than they openly admitted because this kind of work threatened their sense of masculinity.

In general, migration studies in Asia point to the resilience of the woman–carer model: extended family members—often women—take over caring

and nurturing tasks vacated by absent mothers (Gamburd 2000; Parrenas 2005; Save the Children 2006; SMC 2004). The continued pressure to follow gender norms with respect to caring practices, as noted by Parrenas (2005, 92), explains men's resistance to adjusting their parenting responsibilities in their wives' absence. The delegation of the mother's nurturing and caring tasks to other women family members, and not the father, upholds normative gender behaviors in the domestic sphere and thereby keep the conventional gendered division of labor intact (ibid, 99).

One of the important reasons for men's refusal to take over their wives' caring tasks is that by doing so they feel that their masculine identity is jeopardized. Men already feel a loss of self-respect and dignity when their wives take over the breadwinner role (Gamburd 2000), which is aggravated by the fact that many left-behind husbands do not hold regular jobs (Piper 2008, 10). Feelings of inadequacy at failing to provide for the family and the shame at having to do housework may lead men to "vices" such as drinking, gambling, and womanizing (Gamburd 2000). Women's labor migration has been linked to increased marital dissolution, although the direction of causality is not always clear (Oishi 2005; Zlotnik 1995, 265). Existing studies, however, have been focused on sociocultural contexts very different from that of Vietnam—one of the latest entrants in the global labor market. They also draw on sources of information other than "left-behind" men themselves (such as children or community discourses).[1] It is our aim to fill this gap in the literature.

THE VIETNAMESE CASE

Gender scholarship in Vietnam has been mostly concerned with women while literature on men and masculinities is both rudimentary and fragmented. Studies on contemporary Vietnam are divided by Scott and Truong (2007) into two major approaches: (a) the "women only" approach that looks at patriarchal men subordinating women and (b) the public health approach that is concerned with men with risky behaviours. In general, contemporary gender studies emphasise the hegemonic masculinity ideologies that are deeply rooted in the prevailing patriarchal and patrilineal family structure, particularly in Kinh[2] communities. Under the enduring influence of Confucianist values, public and family life in Vietnam is strongly male centered and men's identities are attached to their patriarchal roles in the family (Phinney 2008; Vu 2008; Wisensale 1996). The metaphorical reference to the Vietnamese patriarch as "pillar of the household" signifies both his authority over other household

members and the responsibility to look after their well-being, especially through bringing home an income. However, increases in women's labor force participation as a result of a combination of various factors such as deficits of men in agricultural production during and after the war, increased economic uncertainties following *Doi moi*,[3] as well as socialist values of gender equity have posed challenges to these hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Lying at the crossroads of East Asia and the Southeast Asian region, gender norms and ideologies in Vietnam, which appear relatively more relaxed than those in the East Asian culture, also reflect a mixture of elements from Southeast Asia (Duiker 1995, 165; Hirschman and Vu 1996, 248). Endogamous marriage in rural Vietnam helps women maintain ties with their kin and hence weakens the patriarchal power over them (Belanger 2002, 331). Most importantly, women's significant role in income generation is, to some extent, translated to their domestic influence. Vietnamese women have traditionally been at the center of small trade and played an important role in managing household property and budget (cf. Kabeer and Tran 2000, 11; Long et al. 2000, 12). In contemporary Vietnam, although men continue to be seen as primary breadwinners, women are expected to make economic contributions to the household: the World Values Survey conducted in 2001 reveals that nearly all Vietnamese (97 percent) think that both husband and wife should contribute to the household income (Dalton et al. 2001, 9).

Vietnamese women's critical role in both public and private sphere is directly linked with how masculinities are enacted in everyday life. There is some evidence of Vietnamese men's important involvement in household chores—a survey commissioned by the World Bank indicated that the time men spent on chores was about 75 percent of women's time and that men and women contributed equal amounts of time to child care in both a rural community in the North and an urban community in the South (Long et al. 2000, 86, 96). However, men's involvement in housework seems to differ according to where they live—a survey conducted in Ho Chi Minh City found that urban women spent almost six hours on housework a day and men spend 1.5 hour whereas the equivalent figures in rural areas were, respectively, 7.5 hours and 30 minutes (Vietnam News 1999 cited in Long et al. 2000, 12). Whether this indicates urban men's greater exposure to progressive gender ideologies or urban women's improved status thanks to their relatively greater economic power is unclear.

Nevertheless, qualitative studies show that Confucian-based patriarchal norms remain persistent, not least in rhetoric. For example, Pham (1999, 240) observes that men try to maintain their domination inside the family if

their wives are in higher social positions than them. Women, in turn, often feel obliged to appease their husbands and avoid hurting their masculine pride in both social and sexual terms (Luong 2003, 218). Some recent studies on internal migration in Northern Vietnam also show that despite their increased mobility and enhanced economic power, migrant women are keen to maintain that the reversed division of labor is ad hoc and distinctly temporary, indicating that norms of conventional role assignments still largely apply (Resurreccion and Ha 2007, 219; Truong 2009, 321). This is endorsed by their husbands, who invoke gendered symbols and meanings to "continue to feel like men" while "reluctantly" staying behind in the village and taking up women's work (ibid). Our study contributes to this literature by adding attention to the voices of the men left behind in transnational families.

RESEARCH SETTINGS AND METHODS

Labor exports from Vietnam have increased rapidly within the past two decades. By 2008, more than 500,000 Vietnamese migrant workers were working abroad, remitting home about $1.6 billion annually (Dang et al. 2010, 12). Most workers are on two- or three-year contracts, with men working on construction sites, farms, or industrial estates and women in manufacturing industries and personal and social services. Unlike other countries in the region such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, migration from Vietnam is yet to be considered feminized although the number of women migrant workers has been rising steadily in past years—from 28.8 percent in 2000 to 33.3 in 2008 (ibid, 13). Taiwan is the major destination for Vietnamese domestic workers while women factory workers can be found in Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea.

This article builds on a larger project titled "Transnational Migration in South-East Asia and the Health of Children Left Behind" (CHAMPSEA)—a cross-sectional study focused on the social and economic impact of gender-differentiated migration on source families in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The project was divided into two stages: (1) quantitative surveys with 1,000 households in each country and (ii) qualitative interviews with about 50 households in each country. For the purpose of this article, we draw on in-depth interviews with main carers of left-behind children in 23 mother-migrant households in Vietnam: 17 fathers and five grandparents. Given this sole focus on men carers, our findings may not be generalizable to all the transnational families interviewed.

Figure 1. Thai Binh Province in Northern Vietnam
Source: http://mapsof.net/vietnam/static-maps/png/vietnameseprovincesmap

Even so, they provide us with rare insights into gender dynamics underlying men's involvement in reproductive tasks in their wives' absence. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese by one of the authors. We are aware of the possibility that the men's narratives might have been influenced by the positionality of the interviewer (an educated Vietnamese woman in her early 30s living and working in an industrialized country) vis-à-vis themselves (rural working-class men with less education). For the most part, as a Vietnamese woman, we observed, the interviewer was seen by her male respondents as "one of them" who could potentially have been a sexual object. This is in contrast with, say, a Caucasian woman whose foreign "otherness" would present an impenetrable boundary between her and them. This was at the same time juxtaposed with class differences between the interviewer and interviewees. The mix of sameness and difference, we believe, influenced the various ways the men chose to represent themselves in different circumstances.

As the CHAMPSEA Study was designed to target the left-behind family, and not the migrant, the information we obtained from left-behind husbands represented one side of the story which might have been deliberately portrayed in a way that fit the respondent's purposes at the point of the interview, and not necessarily reflecting the actual occurrences back in time. However, we do not take this as a limitation because it allows us to explore men's subjectivities in reconstructing their behaviors in relation to women.

The fieldwork was conducted in five communes[4] of Thai Binh Province in Northern Vietnam (Figure 1). Thai Binh is one of the top labor-export provinces in the country. During 2000-2005, the province sent nearly 3,000 workers abroad each year, 81.5 percent of whom were women and most of the Thai Binh female migrants (88 percent) worked as domestic workers in Taiwan (HealthBridge_Canada 2008, 27).

The data analysis part that follows is structured on three dimensions of the male identity in the domestic sphere: (1) the husband; (2) the father; and (3) the breadwinner. It should be noted that these are not discrete but overlapping categories, and social expectations associated with one identity may overlap or conflict with those of the other at times. Because both femininities and masculinities are not static social constructs but subject to redefinition and renegotiation (Brittan 1989, 37; Edwards 2006, 104), examining the men's actions, feelings, and attitudes with regard to changing family arrangements enhances our understanding of how gender norms and ideologies are being reconstituted by women's migration.

THE HUSBAND

The first question that we ask in this study is how men position themselves vis-à-vis their migrant wives when the latter migrate overseas for work. As discussed earlier, societal norms in Vietnam still disapprove of families where the wife is socially and economically more successful than her husband because her socioeconomic superiority is seen as a threat to family harmony and solidarity. This could have been one of the reasons behind men's hesitation over women's overseas migration because of its potentially substantial financial rewards. Hội, a 76-year-old grandfather, said:

> She and her husband made the decision together but it took her a long time to persuade him. Her husband first didn't want her to go and told her to stay to do trading. But it didn't work out after a few months and he eventually agreed to let her go. How could she go (otherwise)?

Some interviewed men did not find it comfortable to communicate their feelings of insecurity. The uneasiness in discerning their complex inner world, as noted by Pingol in her study on women's migration and masculinities in the Philippines, could have been due to either "inner conflicts or some deep frustrations that the men consider too unmanly to disclose" (2001, 17). Even though migration was set out as a collective family project and never happened without the man's consent, it was evidently not an easy decision to make when the migrant was to be a woman. Interestingly, many women in our study did petty trade before migration, and their premigration financial contributions to the family were relatively significant. Although this is insufficient to conclude that women's mobility is closely linked with their premigration economic power, the considerable presence of trading women in overseas migration flows points to the selectivity of female migration.

In accounting for their family's decision making about migration, men made sure that their sense of agency and authority was spelled out clearly. This is exemplified in the narrative of Tien—a 37-year-old father of two—who, despite acknowledging that his wife took the initiative to migrate, affirmed, "I am **still** the main decision maker." This echoed other men who maintained that the final decision rested with them and the women thus could not have migrated without their consent. Throughout the fieldwork, the status of "being a man"[5] was often referred to as a justification for or an explanation of a decision. In some cases, it was used to emphasize the man's continued authority in the household despite the fact that their masculine identity tied to the breadwinner ideal was at risk of being undermined

by the woman's labor migration. In other cases, such as that of Sang, a 37-year-old father of two, who works as a welder, the failure to provide for the family was referred to as the justification for his wife's labor migration as well as her decision not to remit her incomes to him:

> My wife has to migrate abroad for work because I am not capable of providing for her and the children. She has the right to keep the money for herself when she makes it. I try to pay for the kids' expenses, borrowing money (from other people) if short.

Sang was not the only man who did not receive remittances from his migrant wife. Five other men reported that their migrant wives did not remit money to them but to the maternal family, making them solely responsible for paying for the household upkeep.

Interestingly, all these six "nonremittance" cases were in the same study commune—Commune 1.[6] With a high incidence of women's migration and most of the migrant women doing domestic work in Taiwan, Commune 1 had attracted substantial media attention, much to the distaste of local people. It was dubbed the "Taiwan Village" in the national media and households of migrant women were portrayed in a negative light in stories featuring lazy and promiscuous fathers who neglected their parenting duties and squandered away their wives' remittances. Troubled by this negative stereotype of left-behind men, the respondents appeared very cautious when talking about their families to outsiders (like us). They were hesitant to disclose their feelings about nonremittances.

In the case of Thuận, a 33-year-old construction worker, his wife stopped sending money to him after she started her second three-year contract:

> Her remittances from the first contract were used to build this house. She hasn't sent any money home in the last 3 years because I don't need it now. I told her not to send money home and save it there. Otherwise I would spend it all. She will bring it home when she returns.

While Thuận claimed that his wife did not remit him money because he asked her not to do so, later in the interview he could not hide his grudge against his wife's control of her income and admitted that he often borrowed money from his friends and relatives to pay for living expenses when his income from construction work fell short. Similarly, Sang told us that his wife did not remit him money because "she is near the end of her contract so she will bring money home with her later" but with some

further probing he admitted that the true reason was, "She is also worried because she has heard about many husbands being spoiled by their wives' remittances." Like Thuận, he often borrowed money from relatives and friends to pay for household expenses.

Both men neither blamed their wives for the economic hardship to which they were subjected nor requested money from them in times of need. Beyond the economic difficulties, more important was the sense that their masculine pride was hurt by the woman's distrust in them and their inability to keep the family together as a cooperative project. Though unable to hide their bitter feelings, they were keen to show that they did not mind the woman's decision. The reversed division of labor was already difficult, making them hesitate to compromise their sense of masculinity even further by asking their wives for money, even if it was for the children's benefit. Similar observations have been made by Pingol (2001, 75) in the Philippines, where men tried to convey the idea that migrant wives' earnings did not matter and kept their hurt feelings from the women when they did not send money at all.

While on one hand the man emphasized the importance of their consent in the woman's migration decision and thereby asserted their continued control over family matters, on the other hand they made sure not to give us an impression that they were shirking their socially ascribed breadwinning responsibility and forcing it on women. Thong, a 37-year-old father of two, who was not working at the time of his interview, repeatedly emphasized that remigration was strictly his wife's choice:

> It's all up to her whether she continues to work there. Of course we will discuss it. If she can stand hardships, she'd continue; otherwise she'd return home. I don't force her. It's her decision.

In other cases, men accepted the wife's assumption of the breadwinning role with ease. For men like Chí, a 45-year-old father of five and a farmer, productive and reproductive work duties were equally important:

> She migrated when she made up her mind. One person takes care of the family at this end and the other works hard to make a living at the other end. . . . She and I both have responsibilities."

Though unconventional, this relaxed attitude to the gendered division of labor in the family is not atypical in Vietnamese society. Previous research has shown that, despite the continued practice of referring to patriarchal norms as proper codes of conduct, Vietnamese women are not regarded by

all men as "helpers" but as their equals (Kabeer and Tran 2000, 11). Normative gender discourses always point to the man as the head of the family. Yet the woman can be quite powerful in many circumstances, albeit in covert ways. Although gender relations in the family are still far from equal, Vietnamese women's engagement in productive work has undoubtedly elevated their status within the family.

THE FATHER

One of the biggest challenges faced by the transnational family following the mother's departure is to provide left-behind children with an alternative care arrangement. Migration studies in Sri Lanka and the Philippines have pointed to female relatives as the most important carers in mother-migrant households. A report by Save the Children in Sri Lanka, for example, found that grandmothers made up 50 percent of primary carers, fathers made up 26 percent and the rest were other female kin (Save the Children 2006). In Central America and Mexico, women's number one preference is for grandmothers to be caregivers during their absence (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 559). Dreby's (2010, 149) research on Mexican transnational families shows that migrants of both sexes regarded maternal grandmothers as the most logical caregivers for their children during their absence. The CHAMPSEA quantitative survey in Vietnam, however, identified a different pattern: the father was the most important carer of left-behind children when the mother migrated. Out of the 287 surveyed mother-migrant households, children in 204 cases (71 percent) were cared for by the father whereas paternal grandmother carers accounted for nearly 18 percent.

This finding does not come as a surprise. The Vietnamese father has always participated in domestic work and child care, albeit at varying degrees. In this study, more than half of the 23 mother-migrant households (n = 15) reported that the father was involved in child care to some extent before the mother migrated. Interestingly, in two cases the father had always been the main carer for the children. The reason, according to one of them, was "I think I am more considerate" and because "if my wife cooks we would not be able to eat the food (laughing)." In these cases, father's premigration involvement in child care could have facilitated mother's migration. Though the norm that child care is the mother's job continues to persist in discourse, many men assumed their wives' caring duties without hesitation, as in Sang's case:

> Taking care of children is actually women's job but now I have to try my best (to do it) because of our family situation.

The general consensus in all interviews was that the father should take care of children when the mother migrates, unless he is unable to do so because of poor health or employment-related reasons.

In at least three instances, the father was an overseas migrant himself at the point of his wife's departure but subsequently left his overseas job prematurely to return home to take care of the children. The arrangement was purely based on an economic cost-benefit equation—the mother was paid better when she migrated. Although the father did not necessarily return to do physical care work, which in one case was mostly done by the children's grandmother, the men believed that the presence of a parent was important for children's emotional and psychological needs—"the kids need at least one parent at home" and "I think parents' love for them is more important." This flexible view of men with regards to child care stands in stark contrast to what has been observed in other Asian contexts where "masculine notions of self are premised on men's distance from caring roles" (Gamburd 2000; Kabeer 2007, 53; Parrenas 2005s). For the men in our study, involvement in child care was considered an essential part of fatherhood: "I am their father so I have to be responsible for them." This relates to the argument made by a study on Vietnamese internal migrant fathers that a lack of fathering may constitute a significant crisis of masculinity (Locke, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2009).

Grandparents were not always available to care for left-behind children because of other care commitments, work, poor health, or death. Even when they were, fathers did not consider this as an ideal arrangement because grandparents tended to be "softer" and could not command authority in the eyes of the youngsters. A similar observation was also made by Dreby (2010, 158) in Mexican transnational families, where grandparents were believed to be more indulgent than parents in caring for children. Some fathers, therefore, had to adjust their livelihood strategies to accommodate child care duties after the mother's migration. Trọng, a 42-year-old father of two, quit his profitable trade in the South when his wife migrated to Taiwan to return home to take care of his two teenage children:

> We considered sending the children to their grandparents but then decided not to. We feared that they might go astray and adopt bad practices. There must be someone at home to keep a close eye on their studies and life.

Motivated not only by discipline and education concerns, fathers were worried about the potential psychological and emotional impacts of mothers' migration on children. Thông, for example, recalled how he saw his son with a heavy heart when he returned home from a 10-day stay in the hospital:

> The kid looked really lonely. . . . He looked really lost when he got home from school. . . . I think it would have been difficult had we sent them to someone else's care so that both of us could work. . . . We didn't feel we could do that to our children.

That is not to say the men found it easy to be both a mother and father to the children. The exhaustion resulting from their large workload was apparent not only in their physical appearance but also in the difficulties we had when trying to pin them down for an interview. Hiring domestic help was out of question for most families because of financial constraints. Even where it was affordable, the men would not opt for it because they feared that the presence of another woman in the household would create suspicions of extramarital relationships that would be detrimental to not only marital relations but also the children's respect and love for them. In Vietnam, a good father was also expected to be a role model for his children (Pham 1999). Familial ideas about masculinity are highly moralistic as well as nativist (Nguyen 2008).

THE BREADWINNER

Of the 23 left-behind fathers, only one man, who was recovering from surgery, was not working at the time of our fieldwork. All but two were holding low-waged jobs such as petty trade, farming, construction, and factory work. Though unstable, these jobs generated valuable sources of income to pay for the household upkeep and children's schooling, especially in the absence of remittances. Holding on to paid work and taking care of children at the same time was important for these fathers in not only economic but also symbolic terms. The importance of paid work for men has been underscored by other migration studies in Asia as a means to safeguard their prestige, self-respect, and masculine identity against the threat posed by migrant women's increased economic power (Gamburd 2000; Parrenas 2005). Many men in our study literally struggled to do both, and cited domestic work as the reason for their decreased incomes. Sang, for example, complained that cooking and washing took up nearly

half of his working hours and he thus had to reject many orders even though his earnings were not always sufficient to pay for the household upkeep. In another case, Quang—an ornamental trees trader—was struggling to make ends meet because he had only a few hours a day between the children's classes to do business, which often required long-distance travel, while all his wife's remittances went to debt payment. Long hours at work combined with child care duties exhausted some other father carers who started to work off their farms only after the mother migrated. Cuong, for example, sought factory work in order to pay for the family's living expenses and service his wife's migration-incurred debts. Rotating day and night shifts with only a day off per month plus child care responsibilities took its toll on both the father's health and the children's well-being but he felt that he had no other alternatives.

While these men had no other options than juggling paid work and child care at the same time, others could have stopped working yet chose not to do so. For them, continued engagement in paid work carried symbolic meanings rather than an economic imperative—it ensured that they would not look like "spongers" while their wives were working hard to provide for the family. These men mostly did petty trade on an irregular basis and were largely dependent on remittances to pay for daily expenses. To keep earning incomes in some way was particularly important for them in the context of migration, which potentially entailed significant economic success as well as upward mobility for the women. Similar to Pingol's (2001, 49) observation in the Philippines, the maintenance of autonomy forms the basis of male identity. Paid work also serves to ward off potential ridicule arising from men's engagement in "women's work," counteracting any demasculinization effects that this new arrangement may bring. This again reminds us of research in the Philippines indicating a positive relationship between men's financial contributions and their participation in domestic and care work (McKay 2010; Parrenas 2005).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have pointed out the gap between normative gender discourses and actual gender practices in Vietnam. Contrary to popular beliefs about the continued adherence to Confucian values regarding gender in Vietnamese society (see ADB 2002; Long et al. 2000; Luong 2003), gender practices appear more flexible. As Dolan (2002, 60) has cautioned, we should distinguish between men's lived experiences of

their own masculinities, which are necessarily multiple, and their lived expectations of masculinity, which are contained in a hegemonic normative model or set of ideas concerning what defines a man. Our study also calls into question the commonly held view of the delinquent left-behind husband who is resistant to adjust his family duties in the woman's absence (e.g., Kofman and Raghuram 2009; Parrenas 2005). Contradictions in the literature about men and masculinities alert us to the need for further research into what underlies differences in gender practices among countries in the region.

The pressure for men to live up to masculinity ideals is truly immense, especially when different dimensions of the masculine identity in the family conflict with one another. Indeed, some men were torn between fathering responsibilities and the sense of masculinity attached to their breadwinner role when their wives decided not to remit her income. Instead of applying pressure on the woman to remit, they worked longer hours (and thus spent less time with and for the children) or borrowed money from other people to pay for daily expenses (if possible). Clearly, one identity contradicts the other in these instances and the men's ability to keep their sense of masculinity intact compromises their efforts to be good fathers. Conversely, other men readjusted their livelihood strategies to accommodate family duties at the expense of their breadwinner status and economic autonomy. This leads us back to Connell's (1995) conceptualization of masculinities that are not only plural but also competing at times. Women's labor migration has indeed given new meanings to the notion of masculinity, and gender boundaries are shifting along with ongoing global economic restructuring. Our findings contradict the portrayal in the literature of men falling into pieces or resorting to hypermasculinity (cf. Kabeer 2007) in the face of losing their economic power and challenge the assumption that women's increased mobility and economic power leads to a "crisis" of masculinities. The study also dismisses the simplistic dichotomy of separate masculine and feminine spheres and reemphasizes the complexity and malleability of lived gender relations and identities.

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NOTES

1. For example, Parrenas (2005) and Gamburd (2000).

2. Kinh is the Vietnamese ethnic majority group accounting for 86.2 per cent of Vietnam's population. Most of the available gender literature is focused on the Kinh and for this reason our discussion is restricted to them.

3. Doi moi (renovation) refers to the economic reforms launched in the late 1980s that led to the development of what is now referred to as the "socialist-oriented market economy" where the state plays a decisive role in the economy but private enterprises and cooperatives play a significant role in commodity production.

4. Commune is the lowest official administrative level in Vietnam.

5. E.g. "*là đàn ông thì . . .* "

6. We assigned numbers from 1 to 5 to our five study communes in Thai Binh province in order to ensure the respondents' anonymity.

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Lan Anh Hoang is Lecturer in Development Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her scholarship focuses on migration, family, and gender in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. She is currently involved in a large-scale research project on transnational families in Southeast Asia and an ethnographic study on migration, gender, and sexuality in Vietnam and Taiwan.

Brenda S. A. Yeoh is Professor of Geography at the National University of Singapore. She is currently the Editor-in-Chief for Gender, Place and Culture and also serves on the Editorial/Advisory Boards of various international journals. Her research interests include the politics of space in colonial and post-colonial cities, gender, and migration and transnational communities.