



Research Report No. 2 for the Research project 'Linking Migration, Reproduction and Wellbeing: Exploring the Strategies of Low-Income Rural-Urban Migrants in Vietnam'¹

The Family Strategies of Low-Income Rural-Urban Migrant Women and Men in their Peak Child-Bearing Years in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh: An Overview

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May 2010

¹ This research (RES-167-25-0327) is funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK. We would like to thank them for their support but stress that all errors and views expressed herein remain the authors. We would like to thank all the migrants who gave up their valuable time to talk with us and the women's officers and inn-keepers who helped us make contact with them.

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Executive Summary

This report explores 77 life histories of male and female migrants with young families who have to 'go away' for work. Our methodology captures a range of family strategies in the contrasting locations of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. For ease of analysis, we group family strategies them into three broad categories: those migrants who trade off parental separation with spousal separation; those who are seeking to make a life in the city for their family; and those for whom nobody in their immediate family lives together. However, we stress that individual family strategies evolve over time in relation to unfolding circumstances and there are degrees of compulsion and agency for both men and women across all these categories.

The report concludes that parental separation causes most anxiety and that the impact of this on social identity of mothers and fathers is strongly gendered. Whilst mothers' grief and guilt at parental separation was greatest, fathers too deeply regretted their loss of everyday relations of love/care with their children. Absent mothers adopted strategies for remote parenting but these were difficult or impossible to sustain over long distances and prolonged absences. Parental concerns revolved around children social and moral development with migrants arguing that their children were well fed, went to school and had medicine when they needed it because they went away to work. Whilst absences from husband or wife undoubtedly strained marital relations, but these strains did not lead in any straight forward way to divorce or separation.

Making a life for the family in the city involved negotiated a number of complexities: the need for money everyday; for constant vigilance to protect children from the dangers of the city; the difficult trade-offs between work and caring for children without support from extended kin; the difficulties of addressing bureaucratic hurdles to paperwork problems and school admission; and the importance of finding a stable place to live to improve their lives over the longer term.

Going away to work for these migrants is an integral part of building and sustaining families. Whilst their migration is about fulfilling parenting and marital roles, it creates severe challenges and tensions for these same roles. Migrants portrayed the period when their children were young as a 'window of opportunity' in which they could make lasting improvements to their family circumstances. However, there is a real danger for these low-earning migrants that 'going away' for work presages a lifetime of chronic migration or urban poverty with lasting implications for migrants, their children and society as a whole.

1. Introduction

Since the transition to market socialism in Vietnam, rural-to-urban migration has both grown rapidly in importance and has become increasingly feminised. The quantitative understanding of these changing flows was significantly improved by the 2004 Migration Survey. There remains however a need to go further in understanding both the implications of these flows **for changing family lives and wellbeing** and the need to develop a more nuanced and qualitative understanding of different processes and experiences of migration. A number of ongoing studies seek to contribute to addressing this need. This study is concerned with a particular sub-group of migrants: **women and men with young children who migrate to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh from rural areas for low-income work**. This group offers particular insights into the implications of ‘new’ migration flows for gendered family lives for low-income groups. These implications are vital for interpreting the impact of migration both now and in the longer term and is particularly timely in the context of declining state commitments to social sector investments and continuing high expectations for the role of family in society.

This research report provides an overview of **77 qualitative life histories** of migrants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh. It is the second report for the ESRC-DFID funded research project called ‘Linking Migration, Reproduction and Wellbeing: Exploring the Reproductive Strategies of Low-Income Rural-Urban Migrants in Vietnam’ (RES-167-25-0327). Its purpose is to make sense of what it means for mothers/wives and husband/fathers when they have to ‘go away’ for work. This report interprets the core primary data and pays particular attention to understanding the *range* of gendered family strategies. The preliminary analysis for this report informed our presentation at the Vietnam Update Conference in Canberra in 2009 and a revised version of the conference presentation is forthcoming as a book chapter (Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen, forthcoming).

It builds on the first research report (Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen 2008) that describes the broader institutional context that migrant men and women must negotiate when they go away to work. Particular attention was given to changing patterns of migration, work, inequality and gender relations, the evolution of the institutional regulation of migrants through the household registration system, and the changing structure of social entitlements that is found in rural areas and in urban areas, for both residents and temporary migrants. A subsequent research report will explore key themes around: relations with the left-behind, mothering, masculinity, and livelihoods in more detail.

2. Methodology

This research explores these strategies through 77 life histories of male and female migrants from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh (collected in 2008). We focus on low-income migrants with at least one child under 8 years of age drawn from two specific sites with a high incidence of migrants (Phuc Xa and Go Vap respectively⁵). Our purposive sample captures **a range of family strategies**: men and women migrating with their spouse, those migrating whilst their spouse was left-behind, those migrating whilst their spouse migrated separately or elsewhere, and those who have experienced divorce, separation or the death of a spouse (see table 1⁶). Of these categories only that of men with spouses ‘left-behind’ corresponds to the conventional expectations that support married men’s migration, whilst all the other categories break with these norms to varying degrees.

Table 1: Purposive Sample of Low Income Rural-Urban Migrants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh

At least one child less than 8 years	Hanoi Men	Hanoi Women	HCM Men	HCM Women	Totals
Co-resident with spouse	5	5	5	5	20
Spouse ‘left behind’	5	5	6	5	21
Spouse migrating separately	5	5	5	5	20
Separated from spouse/single	2	5	4	5	16
Totals	17	20	20	20	77

Migrants were identified using a combination of gatekeepers, usually local women’s officers, but also migrant guest house owners, as well as snowballing to identify migrants in these categories. The life histories involved a two part interview, often conducted consecutively at the preference of the migrants, consisting of a semi-structured questionnaire and a more narrative informal interview that was tape recorded, transcribed and translated⁷. The life

⁵ Around 40% of people in Go Vap district were registered as temporary migrants of which around 24% were KT3 and 16% were KT4 in the Population Interval Survey of 2004 (GSO 2005a). Our informants were drawn from adjacent wards 6 and 17 of Go Vap which are amongst those wards with the highest concentration of migrants in Go Vap district. In Hanoi, Phuc Xa was one of the three sample wards for the 2005 Migration Survey selected using a two-stage sample for their high number of migrants.

⁶ It was our intention to interview 5 people in each purposive category. However, men with disrupted marital histories proved difficult to identify and reluctant to participate. Men quickly remarry after divorce and few are reluctant to admit or discuss this inevitably painful history. Using a male interviewer in a few cases helped increase male response rates in Ho Chi Minh but was less successful in Hanoi and in both cases we failed to attain our target of five respondents. In contrast, the disrupted marital history of women, for whom divorce is more shameful, is more visible because they rarely remarry and often have children. Although their experiences were extremely painful women were more willing to recall their histories. Less surprisingly, in both cases, willing respondents tended to portray themselves as the ‘victims’ and their spouse as the party to blame, indicating a further source of selection bias within this purposive category. In Ho Chi Minh we inadvertently interviewed an ‘extra’ migrant male whose wife was left-behind and we have included this data in our analysis here.

⁷ Hoa and Tam conducted the overwhelming majority of these interviews and verified every translation. In addition the quality of translation was verified for two interviews by an independent Vietnamese researcher and researchers referred back to Vietnamese transcripts during data

histories focus broadly on marital relations, childbearing and parent-child relations and need to be regarded as a narrative data, rather than as factual accounts⁸. The data is primarily qualitative giving rich insights into how migrants experience their relations with the left-behind but is supported by structured information about informant's, spouse's and children's moves, residence and schooling⁹. The following analysis is based on interpretation of the full dataset but foregrounds the experience of 16 migrants (the first completed case from each purposive category) (see table 2 below).

Table 2: Spouse and Occupation of Sample for In-Depth Presentation

Name	Sex	Occupation	Spouse	Spouse's job
<i>Hanoi Migrants</i>				
Linh	F (27 yrs)	Porter	Migrating together	Porter
Mai	F (32 yrs)	Porter	Migrating separately	Construction worker
Binh	F (32 yrs)	CD Seller	Left-behind seasonally	Porter/fisherman
Tran	F (37 yrs)	Porter	'Separated'	n/a
Phong	M (35 yrs)	Barber	Migrating together	Fruit seller
Dung	M (41 yrs)	Porter	Migrating overseas	Factory worker
Tao	M (38 yrs)	Coal Seller	Left-behind	Left-behind, farm work
Toan	M (36 yrs)	Coal Seller	Twice Remarried	Left-behind, farm work
<i>Ho Chi Minh Migrants</i>				
Hue	F (34 yrs)	Babysitting and errands	Migrating together	Syrup drink seller
Huong	F (32 yrs)	Outwork for tailor's shop	Migrating separately	Shrimp farming
Kieu	F (28 yrs)	Junk trader	Left-behind	Left-behind, electrician.
Chien	F (26 yrs)	Working as seamstress	Widowed	n/a
Manh	M (48 yrs)	Bicycle repair man	'Migrating' together	Garment factory worker
Hung	M (28 yrs)	Bricklayer	Migrating elsewhere	Domestic worker Binh Duong Province
Thuat	M (31 yrs)	Mason coolie/ masseur	Left-behind	Left-behind, farm work
Duong	M (32 yrs)	Mason	Remarried	Currently pregnant and not working

Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi represent **contrasting case studies** which are explored in some detail in Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen (2008). To summarise, institutional barriers and normative gender expectations are respectively lesser and greater for migrants attempting to manage their reproductive lives in Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi. Whilst 80% of migrants in Vietnam have some form of temporary registration, less than 5% have permanent registration where they work because they don't meet the requirements (GSO 2005:4). Significantly more migrants are on KT4 registration in Ho Chi Minh City (86%) than in Hanoi (36%) and negligible proportions have acquired permanent registration whilst nearly 5% of migrants in Hanoi are unregistered (KT0) as compared with only 1.4% in HCM. These different flows of migration pose different challenges for migrants attempting to sustain marital and parenting relations.

interpretation. Ethical clearance was given by the University of East Anglia (UEA) and by the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) and all names used here are pseudonyms.

⁸ Quotations from migrants below, presented in italics, are verbatim translations from the in-depth interviews. Editorial additions to clarify sense are in square brackets.

⁹ Further detail about research design and methodology can be found at [www.uea.ac.uk/dev/faculty/Locke/ Research/Linking MRS](http://www.uea.ac.uk/dev/faculty/Locke/Research/Linking%20MRS). It is intended to archive the full dataset in English with the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) of the UK for future use by other researchers.

In Hanoi, over 70% of migrants come from the nearby Red River Delta (Guest 1998, GSO 2005), where socio-economic indicators are relatively good and where there is a complex legacy of Confucianism and Communism: here circular migration is about investing in the rural homestead that has been left-behind. The overwhelming majority of low-income migrants to Hanoi leave their young children behind, even where they live together as a couple in the city. Consequently, none of the sub-sample of Hanoi migrants had families who were 'united' with both parents and young children living together¹⁰. However, most migrants to Hanoi were able to maintain close links with their rural homes: fathers/husband typically visiting once a month and mothers/wives visiting every couple of weeks.

In Ho Chi Minh, migrants come from all over the country (ibid)¹¹ with distances and conditions in their home provinces having important implications for their aspirations for the future (see table 3). Those coming to Ho Chi Minh from the Red River Delta are mostly orientated to sustaining rural families but have to contend with the difficulties of doing so over much greater distances. They were only able to visit annually at Tet, and occasionally less frequently because they had only recently arrived, had not got enough money to take home gifts or needed to save money. In contrast, many migrants from poorer rural situations in southern, central and northern Vietnam aspire to settle their family in Ho Chi Minh¹².

¹⁰ However a few in the wider sample of Hanoi migrants did have children with them, in some cases temporarily where children were too young to be left-behind but mothers needed to return to work and, and in a couple of 'special' cases more permanently, where migrant women had married urban residents or where returning to the village was not an option.

¹¹ Around 28% of migrants to Ho Chi Minh City come from the nearby Mekong Delta, 15% from the Southeast, 11% from the Central Coast, 18% from the Northern Central region and another 18% from the Red River Delta (GSO 2005:38). In 1998 it was estimated that Ho Chi Minh received around four times as many migrants per annum as Hanoi (ibid).

¹² Our findings appear to qualify that of the 2005 Migration Survey which found that nearly half of migrants to Hanoi and nearly 30% of migrants to Ho Chi Minh City say that they intend to stay permanently in the city (GSO 2005: table 3.14). However these survey findings cover all migrants and not just low-income migrants as in our sample. In addition further large proportions of migrants in each city say in the survey that they are presently undecided about whether they will stay permanently, indicating that if things go well for them they may be prospective urban settlers (GSO 2005: table 3.14).

Table 3: Origins and Aspirations of Ho Chi Minh Sub-Sample for In-Depth Presentation

Respondent	Natal Province	Spouse's Natal Province	Current Family Arrangements	Aspirations
Hue (F)	An Giang (Mekong Delta)	Dong Tap (Mekong Delta)	Living with spouse and children	Plans to stay in the city
Huong (F)	Nghe An (North Central Coastal)	d/k	Living with children, spouse migrating separately	Make a life for all family to live together in the city
Kieu (F)	Vinh Phuc (Red River Delta)	Vinh Phuc (Red River Delta)	Spouse and children left-behind in RRD	Keep family 'together' in the village.
Chien (F)	Thanh Hoa (North Central Coastal)	d/k	Widowed and living with her child	Try to survive in the city with her child
Manh (M)	Thai Binh (Red River Delta)	Nghe An (North Central Coastal)	Living with spouse and children	Plans to buy land and settle in HCM
Hung (M)	Ben Tre /Ca Mau (Mekong Delta)	Ca Mau (Mekong Delta)	Children left-behind, and wife migrating elsewhere	Plans to return to village but wife prefers to work in HCM
Thuat (M)	Vinh Phuc (Red River Delta)	Vinh Phuc (Red River Delta)	Wife and children left-behind in RRD	Keep family 'together' in the village.
Duong (M)	An Giang (Mekong Delta)	Vinh Long (Mekong Delta)	Lives with his new wife and son from first marriage	Plans to stay in the city

The rural-urban 'gap' in social and economic circumstances is much lower between the Red River Delta and Hanoi/ Ho Chi Minh than between other rural regions and these cities. Some of these migrants were negotiating the difficulties of managing urban family life, but others were unable to bring or keep spouses and children living with them in the city. Whilst some migrants to Ho Chi Minh from the nearer parts of the Mekong Delta were able to visit home more easily they maintained rather looser contacts with their rural homes than the short distant migrants to Hanoi: with women often visiting every month, and men every few months, or even less just two or three times a year. This in part seems to reflect cultural differences, with southern Vietnamese maintaining looser ties to their rural homes and villages than northern Vietnamese.

3. Differentiated Family Strategies

Our report groups this variety of migrant family arrangements into three distinct types for ease of analysis. Firstly, we group together migrants who leave spouses and/or children at home in what we call **‘visiting marriages or remote parenting’** arrangements; secondly, we consider migrants who are trying to **‘make a life in the city’** with their immediate families; and thirdly, we examine the strategies of migrants for whom **‘nobody’ in the nuclear family grouping lives together** (see table 4 below). Whilst these groupings are useful for analysis, it is important to avoid misrepresenting migrant family strategies in ways that are overly categorical, deterministic or static. Family strategies are in reality **negotiable, dynamic and contingent** and families that currently fall within one strategic grouping may in the past or in the future belong to a different one as their strategy evolves to fit their changing circumstances and needs.

Table 4: Broad Categorisation of Family Strategies of Migrants

Family Strategy	Description	Migrants
Visiting Marriage or Remote Parenting	‘Classic’ visiting marriage: husband migrates leaving wife and children in the countryside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tao (M, Hanoi, wife left-behind) • Toan (M, Hanoi. Twice remarried, third wife left-behind) • Thuat (M, Ho Chi Minh, wife left-behind)
	‘Reverse’ visiting marriage: wife migrates leaving husband and children in the countryside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Binh (F, Hanoi, husband left-behind) • Kieu (F, Ho Chi Minh, husband left-behind)
	Joint migration and remote Parenting: husband and wife migrate together leaving children behind in the countryside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linh (F, Hanoi, migrating with husband) • Phong (M, Hanoi, migrating with wife)
Making a Life in the City	Family is working towards making a life in the city over the medium to long term. At least one parent and child(ren) are living together in city already.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hue (F, HCM. Migrating with husband and child) • Huong (F, HCM, migrating with children, husband migrating elsewhere) • Chien (F, HCM, widowed and living with child) • Manh (M, HCM, migrating with wife and child) • Duong (M, HCM, remarried, living with second wife and child)
Nobody in the Family Lives Together	Chronic family separation with mother living separately from father and with children left behind without either parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mai (F, Hanoi, husband migrates elsewhere and children left-behind) • Dung (M, Hanoi, wife migrated overseas and child left-behind.) • Hung (M, HCM, wife migrates elsewhere and child left-behind) • Tran (F, Hanoi, separated from husband, children left-behind)

Many of our now migrant interviewees, had at various times also been ‘left-behind’ themselves at different times and anticipated being so in the future. This was most prominent in the case of women, particularly returning in the later stages of pregnancy for child-bearing

or only first migrating after marriage after the first child was safely outside early infancy, or when subsequent children were weaned. However, it also occurred in the case of men, some of whom returned seasonally to follow rural occupations leaving wives in the city, others who felt that wives had relatively more workable income-generation opportunities in the city in the absence of significant capital, and yet others who felt they were now ‘too old’ to continue with ‘hard’ physical labour in the city. **The left-behind are not a separate group** from migrants in these households and many husbands and wives shifted between being migrants, non-migrants or left-behind partners across their life histories. Our evidence supports that of Jensen et al (2008) who found that in their case female junk collectors, and in ours women in wider range of low-income occupations were increasingly moving **before, between and after child-bearing** (see table 5)

Table 5: Women’s Migration (and Husband’s Migration) for Work Across Reproductive Life Course in Hanoi Sample

Migrant	Purposive Category	Ever migrated for work			
		before marriage? (Husband?)	after marriage and before child-bearing? (Husband?)	after first child and before second child? (Husband?)	after second child? (Husband?)
Cuc	Separated	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (n/a)
Ha	Husband left-behind	Y (M)	Y (N)	Y (N)	Y (N)
Chau	Husband migrating separately	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Sam	Migrating with husband	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Anh	Widowed	Y (M)	N (N)	Y (N)	Y (N)
Thao	Migrating with husband	Y (Y)	N (N)	Y (Y)	n/a (n/a)
Le	Migrating with husband	Y (M)	N (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Thuy	Migrating with husband	Y (Y)	N (Y)	Y (Y)	n/a (n/a)
Hai	Divorced	N (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	n/a (n/a)
Que	Husband migrating separately	N (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)	n/a (n/a)
Nga	?divorced/separated	N (N)	N (N)	Y (Y)	Y (n/a)
Hang	Husband left-behind	N (N)	N (N)	Y (N)	Y (N)
Nhan	Husband left-behind	N (N)	N (N)	Y (N)	n/a (n/a)
Mai	Husband migrating separately	N (N)	N (N)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Dieu	Husband migrating separately	N (N)	N (Y)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Giang	Husband migrating separately	N (N)	N (N)	Y (Y)	Y (Y)
Tran	Separated	N (N)	N (Y)	N (Y)	Y (Y)
Binh	Husband left-behind	N (N)	N (N)	N (N)	Y (Y)
Hien	Husband left-behind	N (N)	N (N)	N(N)	Y (Y)
Linh	Migrating with husband	N (N)	N (N)	N(N)	Y(Y)

Young children in low-income families moved less frequently than their parents and (aside from short visits) most children of Hanoi migrants were generally left-behind. Whilst some children of Hanoi migrants were ‘called’ from the countryside at times of illness (theirs or a grandparents) or ‘sent back’ to the countryside for education, low-income migrant mothers and fathers emphasised the ‘impossibility’ of bringing their children to Hanoi with concerns revolving around the cost of adequate housing, food, education, and their foregone earnings. Whilst migrants to Hanoi constructed the city as an ‘undesirable’ place to raise children, many migrant parents to Ho Chi Minh, particularly those from provinces other than the Red

River Delta, felt that city life potentially offered their children new opportunities, better education and better food, and some were willing/able to incur/bear considerable expense and hardship to make this a reality. The pattern of child movements reflected the fact that it was easier for parents to negotiate barriers to bringing children to Ho Chi Minh until the start of elementary, and certainly secondary school, when children were often sent back. In part, this was due to the possibility of flexible nursery or home-based care or reciprocal child-care arrangements. Indeed, the analysis of our wider sample stressed that although the presence of children in Ho Chi Minh might be seen as a possible indicator of whether families are desiring to 'make a life' permanently in the city, this does not necessarily mean that husband and wife are currently living together, nor that children will not at a later date be 'sent back'. Aspirations to settle may take many years to come to fruition and for some will not ultimately be realisable.

Even in Hanoi, where 'leaving-behind' of children and, until quite recently young wives too, is strongly institutionalised, the movements of husbands and wives and children were **contingent** upon a range of other factors that notably included children's developmental needs and carer's capabilities. For instance: Phong sent his wife home for a few months because his son was having psychological difficulties as result of both his parent's absence; Kieu's husband migrated the shorter distance to Hanoi (rather than continuing to work in Ho Chi Minh) around the birth and early infancy of his children so that he was near at hand. In these contexts then, **parental or spousal separation may not be an enduring feature of migration**, with dynamic and provisional strategies evolving in response to changing needs, opportunities and circumstances.

Further, the data suggests **caution in reading dis/empowerment into any specific arrangements of going and staying**. Varying degrees of agency and compulsion were evident across all the categories of migration for men as well as for women. Even men who had left wife and children in the countryside and who offered highly conventional gender stereotypes justifying male migration complained of feeling homesick, of feeling removed from the everyday care of their children and close relations with them and simply desired to be able to make a decent living in the village. Others mentioned the impossibility of remaining and being poor in villages where all the men go away for work and many women migrants describe how they played a role, sometimes covertly, in their husband's decisions to migrate. Whilst women talk of being 'allowed' to go and men describe 'sending' their wives, reflecting prevailing conjugal power relations, it is clear that some women actively manoeuvre for migration whilst others are unable to resist pressure to go from husbands and in-laws. For some women the city represented a potential escape from a 'rural life', however,

for others becoming 'stranded in the city' represents a much more vulnerable situation than being 'left-behind': this is reflected in various cases where women are excluded from their natal villages after divorce, after the disintegration of adulterous relations or in one case because of the prolonged mental illness of a husband.

The following sections consider each broad strategic grouping in turn.

4. Visiting Marriages or Remote Parenting¹³

The practice of male migrants leaving behind wife and children in the village has a long history, particularly in the north with conventional norms offering support for these ‘visiting marriages’ in which men migrate for work leaving wives and children at home in the village (Pham Van Bich 1999, Kabeer and Thi Van Anh 2002, see Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen 2008 for further discussion). These norms provide strong support for the ‘**classic**’ **visiting marriage** in which male breadwinner roles and male authority over wife and children gives them the right to migrate for work to support their family. As Tao puts it: *“when the husbands say that they will go out to work and the husbands tell their wife to stay at home, women have still to obey their husband and they will never say a word..... I still go out working even over 10 years after getting married,... it is quite a short time for us to live together at home.”* Indeed the **moral approval** of this arrangement is claimed by Tao’s direct comparison of his marital arrangements as a coal-seller with a high status civil servant. He has migrated before and during marriage with only a few weeks at home at the time of his marriage and the birth of his children, says *“I am not a public servant you see, but I am still living far from my wife as if I was a public servant leaving his wife in the countryside.”*

Today, however, migrant family strategies include a **gender reversal of the ‘visiting marriage’** in which wives leave husbands and children behind as well as the **joint migration of husbands and wives with children left-behind** usually in the care of paternal, or less often maternal, grandmothers (see table 6). These different strategic separations trade-off parental and spousal absence and thus raise different challenges for maintaining parenting and spousal relations and identities.

¹³ These themes will be explored in greater depth in our third research report (forthcoming) and in two draft manuscripts (Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen, draft manuscript a and b) and a conference paper (Locke, Nguyen and Nguyen 2009).

Table 6: Migrants with Visiting Marriages or Remote Parenting Strategies

Name (Sex, Site)	Purposive Category	'Current' age of children	Migration away from children
'Classic' Visiting Marriage			
Tao (M, Hanoi)	Wife Left-behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 12 years • Boy 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrated before and during marriage • Returns home briefly for births • Visits monthly
Toan (M, Hanoi)	Twice Remarried	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, school age • Girl, school age. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrated before and during marriage • Returns home briefly for births • Visits monthly
Thuat (M, Ho Chi Minh)	Wife Left-Behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wife was migrating with husband when fell pregnant • Returned to marital home for birth • He returned and stayed with wife and baby until son was over 2 years of age • Wife and son now left-behind
Reversal of Visiting Marriage			
Binh (F, Hanoi)	Husband Left-behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 10 years • Girl, 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First migrated when 2nd child was 2 years old • Husband joins her in city seasonally
Kieu (F, Ho Chi Minh)	Husband left-behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 7 years • Boy, 4 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrated with husband to HCM • Both returned to village for birth • Husband migrated to Hanoi during infancy • Husband returned to look after sick mother and daughter. • She migrates to HCM when son 2 years
Joint Migration and Remote Parenting			
Linh (F, Hanoi)	Migrating together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 7 years • Boy, 4 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First migrated when second child was 18 months and first was nearly 5 years.
Phong (Hanoi)	Migrating together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 4 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrated before and during marriage • Wife rejoins him when son is 2 years old

Whilst anxieties about parenting are lessened when wives, and to a lesser extent husbands, remain in the village, those who migrate with their spouse to the city leaving children behind in the care of others **construct strategies of remote parenting**, particularly on the part of mothers. These are credible where distances are short enough to visit regularly but impossible to sustain when distances are large and visits home infrequent. Strategies for 'remote parenting' were markedly gendered. Whilst absent fathers with wives and children left-behind felt confident in their children's everyday loving care, they were notably **concerned about the impact of the lack of 'fathering'** on their relation with their child, on their children's emotional and social development. For instance, Toan says that his migration "*makes me neglect to look after and care for them ... it is difficult for me to compensate for their lack of affections and fatherhood*". Short-distant migrant mothers, even those with husband's left-behind, construct their migration as parenting work because it is providing for their children but their active strategies for 'remote parenting' go beyond the sending of regular remittances. They refer to their more frequent visits home as about "*taking care*" of the children whilst fathers go home less frequently "*to visit*"¹⁴, their detailed planning for the delegation of caring roles, and their fostering of direct contacts with children's teachers (through telephone calls when away and personal visits when home). Fathers, who see themselves as playing an

¹⁴ Resurreccion and Khanh (2007) also note that women resume normal household reproductive duties on even the shortest visits home.

important role in disciplining and guiding their children's education and occupational choices, also report reviewing children's school work when they go home.

Maternal migration is seen as a “sacrifice” by women to fulfil their obligations to their children. Whilst this ‘sacrifice’ sits comfortably with the official ideology of the doi moi era that wives should ‘help’ husbands to develop economically stable families, it produces a dilemma. As Linh succinctly puts it *“If I want to provide for them, I have to migrate. But when I migrate I cannot take care of them”*. However, patterns of chain migration mean that there have been substantial shifts in social norms that mothers should be with young children, particularly within communes where female migration has become more established. As Binh says:

“In my home village, there are many people migrating to Hanoi. We all understand that because of the difficulties in life, people have to leave their children at home to go to big cities earning a living. No mother or father wants to leave their children behind... ..people do not think mothers, like me, are bad mothers because they leave their children at home to come here to earn a living not to go wandering aimlessly around.”

Nevertheless, women's **loss of their everyday relations with children were painful** and their grief at parting for the first time was often overwhelming. Both mothers and fathers were **anxious about being able to return home when children got older and had more complex parenting needs** (including for moral guidance, supervision of leisure time to avoid social evils, support with studying, and guidance towards appropriate occupational and marital choices) and most worried about whether their children would form **proper sentiments of love and filial piety** for parents over the longer term¹⁵.

Crucially, **strategies of ‘remote parenting’ become harder to sustain over long distances.** Kieu and Thuat work in Ho Chi Minh leaving their families behind in the Red River Delta and visiting only once a year at Tet. Kieu contrasts her earlier short distance migration to Hanoi to her present long distance migration to Ho Chi Minh: *“Because we could see our children more often, I feel emotionally more comfortable to live in Hanoi than in this city [Ho Chi Minh]. .. It is far to live here, so I just come back to the village once every year.”* She mainly writes to her children calling only every two weeks because it is *“expensive”* as they have much to say and upsetting (*“after I talk with him [her husband], I miss him and our children so much that I find it difficult to fall into a sleep”*). She says plainly that she *“does not know about their [her children's] childhood because I was often far from them”*. It is significant that in her view a good wife is *“a wife who goes to work and earns money in*

¹⁵ This anxiety is increasingly significant as Long et al (2000:135) document a reorientation of filial piety from having to care for in-laws to a greater focus on meeting children's needs.

order to share the family responsibilities with her husband". For Thuat it is easier to reconcile traditional notions about gender roles with his long distance migration. The parenting of his son is "*undertaken by his mother [Thuat's wife]. She is a woman, so she stays at home*". Whilst Thuat feels comfortable with his breadwinning role, he too is clear that "*once we are migrants, we cannot balance the responsibilities*" and like Kieu, he says he can't comment on his son's everyday care because "*I haven't stayed with him at home for a long time*".

The dominance of intergenerational relations has historically led to relatively weak conjugal relations, however changing marriage practices and expectations may have increased the scope for greater spousal intimacy. **Spousal separation is dominated by anxieties which reflect gendered expectations of marital fidelity, sacrifice and self-discipline.** Whilst wives who stay in the countryside are seen as 'left behind', husbands who remain there describe themselves as having 'sent their wife' to the city. Whilst left-behind wives must have faith that their husband's will not be tempted to get involved in 'social evils' or other relationships, left-behind husbands emphasise that women do not 'go around' the city, point to the social surveillance arising from the fact that women migrants share guest house rooms in the city with others from their village, and articulate their refusal to tolerate infidelity (in a context where divorce is deeply shameful for women)¹⁶. **Those who do migrate with their spouse justify this choice in markedly different ways: men tend to point to economic factors and women more explicitly to a range of emotional factors.** However, depending on their circumstances, **migrating together may afford little conjugal intimacy:** many couples share small rooms with 5 or 6 other couples. Whilst Linh echoes the feelings of other women when she says "*sentimentally it is better to have your husband with you*", this 'love' talk may well conceal the desire to avert affairs that may pose a threat to husband's economic fidelity (see Phinney 2008a). Indeed Hai, a female migrant to Hanoi from the wider sample, was told by her mother-in-law when she was in late pregnancy to "*hurry up and give birth so you can go up there to work with your husband. Otherwise I am afraid he would marry another wife!*"

Rather than young families tying parents, or even women, 'to the bamboo grove', instead they seemed to represent **a window of opportunity** when parents could 'go away' to work: the children left-behind were 'still young' and had not yet developed more complex parenting needs; the couple had begun living independently so could direct remittances and savings to

¹⁶ These normative positions belie the complexity of real life relationships. Our sample included husbands who had been abandoned by wives and who were prepared to take back adulterous wives as well as vice versa.

their children's nutrition, education and clothing, their personal debts and house building projects; grandparents were often still fit and willing to take on caring roles; and the migrant's themselves were in their peak earning years and wanted to make a lasting difference of their family's standard of living.

5. Making a Life in the City

Whilst it is rare for low-income migrants in Hanoi to be seeking to ‘**make a life in the city**’, this was precisely what many low-income migrants to Ho Chi Minh are attempting to do with varying degrees of success (see table 7). To recap, this strategy seemed more attractive for migrants coming from relatively poorer rural situations and tended to be associated with more positive attitudes to city living even though they faced certain difficulties. Interestingly, these families were not necessarily ‘united’ but did involve at least a parent and children ‘living together’ in the city and the intention to make a life in the city over the long term. The chief anxieties of this group revolved around being able to sustain their income generating activities, escaping debt and being able to save enough to secure their children’s education and ultimately home ownership in the city.

Table 7: Migrants Making a Life in the City

Name (Sex, Site)	Purposive Category	‘Current’ age of children (carer)	Birth and Parenting arrangements
Hue (F, HCM)	Migrating together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 7 years • (herself) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born at mother’s natal home as mother-in-law not fit • Couple first migrate with son when he is around 6 months • After a few months, son sent to paternal grandparents and returned when 3 years old • No school enrolment but attends private classes
Huong (F, HCM)	Migrating separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 9 years • Boy, 4 years • (herself) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents met and married in city • Living together in city before babies arrives • Both boys born in city • Cared for by mother whilst she worked until started public nursery school at 4 years and 3 years respectively • Older son now in public elementary school
Chien (F, HCM)	Widowed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 6 years • (herself) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents living together in city when born • Daughter born in city • Private nursery from 9 months old (500,00 VND nursery fees)
Manh (M, HCM)	Migrating together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 7 years • (himself) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents both living together in HCM before birth • Born in HCM in accordance to father’s wishes • Has always lived with parents • Attends public elementary school • Father prime carer as mother works long hours
Duong (M, HCM)	‘Remarried’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy, 7 years • (his older sister living nearby in Go Vap) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Son of first marriage • Parents living together in HCM when born • Sent wife to his natal home for birth but she returned to HCM with son aged 4 months • Son sent to private nursery at 3 years so mother can work • Mother left and son sent to paternal grandparents for 6 months • Father brought son back to city as he was missing him • Son not at school because of psychological problems that father attributes to mother’s departure but knock on paperwork problems now for him and coming baby to attend school.

Many of those making a life in the city had first migrated at a relatively young age and had **loose ties** to their rural homes. Huong and Chien were orphans who came at 15 and 17 years respectively to work in Ho Chi Minh and Duong, after a very difficult childhood, quit military service at 19 years and came to the city to avoid reprisals. Manh found himself unwilling to return to village life after military service and gave his share of the family land to his older brother whose family were living in “*a pitiable condition*” in the forest. Although migrating

only later, at 28 years, Hue says that “*there is very little there*” in the village for her, her partner and their 6 month old son. For these migrants, the impossibility of earning money in their villages, the poor conditions there and their loose ties meant that they aspired to make a life in the city.

Unlike the circular migrants who went home to marry, and preferred endogenous matches, these migrants generally found their partners, **made their marriages**¹⁷ and began their families in the city. Whilst migrant networks often meant that some spouses came from nearby rural communes, in other cases partners’ home places were far apart (see table 4 above). These marriages appear to be **less tied into intergenerational obligations/expectations**. Aside from Manh, these were love marriages to partners they had met in the city often through work, relatives or friends, and become romantically attached to. Although Hue did not migrate until after her ‘marriage’, she too fell in love with her partner and, even though he was too poor to actually marry her, her family have now reluctantly accepted their union. Similarly, those migrants who had married in the city tended to also **bear their children in the city**: apart from Hue, who had not yet migrated, and Duong, whose mother ‘called’ his first wife back home to give birth, these couples did their child-bearing in the city. Manh insists his baby be born in the city and links his decision directly to his fathering role of the infant: “*she wanted to give birth in the home village, in order to save money. I did not agree. She should give birth here. At that time, I can take care of my baby directly. I am his father, so I can take care of him better than others.*” Chien and her husband took on an interest free loan of 1 M VND to pay for her birth¹⁸ and ‘maternity leave’: “*I didn’t go to work for a few months before giving birth, so I didn’t get any salary. He worked as a bricklayer, got his wages by the week and had no money to save. When I gave birth he went out borrowing money. When the baby was 9 months old, I went to work, had money and paid back*”. Unlike the Hanoi migrants’ children, these **children are largely raised in the city** by a parent and they are ‘used’ to city life.

Raising a family in the city involves negotiating a number of difficulties which revolve around caring for children in an urban environment, often without the support of the extended family and where everything must be paid for. Many complain about frequent moves in rented accommodation and the difficulty of finding a **stable place to live**. Housing that is adequate for a family is costly and although this group are generally not sending money to the

¹⁷ In most cases the customary visits to parents were carried out and in a few cases the marriage ceremony was conducted in the rural home but the marriages themselves were agreed and arranged by the urban couple.

¹⁸ A natural delivery at a public hospital costing 620,000 VND.

countryside, several are in debt or receiving help from other relatives both in the city and in the countryside. They refer to the constant **need for money “everyday”**, the attentiveness as parents they must pay to ensure their children do not **“get spoiled”** in the city and the potential **dangers of the urban/working environment** for looking after small children. Non-relatives are also a potential source of solidarity and Manh has several fictive kin who have been instrumental in his survival and Chien’s neighbours and landlady **“look out”** for her. Strikingly debt is a problem for Hue, Duong, and Chien, in each case as a result of medical fees. Like most low-income migrants, almost none have health insurance and their ability to claim free care in the city, even for children under 7 years, is variable. For instance, when Chien’s husband was diagnosed with tuberculosis and ‘brain disease’ in the city he had to transfer back to his home place to be eligible for free treatment: he died about 4 weeks later leaving her with his urban hospital fees to repay.

Raising children without the support of an extended kin network involves **difficult trade-offs between work and care**. As in rural areas, many mothers take infants with them to work where circumstances allow, some persuade mothers or mother-in-law to stay with them for several months, or where this is not possible mothers take a break from work, and use private nursery care after the key period of breastfeeding. Young children were only ‘sent back’ to the countryside as a last resort. Hue’s son was ‘sent back’ to the village at 7/8 months of age and unsatisfactorily shuttled between her and her husband’s sick mother until the age of 3 because she was working long hours in a shoe factory. She now sees this as ignorant and would not ‘send him back’ alone to the countryside again. Duong’s son ‘sent back’ to his parents because of his wife’s desertion but he failed to settle and Duong brought him back to the city and his older sister who lives nearby looks after him during the day and, since Duong’s new partner moved in, at night too.

Private nursery care is preferred to public nursery care even though it is more expensive because it is more flexible about when parents can drop and collect their children. As Chien says *“I work irregular shifts and couldn’t come home on time”*. Strategies of early child care evolved in relation to trade-offs between parents’, especially mothers’, work options and children’s needs. For instance, Manh’s wife stopped working in the factory to have their baby but took in sewing at home after a year and resumed working long hours in a junk-sorting warehouse only when her son was 3 years old. In Hue’s case, she stopped working in the shoe factory for reasons of occupational health and to call her son back from the countryside and now looks after her brother’s children and does other errands and domestic work where her son can come too. Huong looked after both her sons whilst she worked but was able to feed her first on demand when she managed an out-working workshop but could not her second

when she worked as a hairdresser: she feels her second son is more sickly and less strong because her work interfered with his feeding and led to his earlier weaning.

If one parent is more flexible then public nursery care and schooling is desired but several have had problems accessing this. These difficulties revolve around **differential application of policies** about the allocation of nursery and school places as well as the difficulty of resolving paperwork problems as migrants are administrated through their home communes. Huong and Manh have successfully secured public nursery and elementary school places for their children using their birth certificates alone¹⁹. However, Huong believes that she will not be able to procure secondary school places for them without KT3 registration: unable to build on the land she has bought on the outskirts of the city, she believes they are ineligible and meantime they will ask her sister-in-law if they can register in her home. Whilst Manh knows he is eligible for KT3 registration, he too has failed to secure it because bureaucratic problems: *“If fact, our residence here is legal. We don’t do anything wrong. If we have a KT3 certificate, it will be more convenient for our child’s schooling. However, it’s too hard to go back and forth.”* In contrast, Hue was refused a school place for her son because she could not show her registration documents and because of an error on her son’s birth certificate and he now attends only ‘private classes’. Duong can’t get school entry for his son because his neighbourhood head is ‘uncooperative’ and he is now over-age for grade and needs a ‘sympathy paper’ from his home district, in view of his mother’s desertion, to get late entry. He anticipates problems for the coming baby too since his divorce has not been registered at his home place, he has no official marriage certificate for his second marriage, and so will not be able to apply for the birth certificate.

These migrants believe that children should live with parents and seek greater stability in their lives in the city. As Huong says *“to have a lot of children is better than to be rich in money”* but *“life can be improved, only after having a stable place of living”*. In her case, her husband spent 3 years in Taiwan and is now working away again in Dong Thap in order to keep his wife and children ‘together’ in the city. Although Chien’s mother-in-law and an aunt have both offered to look after her daughter whilst she migrates for work, Chien says *“If I work and still have money to support her, I’ll keep her living with me: I don’t want to live far away from her”*. She endures considerable hardship as a widow to maintain them both in Ho Chi Minh: *“Now I just have money to look after my child and pay the rent only; in general, I don’t have money to save up so I tighten my belt”*. She skips her own breakfast, takes lunch at her work place, and eats plain noodles for supper. She uses her 800,000 – 1.3 M VND

¹⁹ Huong notes that whilst she could get the birth certificate for the first child in the city, for the second she had to apply in the home commune due to a change in regulations.

(depending on how much overtime is available) to meet the 500,000 VND rent and similar amount for nursery fees and to pay for her child's food and clothing. She doesn't have "anybody to rely on" but her neighbours "sometimes ask me if I've eaten anything yet, and they give me food".

In order to pursue their strategies of building new families in the city, these migrants must negotiate with traditional expectations of gender roles. Whilst in some cases of city births mothers or mothers-in-law (Manh, Huong) came and stayed for several months to help out in other cases couple's managed on their own. Huong feels the strain of bringing up her children in the absence of her husband but says that people admire her saying: "you undertake the role of a woman and the role of a man at the same time. You are so resourceful". Unlike other construction workers who live on site, Chien's husband left home around 5.30 every morning to cycle to his site. When Chien gave birth, her mother-in-law was too old to come and help, but "upon coming home from work, he [her husband] washed the clothes. He washed the clothes for 3 months and then I did the washing by myself". Manh is the primary carer for his son since he was 3 years old as well as doing all the housework and shopping. Although he is proud of his parenting role and values the time with his son, he is dissatisfied with wife (who he describes as "sluggish", "untidy" as "knowing nothing" and "rarely smiling"). Although her regular income meets their rent and fees, he has a low opinion of her as a mother ("she does not fully understand our son") and a wife ("we rarely talk happily with one another"). However, other migrants use ideas of **familialism** that privilege the importance of children living with parents and ideas of the **greater civility of urban life** to support their choices. For instance, Hue says that "not knowing much, my husband and I sent [my son] back home again" but that now she feels "it would be a pity to leave him wandering alone back in my hometown. Here we have mother, father and child. Grandfathers or grandmothers aren't as good as his parents at raising him." Huong too notes that "rural people do not know how to learn from each other regarding to child-upbringing... children in the city will have a better future". Manh thinks that his son "will be smarter" because he is familiar with city life and it offers him a "chance" to "contact" with "higher culture".

Their positive attitude to city life emphasises that settlement is a deliberate strategy for this group, sometimes in the face of discouragement from other relatives, even though some couples may ultimately be unable to see this through. Huong says that her siblings encourage her family to return to the village but that she and her husband refused "To live in the City is always better than to live in the countryside... Although we have difficulties in the City, we can strive to make a living. It is better for our children, when we live in the city". In contrast, life in the countryside is seen as "harder", particularly farming work, and these migrants see

the fact that they have to work hard in the city each day as a worthy struggle to stabilise their family circumstances. Huong, like many ‘making a life in the city’, emphasises their **endurance**: she says “*my husband and I have overcome a lot of difficulties in order to stay in this city for so many years*”.

6. “Each member of our family is living in a different place”²⁰

The strategic separations of migrants who trade-off leaving spouses or children behind, and the strategic togetherness of those trying to make a life in the city, contrasts with those migrants for whom nobody in their immediate nuclear family lives together (see table 8). Some migrant couples migrate *separately*, in some cases to different destinations in other cases living and working separately at the same destination, *and* leave their children behind. Their migration to try to provide a better life for their children is built upon **the apparent dis-integration of the family unit for extended periods of time**. Worryingly, several can not see clearly the end point of this chronic family separation or what viable alternative they may have.

Table 8: Migrants Who Live Apart from their Children and Spouses

Name, (Site)	Sex, origin and occupation	Spouse	‘Current’ age of children	Birth and Parenting arrangements
Mai (Hanoi)	F RRD Porter	Migrating separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boy 11 years • Girl 6 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First migrated when first child was 3 years old • Returned home for birth of second child • Resumed migration when second child was 3 years
Dung (Hanoi)	M RRD Porter	Migrating overseas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 8 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrated when his only child was 4years • Returned home for a few months after wife went overseas when daughter was 6 years • Resumed migration
Hung (HCM)	M Cau Mau Bricklayer	Migrating separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, • 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child born in rural home at district hospital • Child left-behind with his wife in the village. • Wife and child joined him in city for 5 months when daughter was 4 years old. She sold drinks at a construction site whilst looking after child. • Wife migrated to Binh Duong to work as maid and child sent back to village
Tran (Hanoi)	F RRD Porter	‘Separated’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl, 14 years • Girl, 13 years • Boy, 8 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrates to join husband who is being unfaithful and failing to send remittances when daughters are 4 and 5 years old • Returns for birth of son • Resumes migration when son is 2 years old

In each case this ‘strategy’ represents a form of **failure or desperation**. Mai migrated to Hanoi just a few months after her husband did, but went ‘alone’ and he works and lives with his construction gang in different parts of the city whilst she carries goods in Long Bien market with other female villagers. She is clear that “*It [would be] better to stay at home because my child was still young*” [only 18 months] but she and her husband went because they were “*still poor*” and “*had nothing*” and she, like other migrant mothers who have left children behind presents her earnings as “*for*” her baby. Dung’s wife is ‘locked’ into a three year contract for factory work in Malaysia: She persuaded Dung to let her go because the opportunity was promoted as a change for workers families ‘to escape poverty’ but she cannot make any savings and is being mistreated. Although he promised to stay home to look after

²⁰ Hung.

their child, Dung was forced within a couple of months to resume his work as a porter in Hanoi to keep his daughter and mother. Hung first migrated when his daughter was 18 months old *“in order to make it possible for me to keep her [his wife] staying at home and taking care of our child”*. However his wife and child followed him a year later and after selling drinks around construction sites with their daughter, his wife got a job as a live-in maid in Binh Duong. Although he opposes his wife’s decision to ‘send’ his daughter back to the village, he *“respects”* it and can not insist otherwise since his earnings alone are insufficient to impact on their living conditions. Tran’s husband now lives openly with another married woman in Hanoi and no longer supports her and their three children materially. She is now forced to migrate for work leaving them behind in order to feed, school and clothe them.

These absent parents face anxieties about both **their children’s wellbeing and their relations with their spouse**. Although Dung is absent, he is very much the left-behind parent because his wife is overseas and he takes on the role of primary carer. He is the only man in the Hanoi sub-sample to return home every 10 to 15 days as the women migrants do *“to take care”* of his daughter and says that *“she already missed out on her mother’s affection, and now her father is away, she is missing out on a lot....”*. Hard as he tries, he worries that he can not make up for her mother’s absence in his parenting because he is a man and fathers are traditionally associated with discipline: *“It would be different if her mother was home. She is a girl and I am a man.”* Whilst Mai admits that *“our children do not have the same care like those kids whose parents stay at home”* she emphasises that *“a mother who stays but cannot provide for her children is not as good as migrant people like us”*. Hung’s wife reminds him that *“we are not the only people who have left children in the home village”* and he feels that as adults they can *“stand miserable living conditions, yet, it is impossible for us to leave our child in the same miserable conditions”* and she will be better off with her grandparents. He and his wife visit 2 or 3 times a year and telephone every week.

Whilst spousal absence strains marital relations, these migrants show that this **does not lead in any straight-forward way to separation or divorce**. Dung’s exogenous love marriage to an ethnic minority woman from Loa Cai is grounded in love and tolerance and he sympathises with the vulnerable situation she has found herself trapped in and says *“I just want my wife to come home”*. Hung refers affectionately to his wife as *“fierce”* and also has a marriage build on mutual respect and compromise. Whilst he trusts his wife he is anxious that their ‘understanding’ of one another will diminish with extended periods of separation. Although Hung and Mai can both visit their spouses in the city, they rarely do, and have to wait until

they visit the village to be sexually intimate²¹. Mai says “*We are rural people, how can I say about love?... We did not think about love or our emotion.*” Significantly Tran’s estrangement from her husband was not caused by migration: rather migration provided a space for him to continue his affairs without harassment and to withdraw from family obligations. Interestingly, Tran’s good relations with her in-laws mean that she retains a cherished place in her marital home as daughter-in-law despite her husband’s estrangement.

Aside from Mai, who is able to convincingly remote parent, the others in this group **struggle to satisfactorily fulfil their social identities as mother/fathers and husband/wives**. Dung feels he is a poor substitute carer for his wife and Tran feels her three children do not behave as well as others whose parents care for them everyday and says that “*I am not really a very good mother*”. Hung cries during his interview and says:

“I am a father, but I cannot take care of our daughter; I haven’t done anything for her. I haven’t done anything for my family; that’s why my wife had to work far away. This means that I haven’t fulfilled my duty towards my wife. I haven’t done anything for my parents, either; on the contrary, they have to do things for us. I feel that I am so useless that I cannot do anything for my wife and daughter.”

²¹ Hung and his wife only go home 2 or 3 times a year but will see each other perhaps every month in the city. Mai and her husband will go home every month and very rarely see each other at all in Hanoi.

7. Conclusions

Our sample is specifically designed in such a way as to enable us to explore what various kinds of strategies mean for family relations for low-income migrants. We need to emphasise that it is not a statistically representative sample and we can **not** infer from our findings how prevalent different kinds of strategic separation are: what our data does enable us to do is to **explore the meanings of different kinds of strategic separations**. Nevertheless, what we know from secondary data, from our key informant interviews, and from the histories of the individual migrants is that these configurations are *not* highly unusual.

Periods of spousal and parental separation are found in almost all the life histories, regardless of current strategy, however, we have argued that there are some distinctive patterns that have specific consequences for gendered family relations. The dynamics entailed in managing a ‘visiting marriage’ or in ‘remote parenting’, vary from those in migrant families trying to ‘make a life’ in the city, as well as from those that characterise migrant families in which ‘nobody lives in the same place’. Our data confirm that spousal and parental separations undoubtedly strain family relations but whilst there is concern that “migration... is contributing to a small but growing trend for families to break up” (Summerfield 1997:206) the idea that these strategic separations will in themselves lead to family disintegration needs to be questioned (see also Kabeer 2007:31-32 and Zlotnik 1995). In all these situations **‘going away’ to work is an integral part of building and sustaining families**, albeit with different configurations. It is the challenges of maintaining **parenting relations**, whether remotely or in the city, rather than marital relations, that troubles our respondents most, although all are concerned about the impact of prolonged separation on the sentiments and understanding between husbands and wives.

Significantly, the migrants overwhelmingly subscribe to social norms of family co-residence and these are used to support strategies of making a life together in the city. Absent parents justify themselves in terms of fulfilling their parental or marital roles in the current economic climate in which agricultural opportunities are insufficient, the importance of education is widely accepted and the ‘real’ cost of education (even for rural children at primary level) is growing. Whilst the motivation for migration is economic, at heart it is for these mothers and fathers about the desire to make a better life for their children. The strategies they employ, and the choices they make, and their subjective experiences as migrant fathers/husbands and mothers/wives are powerfully shaped by prevailing institutional conditions and by the power relations that inher in gendered family relations.

Whilst absent fathers/husbands drew on established cultural norms for support for their absences, absent wives/mothers migrants drew flexibly from newer narratives about the suitability of sending women for labour and on women's roles in contributing to the family economy. In this way women were able to **represent their absences as doing parenting and conjugal work** by supporting their children and 'helping' their husbands keep their families. Whilst absent mothers developed strategies of actively remote parenting, these could not credibly be maintained over long distances and prolonged absences. Casting women's migration as parenting work **obscures its contradictions with their obligations and desires to provide everyday care for their children.**

Conventional expectations of men were more supportive of male migration but some male migrants struggled to meet expectations that their breadwinning could, even in any minimal sense, keep the family living 'together' and **all absent fathers regretted their emotional disengagement from their children and everyday rhythms of family life.** There is some evidence that fathers making a life together with their family in the city can show flexibility in taking on parenting work but more common was the substitution of family-based care for commercialised care, the taking of loans to cover 'maternity leaves' and by mothers the combining of productive work with caring for children, particularly under three years.

Taking advantage of new economic opportunities for these low-income migrants with young families comes at a cost and **this cost in terms of family relations, social identities and subjective experiences is strongly gendered.** The peak child-bearing years of migrants appear coincide with a '**window of opportunity**' for couples to improve their new family's standards of living. Linh like many migrants tells herself that "*I just come here to work for sometime. When we have enough, I mean enough to live on, we'll return home*" but she admits that it is hard to establish how much money is enough, particularly in the context of rising prices and rising expectations. Economic crisis has added pressure to these strategies by dramatically affecting the relative trade-offs of going away to work or making ends meet in running family life in the city. Worryingly, the '**window of opportunity**' for many low income migrants may well extend to **a lifetime of chronic migration or urban poverty** despite their current sacrifices. As Linh asks "How can we migrate for ever?" Ironically such outcomes will have **lasting implications for children** even though the desire to make a better life for their children is the prime motivator behind these mothers and fathers migration strategies.

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