



The impact of COVID-19 on labor migration and the roles of small-scale farming in the pandemic in Vietnam

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Abstract

Drawing on in-depth interviews of migrant workers and their families in rural Vietnam, this study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational and rural-urban migration as well as the role of small-scale farming in remittance-receiving households. Fieldwork was conducted in two provinces: the Son La province where ethnic minority women and men work in urban construction sites, and the Ha Tinh province where young men work in East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Research findings show that in Son La, the pandemic exacerbated the already precarious lives and livelihoods of labor migrants, especially women and children. On the other hand, in Ha Tinh non-market-oriented small-scale farming and livestock production support remittance-receiving households, thereby limiting the impact of reduced remittances from transnational migration in the short-term. In both study sites, the pandemic did not change respondents' perceptions of livelihood strategies. Labor migration remains the only available option for Son La farmers from the poor households to provide for their families and the best option for many young men in Ha Tinh to gain financial autonomy. These individuals are deeply affected by structural injustice in the commodification of the labor market, which is inherently unequal and exploitative. Current agricultural development must offer diverse options to accommodate the various needs of marginalized households that depend on off-farm incomes as well as small-scale farming.

Key words: COVID-19, migration, gender, agriculture, Vietnam

1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected transnational and rural-urban labor migration across the world through travel restrictions, job loss and/or exclusion from government support, making the already precarious lives and livelihoods of the most marginalized and their dependents worse. The literature on political economy points out that although the pandemic has clearly illuminated the risks and vulnerabilities of labor migration, this issue is not new. It has been persistent as it is rooted in neo-liberal capitalism, a system which is inherently unequal, sustained by the exploitation of labor in both production and reproduction (Pattenden et al., 2021). On the other hand, rural poor households' dependency on remittances in the global South is partly an outcome of neoliberal capitalism that marginalizes small-scale farmers in rural areas (Kandikuppa and Gupta, 2021). This pandemic has thus revealed the contradiction of global economic development and the fragility of current social and economic systems that exacerbate inequality based on gender, class, and race (Khanal and Todorova, 2021; Rao, 2021).

While the global media has highlighted issues regarding stranded migrants, limited studies exist on the lived experiences of migrants and remittance-receiving households during the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia. Waibei et al. (2020) highlight the resilience of rural households in the greater Mekong subregion. Rural farming, fishing, home gardening, and raising livestock function as a safety net for not only those who live in these rural areas but also their family members in urban areas where migrants and residents are affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

In Vietnam, international borders were closed in early March 2020, after which Vietnamese transnational migrants were stranded in their destination countries. Over 75,000 Vietnamese were repatriated from 59 countries on 260 repatriation flights in 2020 (Anh, 2020). However, many Vietnamese remain stranded in other countries, including more than 20,000 migrant workers in Japan (Hirayama, 2020).

Though the borders were closed in Vietnam, the COVID-19 outbreak spread in early 2021 in factories in the northern industrial zone. This affected migrant factory and construction workers, many of whom are ethnic minority women and men from northern mountain provinces. Although the outbreak was under control by June 2021, another outbreak occurred in July 2021 in the southern regions of Vietnam, which led to a strict three-month lockdown of provincial borders.

How do migrants and remittance-receiving households respond to these challenges? What are the roles of small-scale farming during times of pandemics? How does existing inequality based on gender, ethnicity, and class affect these migrants' coping strategies? The aim of this study is to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transnational and rural-urban labor migration, consequences for gender and family relations, and roles of rural small-scale family farming. In Vietnam, labor migration is common for smallholder farmers (both men and women, including youth) in rural areas. Although forms of migration vary with each specific rural economy, many rural households value their farms, especially paddy fields, and some plots are usually maintained for food security of families and relatives (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2020; Resurreccion, 2007).

Between April and July 2021, a qualitative study was conducted in two study sites in Vietnam: Son La province where ethnic minorities (both women and men) work in northern industrial areas seasonally or year-round, and Ha Tinh province where young men (both married and unmarried) work in East Asia (Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea). In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 12 respondents who are returning migrants or migrants' family members in remittance-receiving households.

The report structure is as follows. The next section describes methods employed in this study. Then Section 3 outlines research contexts of Son La and Ha Tinh provinces, particularly gendered migration trends and agriculture in the study villages. Section 4 presents findings from the research. Section 5 discusses the unequal distribution of COVID-19 impacts and subsequent negative effects on women from a feminist perspective. The report concludes with implications for rural agricultural development.

2. Methods

Fieldwork was undertaken in April 2021 in the Dan Truong commune, Nghi Xuan district, Ha Tinh province and July 2021 in the Chieng La commune, Thuan Chau district, Son La Province. The field study consisted of key informant interviews with village leaders and women union leaders and in-depth interviews with 12 migrants or their family members (Tables 1 and 2). Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990; Hamilton, 2014) was used to select respondents who have rich information related to the objectives of this study. Respondents were selected based on guidance from a female local government officer who was knowledgeable about migration in the commune in Ha Tinh and Son La respectively. In Son La, we requested that respondents with typical cases who have been affected by the pandemic be selected. All the respondents were female because women's migration has been affected more seriously than men's and their experiences include intersectional constraints based on gender, ethnicity and poverty. In Ha Tinh, we selected respondents whose family members were abroad for work. We were also able to find one respondent who was about going to Taiwan.

Table 1. The list of respondents in Son La

#	Name*	G	Age	The relationship with a migrant	Destination	Year started
1	Nhinh	F	38	Herself, husband & eldest son	Hai Phong, Hai Duong	2019
2	Co	F	41	Herself	Hai Phong, Quang Ninh	2018
3	Mang	F	28	Herself	Quang Ninh	2018
4	Bua	F	61	All four children & their spouses	Bac Giang, Ha Noi	2019
5	Phieng	F	35	Herself	Hai Duong	2019
6	Song	F	40	Herself & husband	Hai Phong	2019 (herself) 2017/18 (husband)

*Names were changed to protect their privacy

Table 2. The list of respondents in Ha Tinh

#	Name*	G	Age	The relationship with a migrant	Destination	Year started
1	Uan	F	54	Her son	Japan	August 2015
2	Phuong	F	54	Her son	Japan	October 2018
3	Tung	M	32	Himself	Soon Taiwan	May 2021
4	Minh	F	32	Her husband	Japan	July 2019
5	Chuong	F	49	Her son	Japan	Oct 2019
6	Cuc	F	60	Her first son & daughter-in-law Her second son	South Korea	Jan 2011

*Names were changed to protect their privacy

All interviews lasted around one hour, with translators present for the interviews with the Thai women for Son La.

3. Research contexts in the time of pandemic

This section briefly explains the research contexts, especially the trend of labor migration, farming and the impact of COVID-19 on off-farm work. Information described in this section are based on key informant interviews and in-depth interviews.

Rural-urban migration and agriculture in Son La province

People living in the Chieng La Commune are Thai ethnic minority. Main crops Thai farmers grow are cassava, maize and some fruits such as mango, jackfruits and bananas. Both men and married women go to migrate for construction work in the Red River Delta region or Hanoi. Some educated women (married and unmarried) work in factories in the industrial zone of the Red River Delta region. Off-farm incomes are main source of incomes for the poor with limited farmland. Many Thai women, both the young and the old, do not have confidence in Vietnamese as they do not speak Vietnamese in everyday lives, while men are more exposed to Vietnamese and have more confidence.

The impact of COVID-19 has been particularly serious for those who depended heavily on off-farm incomes and remittances. The Red River Delta region and Hanoi are major migration destinations, and it is common for a couple to migrate together for construction work for a few months during the off-peak farming season. Also, both married and unmarried women often form a group to go to work in factories. During the past two years, labor migration has become increasingly common in the commune being studied. Some households have locked their houses and abandoned their farms as the adult members migrated. As such, both agricultural production and demand for agricultural input have declined.

Since the beginning of 2021, COVID-19 cases have increased in major migration destinations such as Hanoi and the Red River Delta region (Hai Duong and Bac Giang Provinces). Consequently, construction work was halted, and factories were either closed or reduced the number of workers in line with the government's COVID-19 measures. Individual employers in the informal construction sector often do not have enough money to pay salaries for their casual laborers until the construction is completed. Therefore, when construction ceased due to the pandemic, employers had a few options: 1) they could ask the laborers to go home and then return when the pandemic is over by promising payment after the completion of the construction work; or 2) they could ask workers to remain on the site with room and board but no pay. Alternatively, the casual workers themselves might decide to return to their home villages without pay, which they may prefer to being stuck in the city for a few months with uncertain employment prospects.

On the other hand, COVID-19 also affected agriculture. According to the key informant interviews, the pandemic did not affect cassava and maize production in the Chieng La commune as the produce were traded within the province. It did affect fruit producers, however, as the major routes to trade destinations were disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions. For example, Mr Tong Van Hau, a long-distance trader/truck driver used to have a fruit trading business, delivering bananas, mangoes, and longans from Son La to exporting stations such as Hai Duong and Lai Chau. He stopped driving long distances in late 2020 due to rising concern over COVID-19 measures, with many checkpoints established on route. As a result, the price of mangoes decreased sharply from around VND 5,000/kg to VND 2,000/kg, according to mango producers in Mai Son. By contrast, cassava prices were relatively high during the previous season. The Vice-Director of the Mai Son processing factory said that the price of fresh cassava roots was VND 1,600/kg at the beginning of the 2020–2021 harvesting season before prices increased to a high of VND 2,800/kg due to China's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, some factories in Northern Vietnam used to import fresh roots from Laos to process in their factories. However, since the closure of the border with Laos, some Vietnamese factories sent traders to Thuan Chau to purchase more roots from Northern Vietnam to fill the gap. This also helped increase prices in the district.

Transnational migration and agriculture in the Ha Tinh province

Ha Tinh province is one of the largest migrant-sending provinces to abroad, especially to East Asia, middle East and Eastern Europe (Kawarazuka et al., 2020). In the Dan Truong commune, young men (both married and unmarried) go to work in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan by sending money from relatives, a bank and/or private money lenders, while young women (both married and unmarried) work factories nearby. Older men also engage in various wage labor work within and outside the village. Family farms are still considered important and are often managed by women in their 50s and above. The major crops in the Dan Truong commune are rice, ground nuts, and sweetpotato, and many households have livestock (cattle, chicken). Typical married couples in young generation in their 20s and 30s mainly earn incomes from off-farm work and only grow rice as it is staple food and farming is mechanized. Many new two-story concrete houses have been built by remittances from transnational migration. They stand as the symbol of economic success. According to the household survey conducted in Ha Tinh Province including Dan Truong commune in 2020 (total 78 households in Ha Tinh province), an average total annual non-farm income among those who have (49 HHs) is USD 2,200 and remittances among those who receive (15 HHs) are USD 2,500, although incomes from extended families, such as married sons are not counted.

4. Findings

4.1. Rural-urban migration in Son La Province

The impact of COVID-19 on off-farm wage work

In rural-urban migration, ethnic minorities are often exploited by small-scale construction employers and factory owners who see them as cheap and disposable labor. Brokers frequently visit our study site and provide a cost for transport or even arrange a bus for labor migrants. The promised wages depend on the type of work but is usually approximately VND 200,000–250,000 per day including accommodation (a tent) and food. This is extremely attractive for poor farmers who have limited land. However, casual laborers in informal sectors are extremely vulnerable in times of crisis and its impacts on women are far more complicated than the loss of income.

We begin with the story of Nhin (38-year-old woman), whose migration with her husband turned to tragedy for her family. Her household was very poor, and her husband's father did not have enough farmland to distribute to all of his sons. Therefore, her husband came to live with Nhin's family, and the couple was given a small plot of a rice field (720 m²) and some uplands for growing cassava. Eventually, they built a house on Nhin's father's compound. The couple began migrating for work in construction in 2019. Nhin's mother looked after their two boys, aged 9 and 13, while Nhin and her husband used to go to work in a couple of provinces in the Red River Delta region where there was regular work available for casual laborers, and worked for a few months each time.

However, in February 2021, after celebrating Lunar New Year in their village, a wave of COVID-19 cases swept through the Red River Delta region where they were working. The construction work continued, but it was increasingly uncertain, and their employer did not provide enough food for all of them. One day, her husband got drunk and got into a fight with a male co-worker over the distribution of food among co-workers. She said that all of them were hungry at the time. The co-worker was seriously injured, and her husband was given a five-year prison sentence. In May, the COVID-19 situation became very serious, and her employer asked her and the rest of her co-workers to return home. She only received VND 4 million rather than the VND 45 million promised for her work over the previous three months, because, according to her employer, she did not work hard enough. Her co-workers, all from ethnic minority groups, received the same treatment.

She returned to her village, but there was no paid work available as the planting season had finished. Her 15-year-old son and his uncle were stuck in Bac Giang, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, and the provincial border was closed. Without her husband and eldest son, she was not able to do farming during the next planting season. She mentioned in the interview that she was currently being supported by her parents and was waiting for the pandemic to subside so that she could migrate again.

The next case is Bua (61-year-old widow) and lives with her twin grandsons, 14 years old.

This case shows that poor households send many family members to labor migration at the cost of reproduction and family relations. In her family, her four adult children and their spouses are absent from the village for labor work, and her grandchildren stay with their grandparents. All her adult children and their spouses were stuck on their construction sites with no work and no payment for two months. Her youngest daughter, Van, began to be physically abused by her husband in Hanoi, who got drunk every night due to the increased uncertainty.

However, since the provincial border was closed, and Van had no money, it was difficult for her to escape. Bua discussed the matter with the village elders and Van was taken home as a special case. During our interview with Bua, Van was still in quarantine in the village hall for two weeks as she arrived from a COVID-19 area. Bua lost the remittances from her son and daughters, and she now depends on government financial support. Meanwhile, Van was considering divorce, which meant that she was going to become separated from her son who was living with her husband's parents.

Above two cases show that COVID-19 brings about negative effects to already vulnerable and insecure households, and women and their children face specific challenges. In this respect, the impact of COVID-19 on labor migration is not simply financial; it affects the sphere of reproduction and exacerbate social well-being of poor households with possible long-term consequences.

COVID-19 and a setback for women's economic independence

Over the past few years, migration has created opportunities for Thai women to earn incomes outside the village, challenging traditional gender norms and enabling women from disadvantaged backgrounds to become financially independent. Those women have suffered setbacks due to COVID-19.

Mang (28-year-old widow) was married at 18 and now has two sons, aged 8 and 6. The eldest son has Down's syndrome and requires special care. Her husband died after her second child was born. She left her husband's homestead and returned to live with her parents along with her two children and her mother-in-law, as she found it extremely difficult to continue to live in her husband's homestead without him. Her return to her natal village enabled her to reconnect with her family and relatives who provided support for childcare, farming plots (paddy rice) and labor, and accompanied her on her migrations.

She first migrated to Quang Ninh Province with her older brother and sister in 2018 and worked on a construction site for three to four months while her mother and mother-in-law looked after her children. She returned to the village once every three or four months. Before COVID-19, she continued migrating, either with her sister and brother or with her aunt. In early 2021, she returned to the village with her brother and sister because COVID-19 created uncertainty in their work. The three of them were not being fully paid, and they eventually returned to the village as it was better than being stuck in a small tent packed with other workers.

Their youngest brother was the only one who had become a farmer and had therefore been less affected by COVID-19. Now she and her children are financially dependent on her brother's family who provide food for her and her children. Migration had enabled her to become financially independent despite being a widow with no land. COVID-19 also showed that support from family can provide a safety net in times of crisis, and that family farming works as a coping strategy even if it does not break the cycle of poverty.

Another woman, Song (40 years old), has been doing construction work with her husband since 2019 to repay the VND 100 million (USD 4400) debt for her children's higher education. Her daughter completed her university education but remains unemployed due to the economic recession caused by COVID-19, and her son is studying information technology. However, because of COVID-19, it has been difficult for him to find part-time work.

Her husband used to work on a construction site all year round, while she joined him for a shorter period of two to three months and then one-month intervals. During her absence from the village, her parents-in-law looked after their farm. When the COVID-19 outbreak began in the Red River Delta in early 2021, she and her husband had to return to the village. Although the couple worked for three months their employer paid them only for two months. They kept promising to pay the following week, so they waited a further two weeks but received no money. Song does not speak Vietnamese well, so her husband negotiated with their employer, to no avail. They had to give up the rest of the money as they feared COVID-19 infection as well as the closure of the provincial border.

Song and her husband have enough land for growing paddy rice and cassava and for raising pigs and buffaloes (purchased through a state loan). However, these are only enough to survive. They lost their off-farm incomes, but they must still meet monthly debt repayments. She has borrowed some money from her brothers, and now her parents-in-law are offering backup support by borrowing some money from their siblings. If the COVID-19 situation continues, she will need to borrow more money from other relatives. She told us that her father died when she was young, and she only completed her primary education. Therefore, due to her limited education, she can only work in precarious, casual laboring jobs, unlike more educated women who have the option of working in factories. She has borrowed money and taken on debt because she wants her children to complete their higher education. Thus, COVID-19 disrupted a household's long-term investment planning and creates a high risk of being trapped in a vicious circle of debt and poverty.

4.2. Transnational migration in the Ha Tinh province

The Impact of COVID-19 on off-farm incomes and remittances

In-depth interviews confirm that COVID-19 affected both off-farm incomes and remittances for some of the respondents.

Sang (33-year-old man) working in Japan has been affected by COVID-19. We interviewed his wife Minh (32-years-old) who lives with their two young sons. Sang left for Japan in July 2019. The family borrowed money (VND 200 million, USD 8700) from a bank and relatives. He works in construction in Tokyo. After working for five months, the COVID-19 outbreak occurred in Japan. He could not work some time and remain with no incomes. The company provided food for him and the Japanese government provided cash (USD 1000) for all people living in Japan including him. However, his reduced incomes make it difficult for his family in Ha Tinh to repay their debt. Currently (April 2021) he only works 4 days per week. So far, his earning is much less than he expected, and she hopes that he can work a lot more after COVID-19 is over.

Mai (47-year-old woman)'s second son also works in Japan. He went to Japan and his contract expires in October 2021. He works in Tokyo. The first year in 2019 was very good. He earned a lot of money. From the second year in 2020, remittances were reduced to 20 million (USD870) per month, then now the half, 10 million per month. Her family has not yet paid off the loan of his application for Japan. She expects that he can work a lot after COVID-19 is over.

Cuc (60-year-old widow)'s second son in South Korea was also affected by COVID-19. Since the outbreak, his working days have been reduced to 15 days per month. Meanwhile her wife quit a job due to pregnancy. Now they have a new-born baby while his salary remains reduced. Last year therefore Cuc did not receive remittances from him.

The role of agriculture in the time of crisis

While incomes/remittances were reduced to some extent, the reduction does not immediately affect the rural lives and livelihoods of family members in our study site, especially from a short-term perspective. According to the village leader, at least there is no single household who fell into poverty after the pandemic. This is partly because each household has close ties with extended families with whom various resources are shared. Furthermore, remittances/off-farm incomes are often spent only on occasional large investment such as house building or starting a business rather than daily expenditure or agricultural input.

The first case is Minh whose husband, Sang works in Japan. She does not have income as she takes care of her three young children. However, her family is not depending on her husband's remittances. Her household's non-food expenditure is small as children are still very young. Food is provided from their own paddy field and by her parents-in-law who are farmers and live in the next door. This case clearly shows that women-led small-scale family farms works as a safety net, supporting extended families intergenerationally, although Sang's reduced incomes in Japan may have long-term impacts if COVID-19 continues.

The next case is Nhiem (24-years-old man)'s mother, Chuong (49 years old). She is also a farmer, growing rice, groundnuts, sweetpotato and beans. Her household has two head of cattle. She is a main farmer in this family while her husband helps farming occasionally. Apart from Nhiem, she has two daughters who already married and living in the same commune. Their husbands work in Taiwan while both daughters work in a factory in the district. Her agricultural produce is regularly sent to her daughters whose husbands were being stranded in Taiwan. Agricultural production is thus embedded in intergenerational reciprocal support between a mother and her daughters, and it plays an important role as a safety net in times of pandemic.

The last case is Cuc, a widow farmer, living alone in a big old house. Her husband died a long time ago from dengue fever when he was working in Ho Chi Minh city. His first son worked in South Korea for six years, returned, married and lives in Binh Duong, north of Ho Chi Minh city and her wife works as an accountant. Her second son is in South Korea with her son-in-law. However, she is not economically depending on her children. She proudly says that she manages her life independently by farming, and she rather support her first son and daughters by providing food from her farms.

Thus, although adult children in the study site do not engage in agriculture, they are benefited from it through intergenerational family ties and reciprocal support therein. This time, agriculture is more visible as a safety net, providing back-up support to adult children's families who were affected by COVID-19. On the other hand, adult children's remittances used to help old parents to improve material wealth (e.g., building a house) and provide a safety net in times of need (e.g., flooding and subsequent damages in crops, illness), although most of remittances are suspended or reduced in times of pandemic. In this respect, intergenerational support is reciprocal, asymmetric and flexible to economic situations of individuals.

Post-COVID-19 perceptions of young men and women on the importance of agriculture

Despite of reduced remittances and economic uncertainty in destination countries, young men's dream of working abroad is not changed, meanwhile agriculture remains out of full-time job options for both young men and women. We met two households whose sons just went to Japan a week ago. Our respondent, Tung (32-year-old man) is now preparing for going to Taiwan.

"The salary of VND 3 million (USD 132) per month cannot provide for my family with three children as they grow. This is the reason to go abroad". Tung said. He used to earn VND 3 million per month by working in a plastic and packaging factory. The factory was affected by COVID-19 and his salary and working hours was halved. There was no compensation or support from the factory. He decided to quite much earlier than he planned and spent his time with his family while preparing for going to Taiwan where his elder brother worked for three years. He wanted to go to Japan where salary is higher, but it takes longer time for paperwork and training. Since he is already 32 years old, married and have three children, he could not wait for another year or two for going to Japan. Due to COVID-19, he has to pay additional costs for quarantine at the airport in Taiwan for 14 days and home quarantine for another 7 days. Nevertheless, he believes that working abroad can make a big difference in his lives and livelihoods from a long-term perspective, and he was very excited during the interview. He has 3 sao (1500m²) of rice fields which his wife is in charge of and Tung helps during the planting and harvesting seasons. While rice production remains an important activity for his family, agriculture is not a full-time job option at all for young men like him. He confidently said that he will not engage in full-time farming even when he gets old.

One reason why youth does not turn to agriculture even uncertain situations in the pandemic is that many young men are detached from rural farming which is maintained by old women. Young men are reluctant to pursue higher education and some men go abroad or work in a factory immediately after graduating high school. There is no opportunity for them to experience farming or working within their village. Nhiem, who works in Japan, graduated high school and did not pursue higher education because there are no better jobs even if he graduates university or college. He first went to Taiwan and worked for three years. Some of the saving from Taiwan work was spent on building his parents' house (future his house after inheriting). Their house was one of the newest and biggest according to our observation. His transnational migration experience at 18 enabled him to pursue another migration in Japan. This is an increasingly common way for young men in our study site to gain financial autonomy before marriage.

Young women have similar perceptions on agriculture. Minh, whose husband works in Japan, plans to work in a factory or in a restaurant as a cook when her children reached to school age. Although remittances from her husband are much lower than expected due to COVID-19, she has no plan to grow crops now. She perceives that agriculture is old women's work and it remains out of job options for her and her husband.

Thus, Vietnam's success in COVID-19 control at the time of fieldwork means that the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture was limited and households in our study site in Ha Tinh province were overall managing well in changes caused by the pandemic. While agriculture plays an important role in mitigating the impact of reduced remittances and/or off-farm incomes, the importance of agriculture is hidden under inter-generational reciprocal support. This small study confirms that COVID-19 did not motivate young men and women to engage in agriculture in the context agriculture remains small-scale, and their interests remain in off-farm incomes or working abroad.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study explored the impact of COVID-19 on labor migration, roles of small-scale farming, and resulting implications on gender relations. Narratives from women migrant workers and their family members in Son La province showed that COVID-19 has not only economic but also social consequences, affecting gender relations and the wellbeing of children. Poor female farmers who are limited by educational and language barriers have found attractive income opportunities through informal employment in the construction sector. However, these women are exploited or excluded in times of crisis since they have little bargaining power to negotiate with employers.

Labor migration in the global South is often characterized as precarious (Waite, 2009). Feminist literature suggests that women's migration is sustained at the cost of reproduction and care (Fraser, 2014), and this issue is even more visible during times of crisis. In our study, family and childcare are indeed central concerns voiced by women respondents in the cases of Bua, Ninh, and Mang. While farming is a safety net for some of our respondents' survival, others who do not have sufficient land and/or labor are forced into labor migration. Thus, in the context of poverty-driven migration, the pandemic exacerbated vulnerable people's lives, and women bore the brunt of the consequences (Kabeer et al., 2021; Rao, 2021). The analysis of economic systems and livelihoods must therefore include reproduction and childcare as essential activities, as crises deeply affect these aspects of labor migration (Cohen, 2018; Mezzadri, 2019).

On the other hand, the impact of COVID-19 on transnational migration in Ha Tinh province has yet to be assessed. In the short-term, small-scale farming sustains remittance-receiving households and migrant workers in urban areas through intergenerational reciprocal support between adult children (migrants) and their parents (farmers). This is in agreement with findings from another study in this region, which highlights the safety-net function of small-scale farming during COVID-19 (Waibel et al., 2020). In this respect, the pandemic environment confirms the value of women-led non-market-oriented agriculture and livestock production, which were previously undervalued in the development policy for agricultural commercialization.

In both study sites, the pandemic did not change respondents' perceptions of livelihood strategies. Labor migration remains the only available option for Son La workers to provide for their families and for young men in Ha Tinh to gain financial autonomy. These individuals are deeply affected by structural injustice in the commodification of the labor market, which is inherently unequal and exploitative. Current rural agriculture development requires diverse options to accommodate the various needs of marginalized social groups, including ethnic minority women and youth, who depend on off-farm incomes as well as small-scale farming.

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