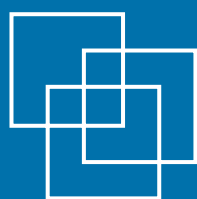




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More choices, more power: Opportunities for women's empowerment in labour migration from Viet Nam



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Jack Miller

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Foreword

Migration across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region is a dynamic development force. For at least a decade, the Vietnamese Government has encouraged the out-migration of citizens for work, reaping significant benefits for the country, and positive economic benefits for the families of many migrant workers. Against this backdrop, Viet Nam has also witnessed the rise of out-migration of women migrant workers, alongside the global increase in demand for care and domestic workers. Many in the international and human rights community have noted the benefits of increasing women's labour migration, especially in contrast to measures that limit women's rights by restricting women's out-migration from many South-East Asian countries. When well-managed, migration for work can lead to improvement in the lives of women, their families, and their communities.

Migration, however, is a complex phenomenon, and while many women benefit from their migrant work experiences, others do not. Women experience different risks during the migration process to men migrant workers. They also receive different reactions from their families and communities on their return. Some have theorized the increased participation of women in out-migration is an indicator, or driver, of empowerment. For those seeking to further a "migration and development" approach, the hypothesis that migration leads to empowerment and increased equality for women has been popular, but seldom investigated. This report seeks to identify the factors that contribute to positive (empowering) or negative (disempowering) outcomes from migration, so migration regimes can ensure Vietnamese women's migration is driven by choice and supported by effective policies and practices. At a time when the Vietnamese Government is considering revisions to labour migration legislation, this report supports increasing the options for women migrant workers as a path to more positive and empowering outcomes of migration for women migrant workers themselves, and to the numerous benefits that result when women are able to fully contribute to their communities.

The focus on women migrant workers reflects the shared priority of the ILO TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme supported by Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC). National research (supported by DFAT) of this kind is crucial in ensuring that the benefits of labour migration are equally realized by men and women migrant workers, employers, and governments within a country context, and vital for shaping improved legislation and policy. In shifting the emphasis towards enabling the development potential of migration, TRIANGLE in ASEAN aims to shape labour migration opportunities to support inclusive and sustainable growth in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

The findings from this study should help to reshape legislation and policy to better reflect women migrant workers' development needs and experiences. This research may also trigger much needed research on the longitudinal effects of migration on society, to enable labour migration policies grounded in evidence. The report concludes with recommendations that could enable better outcomes for women migrant workers from Viet Nam, and across the region.



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Director

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A special thanks is in order for the officials from Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs working in Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Ngãi, Phú Thọ, Bắc Ninh, and Thanh Hóa, especially the Migrant Worker Resource Centre (MRC) staff, as well as local collaborators and respondents from the selected communes of those provinces. Without their support and guidance this report would not have been possible. The author also wishes to acknowledge the participation of stakeholders, academics, and government officials at the validation workshop, who verified the initial results of the data analysis.

Most importantly, this report acknowledges the contribution of women migrant workers whose efforts support families, communities, and nations, as well as their own aspirations. The women who participated in this survey – and the work that they perform – can never be fully appreciated. In providing personal information for the benefit of this study, researchers, practitioners, and officials are better informed about the context in which women migrants work and will be more capable of providing policy and programming in the future. The research in this report aims first and foremost to live up to those needs, and to honour women migrant workers' voices and experiences.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DOLISA	Department of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs
DOLAB	Department of the Overseas Labour Administration Bureau
EPS	Employment Permit System [Republic of Korea]
GDP	gross domestic product
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISDS	Institute for Social Development Studies
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MRC	Migrant Worker Resource Centre
OWC	Overseas Workers Center [Republic of Korea]
UN	United Nations
VND	Vietnamese dong [currency]
VWU	Viet Nam Women's Union



Executive summary

Across the world, women still face challenges in accessing institutions, controlling resources, and influencing decisions. Discrimination limits the power women have over almost every aspect of their lives. Often, these limitations result in less beneficial outcomes from the work women perform and inhibit the potential changes their work could yield for their community and future generations. This is also true for women's experiences of migration – while migration represents a potential means of empowerment for women economically and socially, the challenges women face working abroad are gender-specific and the asymmetry in power is often exacerbated by their migration and work status in countries of destination.

This report looks to the nexus of migration and women's empowerment in the context of Viet Nam. This study uses several empowerment indicators to compare a sample of women who chose to migrate to a sample who remained in Viet Nam. In short, the study attempts to determine if migration is delivering gains in economic and social power for women migrant workers, and how these gains can be maximized. To better understand these interactions, this study focuses on the changes women experienced in control over economic assets and power over social interactions as a result of their migration. It assesses to what extent women's demographic position before migration and their experiences working in different destinations and sectors have affected their empowerment.

The overall outcome of women's migration is located at the intersection of gendered, geographic, and economic factors. This reality frequently limits the access women have to decent work at home and abroad; regular migration channels and job opportunities remain constrained. This means that women

who chose to migrate often make the best choice from a set of unfavourable or exploitative options – the “least worst” option. In addition, the inequalities returned women migrant workers face inhibit the improvements envisioned by government policies and, almost certainly, the women themselves. The study finds that, despite great economic and social advances made in Viet Nam, women’s unequal power circumscribes the positive outcomes they pursue through migration.

■ Research questions and methodology

Four primary questions motivated the research contained in this report:

- How does the demographic profile of women affect the benefits they gain from migration?
- What proportion of women migrant workers from Viet Nam have beneficial migration experiences?
- Are Vietnamese women who migrate better off than non-migrant women in terms of social and economic empowerment?
- What are the factors during migration that enable or hinder Vietnamese women from benefitting from their work abroad?

To answer these questions, a sample of returned women migrant workers was compared with a sample of non-migrant women from five provinces in Viet Nam. These two groups answered a questionnaire or participated in an in-depth interview or focus group discussion to assess what socio-economic changes they experienced over a five-year period. These women were between 18 and 50 years old, with the women migrants having returned between 2010 and 2017, sometimes after several migrations. To compare the change in empowerment indicators, the non-migrant women were asked to reflect on changes that had occurred between 2012 and 2018.

The data was collected between April and June of 2018, using a convenience sampling method with support from local officials from the provincial Departments of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISAs). Women were sampled from five provinces – Bắc Ninh, Hà Tĩnh, Phú Thọ, Thanh Hóa, and Quảng Ngãi – that also host Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) operated by Employment Service Centers of DOLISAs and supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme. The respondents included 323 returned women migrant workers and 178 non-migrant women who participated in surveys, with an additional 61 women participating in interviews and focus group discussions. The majority of the women migrant workers had migrated to six destinations:

- Japan (41 women);
- the Republic of Korea (28 women);
- Malaysia (27 women);
- Saudi Arabia (94 women);
- Taiwan, China (52 women); and
- Thailand (74 women).

Findings

Economic push/pull factors of migration

The potential to make more money abroad was an important motivation leading many women to migrate. On average, the women in this study made more than five times per month during their time abroad than they did in Viet Nam. The highest monthly salaries were earned in Japan (averaging 21,000,000 Vietnamese dong (VND) (US\$940)) and the Republic of Korea (averaging VND19,500,000 (US\$870)), followed by Taiwan, China (VND13,500,000 (US\$600)), with Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand all trailing behind and paying wages averaging about VND8,000,000 (US\$360). Even when removing unemployed women from the sample, the average income while abroad was still more than three times what these women made before migration. Disaggregating the data by province shows even more striking contrasts, with women from Quảng Ngãi making ten times more while abroad than they did before migration, while women from Thanh Hóa made the same amount as they did before migration.

An even more important factor influencing migration was unemployment. Overall, the average income of non-migrant women in 2012 was roughly 17 per cent greater than that of the women migrants prior to migration. However, one must consider that one third of the women migrant workers were unemployed before migration, compared to just one fifth of non-migrant workers in 2012. Thus, when unemployment is taken into account, the non-migrant sample made almost 50 per cent more in 2012 than the women migrant workers did before migration. In addition, many of the women sampled in this study sought or gained employment in just one economic sector – agriculture in Thanh Hóa and Hà Tĩnh; manufacturing in Phú Thọ and Bắc Ninh; and retail overrepresented in Quảng Ngãi – suggesting that risks to that sector or lack of access to that sector could have significant detrimental outcomes for employment.

It is therefore likely that it is not only the difference in income that induce some women to choose migration, but also the lack of employment opportunities in the province of origin. Women traveling abroad for work are therefore not only making more money than they would at home; they are diversifying their potential sources of income beyond the few employment sectors to choose from in their home province.

Context of zero fees

Migration costs are a significant factor in determining the outcome of migration. Costs and fees levied on a worker can lead to indebtedness. In turn, debt can lead to coercive employment relations, where workers feel unable to leave abusive situations until their debts are repaid. Costs and fees can also be higher where the return from the jobs – wages and conditions – are more desirable.

The practice of charging costs and fees to workers for the labour migration process, however, is still widespread and remains legal in Viet Nam. Workers are regularly and legally charged large amounts for service fees by recruitment agencies in Viet Nam as well as by employment agencies and intermediary brokers in destination countries for training, medical fees, transport, and government and identity documents. This study found that payments are made by migrant workers, even in corridors that may officially leverage no fees borne by the migrant worker (i.e., as legislated for Saudi Arabia and given the largely irregular nature of the migration to Thailand). The ILO Private Recruitment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181) and principle 7 of the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines

for Fair Recruitment state that no employment fee or related cost should be borne by workers or jobseekers, and increasingly international business and supply chains are striving to realize this labour standard.

This study, however, seems to support the finding that if migrant workers want to have higher chances to find decent jobs abroad, they need to be ready to pay relatively higher fees. It finds that some corridors correlated with the least improvement in many empowerment indicators – such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand – are relatively less expensive. The more expensive corridors – Japan and Taiwan, China – led to destinations with higher wages and, while certainly not perfect, better protection of labour rights and fewer labour rights abuses. In addition, many women migrant workers reported interest in re-migration to the more expensive destinations; while many of the women who had returned from Saudi Arabia, where migration is usually free for the worker, expressed interest in migrating to expensive East Asian destinations rather than returning to Saudi Arabia. These findings point at the disadvantage faced by workers who lack access to adequate resources to secure decent jobs abroad. They also show how the current migration system reinforces a vicious cycle of low pay and exclusion from access to decent work opportunities.

Geographic effects

In an ideal labour market, competition for quality workers and transparency of working conditions would allow migrant workers to freely choose the best jobs available for them, either locally or abroad. Strongly influenced by their income, unemployment, education, work sector, and the ethnic composition of their province of origin, women migrant workers in this study had to navigate through often opaque labour markets. The women made the best choices available, but these choices were highly constrained by their economic position, lack of information, and limited access to specific destinations or to regular migration channels. Women migrant workers' province of origin played a large role in determining the degree to which their social and economic power increased after their migration.

In this study, the women migrants from two provinces – Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa – exhibited lower levels of education, income, and employment, and also had much higher concentrations of migration to one location – Thailand and Saudi Arabia, respectively. Although these two corridors exhibited important differences, they also featured the lowest wages and lowest predictions for improved social power. Women migrating with better education and economic indicators were able to migrate to a greater diversity of destinations, with concentrations heading to destinations featuring higher wages, more training, and better labour rights.

Labour migration from Viet Nam therefore seems to exhibit an aspect of cumulative causation. Women from privileged provinces have greater access to more “empowering” destinations, and returned to a home province that featured more economic opportunity in terms of wages and diversity of employment.

Limited support for women migrant workers

While pre-departure training is required by law in Viet Nam, only half of the women in this study received training before departure, and while this number jumps to about four-fifths when excluding women who migrated irregularly, this still represents a considerable implementation gap. In addition, training standards show significant differences by migration corridor.

Many women migrant workers surveyed felt unable to use the skills they learned abroad after their return. In addition, having worked abroad had little impact on the income the women earned after return. Unemployment also remained a significant challenge for the returned women migrant workers, and very little mobility between economic sectors was demonstrated. This shows that there is a lack of infrastructure for the reintegration of migrant workers, whereby women can make use of labour migration's beneficial outcomes.

Limits and moments of power

The research indicates that migration cannot be considered wholly empowering for the sampled women workers. Many empowerment indicators were unaffected by women's time spent abroad, and there were cases where cultural norms were resistant to changes in women's power. It is not the case, however, that migration offered no opportunities for the women migrant workers. The women did not remain passive actors in a migration process controlled by institutions, employers, and family members – they took hold of the benefits made available by migration to create significant, if limited, strides towards greater power.

Economically, the women migrants remained behind the non-migrant cohort in many metrics. Labour migration's effect on income in Viet Nam post migration was negligible; as was its effect on unemployment. Work abroad, however, supported significant improvements in asset ownership. Women migrant workers were able to increase the quality of many household goods, which improved the quality of their housing, sanitation, and mobility. In many cases, women were able to gain legal titles over new assets, with the number of women migrant workers with no assets dropping by 40 per cent after migration. Thus, while labour migration did not enable more power over employment status or income, the large sums of money the women migrant workers earned abroad allowed them to improve their quality of life through assets, often gaining legal control over these assets that may normally go to male family members.

Social power also saw limited but significant improvements, with corridors to East Asia predicting higher social empowerment, and work in the Saudi Arabia (almost entirely in the domestic sector) predicting less social empowerment. Local social norms appeared to temper some of the empowering outcomes of migration, with the sample dominated by agricultural jobs showing less growth in women migrants' pride; time spent managing finances and relations with authorities; or power within the family. As such, power for the women migrants in this study was not found in one place or another, but between the confluence and interaction of local and foreign factors of migration. This is evident in differences reported in each province regarding the increased power women attained concerning decision-making power within the family. Women migrants reported lower decision-making power over employment and more time spent on household chores than non-migrant women in 2018. Women migrant workers, however, found their social power grew to be greater than that of the non-migrant women with regard to decision-making power over households, decisions involving their marriage, and family planning. Women who had migrated also felt they had improved their capacity in a variety of social skills, including social communication, social problem solving, understanding of the law, and understanding of other cultures.

Improvements in social skills and decision-making power present the opportunity for women to make further use of labour migration as a form of livelihood that can spur upward mobility. As many of the skills gained abroad were pertinent to labour migration, improvement in social power would improve

women's capacity to ensure beneficial outcomes from re-migration, with this circular migration allowing further investment into businesses and more sustainable development of their communities. This is evidenced by the substantial number of women who expressed an interest in re-migrating, and by the majority of women reporting positive changes as result of their migration. There is therefore evidence that migration enables women to claim power, and that receiving more institutional support could remove some of the barriers that limit the power stemming from migration.

Positive feedback between social and economic power

Another finding was that there are several cases where social power and economic power reinforce each other. One salient case is that earned income abroad, while not predictive of income in Viet Nam or increases in entitled assets, was found to predict improved decision-making power over family decisions and family planning. Similarly, women who were empowered with greater control over the management of finances were more likely to have increased legal ownership of assets.

The women migrant workers expressed similar relationships between economic and social power. Better family relationship and increased respect were two of the most frequent answers given to explain increased decision-making power within the household. Improved family relationships correlated to the amount of income earned abroad, and several women said in interviews that they believed the income they had earned resulted in more respect at home. This positive outcome was not limited to regular migration channels; women who migrated irregularly to Thailand were the most likely to explain their improved income as being due to the social skills they had learned through migration.

Just as important were counter-intuitive cases where social power was not tied to economic power. Level of education, while positively correlated to improvements in many metrics of social power, was not correlated to improved income upon return to Viet Nam. Power over remittance spending did not yield greater assets for the women whose work provided the remittances. This speaks to the resistance of social norms to changes brought on by women's economic power.

Recommendations

Gender-responsive legislation

To enable State policy goals for migration and development, it is recommended that any revision to laws and decisions targeting migration (and concurrent policy goal of the development of “poor districts”) consider how women and men are differentially affected by policy and migration. At the time of writing, Vietnamese legislation governing labour migration has been assessed as gender neutral, or gender blind, delivering equality in the most basic sense that the law applies equally to women and men migrant workers. But, restrictions placed on women migrant workers (either directly, through specific bans and restrictions on women's migration, or indirectly through discriminatory access to recruitment channels or jobs) and different socioeconomic conditions mean that the legislation affects women migrant workers differently to men migrant workers. If the labour migration governance framework is to fulfil the State policy goal of creating “favourable conditions for Vietnamese citizens to work abroad”, legislation should be gender-responsive: recognizing the different situations women experience – at home and abroad – and providing tools that aim to transform those differences. Any revision of the law should aim to positively address prejudices and barriers for women to access regular migration, especially for better jobs in more desirable destinations.

Training and government-run facilities

Standards in pre-departure training should be monitored to ensure meaningful delivery of information that women migrant workers can use in destination. The women who received the most pre-departure training in this study were also the most likely to improve their social and economic power. Complete implementation of the legally required pre-departure training should be enforced, and detailed training standards should be mandated and monitored. Training that empowers women migrant workers to achieve better outcomes from migration must be realized. This includes emphasizing work skills and safety, but also training in “soft” skills, such as negotiation and financial literacy, that will increase migrant worker’s capacity to handle adverse working environments. Topics related to health and wellbeing also must be improved, including gender-responsive and transformative training in health, human rights, harassment, and contacts for support services.

In some cases, government-run pre-departure training facilities were found to predict better outcomes than private pre-departure training providers. This was particularly true in the case of women migrant workers destined for the Republic of Korea, which mandates that all sending and receiving institutions be government-run and supervised with thoroughly delineated responsibilities for each institution. The Government of Viet Nam may consider similar monitoring and evaluations of all recruitment actors.

Diversify access to migration destinations

Tripartite stakeholders, and especially in the Government, should seek to diversify the number of destinations available to women migrant workers and ensure non-discrimination in recruitment processes. This could include creating more corridors for regular migration through agreements that allow Vietnamese women workers to enter a greater variety of work sectors. In particular, Viet Nam should consider revisiting and operationalizing the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Thailand to allow for regular migration between the two countries, with a focus on women migrant workers, who are effectively excluded from sectors currently specified by the MOU.

Diversification should also include increasing access to countries of destination in each province, empowering women to choose their destination. The women in this study with the most economic need had the fewest choices of destination because of their limited financial means, resulting in migration to the lowest paying jobs. With no choice of destinations, women who have chosen labour migration may feel they have no option but to work in regions where rights abuse is more prevalent and can even be expected.

Reduced recruitment fees and related costs and more accessible subsidies

Recruitment fees and related costs for women migrant workers should be reduced, ideally to zero. At the global level, there is a clear consensus that governments should work towards an overall reduction in recruitment costs and fees, and that these costs and fees should not be paid by migrant workers. However, Law 72, the main law governing labour migration from Viet Nam, stipulates that workers need to pay for fees and other costs related to recruitment. This is contrary to the ILO’s General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and the Definition of Recruitment Fees and Related Costs, which also require that governments take steps to reduce and eliminate fees and related costs borne by workers. Reducing fees and related costs is very important, especially to women migrant workers, due to women’s lower access to their families’ finances and assets as a consequence of traditional inheritance practices (ISDS, 2015).

To this effect, while the Government of Viet Nam works toward removing fees payable by migrant workers themselves, awareness should be raised about the existing government-subsidized loans, created under Decision 71, for prospective migrants residing in “poor districts”. The loans should also be made more accessible, keeping in mind the specific needs women may have in acquiring access to loans and the immediate needs of migrant workers. Findings from this report and from other ILO reports in Viet Nam have shown that migration fees are a reality for migrant workers (ILO, 2018a), and taking unsubsidized loans or loans from informal institutions can create greater risk for migrant workers. Increased awareness of and access to these government-subsidized loans can bring workers to better outcomes by making corridors that currently retain higher upfront costs but larger net gains to workers who are the most economically disadvantaged.

Better system for reintegration of skills

Migration to sectors where women migrant workers learn new skills is important in helping them find jobs or start new businesses upon return, but it is not sufficient by itself. Support for returned workers is stipulated in Law 72, but increased implementation – with more attention given to local economic conditions and a focus on what skills are needed and where – would increase the benefits of women’s migration. In addition to creating more migration channels, financial support incentives and government coordination between recruitment and economic planning targets can connect women to work abroad where they will learn skills that will be useful on return.

Reintegration programmes can assist women migrant workers to readjust to living in Viet Nam and to find jobs that make use of new skills. Such programmes could provide support for women who face stigma as a result of working abroad and offer counselling for families having difficulty due to prolonged absences. Reintegration programmes can also provide institutional linkages to enterprises in Viet Nam, providing accreditation for the skills learned abroad and job matching with employers in asimilar sectors.

Transparent, uniform migration policy and ease of migration

Migrant workers face complicated and slow processes for regular migration. Transparent information about migration needs to be widely available so that prospective migrant workers can make informed decisions. Making information about Viet Nam’s labour migration agreements and about working conditions in destinations more easily accessible and understandable would help migrant workers achieve more empowering outcomes. In addition, raising awareness of the different destinations and outcomes is an important step to empower women migrant workers to make informed decisions.

The Government of Viet Nam can support migrant workers by harmonizing – insofar as possible – labour migration agreements. This would make processes easier to understand; make pre-departure training easier to provide; ensure higher quality training for all potential migrant workers; and streamline the migration process so that migrant workers can start working faster and remit funds sooner. In tandem with improved financial support for prospective migrant workers, this could ensure that no recruitment actors could market less-decent work that takes advantage of women’s immediate financial need or lack of information.

Finally, by making the labour migration process more homogeneous and streamlined, the Government can support the use of circular migration as a sustainable and empowering livelihood option. As with any job, the more women work abroad, the more they learn how to achieve the best outcomes from

those experiences. Many women in this research stated their intention to migrate again, and pointed to their improved cross-cultural skills and understanding of the migration process. Making the migration process easier not only gives access to foreign capital, it also incentivizes women to return and reinvest in Viet Nam (instead of overstaying work permits), because it enables easier re-migration if needed.

More mechanisms for receiving feedback from returning women migrant workers

There are currently few formal channels for returned women migrant workers to provide inputs about the migration process or their employment. Providing platforms and mechanisms for women to share experiences, rate employers and recruitment agencies, give advice to prospective migrant workers, and provide support for women working abroad would improve the migration outcomes of others. Women migrant workers have the best knowledge about what other women migrant workers need; what they lacked in their own experiences; and which parts of the migration process and working abroad were most difficult.

Returned women migrant workers are assets during pre-departure training or service delivery, where they can impart knowledge and soft skills gained through their own migration, helping new migrant workers navigate the material and emotional difficulties of living abroad; deal with interpersonal conflict with coworkers or managers; or handle disputes when employers break their contractual agreements or engage in labour rights abuses.

Formal channels for complaints should also be clear, reliable, and easily accessible so that evidence can inform the implementation and adjustment of migration policy. All migrant workers should be able to access legal aid or other assistance in case they want to make a complaint, and gender should be considered when designing and delivering these services.



1. Introduction

1.1 Macroeconomic changes in Viet Nam

The Vietnamese economy is developing at a rapid pace. After the Đổi Mới economic reforms began introducing market liberalization less than 15 years ago, Viet Nam has skyrocketed from being one of the Asia's poorest countries to lower-middle income status. Viet Nam's gross domestic product (GDP) increased from US\$6.472 billion in 1990 to US\$193.599 billion in 2015; making it the second-fastest growing economy in the world. GDP per capita has risen 5.5 per cent on average since 1990, resulting in Viet Nam's average income increasing three times over (World Bank and MPI, 2016). This economic development continues to provide new opportunities for many Vietnamese.

However, the benefits of economic development have not been evenly distributed across the country or among its citizens. While income share as a percentage of household consumption has increased for the Vietnamese middle-classes, the bottom 20 per cent now have less money as a percentage of total wealth in the country (World Bank, 2019). Differences in the level of economic improvements have been especially stark between urban and rural areas, with more rural and remote regions seeing less convergence in income than the rest of the country (Vu and Nghiem, 2016). In addition, two-thirds of Viet Nam's labour force is found in rural areas, where income is nearly half that of urban areas (Viet Nam General Statistics Office, 2017; 2018). This has had a significant impact on many individuals' decisions to migrate for work, particularly where there is potential for higher wages overseas.

Economic inclusion has also been uneven for Viet Nam's more vulnerable demographic groups. Inequality remains especially significant in the lives of Vietnamese women and ethnic minorities – with women who are ethnic minorities or from the countryside particularly affected (Oxfam, 2017). A recent Labour Force Survey in Viet Nam shows that there remains a considerable gender wage gap across multiple skill levels, and especially in rural areas, despite women's high participation in the labour force (70 per cent of women employed compared to 80 per cent of men), with women constituting 48 per cent of the labour force in both rural and urban areas (Viet Nam General Statistics Office, 2017). These differences in opportunity shape the daily experiences of women in Viet Nam and are influential factors when they consider migration. For women, who historically have had less access to decent jobs, the lure of overseas workplaces may hold a particularly strong financial attraction.

1.2 Government objectives and Law 72

According to statistics by the Government of Viet Nam, there were 540,000 Vietnamese workers overseas in 2018. The major destinations were Taiwan, China (32 per cent), Japan (28 per cent), the Republic of Korea (10 per cent), Malaysia (10 per cent), and Thailand (10 per cent). In 2018, 142,860¹ migrant workers left Viet Nam through formal channels, 35 per cent of whom were women (Department of Overseas Labour, Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, 2019). However, the numbers are almost certainly higher. While estimating flows of irregular migrants remains difficult, one report found that 48 per cent of 450 interviewed Vietnamese migrant workers returned from Malaysia and Thailand had migrated through irregular channels (ILO and IOM, 2017). Given that women have more limited access to information, training, and resources, it is possible that the proportion of women migrant workers who chose irregular channels is even greater.

The Government of Viet Nam has adopted a poverty reduction strategy embracing labour migration in order to redress economic inequality within the country (Bowen and Huong, 2012). Adopted in 2007, the Law on Overseas Workers (No. 72/2006/QH11) (henceforth, “Law 72”) was the first comprehensive legal framework in Viet Nam to govern international labour migration. Under this law, recruitment agencies are required to obtain licenses, report to relevant labour authorities, and provide labour supply contracts and pre-departure training to migrant workers. In addition, recruitment agencies are subject to fines and sanctions for noncompliance. The law, however, makes no mention of women in particular, nor does it contain any articles covering foreign employment that predominantly hire women.

In 2009, under the Prime Minister's Decision No.71/2009/QD-TTg (Decision 71), the Government introduced a policy targeting disadvantaged “poor districts” for support in accessing labour migration, setting yearly quotas of 10,000 workers sent abroad – 80 per cent of whom were to be ethnic minorities – during the 2011–2015 period of this study. The aim of Decision 71 is to relieve poverty in remote areas by guiding workers from identified “poor districts” to higher-paying work. Under the 2008 Resolution No. 30a/2008/NQ-CP, this policy provided preferential conditions for 61 districts (out of a total 1,228 districts in 2009) with a poverty rate over 50 per cent. In these districts, over 90 per cent of the population are ethnic minorities engaged in subsistence agriculture in rough terrain. By providing financial subsidies to aspiring migrant workers – in some cases, such as with ethnic minorities, featuring

1 43 per cent to Taiwan, China (of which 32 per cent were women); 49 per cent to Japan (41 per cent women); 5 per cent to the Republic of Korea (12 per cent women); and 1 per cent to Malaysia (58 per cent women).

0 per cent interest – the 2009 policy intended to help disadvantaged groups pay for migration costs. This study focuses on five provinces with significant outbound migration, namely Bắc Ninh, Hà Tĩnh, Phú Thọ, Thanh Hóa, and Quảng Ngãi provinces (see chapter 2 for details).

In this context, Law 72 is a central part of the Government’s strategy to steer “qualified migrant workers” (a phrasing which may result in gender discrimination depending on the migration destination and work sector) toward decent work while using migrant worker remittances to decrease rural poverty. While Law 72 aims to protect migrant worker’s rights and interests, an independent assessment suggests that its implementation is not always or universally effective in protecting Vietnamese migrant workers (ILO, unpublished).

Close attention to the conditions faced by migrant workers, and particularly women from Viet Nam’s most disadvantaged demographics, is therefore necessary to support future initiatives to alleviate poverty and promote development. The absence of a gender-responsive component to the law has important implications, as women have fewer economic resources and less social influence. This has resulted in women being the most at risk for poverty and therefore interested in employment abroad, where they can face the “double stigma” of being both a woman and a foreigner, potentially leading to exploitation and sexual harassment (UN Women, 2016). These structural limitations need to be addressed to broaden access and to amplify the positive effects migration can have on women’s income, skills, self-efficacy, and autonomy.

1.3 Social conditions of women in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has been proactive in supporting the rights of women. In 1995, the Government of Viet Nam approved the implementation of the 1995 Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, and by 2000 the National Committee for the Advancement of Women included 50 ministries and other institutions across the country. In addition, the Viet Nam Women’s Union (VWU) has branches in every province of Viet Nam, supporting government policies at the local level and providing health and education activities to some of Viet Nam’s most disadvantaged women (Schuler et al., 2006). Since then, the Government has established additional gender legislation, including:

- the Law on Gender Equality (2006), which stipulates equal recruitment, wages, pay, social insurance, and training and promotion;
- the National Strategy on Gender Equality (2011–2020), which aims for an equal share of new jobs for men and women, and the reduction of the burden of family responsibilities on women;
- the 2012 Labour Code, which protects “the female employees’ right to work on the basis of equality” with regard to equality in recruitment, employment, training, working hours, and rest periods, and established labour rights for domestic workers; and
- the State Budget Law (2015), which sets gender equality as a budgetary priority.

Viet Nam has made a strong push for equal education for women in the last decade, and women now make up 43 per cent of primary school enrollment and 40 per cent of secondary school enrollment in the country. Lower-secondary school in Viet Nam ends after ninth grade, with the gender parity index for gross enrollment in lower-secondary averaging 0.95 from 2000 to 2013 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2015). For the five provinces studied for this report, women’s participation in every level of education was above 48 per cent in 2010 and 2017, with women’s participation in upper secondary

comprising over 50 per cent in each case (General Statistics Office of Viet Nam, 2019). However, total enrollment in upper-secondary education in Viet Nam had only reached 50 per cent of the eligible population in 2010 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2015).

Despite Viet Nam's advances, women in Viet Nam still experience gender discrimination and unequal outcomes across a range of socio-economic indicators. Like in much of the world, many women in Viet Nam are expected to put the needs of their family above their own. According to the Government of Viet Nam, 60 per cent of contributing family work, which is unpaid, in urban areas and 66 per cent in rural areas is performed by women (Viet Nam General Statistics Office, 2018). One study found that women performed five hours of unpaid care work a day – two more hours than men (ActionAid, 2016). Unpaid work, such as family care and work on family farms, is a barrier to employment for many women (UN Women, 2016). In Viet Nam, it is estimated that 14.5 per cent of women are outside of the labour force due to unpaid care, compared with 5.5 per cent of men (ILO, 2018b). In addition, many women are also expected to perform paid work in addition to supporting the household. For example, the principle “good at national tasks, good at household tasks” proposed in the 1960s is still in effect, and represents a double burden for women to succeed in paid and unpaid care work (Schuler et al., 2006).

Historically, women in Viet Nam have also received fewer resources than men. There is a noted general preference given to boys – registered children were 5 per cent higher than the normal biological rate in 2009 and 7 per cent higher in 2016 (UNFPA, 2009; Thi Bich Ngoc, 2018). Although Viet Nam – at 72 per cent – does have higher women's participation in the economy than average for lower-middle income economies (ILOSTAT, 2019), these figures can be misleading. As mentioned above, women are over-represented among contributing family workers and earn on average 12 per cent less than men with the same education, partially because they are concentrated in low-paying sectors (ILO, 2018; World Bank 2018b). In addition, women are concentrated in vulnerable jobs, with about half of women-owned enterprises being micro-enterprises (IFC, 2017). So, while Viet Nam is ranked 76th out of 108 countries in its proportion of female managers (ILO, 2015a), it was also ranked one of the lowest countries in women's opportunity to rise as business owners (Mastercard, 2018).

Viet Nam has instituted important laws and policies on gender equality, but there are still challenges in turning gender equality into a reality. Although the reduction of women's time performing housework is identified as a target in Viet Nam's National Strategy for Gender Equality, little action has been taken to approach it as a stand-alone issue, and no action is approaching it as a cross-cutting issue affecting all sectors (UN Women, 2016). The reasons for this include a very limited knowledge of the laws among the public and a lack of capacity among those who are responsible for implementation (Fontana, 2018). A recent survey of two rural provinces found that men owned the majority of land, and few farmers completely understood women's rights to retain land after a change in familial relations (ICRW and ISDS, 2015). Finally, Viet Nam currently ranks 77th of 149 countries studied in the World Economic Forum's latest annual survey of gender equality, having fallen seven levels from 2017 to 2018 – with particularly low scores in political empowerment indices.

1.4 Migration and women in Viet Nam

According to the United Nations (UN) Population Division, the migrant stock of Vietnamese women living abroad is roughly 1.4 million – with women migrants just outnumbering men migrants (women: 1,384,485; men: 1,342,913) (UNDESA, Population Division, 2017). Indeed, the increased contribution of women migrant workers has been a noted trend in the past decade (Hennebry, Holliday, and Moniruzzaman, 2017).

International remittance has also attracted considerable interest among development actors. Total world remittances are a significant economic force, worth three times more than international aid in 2012, and estimated at over US\$600 billion in 2016 (World Bank, 2018b). Viet Nam is one of the top remittance-receiving countries in the world, having received US\$12.3 billion in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). Among Vietnamese migrant workers who remit, 60 per cent use remittances to provide financial support for family members (ILO and IOM, 2017).

Against this background, the nexus between labour migration and women's empowerment presents a critical space for analysis. The ILO has released several reports that focus on women migrant workers (see Napier-Moore and Sheill, 2016; Anderson, 2016; Napier-Moore, 2017) and a 2015 policy brief on Vietnamese migrant domestic workers that have engaged with the idea that migration affects how women claim power (ILO, 2015b). While these publications represent an existing body of knowledge on gender and migration, there is still a lack of comprehensive data on labour migration and its effects on women's empowerment in Viet Nam.

Given these trends and the disadvantages women face in the economy of Viet Nam, it is critical to have a better understanding of the effects of migration for the women who work abroad; who send money to the Vietnamese economy; and who return. This report aims to provide further knowledge on the connection between Vietnamese women's power and labour migration. In so doing, it explores factors that enable or prevent women from accessing the full benefit of their migration, providing evidence for policy development. The goal of this report is therefore to support programmes and measures that will enable more beneficial migration options for women workers and enhance women's power both abroad and at home.



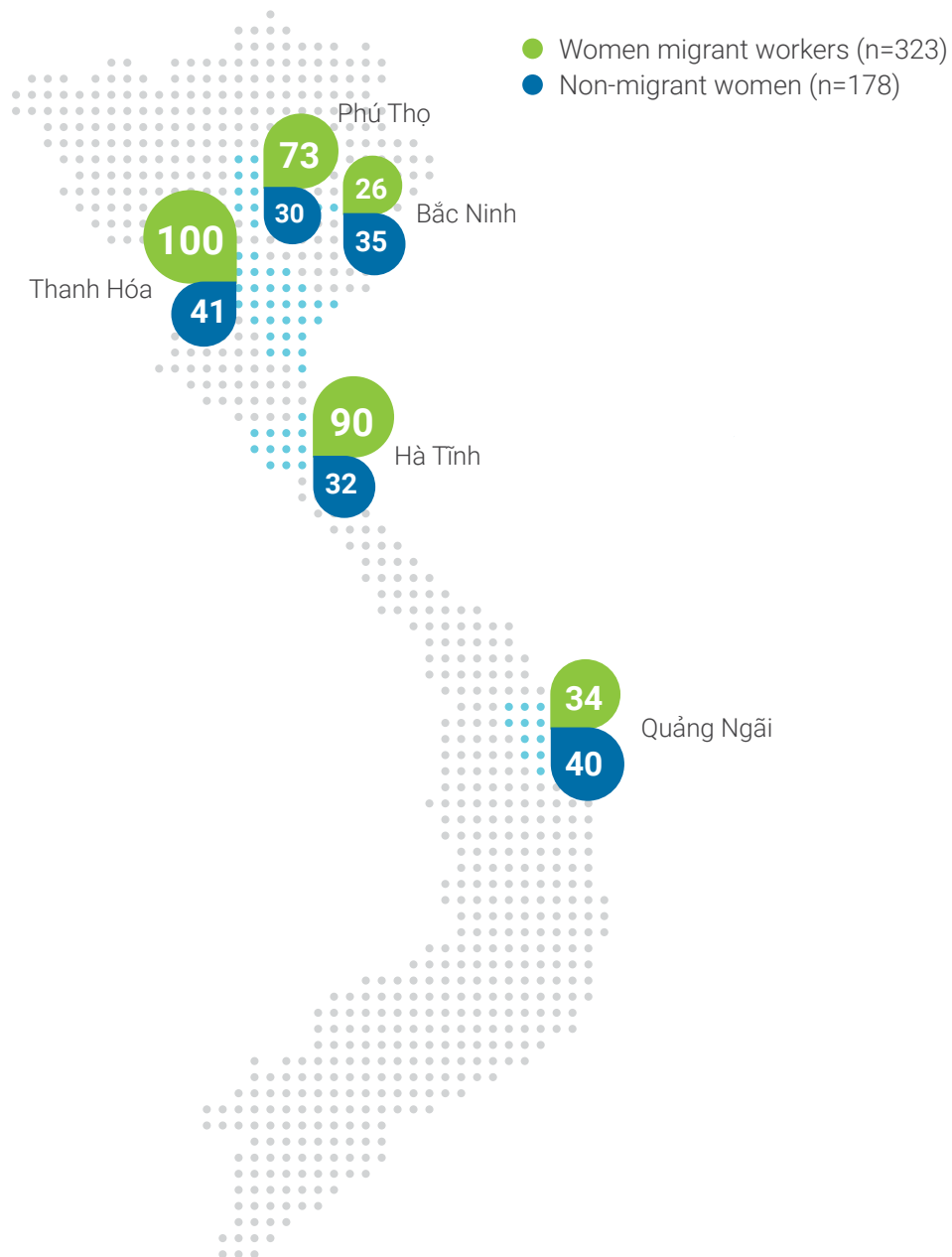
2. Research approach

2.1 Research questions

To examine the extent to which the legislative framework that governs labour migration in Viet Nam contributes to gender equality, this study compared a sample of returned Vietnamese women migrant workers to a sample of women who had not left the country. Using data from these samples, this report attempts to answer the following questions about whether and how international labour migration allows women to claim economic and social power:

- What proportion of women migrant workers from Viet Nam have beneficial migration experiences?
- How does the demographic profile of women affect the benefits they gain from migration?
- What are the factors during migration that enable or hinder Vietnamese women in benefitting from their work abroad?
- Are Vietnamese women who migrate better off than non-migrants in terms of social and economic empowerment?

Figure 1. Map of provinces surveyed



2.2 Research methodology and validation

The study compares the socioeconomic circumstances of two groups of women respondents: (1) return migrant workers who had returned between 2010 and 2017; and (2) women who had not migrated from Viet Nam. The methodology was quasi-experimental in design, using a nonequivalent control group post-test-only methodology. The research attempted to discover any effects from migration that affected women’s power over different facets of their lives. This was done by identifying significant differences between women migrant workers and a “control group” of women workers who remained in Viet Nam, through quantified survey data. In many cases, this meant that women were asked to compare their position now relative to before their migration – which ranged from two months to ten

years, and sometimes included several migrations. The non-migrant women were asked to reflect on changes that occurred since 2012 to 2018. This information was then compared to questionnaire data about the migration experiences from the women migrant worker sample to elucidate possible causes for differences between the migrant and non-migrant samples.

Because non-migrant women were asked to reflect on the period from 2012 to 2018, but many of the women migrant respondents had engaged in migration prior to 2012, this report will use specific terminology when referring to the start date of specific survey respondent cohorts:

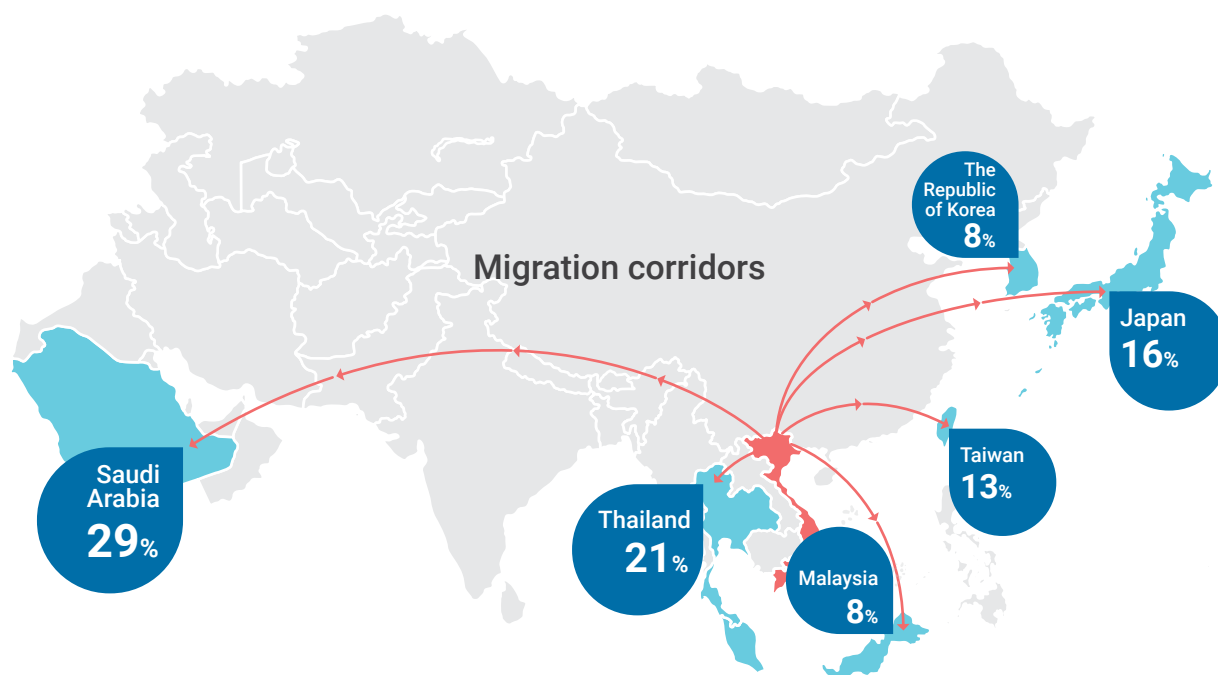
- **women migrants only** – The term “before migration” will be used only to refer to those respondents who engaged in international migration, and will refer to the period before the respondent engaged in their first migration.
- **non-migrant women only** – The report will simply give the start year – 2012 – when referring to the experiences of non-migrant women respondents.
- **all respondents** – The term “before migration/2012” will only be used when referring to the entire survey sample – i.e., both women migrants and non-migrant women – to account for the staggered start dates of both groups.

Data was collected during April to June 2018 using a convenience sampling methodology with a mixed quantitative/qualitative approach. Due to challenges in recruiting return women migrants who fit the intended profile, the research included women who had migrated as early as 2003. This involved gathering quantitative data through surveys given to 501 women: 323 women migrant workers and 178 who had remained in Viet Nam. Qualitative data was also gathered from 47 migrant and 14 non-migrant women through in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions.

Data collection, cleaning, and initial analysis was conducted by the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS), an independent research institution based in Hà Nội, Viet Nam. With support from the Department of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), 12 communes¹ from five provinces – Bắc Ninh, Hà Tĩnh, Phú Thọ, Thanh Hóa, and Quảng Ngãi – were chosen because they hosted Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) (figure 1). As required by law, the research team in each commune worked with the Commune People’s Committee to approve the research plan. The main destinations for women migrant workers in this study were Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan (China), and Thailand (figure 2).

1 The 12 communes include: (in *Thach Ha district, Ha Tinh province*) Thach Long, Thach Hai, Thach Son; (in *Cam Thuy district, Thanh Hoa province*) Cam Quy; (in *Binh Son district, Quang Ngai province*) Binh Chau; (in *Tu Nghia district, Quang Ngai province*) La Ha town, Nghia Lam, Nghia Ky, Nghia Dien; (in *Viet Tri city, Phu Tho province*) Nong Trng, Thuy Van; and (in *Tien Du district, Bac Ninh province*) Hien Van.

Figure 2. Map of major migration destinations of the migrant sample group



Sample size (n=323)

The research in this report was validated in a two-step process. After detailed analysis was conducted, the findings were checked by the ISDS as conforming to their initial analysis of the data as well as their experience in the field during qualitative assessment. This was followed by the peer review² of technical specialists in the field of gender and migration in South-East Asia.

The next step was a workshop co-hosted by the ISDS and ILO in Hà Nội in August 2019. This workshop was attended by government representatives, tripartite stakeholders, academics, MRC staff, and UN and donor representatives. The findings of the report were presented at the workshop, followed by questions and discussions, resulting in validation of the research by the representative stakeholders. While some questions were raised as to the limitations of the research, including representativeness of the sample and the analysis of available data, no feedback challenging the veracity of the research methodology or findings resulted in major changes to the narrative of the report. Additional data and clarity obtained at the workshop strengthened the report.

2.3 Research limitations

Although the findings are indicative of general trends and important directions for policy and programming, the research in this report was limited by a number of factors and should not be considered representative. By design, the research was only intended to consider international labour migration, not migration within Viet Nam. Further, data collection was limited to five provinces in which MRCs are located and therefore, due to the prevalence of particular destinations in each commune,

² Peer review was performed by researchers working for ISDS, the “Safe and Fair” project with the ILO, and UN Women.

may be more reflective of specific migration corridors rather than migration effects for all Vietnamese women migrants. The sample was also limited to women known to have migrated by commune level authorities, resulting in many of the participants being from the same villages.

As women who migrated irregularly may be reticent to communicate their experiences to authorities, this method likely over-represents women who migrated using regular channels. Some women avoided participation. This was particularly common among women who had migrated to the Republic of Korea, many of whom had been previously contacted by authorities to track migrant workers who had overstayed their visas. Another plausible reason for why some women avoided participation was that the questionnaire and interview processes were held at government offices. Finally, the sample sizes from Bắc Ninh and Quảng Ngãi, the two most economically prosperous samples, were significantly smaller than the other provinces, given the migration volume from these provinces is smaller, but also as many workers had left the region for work in other areas

As the data sampling process was based on convenience and official knowledge, the sampling was not truly random. Thus, while the non-migrant control group had statistically higher incomes and levels of education in 2012 than the migrant group had before migration, it cannot be ascertained if this was representative of the total population or an artifact of non-random sampling and participation bias. However, given the use of migration to find employment and supplement low income, the different levels of income and education reported by the women migrants and non-migrants provide an indication of the characteristics of their respective populations, and remain useful.

Another noticeable trend is that both migrant and non-migrant women reported scores – using a scale from 1 to 5 – that were higher in 2018 than before migration/2012 in every social metric in the study. This may represent a bias resulting from the women in this study being required to recall situations six years prior on average, and in some cases almost 15, due to the time of their migration. This study was limited in its longitudinal capacity to survey women both before and after migration, and issues involving the limitations of human memory must be kept in mind when reviewing the results in this report.

In addition to sampling and participation bias, some answers may have been affected by the public nature of the interview locations and the personal nature of some questions in the survey. Limitations during the interview process made it difficult to create safe spaces and build trust with the respondents. Although no officials were present during interviews, in some cases male family members were present. This likely resulted in biased answers for more sensitive topics, especially those about changes among family relationships and experiences of violence. When the answers provided on these two topics were analysed, no significant presence of violence or change in family relationships were discovered. Due to the problematic limitations of the data-sampling environment, these findings cannot be considered accurate and have therefore not been included in this report.

The inability to assess violence did, however, demonstrate a challenge to be overcome in future studies. The need for a better understanding of the nature of violence – physical, sexual, psychological, and economic – against women during the migration process is critical to understanding gendered aspects of migration, and of empowerment in general. Any findings as to the nature of the power gained through migration should be read against this background. In a society where over 30 per cent of women have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner; 10 per cent have experienced sexual violence from an intimate partner; and 35 per cent of women think that it is sometimes justified

for a husband to beat his wife (UNDESA, 2015), the inability to assess experiences of violence is a major limitation that can hopefully be overcome in future research in Viet Nam and throughout the region.

Therefore, while the changes found over time and between groups should remain valid relative to their benchmarks, it would be inappropriate to extrapolate these findings beyond the sample in the study. This report should therefore be understood as not representative of the general Vietnamese women migrant worker population, but as an exploratory assessment uncovering possible trends for further research. The research reported here clearly indicates that simplifying migration as an “empowerment” tactic for women requires much more interrogation, and further studies should look to more fully understand the relationship between migration and the structural inequalities in households and national policies that limit women’s power before and during their migration.

2.4 Research ethical guidelines

All data collectors adhered to standard ethical procedures and international best research practices to protect the anonymity of all participants and the confidentiality of research data. To this end:

- Data collectors ensured that respondents understood the aims and purposes of the survey and how the findings would be used.
- Respondents were asked to provide verbal consent to participate in the study and to be recorded.
- No written consent was obtained in case it could be later used to identify respondents.
- Respondents were notified that they were free to stop the interview at any time.

Participants were also given reimbursements to cover their transportation and compensated 120,000 Vietnamese dong (VND), the equivalent of US\$5, for filling out a questionnaire and VND240,000 (US\$10) for in-depth interviews. No identifying details of the respondents were passed on to the data analysts.

2.5 Research terms and concepts

This report recognizes that women’s power, over both economic and social aspects of their lives, is a necessary element of gender equality and empowerment. While various international legal standards provide guidance on the advancement of women and on non-discrimination, the meaning of the term “empowerment” can be difficult to pin down, even by practitioners, and has been noted for the “fuzziness” of its use (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009). UN Women, informed by the global women’s movement, define empowerment “as the process through which people individually and collectively become conscious of how power relations operate in their lives and gain the necessary confidence and strength to change inequalities and strengthen their economic, political, and social position”, stressing that women’s empowerment, fundamental to human rights, is an increase in creative and shared power to institute change rather than dominate people or things (Petrozziello, 2013, p. 25). The ILO’s TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme considers women’s empowerment as, “women’s increased participation, power, and decision-making in all aspects of life,” and as “a necessary element in achieving gender equality” (Napier-Moore, 2017, p. 8).

Only through the combined existence of formal rights and the opportunity to use their capacity to access these rights will women be better able to determine their futures. For women to fully employ agency over their social environment and personal development, a shift in social structures is required.

This would include increasing women’s participation at local and national levels of decision-making; increasing women’s opportunity to build skills, knowledge, and self-confidence; and amplifying social recognition of the work and acts women have and will take in contributing to their family and community’s wellbeing. Equally important to these social conditions is the recognition of each women’s contribution to her own life and the transformative potential she has in furthering equality for herself and others. This recognition necessitates a fuller understanding and respect of a women’s inherent capacity as well as her embodied differences. It requires seeing beyond the economic wealth that rightfully belongs to her as the outcome of her own work, to the recognition of her choices and respect for her actions.

Understood in this sense, outcomes for women’s empowerment are difficult to measure and require a long-term focus beyond the intended scope of this study. This study remained true to women’s empowerment by looking at how the outcomes of women’s migration affected their power through participation in work, economic control, and decision-making influence at home and in everyday life. An analysis of collective power and in terms of bargaining, political association, and shifting of large-scale social norms was outside of the data limitations of the study. To better understand if and how migration is furthering a women’s own agency over her rights, possessions, and actions – and their transformative role on the social recognition of her legal status, social standing, and civil contribution to society – this study had to look to changes occurring within a more limited definition that could indicate larger transformations. A longitudinal study would be a welcome addition to this body of knowledge.

The indicators used in this study follow from the World Economic Forum (2018) definition of women’s empowerment. This definition employs five key elements: economic participation, economic opportunity, political participation, educational attainment, and health and well-being. While not exhaustive, the definition of “women’s empowerment” in this research was confined to women:

- having a range of options from which they can choose their own aims and goals;
- having access to material and social resources and ability to access information to reach goals;
- having decision-making power over family decisions and social affairs; and
- retaining control over economic resources and access to social capital.

To measure changes within this framework of empowerment, this study asked women about the changes they experienced in the following measures, broadly grouped into two categories of empowerment indicators.

Economic	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ work status and work sector; ▪ income; ▪ legal ownership over assets; ▪ living standards improvement through improved quality of assets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ social knowledge and skills; ▪ decision-making power within the family; ▪ family work division; ▪ self-esteem.

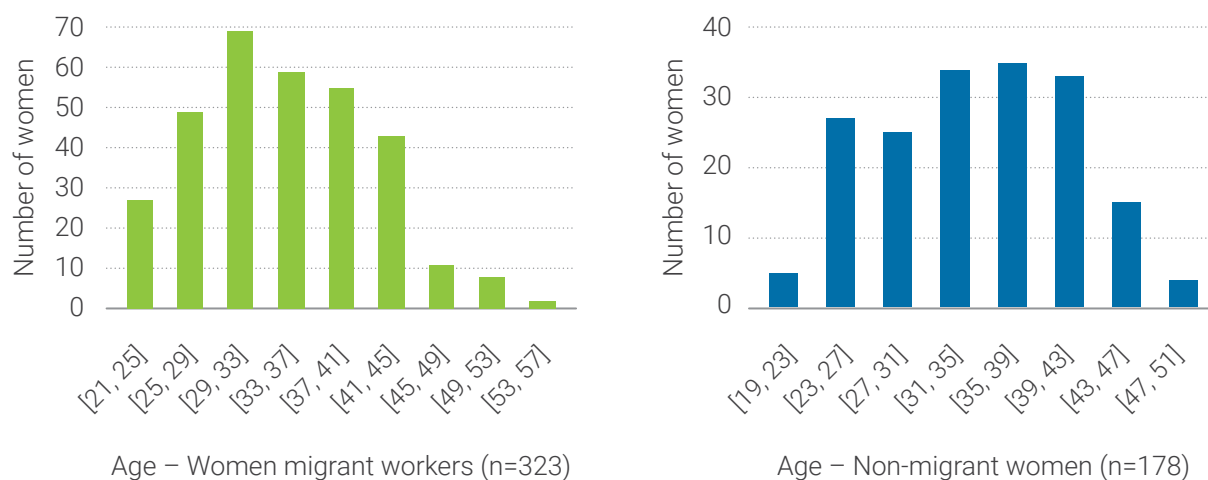


3. Profile of respondents

This chapter provides a description of the women who migrated for work and compares them to those who did not. It starts with a general demographic and economic description of both samples. It then delineates the significant changes seen in the empowerment indicators for each group over time. Finally, it compares the two groups together to see along which metrics the women were significantly different. It then disaggregates the study's data both by province of origin and by migration destination. This is done because important trends can be observed connecting origin to destination, and when connecting both to social and economic empowerment. This chapter therefore tries to answer to what extent demographic factors affect the benefits of migration and whether women who migrate from Viet Nam have better outcomes than women who do not migrate.

3.1 Demographic comparison of migrant worker and non-migrant samples

Figure 3. Frequency of age in women migrant sample vs. non-migrant women sample



Of the 323 women migrant workers surveyed, 26 were from Bắc Ninh; 90 from Hà Tĩnh; 73 from Phú Thọ; 100 from Thanh Hóa; and 34 from Quảng Ngãi (figure 1). The average age of the women who migrated was 35, and 88 per cent were married. Most migrant respondents (93 per cent) had children, at an average 1.97 children per woman. The non-migrant sample was similar in their family composition: The average age for non-migrant women was 35, 90 per cent were married, 93 per cent had children, and the average number of children per woman was 2.1. See figure 3 for a distribution of ages among migrant and non-migrant survey respondents.

Most of the women migrant workers (77 per cent) identified as ethnically Kinh – the majority ethnicity of Viet Nam. Comparatively, 83 per cent of the non-migrant women identified as ethnic Kinh. Due to the sample size, these are not significantly different. However, disaggregating the data shows that ethnic minorities were highly correlated to Thanh Hóa, the province with the lowest income growth, and ethnic minorities from Thanh Hóa had experienced 60 per cent unemployment before migration/2012, compared to 20 per cent unemployment among ethnic Kinh from the province. Thus, while ethnicity was not a direct explanatory variable influencing migration choice, the strong correlation of ethnicity to unemployment and the province with low economic growth shows a correlation between economic push factors and ethnic identity.

According to Viet Nam’s most recent demographic survey, Kinh people comprised 84 per cent of the population in 2009 (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2010). Even so, the prevalence of Kinh ethnicity in the women migrant worker sample is surprising. The Government of Viet Nam recognizes that 90 per cent of ethnic minorities are in rural areas with a poverty rate 3.5 times that of ethnic Kinh, and the Government set out to develop ethnic minorities’ “material and spiritual” life with 2008 Resolution No. 30a/2008/NQ-CP. Given that the provinces selected for the survey meet these parameters, one would expect a larger degree of ethnic minority representation in the sample, especially considering that all but two women identifying as an ethnic minority came from Thanh Hóa. The large number of ethnic Kinh women in the sample of women migrant workers could indicate a gap

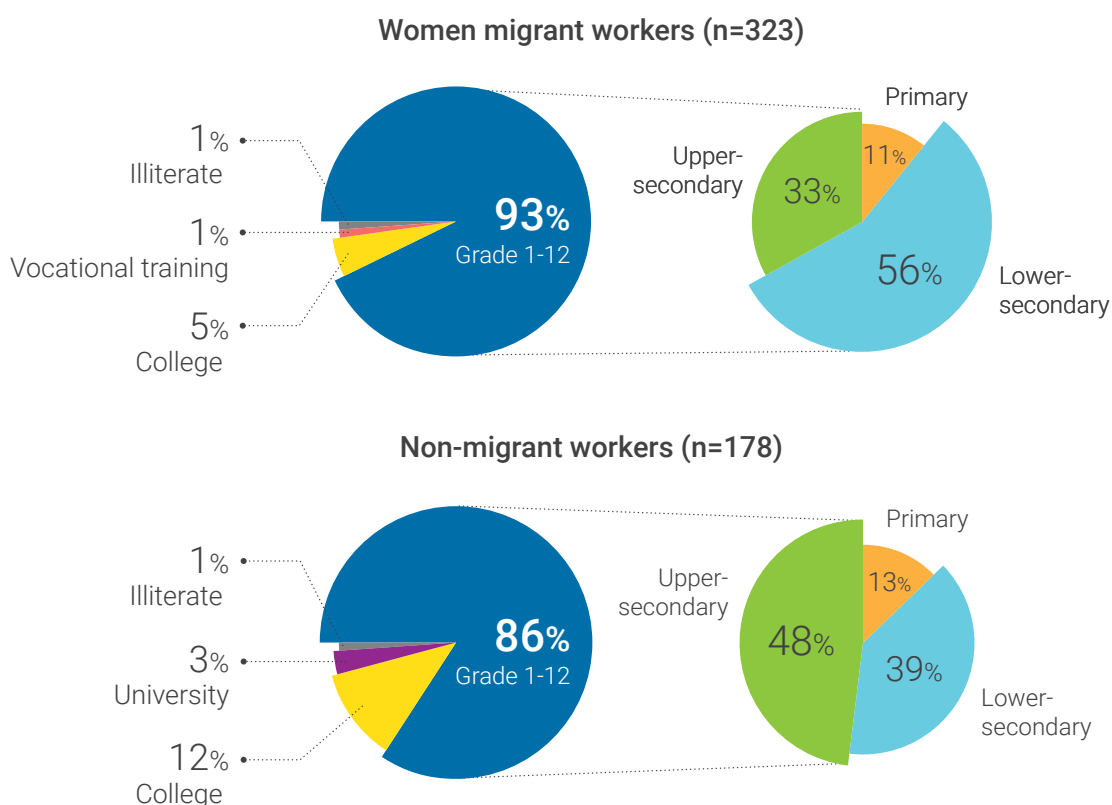
in implementation of Resolution No. 30a/2008/NQ-CP, or a response bias in the convenience sampling methodology of using provincial government lists of known women migrant workers. See box 1 for more details about the ethnic minorities surveyed for the study.

Box 1 Ethnic minorities in Viet Nam

The majority of women in this study were of Kinh ethnicity, Viet Nam's ethnic majority. Ethnic identity, and the concentration of particular ethnicities in particular provinces, appears to have significant effect on the migration corridors they travel. Excepting one respondent identifying as Tay, an ethnic minority from the North of Viet Nam having similar cultural roots to the Thai and Lao people, every other woman identifying as an ethnic minority in this study were Muong, a people linguistically similar to the Kinh but residing in more rural and mountainous terrain. Of the 104 women identifying as an ethnic Muong in this study, all but one came from Thanh Hóa province. Thanh Hóa has the highest unemployment and lowest wages of the provinces in this study. While Thanh Hóa is one of the provinces with the highest concentration of Muong people, they only make up 13 per cent of the province's population, much lower than the 73 per cent sampled from Thanh Hóa in this study (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2010). The most at-risk individuals for poverty in Viet Nam are rural villagers, women, and ethnic minorities (World Bank, 2017). All of the Muong women from Thanh Hóa in this sample migrated to Saudi Arabia, which was correlated to lower empowerment outcomes, and given that the Vietnamese Government is actively promoting labour migration as a poverty alleviation strategy, the high percentage of Muong women and low empowerment outcomes in this corridor implies important policy considerations.

Turning to education, 93 per cent of the women migrant workers answered that they had "some schooling", with an average of 8.9 years. Of the remaining 7 per cent, 5 per cent had a college education, 1 per cent had vocational training, and 1 per cent were self-assessed as illiterate. The educational attainment of the women in this study is therefore consistent with most educational attainment of Viet Nam's general female population, and had lower illiteracy than Viet Nam's 15 per cent average women's illiteracy (Ministry of Education and Training, 2015). None of the women migrant workers, however, had university level education. This was the one significant difference with the non-migrant sample: 12 per cent of the non-migrant women had a college education and 3 per cent had a university education. The remaining 84 per cent of non-migrant women had some primary or secondary schooling, with an average of 9.1 years, and 1 per cent were illiterate (figure 4).

Figure 4. Comparison of educational attainment of migrant and non-migrant women

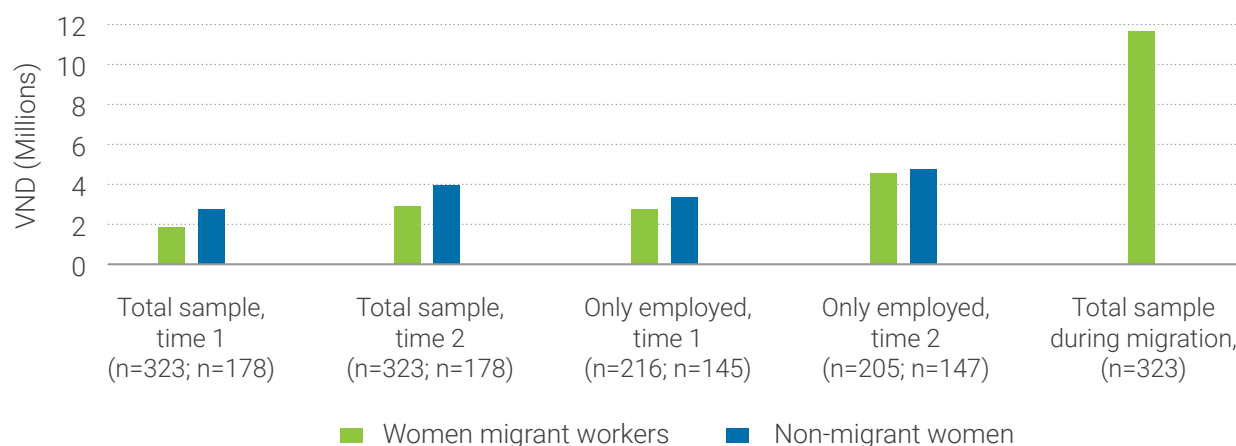


The average monthly income among migrant workers before migration was VND1,850,000 (US\$90), and after migration was almost VND3,000,000 (US\$130), representing an increase in income of nearly 60 per cent. These numbers, however, are heavily affected by unemployment. When only accounting for employed women, the average income rises to VND2,850,000 for the period before migration and VND4,000,000 for the period after their return. The average income in 2012 for non-migrant workers was VND2,000,000 (US\$100) and grew to VND4,000,000 (US\$175) in 2018, essentially doubling their income. The non-migrant sample thus earned an income 8 per cent greater than the migrant sample in (roughly) 2012, and 33 per cent higher than the migrant group in 2018 (figure 5).

These numbers highlight the importance of the incomes women migrant workers earned abroad. The average income for work in all countries of destination was VND11,700,000 (US\$525) – over 500 per cent more than what they were earning before migration and 300 per cent more than they were making in 2018 (figure 5). These differences represent significant potential for improved quality of life. As one woman from Hà Tĩnh observed:

“ Doing farm work could not bring me a high income. I decided to migrate because when coming back, I would have money to find a job for my first child. I could not do that if I stayed.

Figure 5. Average income before, during, and after migration



These demographic profiles show slight differences between the women in this study who chose to migrate and those who did not. Most of the demographics so far, however, were not found to be significantly different. The one exception was educational profile. Women migrant workers had slightly lower educational attainment by level – while their average years of pre-tertiary schooling was not significantly different, the prevalence of post-secondary education was significantly lower.

Another important significant difference was the amount women were contributing to the household budget. As a percentage of family income, the women migrants’ income accounted for 32.7 per cent before migration and 36.3 per cent after return. The income of non-migrant women accounted for 40 per cent of the family income in 2012 and 42 per cent in 2018, significantly more than the women migrant workers at both time frames. However, when only including employed women, the women migrant workers contributed 42 per cent before migration and 49 per cent in 2018; while the non-migrant women contributed 49 per cent in 2012 and 50 per cent in 2018.

The final and most significant difference was work sector, with the women migrant workers showing much higher rates of unemployment both before migration and after return. The women migrant worker’s top three sectors of employment before migration were: (1) “unemployed”; (2) “manufacturing”; and (3) “agriculture”. For the non-migrant women, the most common sectors in 2012 were: (1) “manufacturing”; (2) “unemployed”; and (3) “agriculture”. Unemployment among the women migrant workers was high – 33 per cent before migration and 36 per cent in 2018. Of the total sample, 26 per cent of the women migrant workers were unemployed both before and after migration, indicating a structural economic condition. Unemployment was also significantly lower among the non-migrant women – 19 per cent in 2012 and 17 per cent in 2018, with 11 per cent unemployed in both years. It is important to note that in many cases, returned women migrants do not wish to immediately return to work after the long work hours experienced abroad and the extended time away from home and family. However, the average year of return for the women migrants in this sample was 2014, and the statistical equivalence of unemployment for both over time implies a structural condition.

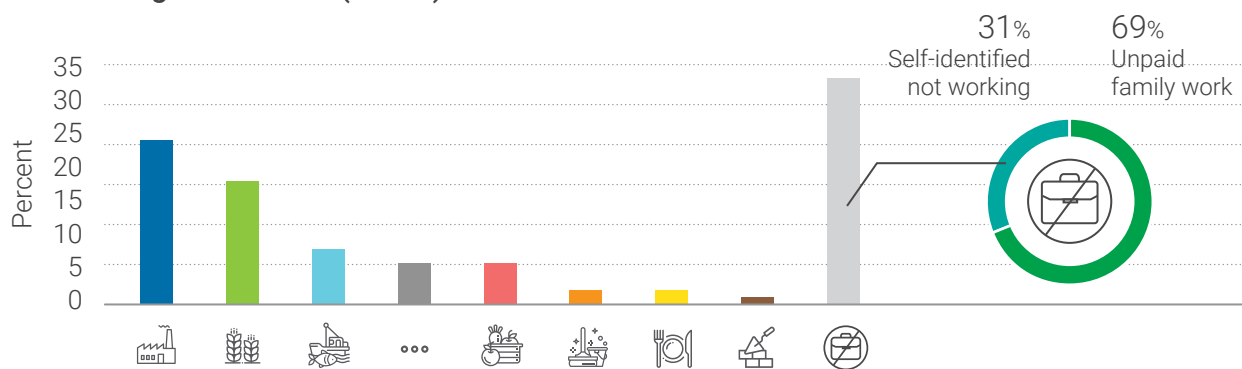
These unemployment figures are significantly above the reported average female unemployment rate and levels in Viet Nam. Being able to choose between different kinds of employment – or, at a more fundamental level of empowerment, to access employment at all – is central to women’s economic

power. Unemployment was a serious issue for many of the women surveyed, and there was little mobility between sectors before and after migration. The findings of this report indicate that the economies to which women returned did not provide opportunities for them to use the skills and money earned through migration to access better employment. As one woman returning from Thailand said:

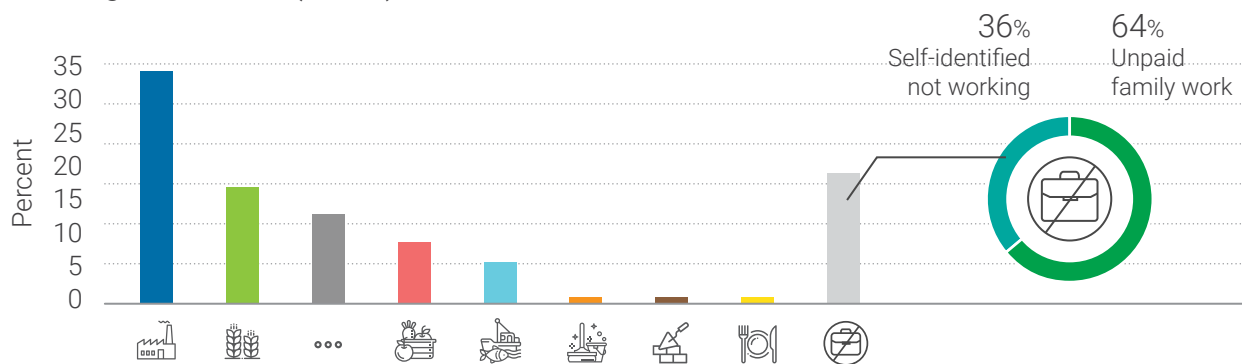
“ I don’t work. It is very difficult to find a job here. I have a small child and I need to take care of the family; also it is very hard to find any job to do here.

Figure 6. Comparison of sectoral employment of women migrants before migration and non-migrant women in 2012¹

Women migrant workers (n=323)



Non-migrant workers (n=178)




- Manufacturing ■ Agriculture ■ Fishing ■ Other ■ Retail
- Domestic work ■ Restaurant ■ Construction ■ Unemployed

1 This figure includes “unpaid work”, which is difficult to measure. These figures use official statistics from the General Statistics Office of Viet Nam and therefore refer to contributions to family work that are unpaid, not unpaid care work. For more on this topic, see section 1.3.

3.2 Changes in economic metrics for women migrant workers compared to non-migrant women

Work situation

There were significant changes in the women's work situations and work sectors when comparing the period before migration/2012 and 2018. The number of women migrant workers who "worked for an employer" fell by about 10 per cent. This was accompanied by an 8 per cent increase in returned women migrants reporting being self-employed or business owners, although many are likely to be micro-enterprise owners or in the informal sector. Women migrants reported a significant shift from low-skilled to semi-skilled employment; while the non-migrant group had a shift from semi-skilled to high-skilled employment. Both groups comprised equivalent employment in the agricultural sector before migration/2012 and in 2018, and migrant and non-migrant women's employment in manufacturing fell by 10 per cent. This was accompanied by a significant increase of employment in retail, especially among the women who had migrated. As one woman who had worked in Taiwan, China reported:

 *I love orchids, so I invested and opened a business growing and selling orchids at home. ... It's running quite well.*

Income

While the non-migrant women had significantly larger monthly incomes both in 2012 and 2018, income for both groups show large improvements. The women migrants featured a larger increase in income earning over time, both in the total and employed sub-samples. In addition, the employed sample showed both groups earning statistically equivalent average incomes by 2018. This implies convergence between the two groups, with the women migrants able to catch up economically due to the impressive macroeconomic improvement in Viet Nam. Contributions to household income demonstrated a similar pattern – before migration/2012, women migrant workers were contributing significantly lower proportions of household income than the non-migrant workers (32 per cent to 40 per cent), but the difference between the two samples diminished by 2 per cent by 2018. When looking only at the employed sub-sample, the improvement for women migrants was even stronger, with the women migrants raising from 44 per cent before migration to 49 per cent in 2018. This means that employed women migrants in 2018 were contributing an equal amount to non-migrant women in 2018, who were contributing 50 percent in 2012 and 51 per cent in 2018.

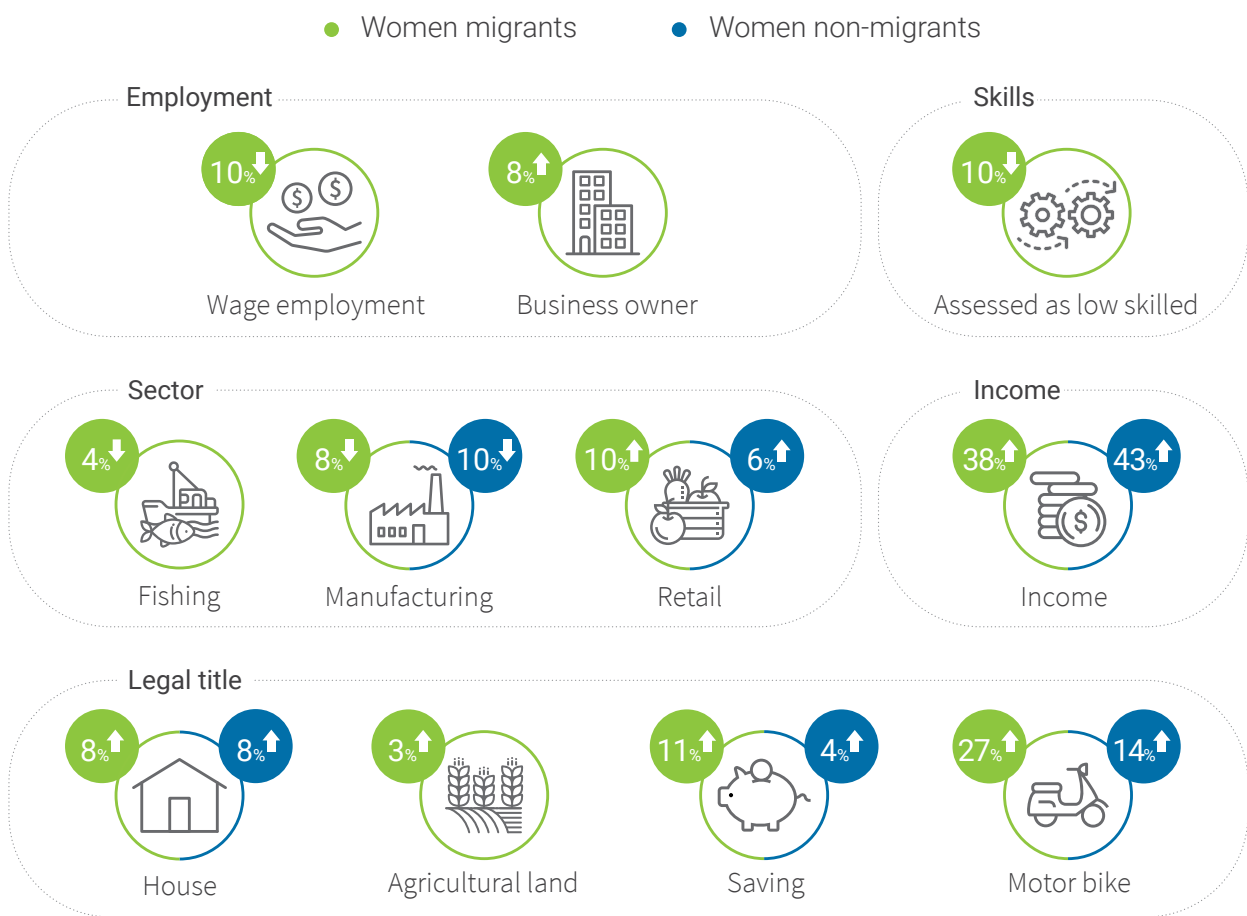
When taking employed migrant and non-migrant sub-samples with equivalent starting incomes, the greatest improvement in income is seen for the poorest sub-samples. This is true whether the women had migrated or not. This is consistent with Viet Nam having the lowest scores for inequality in South-East Asia (World Bank, 2019). Indeed, the mean increase in income for the women migrants was roughly 65 per cent, 17 percentage points higher than the rate of increase in the country's GDP per capita over the same period, which was about 48 per cent. Meanwhile, the mean increase for non-migrant women was about 41 per cent, 6 per cent less than Viet Nam's rate of increase in GDP per capita.

This is an important finding, but it is also vital to keep in mind the geographic distribution of these effects, especially as the comparison of women's income to the GDP of Viet Nam does not include unemployed women.¹ This means that while the women studied in this report showed income

1 With unemployment included, the women migrants' average increase in income falls to 58 per cent while the non-migrant women's rises to 43 per cent.

improvement above the country's average, women who come from locations with high unemployment are not seeing the same economic improvements. Thus, economic power did not increase for many among the most disempowered before migration. This too is consistent with general economic changes in Viet Nam, where the income share captured by the lowest 20 per cent of income earners is falling (World Bank, 2019), and suggests important focus areas for Viet Nam if it is to maintain sustainable and equitable growth.

Figure 7. Comparison of migrant and non-migrant women's changes in economic empowerment



Assets

Both groups achieved significant improvements in the ownership of assets, both in the formal legal titles held by women and in the quality of possessions in their household. Importantly, the number of women migrants reporting no legal assets fell by 40 per cent. In particular, ownership among women migrant respondents converged in ownership of motorbikes and land for business, and they surpassed non-migrant women in residential property and having savings books, indicating access to formal banking. The significant increases in capital assets, while small in number, give important evidence for migrant workers investing in higher income livelihoods and adding to the economic development of their home provinces. This is exemplified by one woman who returned from Saudi Arabia:

“ Currently I am running a business trading buffaloes and cows in big markets. [Before] I never had any money to invest in such a thing.

However, many women indicated that women’s power via legal ownership could have been significantly higher if it was coupled with changes in social norms. One woman who returned from Thailand said:

“ I sent the remittances to my parents-in-law back home. They could spend from that and whatever [was] left they saved and built a house for us. I didn’t really think about it. ... The properties are under my husband’s name.

All of the women in this study were also able to improve the quality of household goods. The women migrants reported significantly improved housing, indoor bathrooms, televisions, air-conditioners, and motorbikes. In comparison, the non-migrant women reported greater improvements to water-heating units and cars. This difference in what the two groups purchased also indicate that women migrant workers purchased more basic needs that they could not afford before migration – housing, sanitation, and transport – allowing them to climb higher up in their hierarchy of needs. For example, one woman who worked in Malaysia said:

“ I built a house, no paint yet though. And I bought things for the house like air conditioner, a fridge, TV, and water boiler. I bought these big things first. Ah, and a bike too.

3.3 Changes in social metrics for women migrant workers compared to non-migrant women

Social Knowledge

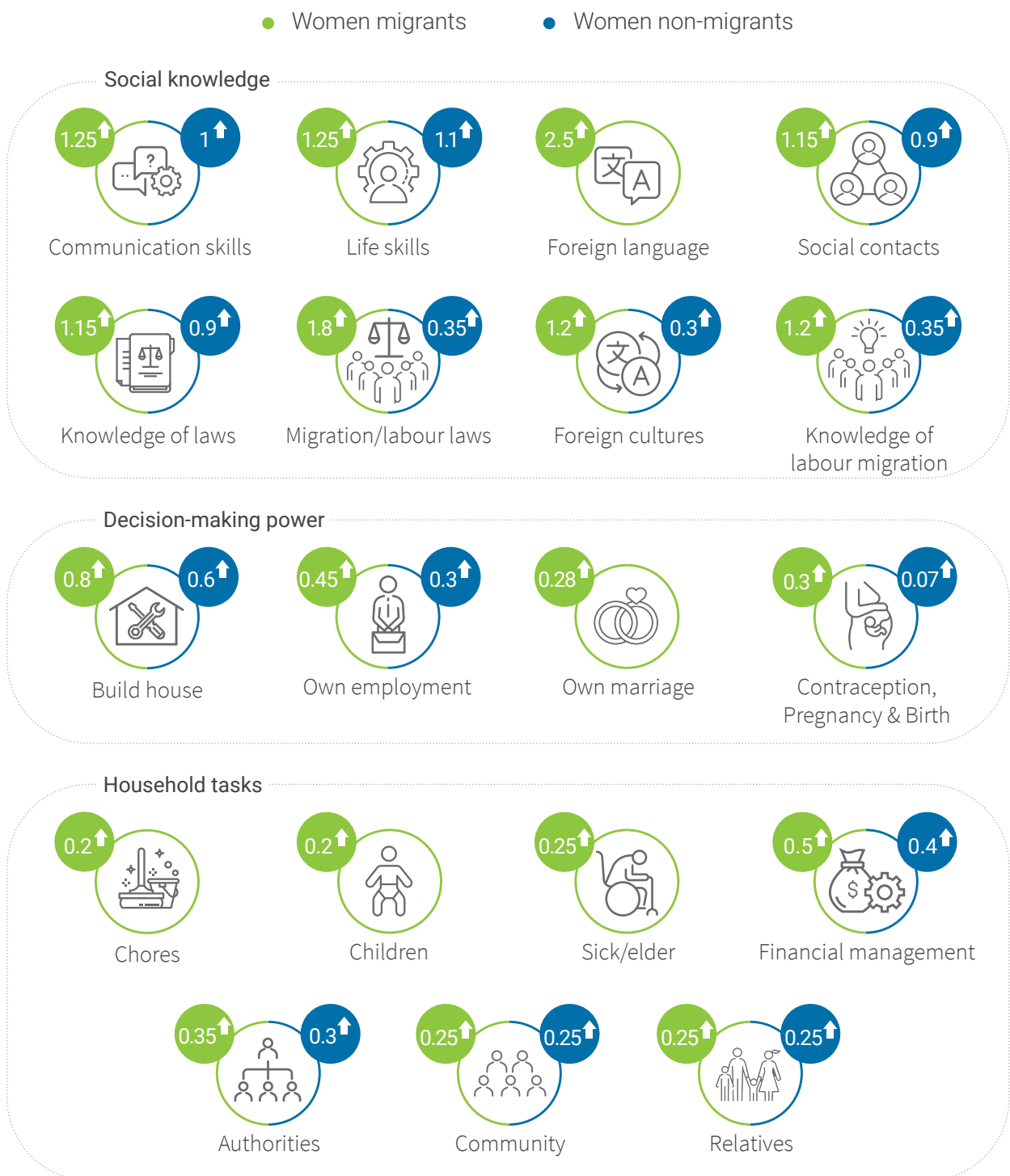
Both samples reported tremendous social empowerment – there were no metrics in this study where women reported decreased power in the social knowledge or decision-making power indices. At a fundamental level, this systematic belief that their lives and abilities have improved is proof of a real and systematic form of empowerment in self-efficacy. Social knowledge indicates a broad spectrum of awareness and skills that increase women’s power over their social environment. In this study, women were asked to rank improvements in their:

- communication skills;
- problem solving and conflict resolution skills (life skills);
- positive social contacts;
- facility with foreign language and culture;
- knowledge of the law; and
- knowledge of labour migration.

Women from both groups indicated significant improvements in their capacity at social communication, life skills, positive social contacts, and knowledge of the law. Women migrants reported significantly greater improvements in their knowledge of foreign languages and foreign cultures, knowledge of migration law, and knowledge of the migration process (figure 8). The more significant improvements in these skills show that, through migration, women workers were able to hone skills in cosmopolitan capacities that would enable migration as a livelihood strategy. However, several women reported that they did not feel the skills they learned were applicable in their home provinces. For example, one migrant worker who returned from Taiwan, China stated:

“ Over there I knew more about their customs and their language. I also learned from their way of being, like honesty and order, unlike in Viet Nam. ... When I first got back here ... I thought to myself, “This is Viet Nam, not Taiwan; if I keep doing that I will be disadvantaged.” ... In Viet Nam, with the Vietnamese lifestyle, I can’t use the knowledge I learned abroad; so it’s unbeneficial for me even though I find it very interesting.

Figure 8. Comparison of migrant and non-migrant women’s changes in social empowerment




Decision-making power

Empowering women's social influence requires increased participation and decision-making power over social relations at familial, local, and national scales. This study was limited to power over household decisions. Family relations are likely the most immediate and pervasive social dimension of rural life in Confucian-influenced Kinh Viet Nam, and a woman's capacity to influence family decisions indicates a capacity to achieve her goals through the influence of her social environment.

The non-migrant women reported increased power over decisions involving their housing, employment, and family planning during the 2012–2018 period, but by 2018 they only reported significantly greater power than the women migrant workers in one category: power over employment. In every other category the two groups were not significantly different by 2018. That said, women migrant workers did report more significant improvements than non-migrant women in all categories across the study period, and non-significantly higher decision-power over housing, marriage, and family planning.

It is surprising that successful employment abroad – meaning new job experiences, new work skills, and higher incomes – did not translate into more power over their own employment upon return. While women migrants saw more significant improvement in this metric than non-migrant women, the women migrants' self-reported power in 2018 was close to that of non-migrant women's self-reported power for 2012, and it is reasonable to hypothesize that this lack of power may have been a factor leading to their migration.

When asked to gauge their overall power in relation to their family, not only do both groups report strongly significant improvement, but the scores start and end in indistinguishable positions. That is, the women migrant workers showed the same improvement in general power within the family as the non-migrant women, despite reporting greater increases than non-migrant women in empowerment over decisions on specific topics. These results show that migration does not have simple and clear effects on women's power – positive or negative. Nor is it a simply a story of economic gains – the differences between social and economic empowerment is not so easily distinguished. As one woman from Hà Tĩnh said:

 *We came back and we are more independent financially. We can earn money and we are more comfortable and have more freedom than before. Before we were dependent on our husband, we felt like we had no rights, no power at all.*

Time spent on household work

The women were also surveyed on how frequently they performed tasks necessary for the upkeep of the household relative to other family members. These tasks were grouped into three categories:

- reproductive labour – such as household chores, taking care of children, and caring for the elderly;
- tasks involving the management of finances; and
- tasks involving management of relations outside the household.

Both groups reported carrying out a greater proportion of work in the latter two categories, but had differing responses regarding reproductive labour.

Non-migrant women reported no overall increase during the 2012 to 2018 period in the amount of reproductive labour they performed. Both groups reported that in 2018 they were handling the majority of household chores, but the women migrant workers reported that they had performed fewer chores before migration. The women migrant workers also reported significant increases in time spent caring for children, the sick, and the elderly, despite steady levels of unemployment. This situation is clearly complicated, however, as the non-migrant women, despite reporting no overall increase in reproductive labour since 2012, still reported more time taking care of children in 2018.

It therefore appears that the amount of time women spend on tasks maintaining the household was resistant to change. The resistance to change is striking considering the significant growth in self-confidence, social skills, and decision-making power the women migrant workers reported. This indicates that some gender norms are more “deeply” embedded in the culture. As one migrant woman said:

“ Now I live alone but, for example, if I do anything big such as to build a house or anything, I would have to discuss with my father. I don't ever decide by myself.

Both groups reported spending more time managing financial and social capital than they did in the past, especially the non-migrant women. Both groups reported performing more financial management than their family, but spending less time than family interacting with authorities. It is impossible to say whether this increase in time was accompanied by more power to make financial and social decisions, as it is possible that the greater proportion of time spent in these categories only indicates more time executing tasks without being empowered to make final decisions. Because the women reported more decision-making power over the management of housing and family planning, this spending of more time managing financial and social capital could reinforce women's power in some aspects of their life.

Increased participation in financial and social management is a necessary component of empowerment, but is not sufficient by itself. Either way, there was no significant difference in the time spent on these activities between the two samples, implying that migration's effect is negligible in improving financial and social management by itself. Several women still felt that the patriarchal norms within the household remained the same despite the changes labour migration had in other domains. As one woman from Phú Thọ said:

“ To be honest we will still have to give favour to the husband. Even if we have money, we will have to ask our husband to decide for us. For us it's mainly our husband who is the household head so they decide. We often give them the power to – we never overpass that, we respect them.

Life improvement

Finally, the women were asked about more general life improvements, including how much their lives had changed over the past five years, and how proud they were of themselves before and after the study's time period. The women in this report have achieved greater skills, knowledge, and self-respect. The women reported that their lives had changed, and that the change was mostly positive. As one woman who had worked in Japan explained:

“ It’s usually “more money, more bravery” [mạnh vì gạo bạo vì tiền]. Back then I didn’t have the condition to do such things. Nowadays I can help others, or participate in travelling or going for holidays with my friends. Before I never dared to because I had no money.

These improvements speak to empowering trends generally, but the quantifiable effect of migration remains ambiguous. For example, the two samples were not found to have significantly different levels of pride or amounts of positive life change. Instead of speaking to systematic women’s empowerment, much of the interview and the statistical data speak to moments of power. They indicate that migration supported women in their ambition to improve themselves and their context. These improvements included large one-time injections of capital, the improvement of important but not easily transferable skills, and the capacity to effect limited shifts in family decision-making.

In some cases, most notably in decisions over their own marriage and family planning, migration does appear to have empowered these women in unique ways that cannot be reduced to income alone. As shown by the women’s statements during in-depth interviews, many of the women know that they have been empowered through their experiences. In other cases, increased funds have improved their quality of life and earned respect from their family and community. In many cases, however, when the women returned, they ended up earning less than the women who did not migrate, and the double burden of earning an income and maintaining the household remains apparent. Migration has provided tools that women are using to influence aspects of their life, but many aspects of their life still resist changes brought by an individual woman’s power.



4. Provincial differences for women migrant workers

This chapter disaggregates the data by province of origin. The destinations women migrate to are strongly connected to their origin, and both social and economic empowerment show significant correlation to provinces of origin. It is therefore important to recognize the differences among the provinces of origin that influence outcomes for women migrant workers. Two key findings of this study are that migration destination strongly influenced the empowerment outcomes of women migrant workers, and that the destination was largely determined by the women's province of origin. This chapter looks at the aspects of provincial origins that both influence and limit the outcomes of women's migration.

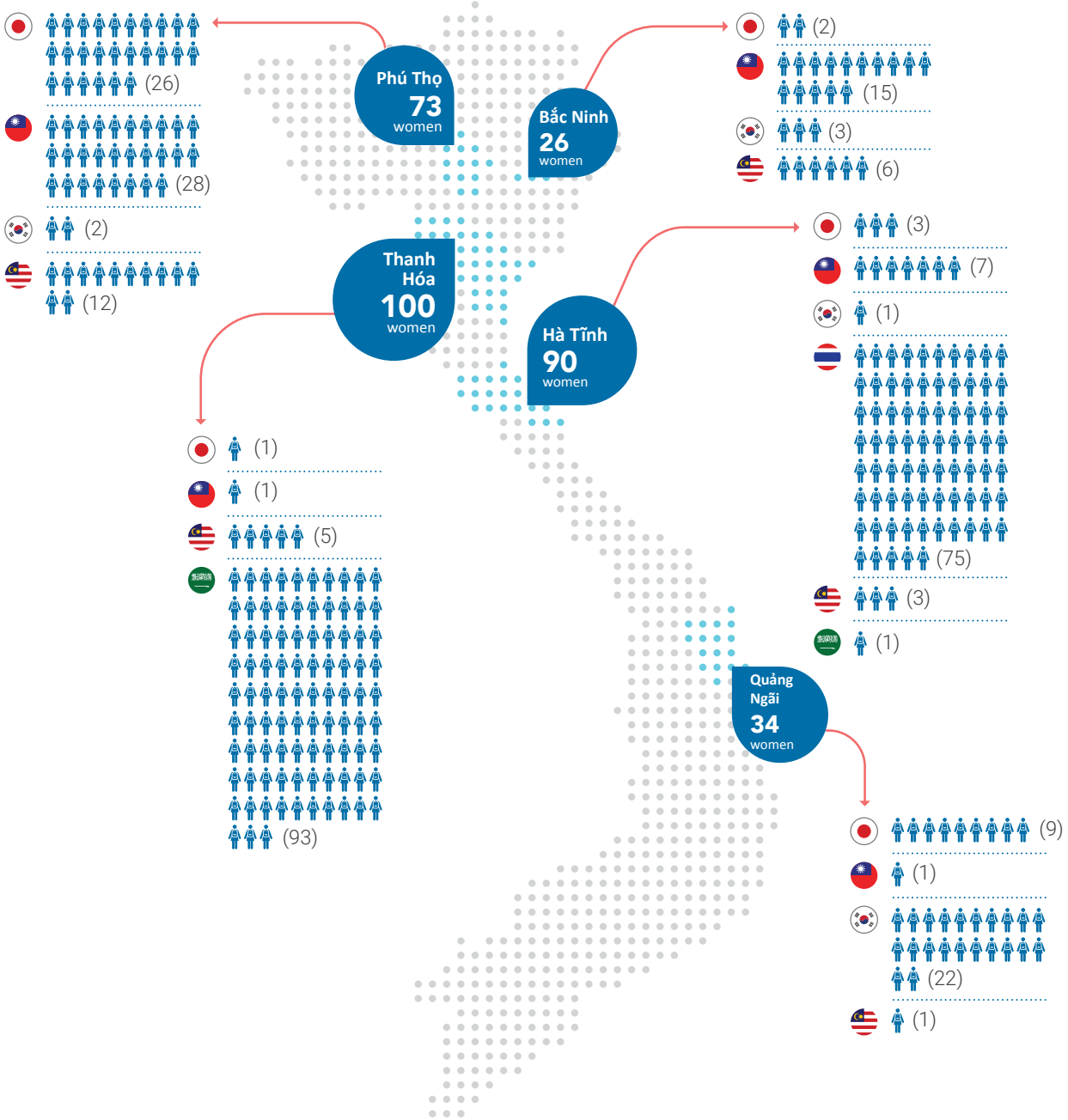
4.1 Migration corridor in the sample by province

Although these findings are limited by the sampling methods described in chapter 2, there was a strong correlation between the migration destination and income earned in Viet Nam. Of the 27 women from a commune in Bắc Ninh, 77 per cent migrated to East Asia (including 58 per cent to Taiwan, China), with the remaining 23 per cent having gone to Malaysia. Districts in Phú Thọ showed a similar trend, with 74 per cent migrating to East Asia (36 per cent to Japan; 38 per cent to Taiwan, China), and the remaining 16 per cent to Malaysia. As the women who returned to Bắc Ninh and Phú Thọ have higher average incomes than others in the study, recruitment to East Asia was correlated with more prosperous provinces. This phenomenon is highlighted by Quảng Ngãi districts, which

had the highest percentage of migration to East Asia. Of the 34 women from Quảng Ngãi, 65 per cent traveled to the Republic of Korea and 26 per cent to Japan. These women also saw the largest increase in salaries.

This picture is markedly different from the two least prosperous provinces in this study – Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa. Of the women migrants from Hà Tĩnh in the sample, 76 per cent migrated (informally) to Thailand, with the next largest destination being Taiwan, China at 7.6 per cent. In Thanh Hóa, 93 per cent of the women migrants migrated to Saudi Arabia (see figure 9).

Figure 9. Migration corridors by province of origin (top six destinations only)



Thus, the three provinces that exhibited stronger economic improvement and social empowerment indicators had a greater range of major migration corridors, and the East Asian destinations they accessed were characterized by generally better working conditions. Probable explanations for the choice of migration destination in the two poorest provinces is that women from Hà Tĩnh seem to migrate informally for work to the closest country with available work; while the sample district in Thanh Hóa appears to have been preferred by those recruiting to meet the Saudi Arabian market needs for domestic workers. In both cases, destinations that correlated with less growth in empowerment metrics resulted in generally lower migration outcomes.

It is important here to note that, in most cases, women migrating to domestic work in Saudi Arabia are supposed to pay zero fees to migrate, as opposed to the considerable costs of migration to destinations in East Asia. This is certainly one of the factors reinforcing the migration corridor between Thanh Hóa and Saudi Arabia, as women in the province had higher unemployment and do not have the funds to pay upfront fees, and evidence from our sample shows that very few women are using, or possibly do not have access to, loans subsidized by the Vietnamese Government. However, this factor appears to be insufficient on its own, as prominent levels of unemployment are found in other areas – such as Hà Tĩnh, which has unemployment levels that are statistically equivalent to Thanh Hóa. This makes Thanh Hóa’s focus on migration to Saudi Arabia distinct.

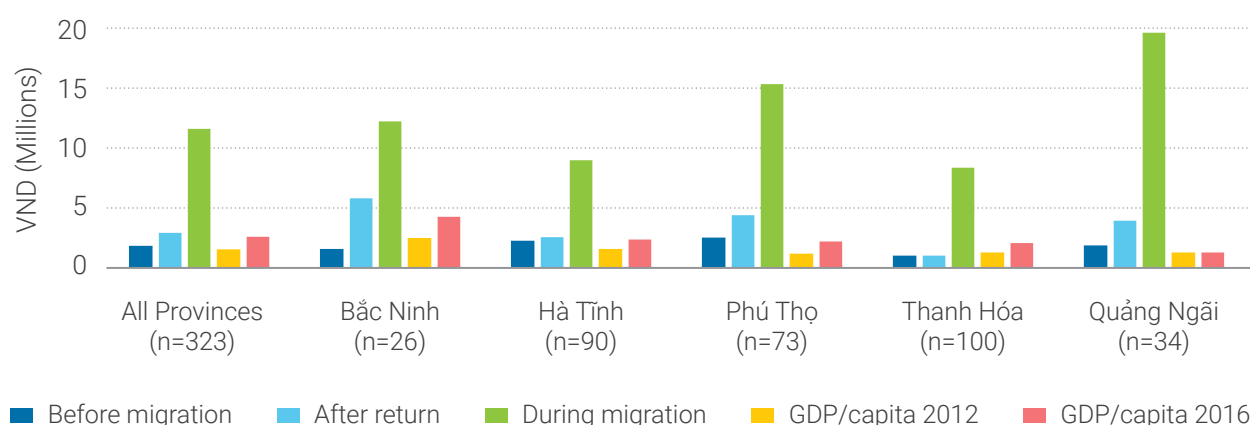
Despite the existence of government-subsidized loans to facilitate empowering migration for those in more impoverished rural areas. Only 9 per cent of women in the entire migrant sample reported using the loans to finance their migration. Comparatively, 24 per cent took out interest bearing loans from banks or family and 23 per cent took out non-interest bearing loans from family. In fact, only one woman from Thanh Hóa used a government loan – a method which could have enabled the women who had experienced the lowest economic growth to access migration corridors correlated to more empowering outcomes. This indicates the importance of strengthening the implementation and reach of these loans to support the women considering migration in more rural areas. These women are choosing what they see as the best option available, but as the options available are limited by their geography and means of finance, the outcome they receive is below what they would have if they had better access to finance and greater choice over destination. This was similar to a finding in another ILO report, wherein women were observed to be taking the “least worst” option available to them (Napier-Moore and Sheill, 2016).

4.2 Economic differences by province

Women migrant workers from different provinces of origin reported significantly different monthly incomes earned abroad (figure 10). The amount earned ranged from the women from districts in Quảng Ngãi, who earned an average of VND20,000,000 (US\$900), to the women from Thanh Hóa, who earned VND8,500,000 (US\$380). During migration, the women from Quảng Ngãi made over ten times their salary at home; while the women from Hà Tĩnh only made three times as much. These figures not only show large differences in what women from different provinces were likely to make, due to the strong connection of origin to destination in Viet Nam’s migration corridors.

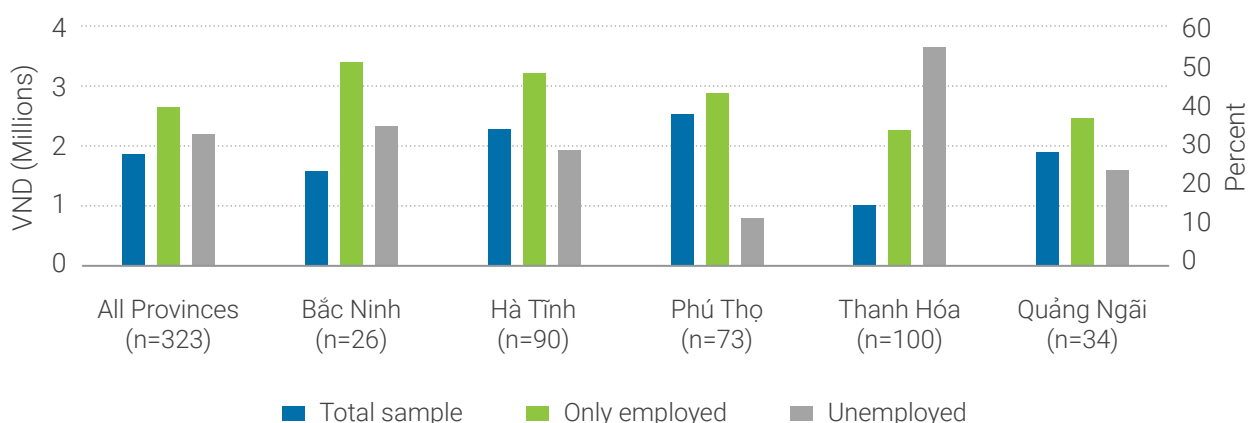
In addition, both the relative and absolute changes in income are important for assessing women’s economic empowerment. A person’s understanding of improved economic power will be relative to their past economic situation, and the difference in the incomes they experience can be more important than the absolute income they earn when it comes to the degree of change they report in their subjective well-being. At the same time, this relative understanding of women’s power should not be a stand-alone indicator, as it can privilege relative increases over absolute amounts, leading to policies that might create structural barriers to accessing destinations with higher incomes. For example, the women migrants from Thanh Hóa had a larger relative increase in income than the women migrants from Phú Thọ, but they could have made more money if they had access to East Asian destinations. While the relative increase is important for subjective empowerment, the absolute amount is important for material outcomes of migration. Both of these indicators are necessary for a balanced understanding of women’s empowerment and evidence-based policy.

Figure 10. Average incomes of women migrants by province of origin



The average incomes also highlight the importance of geographic factors in shaping the economic situations to which women migrants returned. Women from Bắc Ninh, a province close to Hà Nội, more than tripled their income on return. The income for women from Quảng Ngãi, with a major port centre and a targeted site for industrial development, doubled on return. Meanwhile, the income of women migrants from Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa’s remained almost static, despite Viet Nam’s 1.5-fold improvement in GDP over the period. Another important finding is the differences in GDP per capita compared to the incomes of the sample from this study. The women who migrated from Hà Tĩnh, Phú Thọ, and Quảng Ngãi seem to be relatively privileged, with incomes exceeding the provincial GDP per capita both before and in 2018. Meanwhile, the women from Thanh Hóa, predominately ethnic minorities, seem economically worse off than the average both before and in 2018. The women from Bắc Ninh seem to have incomes below the average before migration, but were more prosperous than the average in 2018, a surprising finding given they were the least likely to report positive change in their life (see chapter 7).

Figure 11. Comparison of income for women migrant workers and unemployment rates by province



Perhaps even more telling is the unemployment data from the sample. In fact, when only accounting for women migrants who were employed, the differences in before migration income for each province seem much less significant. This implies that access to employment is a leading push factor for migration, and a leading structural limitation to accessing more expensive destinations correlated with better outcomes. Unemployment remained just above half for all the women migrants from Thanh Hóa, both before migration and in 2018; while unemployment among the women migrants from Bắc Ninh fell from 35 per cent before migration to 12 per cent in 2018 (figure 11). This is likely to do with its prominent location, 35 kilometers north-East of Hà Nội, and industrial development supported by the central government, with over 700 foreign direct investment projects investing over US\$23 billion in 2015 (Bac Ninh Portal, 2015)

There are also greater differences in unemployment rates than there are in the disparities in income levels between the women who did migrate and those who did not. The level of unemployment for the women migrants before migration and in 2018 remained higher than the unemployment levels for the non-migrant sample at any time during the study period. These findings imply that migration, and the money and skills earned through migrating, are not alone sufficient to overcome the structural unemployment many of the women faced in returning to Viet Nam, and migration may currently only function as a stop-gap measure or temporary interruption to longer-term exclusions.

Box 2

Factors and targets influencing recruitment

There are a number of factors that influence the hiring process of women migrant workers, including the modalities under which women can be hired to work abroad as outlined by Law 72; targets and quotas used in the law's implementation; and the preferences of recruiters, governments, and employers abroad.

As prescribed by Law 72, there are four different modalities under which women can be hired for work in other countries. They can:

1. be directly hired by foreign employers;
2. be hired by state-owned or private recruitment agencies;
3. be sent to work abroad for an operation run by a Vietnamese enterprise; or
4. be sent to work abroad by a multinational corporation that does business in Viet Nam.

Excluding those who migrated to Thailand, most women in this study were hired through state-owned or private recruitment agencies. In these cases, licensed recruitment agencies can recruit women who enter into a contractual agreement with the recruitment agency. The women migrant workers then enter a contractual agreement with their employer or a second recruitment agency in the destination upon arrival. According to the Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB), there were 165 registered recruitment agencies in Viet Nam as of 2012, of which approximately 56 per cent had placed over 100 workers and 7 per cent had placed over 1,000. As of 2017, there were 277 registered recruitment agencies, of which 72 per cent had placed over 100 workers and 22 per cent had placed over 1,000, indicating an increase of recruitment agencies working at large scales of recruitment since the period in which women in this report migrated (DOLAB, 2019).

Alongside these modalities, recruitment preferences influence who is able to work abroad. For example, Taiwan, China has been the largest destination for Vietnamese migrant workers since 2010 (ILO, 2018a). Before instituting a ban on domestic workers from Viet Nam in 2005, Taiwan, China was also the major destination for women migrants from Viet Nam. To enter, women were required to be married and be between 25 and 45 years of age to be hired as a domestic worker (single women could be employed in the manufacturing sector). To get around these discriminatory restrictions, some women reportedly purchased fake birth certificates; others reportedly used doctored photos to appear as more attractive employees in catalogues sent to recruiters in Taiwan, China (Bélanger and Wang, 2013). As found in another ILO study, such restrictions are usually ineffective, as women will find means to circumvent barriers to achieve their aims, sometimes resulting in greater risk during migration and more coercion in their workplaces abroad (Napier-Moore, 2017).

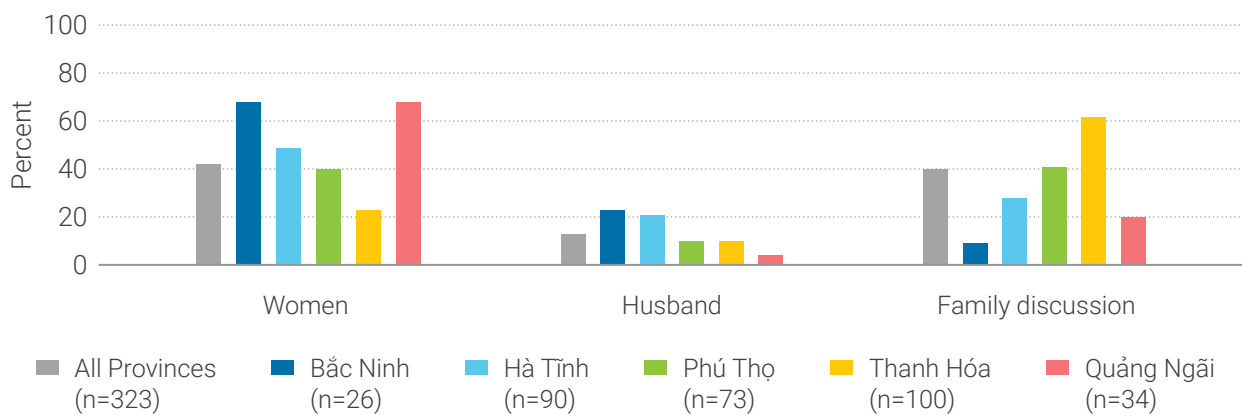
Today, many Vietnamese women migrating to engage in domestic work are employed in Saudi Arabia, a destination linked in this study to less decent work and lower migration outcomes. About 50 per cent of the 7,000 Vietnamese migrant workers in Saudi Arabia were recruited from one province – Thanh Hóa (ILO, unpublished). As seen in this report, these women are disproportionately ethnic minorities with limited work opportunities in their communities. The examples described here indicate the confluence of legislation and recruiter preference in shaping the available choices for women seeking work abroad, where a women's age, marital status, and birthplace help determine her destination and work sector. This, in turn, has important effects on the social and economic empowerment resulting from her labour migration.

4.3 Social differences by province

In this study, respondents level of education was disaggregated by province. When looking at the migrants' average years of schooling, the women migrants from Hà Tĩnh (8.5 years) and Thanh Hóa (7.7 years) were found to have significantly fewer years of schooling than the total migrant sample, which had an average of 8.9 years. In addition, Bắc Ninh, Phú Thọ, and Quảng Ngãi had significantly higher numbers of respondents with tertiary education. While this could help explain the lack of East Asian migration corridors for Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa – as the East Asian destinations have more stringent requirements to qualify for employment – recruitment agency contacts and political economy factors should not be discounted. For example, an MRC staff worker at the validation workshop indicated that the VWU actively engages in outreach to recruit women from villages in Thanh Hóa for domestic work in Saudi Arabia. Institutional connections could be more influential than labour market demographics, and more research could provide better insight into the recruitment process.

When the married women from each province were asked who made the decision for them to migrate, almost 70 per cent of the women from Bắc Ninh and Quảng Ngãi said they made the decision themselves; while nearly 50 per cent from Hà Tĩnh made the decision themselves. However, fewer than half the married women migrants in Phú Thọ (about 40 per cent) and only about a quarter of the married women migrants in Thanh Hóa (about 24 per cent) made the decision to migrate by themselves (figure 12).

Figure 12. Comparison of who made the final decision to migrate by province, within sample of married migrant respondents



As highlighted in chapter 7 below, situations where the husband or the whole family made migration decisions together were correlated with lower empowerment indicators. They are also correlated to migration to Saudi Arabia and Thailand. It should be noted, however, that the decision-making process and the migration process was quite different for each of these two destinations. Migration to Thailand was more correlated with the husband making the decision for his wife to migrate; was entirely irregular¹; and it also featured a greater frequency of families migrating together. Migration to Saudi Arabia was correlated to the whole family making the migration decision; was always done through formal, regular channels; and in all but one case the woman migrated alone, which is in accordance

1 Sixty-four per cent migrated by themselves, 27 per cent through social connections, and 9 per cent through unlicensed brokers; 61 per cent with a tourist visa, 36 per cent with no visa, and 3 per cent could not remember.

with the immigration system for domestic workers. The self-reporting of empowerment for women who had travelled to Thailand was found to be higher in several categories than women who travelled to other destinations, which calls into question any simplistic reading of family discussion or informal migration. To understand the full impact of migration, more efforts are needed to ensure context is taken into account. As one woman from Thanh Hóa stated:

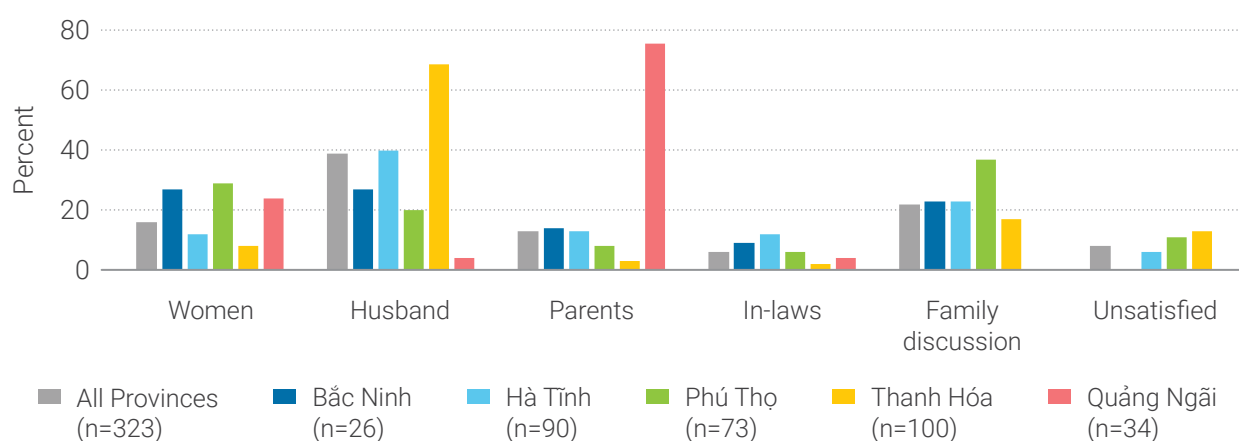
“ We, husband and wife, discussed together ... but in making decisions my husband makes all the decisions. ... It has always been like this; no difference between now and before my migration. **”**

Among all the women who sent remittances, 27 per cent decided for themselves how to use the money they remitted. Looking only at married women, 16 per cent decided for themselves, 40 per cent had these decisions made by their husbands, and a little more than 20 per cent discussed them with their whole family (figure 13). Overall, this gives a rather bleak indicator off women’s power over the economic outcomes of their own labour. When asked how happy they were with how the remittances were spent, only 9 per cent indicated they were unhappy – although this can be put into question by the lack of privacy given to women as indicated in section 2.3 on research limitations, or the lack of financial literacy training in much of the pre-departure training. While women in this study had a good memory of their income levels abroad and at home, they had a much harder time estimating the amounts they had remitted.

Thanh Hóa seems to be a special case, with husbands making 65 per cent of the decisions around remittance spending, and the women making the decision themselves only 8 per cent of the time. This highlights the connection between women’s decision-making power and their satisfaction with economic outcomes from migration, with 13 per cent of married Thanh Hóa women indicating they were unhappy with the outcome of the remittance spending. This was also the only sample that where any women responded that they were “very dissatisfied” with how their remittances were spent.

Quảng Ngãi was also unique in that 65 per cent of the remittance decisions were made by the women’s parents, possibly as a result of their lower age and lower likelihood of being married, and therefore still under the guidance of their parents within Vietnamese cultural norms.

Figure 13. Provincial differences in who decided how remittances would be used within married sample





5. Migration experiences by destination

This chapter describes the working conditions women migrant workers experienced in the six major destinations in this study. It looks at prevalence of work sector, quality of work, and positivity of experience. The destination in which migrant respondents worked was correlated to growth in several empowerment metrics, particularly those involving social power. This chapter therefore looks at differences in six destinations to answer what proportion of women migrant workers benefited from positive migration experiences, and which of the factors that differentiate destinations create the opportunities for better outcomes for women. Box 3 below serves as a primer for this discussion by detailing the migration mechanisms between Viet Nam and each of the six destinations.

Box 3

Migration mechanisms agreed with the six major destinations

Vietnamese labour migration exists within a complex legal space comprised of numerous bilateral memoranda of understanding (MOUs) negotiated with countries of destination. This makes the legal requirements for migration – and their subsequent effects on the lives of women migrants – particular to each destination. The legal requirements themselves are shaped by the demands in destination economies and the interests of the Government of Viet Nam. Many of the MOUs are confidential, making it difficult to get information on the legal rights and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in Vietnamese labour migration. This lack of transparency means that potential women migrant workers – already limited by their economic situation – make decisions in a market characterized by asymmetrical access to information.

Japan

Labour migration agreements between Viet Nam and Japan support a growing share of Vietnamese citizens working abroad, which has increased from about 6 per cent of Japan's migrant worker intake in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2017 (Nguyen, Thuy, and Tran, 2019). Japan accepts Vietnamese migrant workers under several different schemes. The largest recipient of Vietnamese migrant workers is the Technical Intern Training Program, which allows migrant workers to enter under a training programme, enabling differentiated treatment between migrant and national workers. Signed in 2017, the explicit intent of the most recent memorandum of cooperation between Viet Nam and Japan is to support the transfer of technical skills to Viet Nam, promoting development and international cooperation. It provides an exhaustive list of responsibilities of the Vietnamese and Japanese ministries in implementing the training programme. In addition, there is a list of standards that any Vietnamese sending organization must meet to be accredited. These requirements include calculating and making publicly available the criteria for commissions and fees charged to interns; finding appropriate employment for Vietnamese workers to use their acquired skills upon return to Viet Nam; and prohibitions on Vietnamese labour-sending enterprises employing persons with a criminal record, imposing financial penalties on trainees, or using subcontracted brokers as intermediaries in the recruitment process.

Republic of Korea

The 2006 MOU between Viet Nam and the Republic of Korea sets out the provisions by which workers migrate in accordance with the Republic of Korea's Employment Permit System for Foreign Workers (EPS). Unlike the systems set out by other MOUs, all recruitment under the EPS is performed by Centers of Overseas Labour (COLABs), which are publicly funded and managed by a government agency affiliated with MOLISA. Similarly, an agency affiliated with the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Labour receives all migrant workers upon arrival; manages the jobseekers' roster; and receives the costs, reported by the Overseas Worker Center (OWC), of the application and sending of each worker. Workers, who must be between the ages of 18 and 40 and have no criminal convictions, receive an EPS certificate, valid for two years, after passing a test in Korean language, culture, and work safety.

The Republic of Korea informs MOLISA on the types of jobs and number of workers required each year, which MOLISA uses to maintain a list of eligible jobseekers. Korean employers then pick workers from the list and draw up a contract that is sent to the respective COLAB, which is required to explain the contents of the contract to the worker. In addition, the MOU includes provisions on the maintenance of a digital database; the preferential hiring of workers who have previously used the EPS system; and variable demand based on the performance of Vietnamese OWCs. The EPS is also supposed to maintain, through the OWCs, a Returnee Support Program to help returning workers reintegrate upon their return to Viet Nam. The responsive and specific nature of the EPS system may be an important cause behind the better empowerment indicators of women who migrated to the Republic of Korea for work. (cont. next page)

Box 3 (cont.)

Malaysia

Viet Nam signed its first MOU with Malaysia in 2003, with an updated MOU signed in 2015. The terms of the 2015 MOU are much more specific – workers sent to Malaysia must be between 18 and 45 years of age; able to speak Malay or English; pass a medical examination; and have no criminal record. The 2015 MOU also requires a standard contract that mandates an eight-hour working day, one rest day per week, public holidays, overtime pay, paid sick leave, medical insurance, and payments made through a bank account in the worker's name. The employer is required to pay for any security deposits, processing fees, visit pass, insurance, and health examination. The 2015 MOU prohibits the employer from confiscating workers' passports. However, while repatriation costs are borne by the employer, travel to Malaysia is borne by the worker, and the worker cannot change employers.

Saudi Arabia

Viet Nam and Saudi Arabia signed an MOU in 2014, although this MOU was not available for this research. Both governments reportedly want to increase labour migration between the two countries (Vietnam Manpower, 2016). The MOU uses a system common in labour migration in the Arabian Gulf known as *kafala* (Lu, 2016). Under this system, each worker is required to have a Saudi Arabian sponsor, usually their employer. The migrant worker's visa and legal status is maintained by their sponsor, and as such, migrant workers cannot enter the country, change employers, or return home without permission of their one sponsor. The autocratic power this system confers upon a worker's employer can be seen to provide the opportunity for coercion and abuse. The new MOU included the provision of a 24-hour-a-day mechanism to assist domestic workers, which received 40 complaints within the first four months of 2015 (Lu, 2016). In addition to the gendered, restricted, and unprotected nature of domestic work in Saudi Arabia, the high-frequency of complaints may be linked to the *kafala* system, which restricts mobility.

Taiwan (China)

The MOU between Viet Nam and Taiwan, China was signed in 1999 and reflects Viet Nam's migration management capacity at that time, as it contains only 12 articles with few specific protections for Vietnamese workers. The MOU stipulates that the Government of Taiwan, China will decide the employment categories and quotas for labour migration; that Vietnamese workers shall be protected by the laws of Taiwan, China; that the Government of Viet Nam will ensure that Vietnamese workers follow the laws of Taiwan, China; and that Vietnamese workers shall provide proof of their technical skills, health certificate, and lack of a criminal record. Finally, medical expenses incurred by Vietnamese workers not qualified for health insurance shall be borne by the Vietnamese labour-sending companies.

Thailand

Though Thailand had signed MOUs with neighboring Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar by 2003, the first MOU on labour migration between Thailand and Viet Nam was signed in 2015 – after nearly seven years of discussion (Nguyen, 2017). As of 2019, The MOU only enables regular migration into the construction and fishing sectors, neither of which is attractive (or even possible) for Vietnamese women migrant workers. There was therefore no regular channel of migration to work in Thailand available for women surveyed in this study. Given the limited sectoral coverage, the MOU likely remains irrelevant to the interests of many Vietnamese women seeking working in Thailand, and as such, they are unable to reap the benefits of regular migration. (cont. next page)

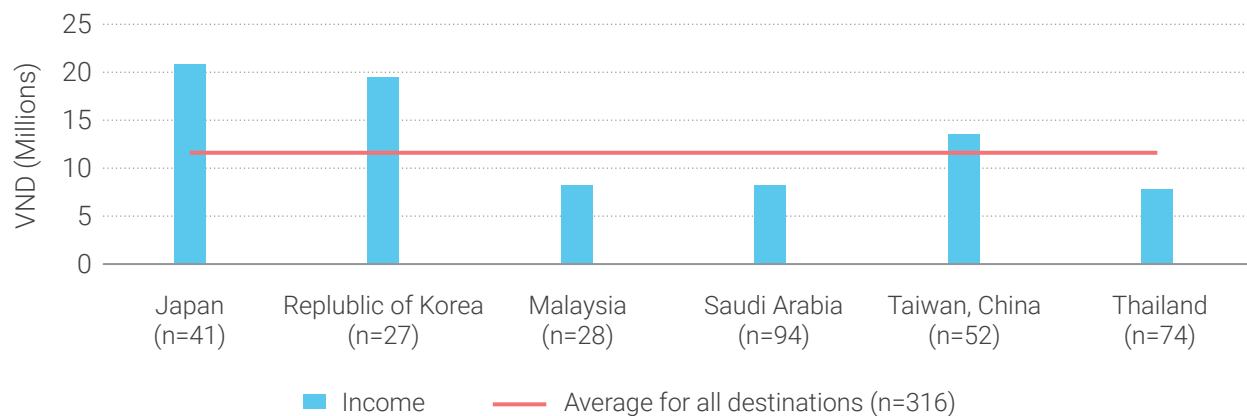
Box 3 (cont.)

Viet Nam's labour migration MOUs with various destinations thus create differences that affect the provision of equality for all workers; the requirements for who can be hired; the methods for managing migration; the restrictions on migrant workers within the destination; and the clauses designed to limit the fees levied on migrant workers. These differences speak to the diversity of destination countries' economic and social interests, as well as their ability to negotiate with the Vietnamese Government. While the formal provisions of these agreements are not always fully implemented, the requirements they legislate – and the capacity of national and provincial governments to implement them – may cause some of the differences in empowerment outcomes witnessed in this report.

5.1 Major destinations and sectors of employment

There were six major destinations in this study: Japan (41 women, 14 per cent); the Republic of Korea (28 women, 9 per cent); Malaysia (27 women, 8 per cent); Saudi Arabia (94 women, 29 per cent); Taiwan, China (52 women, 16 per cent); and Thailand (74 women, 21 per cent). While there were several other countries of destination among the sample group – the Russian Federation (5 women); the Lao People's Democratic Republic (2 women); Cyprus (1 woman); and China (1 woman) – these destinations did not host enough women to look for destination-specific effects. The highest monthly salaries were earned in Japan (averaging VND21,000,000 (US\$940)) and the Republic of Korea (averaging VND 19,500,000 (US\$870)); followed by Taiwan, China (VND13,500,00 (US\$600)); with Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand all trailing behind with wages averaging about VND8,000,000 (US\$360).

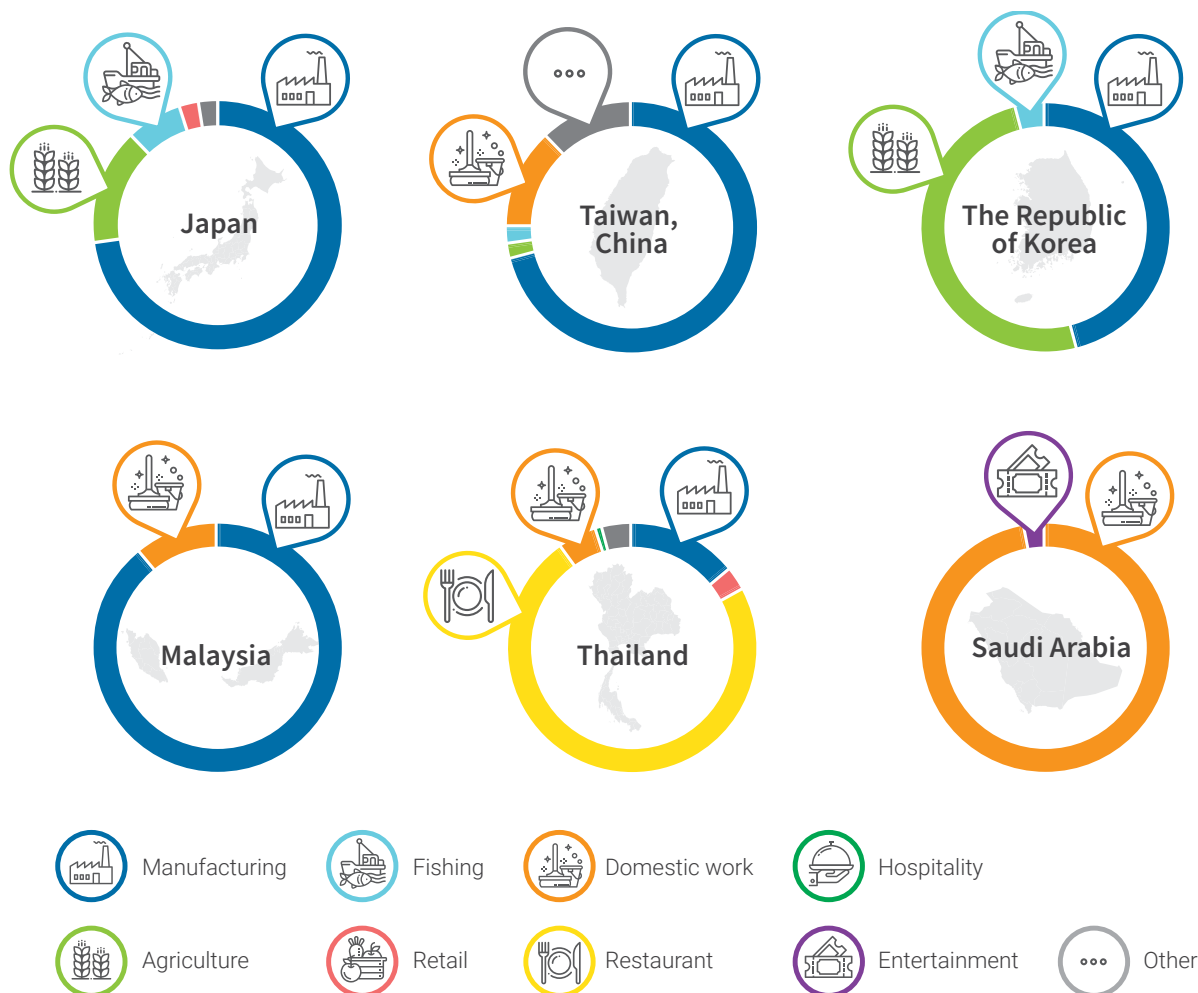
Figure 14. Monthly income earned during migration by destination



In this study, manufacturing was the most common sector of employment. Malaysia was particularly characterized by manufacturing, at 89 per cent, with domestic work being the only other sector employing women migrant respondents. Japan and Taiwan, China also featured prevalent employment in manufacturing, at 73 and 71 per cent, respectively. Outside of manufacturing, Japan employed women in agriculture and fishing, while Taiwan, China had women working in the hospitality sector. The Republic of Korea had the largest proportion of migrant workers in agriculture, at 50 per cent, with manufacturing a close second at 46 per cent. Employment in Saudi Arabia, however, was dominated by domestic work – 97 per cent of the women migrating to Saudi Arabia were domestic workers. Finally,

the majority of women migrating to Thailand, 73 per cent, worked in the restaurant industry, with manufacturing a distant second (figure 15).

Figure 15. Prevalence of work sector in each destination



5.2 Differences in contracts, cost of migration, and training

Excluding those who went to Thailand, almost all the women¹ in the study had a written contract, which is a legal requirement to migrate under article 6 of Law 72. In Thailand, where the lack of an MOU relevant to women migrant workers makes such arrangements improbable, 81 per cent migrated with no agreement at all; 18 per cent started work with a verbal agreement; and one woman reported having a written contract.

Most of the women migrants understood their contract and were able to keep a copy of it. Of the women who migrated with written contracts (n=244): 96 per cent had contracts in Vietnamese; 88 per cent could keep their contract; and 85 per cent said they understood the contents of their contract. The majority of the contracts in Japan, Malaysia, and Taiwan, China were for three years, and most

¹ Two women migrated under verbal agreements – one to Japan and one to Saudi Arabia.

respondents were able to keep a copy of the contract written in Vietnamese. Contracts to the Republic of Korea were for a longer duration, an average of 3.5 years, but fewer women reported being able to understand or keep a copy of their contract. All contracts to Saudi Arabia were for two years, with almost all contracts written in Vietnamese. However, fewer of the women migrating to Saudi Arabia understood their conditions compared to the women migrating to Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, or Taiwan, China.²

Costs of migration varied significantly by destination. Travel costs to East Asia were expensive, particularly to Japan. As travel to Thailand was informal, it was particularly inexpensive. Saudi Arabia is a special case, as the cost of recruitment for women traveling to domestic work is supposed to be borne by the employer. However, roughly 10 per cent of the women migrant workers who went to Saudi Arabia did pay recruitment costs, at an average of VND6,500,000 (US\$300). As declared in the ILO Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and the ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181), the cost of migration should not be borne by migrant workers. In addition, principle 7 of the ILO's General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment states that no fee or related cost should be borne by workers or jobseekers (ILO, 2019).

However, the data from this study indicated that paying higher recruitment-related fees predicted greater improvement in empowerment indicators, as the higher costs were associated with better working conditions and higher salaries. This finding may implicate a contrary incentive to many “zero fee” initiatives that suggest no migrant worker should pay for a job without paying attention to countervailing factors. Zero fees can be used as an incentive for women who lack the financial resources to access other choices, thereby bolstering recruitment to sectors with low pay and exploitative work conditions. It may also imply that if women traveling to East Asia paid lower or no costs for migration, they could experience even greater levels of empowerment. For example, women who migrated to the Republic of Korea were associated with the most empowerment; it was also the least expensive of the East Asian destinations, taking the women in this study half the number of months to pay off their migration fees³ compared to those who migrated to Japan or Taiwan, China (figure 16).

2 Saudi Arabia has developed the web platform *Musaned* (<https://www.musaned.com.sa/en>), which is intended to provide migrant domestic workers with information about their rights while working in Saudi Arabia. To date, no independent assessment of this platform has been produced.

3 This study does not focus on migration costs more broadly, but contains the concept of negative outcomes resulting from migration as part of its empowerment indicators, with lower scores in empowerment metrics being the result of greater costs of migration. For more in-depth research on migration costs please reference: Hennebry, Holliday, and Moniruzzaman, 2019; IOM and Save the Children, 2017; and an upcoming ILO report on Viet Nam's progress on SDG indicator 10.7.1 on recruitment costs.

Figure 16. Monthly income, total migration cost, and average work time to pay migration costs, by destination

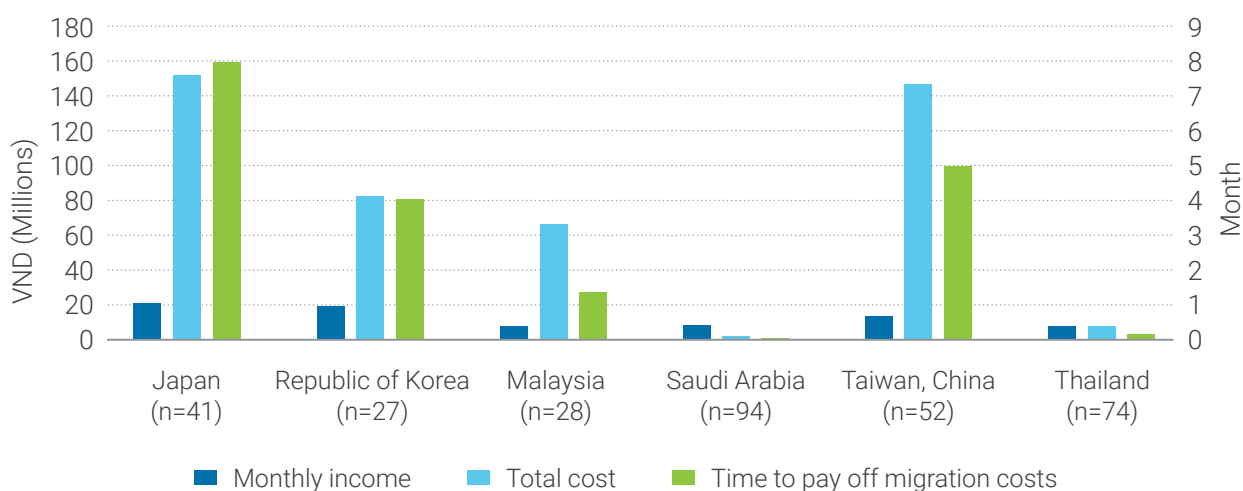
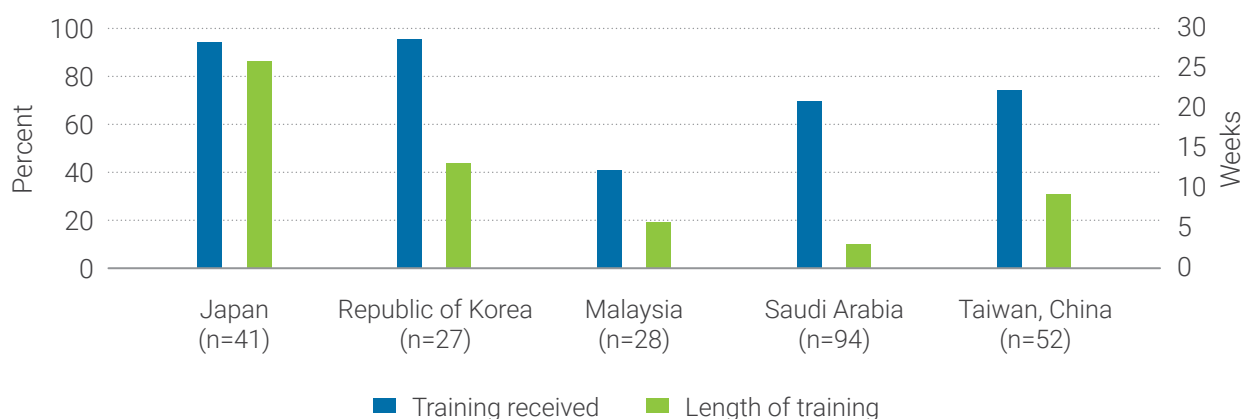


Figure 17. Prevalence of training received and average amount training received¹, by destination²



1 The figures for the average amount of training received only consider the experiences of those women migrants who received pre-departure training.

2 Thailand is excluded from this figure because migration to that destination was largely irregular.

Under Law 72, pre-departure training is compulsory for migrant workers leaving Viet Nam. Excluding Thailand (because of the prevalence of irregular migration), only three-quarters of the women in this study received training. In addition, the cost of migration was not found to be predicted by the presence or length of training. There were, however, significant differences in the subjects taught and the amount of training received depending on the destination. Regarding the likelihood to receive training, the women migrants who headed to the Republic of Korea were the most likely to received training (96 per cent), and those headed to Malaysia were the least likely (40 per cent). Women migrants who went to Japan received the longest training, an average of 26 weeks, whereas those who migrated to Saudi Arabia received, on average, the shortest training, about three weeks. Japan is the destination that seemed to have the greatest focus on training, with training durations that were nearly double that of

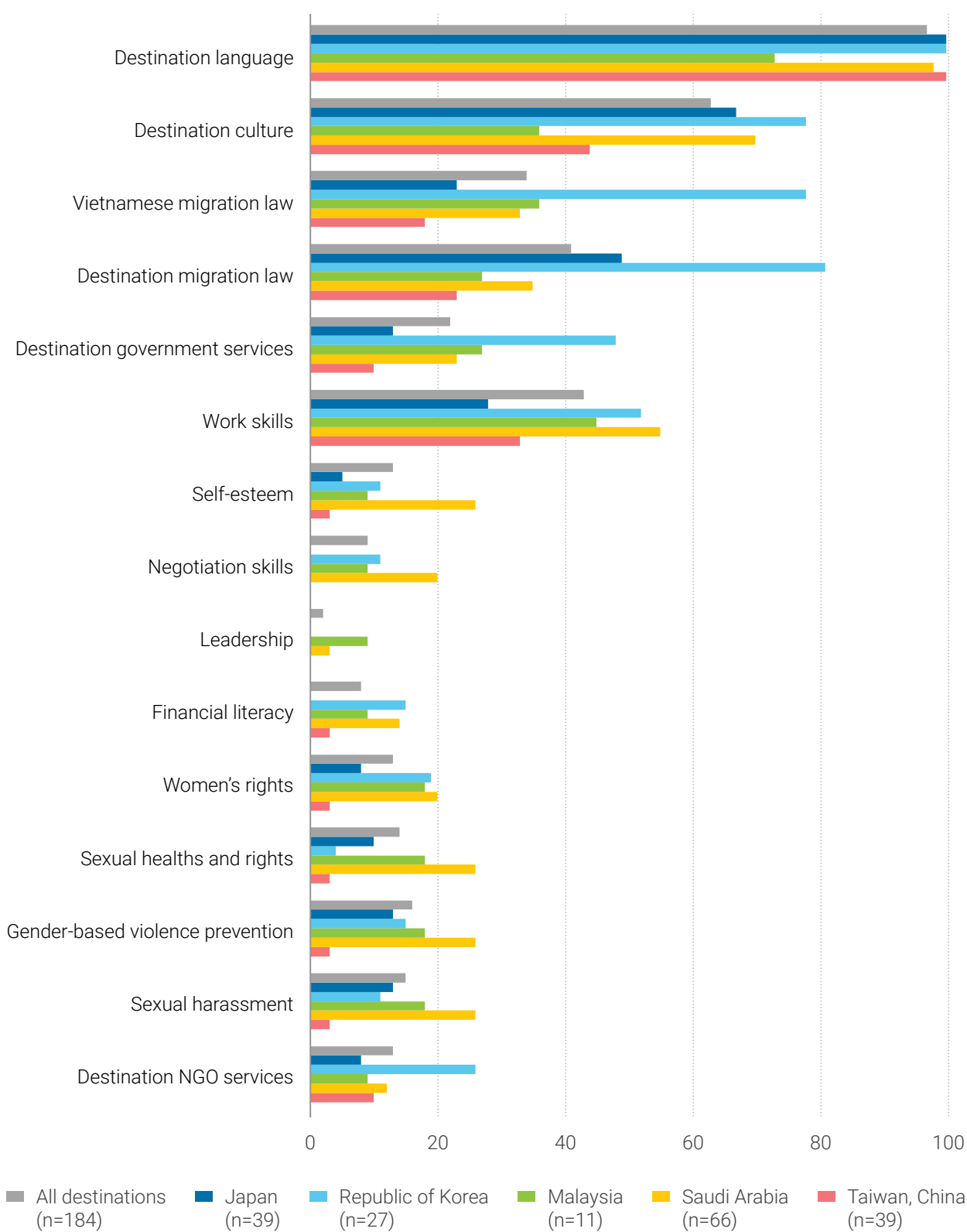
the second-ranked destination (Republic of Korea), and a likelihood of training (95 per cent) that is only just behind that of the Republic of Korea (figure 17).

The most common form of training was in language skills, with nearly all women, except those migrating to Malaysia, receiving lessons in the destination language. The second-most common subject was destination culture, followed by work skills and destination migration law. While some of these topics are of clear utility during women's migration experiences, their prevalence compared to topics designed to protect and empower migrant workers, or even the relative absence of skills training to improve migrant worker capacity, mean that the training typically provided seems to be inadequate to fulfill government migration and development aims.

The women were also asked if they received training on topics such as women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. Women going to Saudi Arabia were the most likely to receive training on these topics, almost certainly due to situations that arise from the confined and intimate nature of domestic work. Of the women who received pre-departure training, women headed to Malaysia were the second-most likely to receive training across these issues. However, only 40 per cent of women headed to Malaysia received training and women headed to Saudi Arabia had the shortest training at an average of three weeks. Thus, women to the Republic of Korea were the most likely to receive substantive training on gender-related issues.

However, regardless of the destination, the likelihood of receiving training in these areas was low very among all the women migrants who received pre-departure training. Just 13 per cent receiving training on women's rights; 14 per cent on sexual and reproductive rights; 16 per cent on gender-based violence; and 15 per cent on sexual harassment. In considering revisions to Law 72, adding gender-responsive regulations for issues particular to the conditions women face during migration would help translate the outcomes of migration to women's empowerment and more full realization of government objectives.

Figure 18. Skills taught in pre-departure training¹ by destination²



1 This figure only considers the experiences of those women migrants who received pre-departure training.

2 Thailand is excluded from this figure because migration to that destination was largely irregular.

5.3 Decency of work by destination

When asked about their experiences of labour rights and labour rights abuses, most of the women in this study who migrated through regular channels felt they received the jobs conveyed in their agreement, although six women who had gone to Saudi Arabia said they were given a different job than that to which they had agreed, as did one woman who worked in Taiwan, China. Likely due to the irregular nature of their migration, the women who migrated to Thailand faced a worse situation. Only 11 of the 74 women who migrated to Thailand had an informal verbal agreement, and seven out of the 11 reported that they had been given a different job upon arrival. As one woman who migrated to Thailand said:

“ *It was so challenging when I arrived there [in Thailand] because I was not accepted to the factory, as I was new and not yet used to the work. So I had to go around looking for other kinds of work.*

A closer look at how working conditions in the destinations differed from what was promised in the agreements/contracts of women migrant workers gives a better understanding of what factors influenced empowerment outcomes, especially for social empowerment indicators (as discussed in chapter 7). Among the women who worked in Japan the most common difference from what was promised in the contract/agreement was the overtime salary; while in Taiwan, China the most common difference was the number of working hours. The women who had returned from Malaysia indicated they received lower salaries and social benefits than promised. Women who had worked in the Republic of Korea described many issues around overtime and wage deductions (table 1).

The women who had migrated to Saudi Arabia faced the most issues. This aligns with other sources, which report frequent abuses for Vietnamese domestic workers in Saudi Arabia (Duong, 2018). Nearly one quarter of the women reported different contract duration; two-thirds experienced different working hours; about one fifth received lower overtime pay and a lower salary (table 1). One woman from Thanh Hóa who had been a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia said:

“ *The contract regulated that I would work for six hours a day but, well, I understood that once I migrated there they wouldn't have that kind of work hours. ... They would let me finish at around 12 at night and I usually woke up at 6 a.m.*

Table 1. Percentage of women migrants who experienced work conditions in the destination¹ that were different from agreement/contract

Agreement item	Japan	Rep. of Korea	Malaysia	Saudi Arabia	Taiwan, China
Type of work	2%	0%	4%	24%	6%
Contract duration	7%	0%	7%	5%	10%
Work hours	5%	7%	7%	66%	19%
Salary	10%	7%	11%	3%	6%
Wage deduction	7%	32%	7%	12%	6%
Overtime salary	15%	18%	4%	22%	10%
Overtime hours	10%	18%	7%	32%	12%
Obligatory savings	5%	18%	4%	20%	6%
Insurance	2%	7%	4%	11%	0%
Social benefits	0%	7%	15%	6%	4%
Living conditions	0%	7%	7%	6%	6%

1 Thailand is not included in this table as most women migrated irregularly and did not have agreements/contracts.

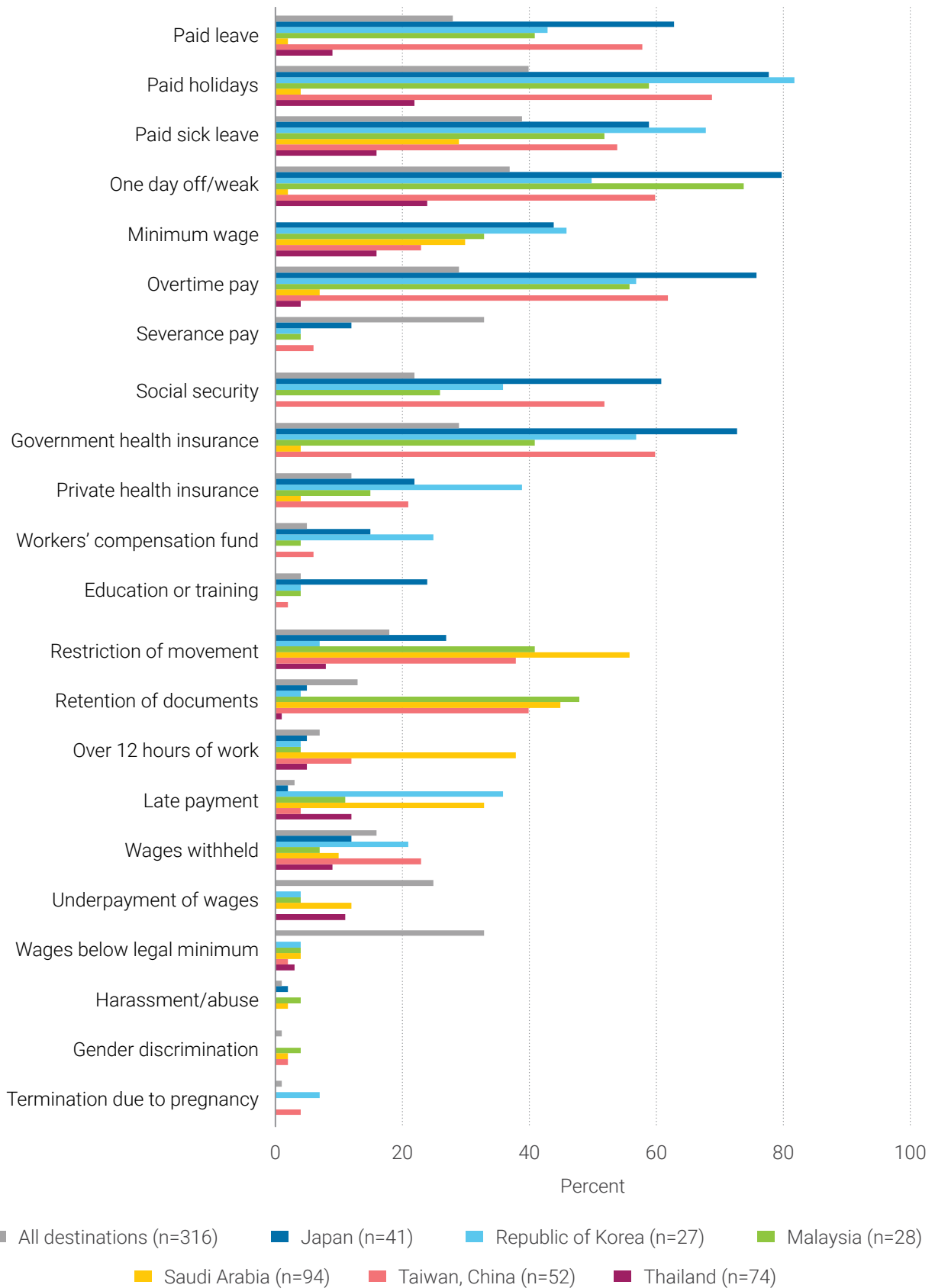
The status of women migrant workers varied considerably among the six main destinations, as reflected in the differing levels of decent working conditions experienced by the women surveyed in this study. Decent work was measured in this study by determining the prevalence of the following:

- provision of selected labour rights;
- access to various benefits schemes; and
- rights abuses related to work (see figure 19).

The women who worked in Japan reported the highest prevalence of the labour rights surveyed, followed by those who had migrated to the Republic of Korea. Migrants to Japan and the Republic of Korea also reported the greatest access to protection/benefits schemes, the fewest rights abuses, and the shortest working days. However, these women migrants were still working long weeks, with women having worked nine-hour days, six days a week in Japan; while those in the Republic of Korea worked ten-hour days, six and a half days a week.

Indicating an important difference in rights protection, Taiwan, China featured labour rights and protection scheme prevalence similar to Japan and the Republic of Korea, but also featured the second highest number of reported labour rights abuses.

Figure 19. Prevalence of labour rights, benefit schemes, and rights abuse by destination (n=184)



The women who worked in Malaysia and Thailand reported longer working hours (10.5-hour days), and working six and a half days a week. While Malaysia was close to the East Asian destinations in terms of the prevalence of labour rights, the women migrants were only half as likely to have access to benefit schemes, and they experienced an above average number of rights abuses. Given the irregular status of most of the women migrants surveyed, it is unsurprising that Thailand had the second-lowest prevalence of labour rights, and all women migrants working without regular status in Thailand would have been ineligible for benefit schemes. However, Thailand did feature the lowest frequency of rights abuses of any country in the sample, despite the irregular status of most of the survey respondents, which runs counter to much received knowledge about irregular migration. This finding will be specific to Thailand not irregular migration in general, and more study is required to understand the underlying cause of the absence of rights abuse, but it seems probable that increased freedom of mobility and greater networks of family and friends for support play an important role.

Even though most of the women who migrated to Thailand had irregular status, they reported a greater prevalence of labour rights received than those who migrated to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia also provided almost no benefit schemes to the workers surveyed. Contrary to international standards set in the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), these women worked an average of 14-hour days, seven days a week. In addition, the average number of labour rights abuses was highest in Saudi Arabia among all six destinations, highlighting the disempowering and in many cases exploitative effects of a migration corridor recruiting women from the least privileged province in the study.

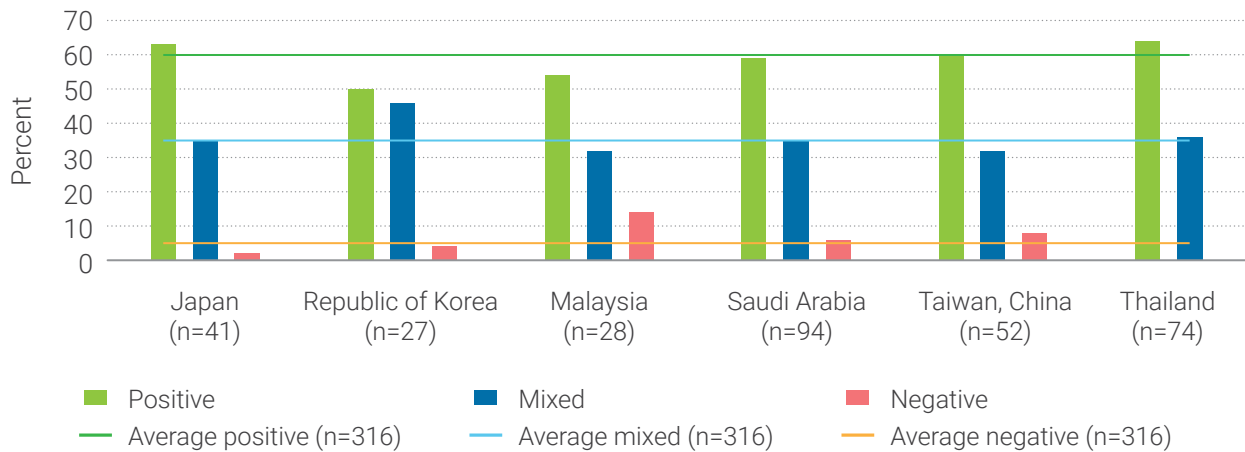
The existence of labour rights and a lack of abuses are important for ensuring a higher quality of life for women migrant workers, both during and beyond the period of migration. Importantly, they served as predictive indicators of social empowerment outcomes for the women in this study, with greater access to labour rights and fewer labour abuses leading to better outcomes. While this improvement may have been caused by an underlying factor that also improves decent work in the migration destination, this finding stresses the importance of ensuring potential women migrants have the agency to choose from a broader range of options, including occupations and countries of destination, so that decent work is not determined by socio-economic background. This is also important for ensuring labour migration policies support women migrant workers' capacity to improve their social conditions upon return.

5.4 Positive migration experiences and intent to re-migrate

The women were also asked whether they would rank their experience as mainly positive, mainly negative, or mixed. Thailand had the most positive ranking on average, with Malaysia receiving the lowest. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia was ranked third – higher than the Republic of Korea, which came fifth (figure 20). These are surprising results, as they do not align neatly with social indicators, such as rights and abuses; economic factors, such as income; the formal and regular status of the migration experience; or even the empowerment improvements discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

These rankings shine a light on the importance of how women understand their experiences, both in terms of the normal conditions and level of empowerment they are used to, as well as their own capacity to overcome and communicate adversity.

Figure 20. Positive and negative migration experiences by destination

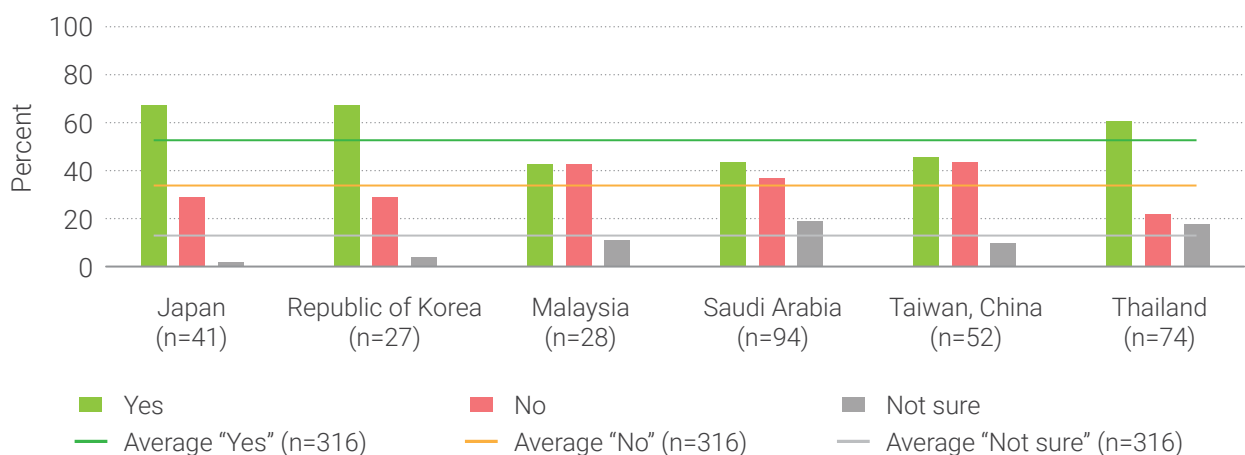


No one who had migrated to Thailand reported a negative experience. This may be because migration to Thailand was the most likely to include other family members, with irregularity counter-intuitively allowing for more freedom of movement and freedom to find different employers, or the relative lack of abuse in their places of employment. However, these possible explanations seem insufficient alone, as women reported Saudi Arabia to be one of the more positive countries of destination despite Saudi Arabia having the highest rate of labour abuses, the most confined working environments, and the most socially isolated conditions. As one returned domestic worker from Saudi Arabia said:

“ In Saudi Arabia, women migrant workers could not meet others because the Muslim laws prohibit women to go out.

These findings are an important reminder that the women who migrated to Saudi Arabia came from the province with the most unemployment; show the least power over financial decisions within their family units; and were composed of a high proportion of ethnic minorities who do not generally enjoy equal economic and social status within Viet Nam.

Figure 21. Intention to re-migrate by destination



The women were also asked if they were planning to migrate again. More than half the women who migrated to Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand said they planned to re-migrate; while slightly less than half of the women who worked in Taiwan (China), Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia wished to do so (figure 21). It is clear that these rankings also do not match the rankings of positive experience, indicating the importance of other factors, such as economic considerations, in determining migration. As explored in chapter 6, it appears that income received during migration did not affect income upon return to Viet Nam. Without other necessary structural factors to support women through reintegration and without improvements in the local economy, women may choose to migrate repeatedly due to economic need despite negative experiences.

However, another distinct, but not contradictory, interpretation is possible. The desire to migrate again as disaggregated by destination was closer to the empowerment findings than to the reported positive experience rankings. Intention to migrate may therefore indicate a more accurate reflection of the empowerment gained from their experience. Both economic and social empowerment were strongly linked to origin in this study. Women who came from areas where our sample saw better economic conditions were more likely to have gone to better paying jobs with better work conditions during their migration. How much of the empowerment witnessed in this study is a result of origin and how much is a result of migration experiences is hard to disentangle. However, whether one factor dominates or both have an effect, the women who were more empowered by the metrics used in this study were also more likely, in this survey, to report negative experiences and also more likely to report intentions to migrate again.

A possible explanation is that more empowered women are more likely to indicate their displeasure with their experiences. This could be due to differences in social norms and conditions, or because more empowered women felt they could be more honest. It is possible that the women felt freer to indicate their plans to migrate, as indicating bad migration experiences could be viewed negatively by family or government authorities. Therefore, only the more empowered women would be likely to report negative experiences. Social norms make this kind of negative reporting very difficult, especially if it would go against (predominately male) authorities. The women who felt less empowered would therefore be less likely to speak out against the decisions that were made for them.

It is also important to note that the intention to re-migrate was not necessarily to the same country, and by far the majority of the respondents indicated plans to migrate to East Asian countries of destination – less than one third of the women who migrated to Saudi Arabia plan to migrate there again. This means that despite Saudi Arabia being ranked as a more positive destination, women from each destination sub-sample preferred to migrate to East Asia. This provides further evidence that asking women their intention to migrate could give a more accurate picture of their feelings of empowerment than asking about their experiences.

Whatever the case, it does seem clear that migration, and specifically the migration destination, has some effect on women's power over some aspects of their lives. Otherwise, it is hard to explain these results. For example, why would women living in a province with over 50 per cent unemployment and the lowest wages in the sample be less interested in re-migrating than the women whose salaries had more than doubled in Viet Nam? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the women who reported the lowest intention to migrate – yet also had the lowest employment – were those who had migrated to Saudi Arabia and who had the smallest increases in social empowerment (discussed in chapter 7).

Meanwhile, why would women who gave a more negative report of their migration – despite having experienced more decent work with fewer rights abuses – also indicate greater interest in working abroad a second time? Money is certainly an important factor in these cases, but the income gap between their income abroad and their income at home was not the largest among respondents, nor did they migrate, on average, to the destination with the highest wages (Japan). Again, the answer seems to be that decent work and related migration conditions tied to the destination matter. The women migrant workers' agency and decision-making power are shown through their understanding, indicating that their choices are based on these conditions.

Women are able to take hold of economic power through migration, but the social conditions they experience – and the effects this has on their social empowerment – appear to influence whether they wish to pursue migration as an economic strategy. The prevalence of intention to re-migrate was more correlated to economic and social empowerment in this study, than it was to migrant workers' reports on whether their migration experience was positive. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that, while migration's empowering effects are limited in scope, migration can enable temporary economic improvements and small but significant increases in social power. During the process of migration, women are able to improve their skill sets required for the actual migration process. They can use these improved skill sets again to re-migrate, possibly to more empowering locations, which can help them to empower themselves further.

The experiences of respondents who reported a desire to re-migrate were correlated not only with improved social skills, but also with improved feelings of pride and positive life change, perhaps the most important empowerment result supported by migration. This may be the key to understanding the survey results. The women who were more empowered were more likely to have gained skills that they could use to re-migrate if faced with continued economic disadvantages in Viet Nam. The same experiences helped the women realize confidence in their own capacity, which may have made them more likely to report negative experiences despite potential disapproval from their family and community. It is to these skills, improved conditions, and changes in power that the report turns to next.



6. Migration effects on economic empowerment

This chapter explores how demographic factors and migration are connected to economic empowerment. Specifically, economic power was measured by changes in unemployment and work sector, as well as increases in business ownership, income, and assets. By elucidating factors that predict changes in these metrics within the migrant worker sample, this chapter attempts to answer what factors enhance or inhibit the beneficial economic outcomes of labour migration.

6.1 Unemployment

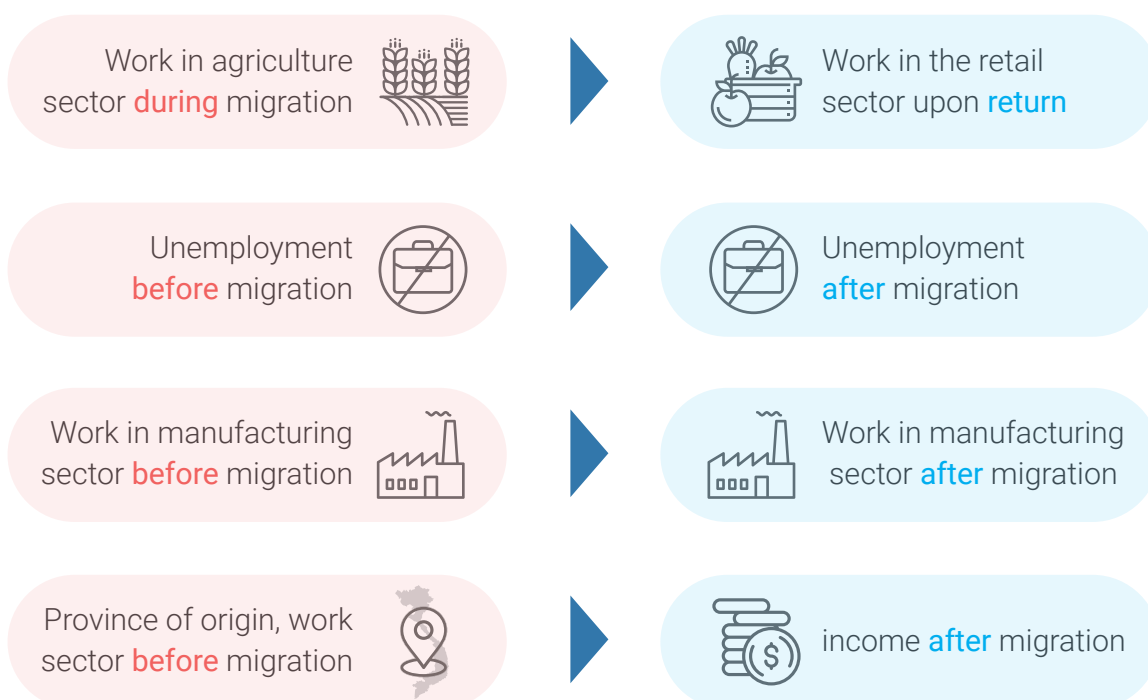
Unemployment was common among women migrants in this survey. It was also stable, if not for any individual at least for within the sample groups in each province. Despite Viet Nam's impressive and generally inclusive growth, the skills and income women migrant workers earned abroad were insufficient to decrease unemployment. This was true for every province other than Bắc Ninh, which likely benefited from its more urban location and the central government's recent support in industrialization.

The income the migrant workers received abroad – which ranged from two to eight times what they earned in Viet Nam – had no predictive capacity on unemployment in 2018. Nor did the number of months working abroad, the migration destination, the sector the women worked in during migration, or the amount of money remitted. Indeed, there were no factors during migration found to have a significant effect on unemployment.

Even demographic factors likely to affect employment – such as age, marital status, and level of education – were unable to explain their employment upon return. The women’s economic status before migration, however, did predict future employment status. Unemployment before migration was the best predictor of unemployment after migration (figure 22). Both income before migration and province of origin were unproductive when unemployment before migration was considered.

These findings indicate that local economic conditions have the greatest effect in determining unemployment, and that migration only has a negligible effect on structural unemployment. It also implies that, for Law 72 to achieve its stated aim of deploying labour migration to reduce poverty, more focus needs to be given to the reintegration of returnee migrant workers and recognition of skills learned while abroad.

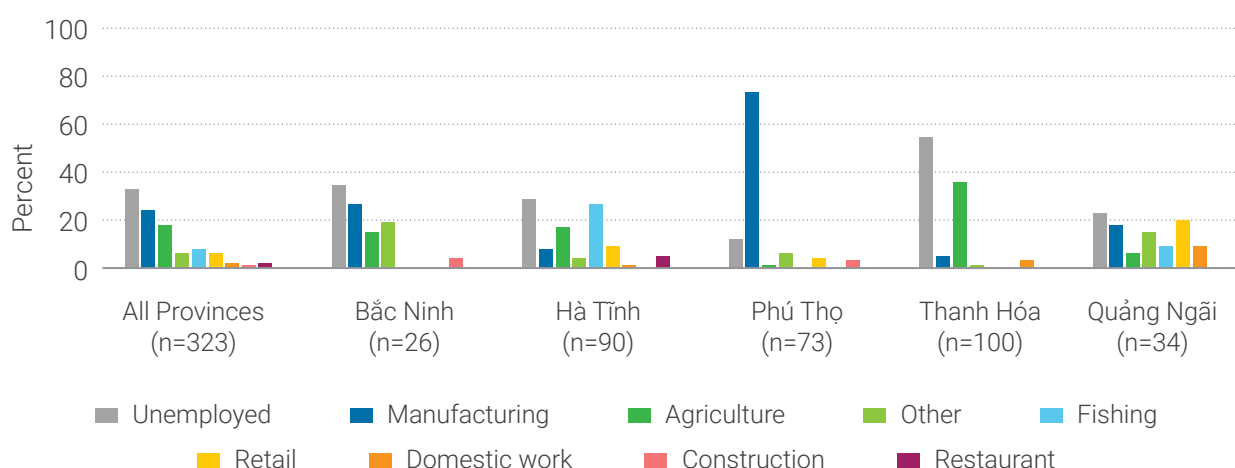
Figure 22. Factors predictive of economic outcomes of labour migration



6.2 Work sector

Province appears to be the most determinate factor for which industry in which the surveyed women work in Viet Nam, although this is partly due to the sampling methodology. Certain sectors – like construction and hospitality – were unrepresented in this sample. Agriculture predominates among Thanh Hóa respondents, and is significant in Hà Tĩnh, indicating the connection between agriculture and poverty. In this study, fishing was found almost exclusively among respondents in Hà Tĩnh. Manufacturing dominates in Phú Thọ, but also exists in Bắc Ninh (figure 23). Retail workers were represented in all locations, likely due to the high prevalence in the Vietnamese economy of self-employed women running microenterprises, but the only province with considerable employment in retail was Quảng Ngãi. Very few restaurant workers were sampled in this survey, and all of them were in Hà Tĩnh.

Figure 23. Predominance of work sector before migration, by province of origin



When looking at the sample of women migrant workers as a whole, the only demographic factor found to be significant with regard to work sector was education. Each year of school decreases the likelihood that women worked in agriculture, fishing, or domestic service. The only significant economic effect on the women migrants' change in work sector was income earned during migration, with higher incomes moving people out of jobs in the fishing and agricultural sectors. Despite this finding, there is little evidence that the economic advantages of working abroad is an effective way of facilitating sectoral transition for individual women or the economy in general, as other factors appear to hold much more significant sway over determining the sector of employment of returned women migrant workers.

This is shown by looking at the data disaggregated by sector. For example, women who were domestic workers abroad were most likely to work in agriculture in 2018. The majority of domestic work abroad was in Saudi Arabia, which, in this study, almost exclusively recruited workers from Thanh Hóa. Thanh Hóa was the poorest province in the study and had the highest proportion of agricultural workers. Compare this to the women migrant workers who actually worked as agricultural workers while abroad. These jobs were almost exclusively located in East Asia, and particularly in the Republic of Korea. Agricultural work abroad was found not to predict work in the agricultural sector upon return to Viet Nam, but rather to work in the retail sector (figure 22).

This demonstrates that there is little evidence that migration abroad is a useful way to gain sector-specific skills that can be reintegrated, given the economic context to which women migrant workers return. Rather, it seems that the sectors that dominate in each province are more likely to determine work sector than skills learned abroad, with employment in the agricultural and fishing sectors a form of fallback employment. The fishing sector was one of the few cases where income earned abroad predicted any change in outcome, with women who earned lower incomes abroad returned to fishing while those that earned more chose to remain unemployed – which cannot really be viewed as change in sector. This is further borne out by looking at the factors that did predict work in agriculture after migration. The most predictive factor was previous work in agriculture prior to migration. The second-best predictor was province of origin. When modeled together these two factors explained half the variation among the sample, which can be seen above in the example of domestic worker migrants from Thanh Hóa.

The women who worked in agriculture during migration were typically not women who worked in agriculture before migration. East Asian countries, which hosted the majority of agricultural work abroad, were privileged destinations, both in that they required higher levels of monetary and cultural capital to attain and in that they provided higher salaries and benefits. These higher salaries and benefits may have enabled these women to transition to other sectors – such as retail – upon return, but ultimately it was their province of origin and the geographically privileged position they held before migration that made it possible to access these employment opportunities overseas. Women from the poorer provinces were excluded from these more empowering destinations. As one female DOLISA officer mentioned:

“ *The majority of migration returnees won't stay in agriculture, they won't do farm work anymore but search for another kind of work. ... Because it is too hard to earn money here doing farm work; it's hard.*

A similar pattern holds for manufacturing. Working in manufacturing before migration was the best predictor of working in manufacturing after migration. In addition, working in manufacturing before migration also predicted working in manufacturing while abroad. However, work in the manufacturing sector abroad added little predictive capacity to working in manufacturing upon return – the best predictor by far was previous manufacturing work in Viet Nam. This finding reinforces the importance of the government diversifying work options and provincial economies to create viable choices for return migrant workers.

Manufacturing, and industry more generally, has been an important driver in Viet Nam's economic growth, and after a fall in 2010, has been an increasing share of Viet Nam's GDP (World Bank, 2019). In addition, an ILO report showed that Vietnamese workers (among South-East Asian workers) and workers in the manufacturing sector (among all sectors studied) had the best migration outcomes in continental South-East Asia (ILO and IOM, 2017). However, as noted above, this report found the best predictive factor for women entering manufacturing is having a province of origin where manufacturing is concentrated, and that having worked in manufacturing abroad is not predictive of transitioning into higher-value manufacturing jobs upon return. This being the case, Viet Nam may be able to enhance the benefits of migration by making jobs in manufacturing more accessible, and by linking manufacturing work abroad to industries in Viet Nam that could make productive use of the skills women migrants have learned.

6.3 Income

The survey results produced a number of indicators for predicting income after migration, some of which proved to be substantially more predictive than others. For example, when controlling for unemployment, income before migration strongly predicted income after migration. However, income before migration was made negligible as an indicator by the even greater predictive power of the pre-migration sector of employment. In addition, the predictive capacity of a migrant worker's province of origin rendered insignificant any effect derived from the migrant worker's choice of destination abroad. It should also be noted that when income earned during migration was modeled alone, it was found to be insignificant in predicting income upon return.

As such, the most predictive model in this study for income after return was the province of origin combined with the work sector before migration. The evidence gathered indicates that the most important determinant of income is where an individual in this sample came from and the sector in which they started work. These factors appear to begin a path of causation that is hard to change – even through migration – with wages before and after migration controlled by work sector, which in turn is highly stratified by province. This was even true for the sub-sample of women who were employed both before and after migration, as province of origin and work sector before migration was found to explain 45 per cent of the variance within the sample.

Migration is therefore not sufficient by itself to ensure women migrant workers exit poverty in the longer term. Rather, any pro-migration policy needs to be coupled with other systems that help women's reintegration into growing sectors of the economy where they can productively use their skills. Attention needs to focus on the least-privileged provinces in order for migration to have the effect the Vietnamese Government outlines within the Law 72 goals, and financial subsidies will need to be made more accessible for women from rural and agricultural provinces. This will begin to redress imbalance and ensure that women in less advantaged areas have the same ability to migrate to higher-income economies.

For example, a closer look at the relationship between the income women earned during migration and upon return shows a positive and linear correlation, except for a group of women who received average incomes during migration but received abnormally low incomes upon return. Almost three-quarters of these women were from Thanh Hóa, with the rest from Hà Tĩnh. As described in chapter 2, nearly half of the women in Thanh Hóa were unemployed when surveyed in 2018 and incomes remain near stagnant in both provinces. Also, the women surveyed in Thanh Hóa comprise a disproportionate amount of the sample identifying as ethnic minorities, even when considering the above average concentration of Muong people in the province. This shows the importance of local and national economic realities that cannot be overcome by gains from labour migration without more effective implementation of state policy aims.

That province of origin and work sector before migration are the best model for predicting after migration income is reasonable given the larger economic situation in Viet Nam. Although the Government has continued transformation to a modern market economy, the transformation from a central planning economy based in agriculture has not been fully realized. While the Government raised the minimum wage in 2013, this wage remains set at different levels based on geographic region (Schmillen and Packard, 2016). Indeed, some of the women in this study cited government-mandated salary increases as the reason behind their increased income. However, only 35 per cent of workers in Viet Nam were employed with a regular wage in 2016, while 45 per cent were self-employed (Schmillen and Packard, 2016). While Viet Nam's economic reforms should be lauded, their penetration is not universal and there is limited opportunity for women's migration to have an impact by itself.

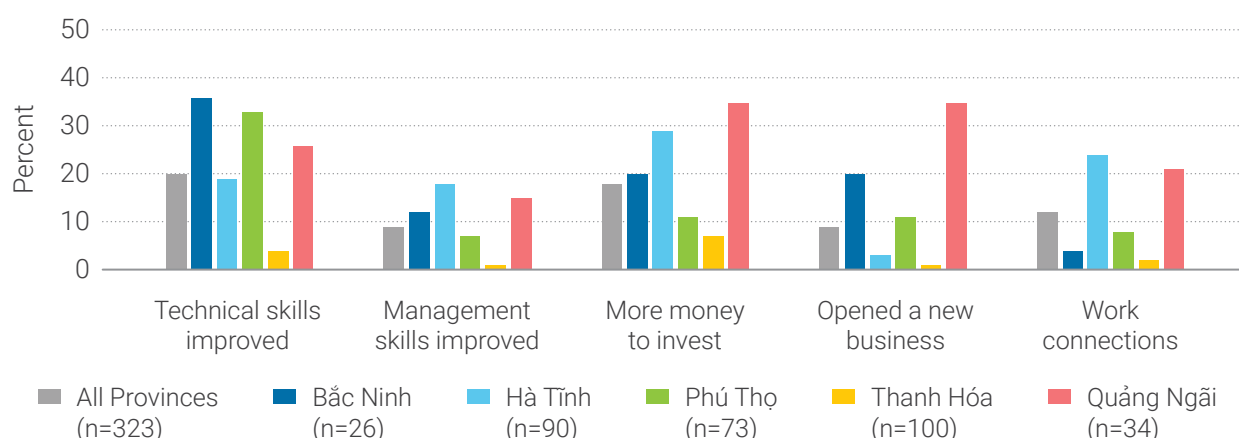
Migration to destinations with higher incomes could support women who are self-employed to invest in businesses that are more profitable. This finds some support in the qualitative data. When asked to list reasons for their change in their income, one fifth of respondents stated it was due to an improvement of their technical skills; just under a fifth felt it was because they had increased funds to invest; and nearly 10 per cent indicating their starting a new business. Yet the importance of geography was significant in opening a business as well – 35 per cent of the women from Quảng Ngãi and 20 per

cent from Bắc Ninh gave it as reason for their improved income, but only 3 per cent in Hà Tĩnh and 1 per cent in Thanh Hóa made such a claim (figure 24).

Women also reported an awareness of macroeconomic conditions. Women from Phú Thọ in particular were more likely to cite larger scale effects in the economy, including more available jobs, a greater value of the currency, greater demand for consumption, and state regulation dictating higher salaries. The most common reason they gave for their improvement, however, was that they were no longer unemployed.

However, other women indicated that the local demand was insufficient for starting a business. Work shortages were a common theme in interviews with women from central Viet Nam, and one vice-chairman of the Commune People’s Committee indicated that the recent closure of a mining enterprise had decreased job availability and depressed local demand. This might help explain why many women in the survey indicated that they invested the money they earned on assets, such as housing and transportation. These would be pressing needs in any case, but their utility would be even higher in an environment where capital investment in a business is perceived as unlikely to yield good returns.

Figure 24. Women migrants’ explanations for improved income in 2018



6.4 Assets

The impact of migration on asset ownership and quality of goods was more positive than its effects on income and employment. Migration destination was found to predict changes in asset ownership and the quality of household goods, providing further evidence that migration’s main contribution to economic empowerment is enabling access to goods that women cannot afford with local incomes. Destinations with higher wages enable more power over assets, and therefore provinces that offer women access to these destinations are likely more empowering. Indeed, destination was more predictive for legal ownership and increase in asset quality than was province of origin – the opposite trend found for income prediction.

This study used two metrics to measure women’s power over their income:

- who decided remittance use; and
- how much time the women spent managing finances and expenditures.

Surprisingly, the decision about remittance spending was not found to predict legal ownership of assets or improved quality of household items. This shows that women with more decision-making power over their remittances did not necessarily use this power to enrich themselves, with money instead possibly going to other family members, debt repayment, or business investment. Change in managing finances, however, had a small but significant correlation to legal ownership of assets after migration. As time spent managing finances before migration had no significance in predicting asset ownership before migration, it implies that women who have increased time spent on financial management upon return will also gain power of legal ownership of the goods bought through the income she earned abroad.

This provides evidence that greater time spent managing family finances may yield women greater power over those finances in Viet Nam, and that the process of migration does allow inroads into the patriarchal norms of property ownership in Viet Nam. As one female DOLISA officer put it:

“ Our Vietnamese custom is that the husband holds legal ownership towards properties and possession. This is the norm. Even now, when the woman has money and buys property, it is still under the husband’s name.

This is backed up by the women migrants’ own explanations for increases in property ownership. One third of the women responded, “I spent money to buy and own more property.” The second-most common response, at only 10 per cent, was “I was given/inherited more property”. Only 2 per cent said that they demanded ownership of old property. As with earlier findings, family power dynamics are still resistant to the impacts of migration, but it does provide a way for women to potentially secure legal ownership of new assets. This is reinforced by the finding that non-migrant women were significantly less likely to give “purchasing assets” as an explanation for increased ownership. Over half the women migrant workers in Bắc Ninh, Phú Thọ, and Quảng Ngãi reported purchasing assets in their own name; while women from Thanh Hóa and Hà Tĩnh were much less likely to give that as a cause. In addition, the women’s responses highlighted the importance of access to higher paying migration options.



7. Migration effects on social empowerment

This chapter describes which factors were able to predict changes to this study's social empowerment indicators. Social power was measured by changes in work sector and increases in social knowledge, decision-making power, time spent on household tasks, and overall life change. This chapter attempts to answer what factors enabled or hinder labour migration's influence on the women's social power after their return to Viet Nam.

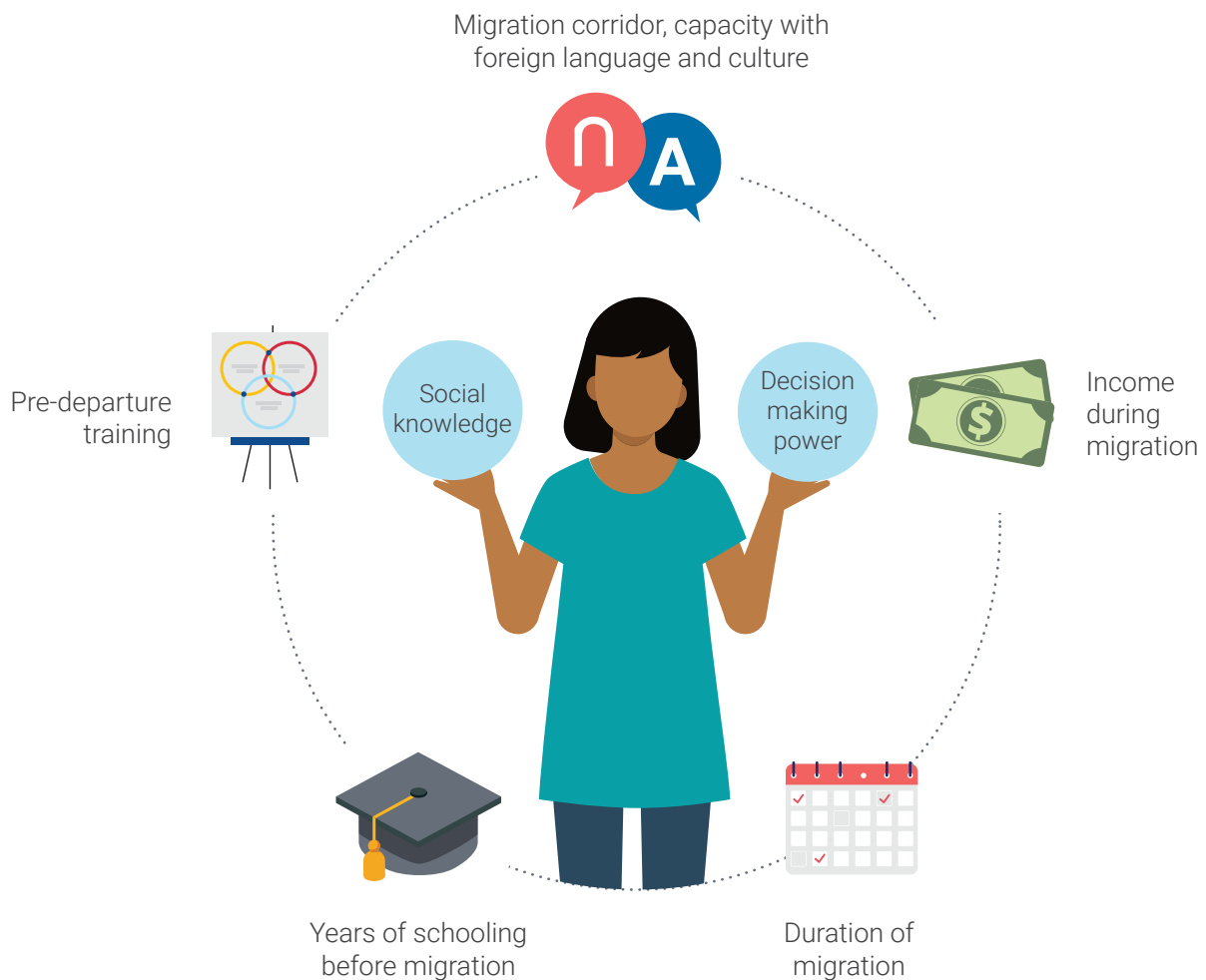
7.1 Social Knowledge

Social knowledge, as discussed in chapter 3, is a set of capacities and aptitudes that women can use to influence social aspects of their lives. Women migrants showed marked improvement in these indicators, and their improvement in different social knowledge metrics were highly correlated. As these variables therefore appear to have been learned together, it follows that differences in social knowledge outcomes are a result of different migration experiences. In particular, the results show that women's improvement in social skills was highly connected to improved capacity with foreign languages and cultures. As a result, social knowledge seems to have been heavily affected by the migration destination.

Several general factors were found to predict improvements in social knowledge (figure 25). These include income earned during migration, the duration of migration, and years of schooling before migration. Migration costs were also positively correlated to improved capacity in social communication

and migration law, providing some evidence that paying larger amounts may have beneficial outcomes if those costs translate into destinations with higher incomes and more decent work. Another important finding is the positive effect of pre-departure training, which positively correlated with improvements in social communication, foreign culture, migration law, and knowledge of migration processes.

Figure 25. Summary of factors during migration predictive of social empowerment



Many of the factors that predicted improvement in particular metrics of social knowledge indicate the importance of migration corridors in influencing improvement. For example, several proxy indicators signaled lower social learning in the Thanh Hóa–Saudi Arabia corridor. Women were less likely to improve their social knowledge if they were from Thanh Hóa, worked in the domestic sector, worked longer hours, or faced more frequent rights abuses – all factors correlated with employment in Saudi Arabia. Social communication, in particular, was less likely to improve.

Several factors also pointed to the influence of the Hà Tĩnh–Thailand corridor. For example, women migrating irregularly were significantly less likely to report improved social learning. This finding stresses the importance of creating more inclusive regular migration channels so that women migrant workers can benefit from training, social protection, and access to health-care, legal, and education systems. However, women from Hà Tĩnh were more likely compared to women migrating from other

provinces to improve their understanding of the law. This is a surprising result given that most women from Hà Tĩnh received no pre-departure training. By comparison, women from Phú Thọ were less likely to learn about the law than the women migrants from Hà Tĩnh, despite having been trained for an average of 13 weeks. This implies that women are able to learn a lot about the law by having to navigate irregular migration. Indeed, the women who migrated to Thailand had the highest prevalence of arrests, but three-quarters stated they were released to continue working.

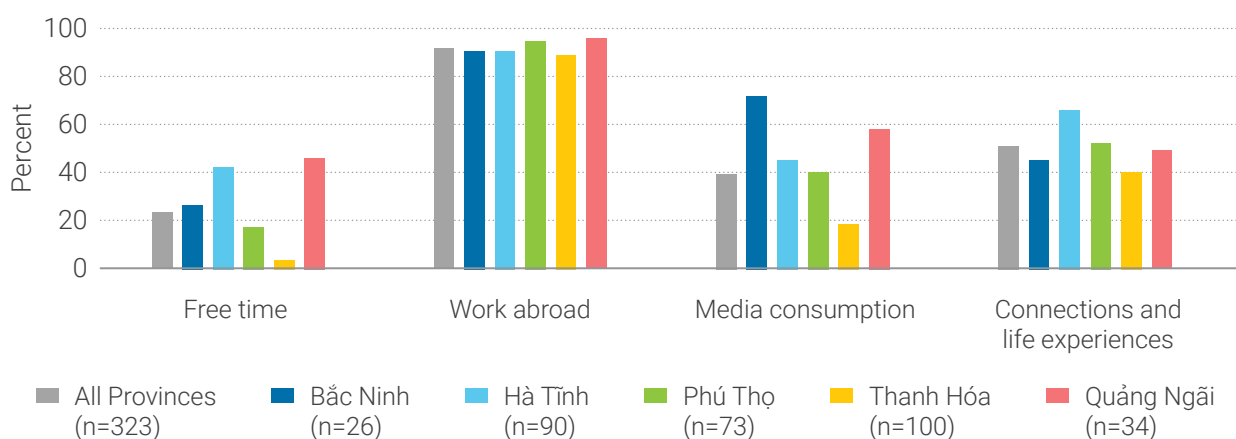
East Asian destinations were more likely to foster social learning, especially the Republic of Korea. Looking at regions in general, East Asia featured better improvements in social communication than South-East Asia or Saudi Arabia. In addition, agricultural workers, almost all of whom were in East Asia, were the most likely to improve social communication, followed by women working in manufacturing. Women migrants from Bắc Ninh, a province characterized by a high rate of migration to East Asia, were also more likely than women migrating from other provinces to report improvements of their social communication skills. Likewise, women from Quảng Ngãi – who were the most likely to migrate to East Asia (33 out of 34, or 97 per cent), and the most likely to migrate to the Republic of Korea (64.7 per cent) – were also the most likely to improve in every social learning metric. Migrating to the Republic of Korea predicted greater improvements than migrating to other destinations in understanding law, migration processes, and foreign cultures.

While much of what happens in the pre-departure trainings is unclear, the differences women migrant workers described in chapter 4 may explain why different corridors feature marked differences in social knowledge improvements. For example, the Republic of Korea regulates training for incoming migrant workers; women migrating to the Republic of Korea were the most likely to receive training among the migrant sample group, which featured the most likely training in a wide set of skills, such as available support services and financial literacy (figure 17)¹. This might explain why migration to the Republic of Korea was correlated with particularly strong learning. It is also possible that agricultural work – a prominent sector of migrant employment in the Republic of Korea – might involve collaborative work that facilitates social skills, but it is hard to rationalize how it would lead to more improved communication skills than restaurant service in Thailand, or how it would improve understanding of migration law over manufacturing work in Japan. These findings therefore imply that the quality of the pre-migration training is significant, and that Viet Nam should consider regulating and monitoring harmonized standards of training for all destinations.

When asked to explain the causes for their social learning, over 90 per cent of the women migrants indicated that their improvements came from working abroad. One quarter of the women migrants stated their social knowledge improved due to increased time to participate in social activities, although this was a significantly more common explanation among the non-migrant women. Compared to the women migrant sample as a whole, women migrants from Quảng Ngãi were significantly more likely to consider their free time as a source of social empowerment. Interestingly, free time was cited as a cause by nearly 30 per cent of the women migrants from Hà Tĩnh but only 4 per cent of the women from Thanh Hóa. Similarly, social connections and life experience were considered significantly more empowering among women migrants from Hà Tĩnh, but significantly less for women from Thanh Hóa (figure 26).

1 The only country with reported higher rates in several skills categories, such as self-esteem and women's rights, was Saudi Arabia, which also featured the shortest length of training at three weeks.

Figure 26. Women migrants' reason for improved social knowledge in 2018



7.2 Decision-making power

Increased power over decision-making is critical to gender equality. How migration influences decision-making is essential to understanding the nexus of migration and women's empowerment. Women migrant workers reported significant improvements in decision-making power over housing, employment, marriage, and family planning. In particular, decision-making over housing, their marriage, and family planning indicated migration effects that supported the women migrants in gaining more power over these matters than their non-migrant counterparts. Like with social knowledge, many of the metrics found to predict changes in decision-making power were connected to geography. However, while social knowledge was more linked to destination, decision-making power showed correlation to province of origin. Thus, while social knowledge was likely an outcome of experiences abroad being influenced by the educational background women brought with them, differences in decision-making power likely result from how empowering outcomes of migration were received and influenced by factors at home.

Several general conditions were found to predict improved decision-making power with regard to housing. These included: time spent working abroad; the length of pre-departure training; and having a written contract. Having received labour rights and benefits in the migration destination was a good indicator of empowerment. In addition, women who worked in East Asia had the best odds of improving their power over housing, with the Republic of Korea once again yielding the greatest likelihood. While this trend may at first glance appear unsurprising considering the importance of the larger incomes to be earned in East Asia, migration income and remittances were not shown to be significant factors in predicting improved decision-making power with regard to housing. This implies that the social power of women in their provinces of origin plays a significant role. As one woman from Thanh Hóa said:

“ [My husband] said that he spent all the money I sent to raise the children, and bought this, bought that – it's all finished. So, I could say whatever I wanted, but what else could I do about the money? I had to accept it. ... He didn't spend it as effectively as I would, but what to do now?

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that province of origin proved more predictive for influence in decisions involving housing than the migration destination. Women from Quảng Ngãi were the most likely to see an increase in power in this metric, followed by Bắc Ninh, then Hà Tĩnh, and finally Thanh Hóa. However, it should be noted that having Phú Thọ as one's province of origin was actually insignificant as a predictor. This overall trend was reinforced by the predictive findings attached to the sector women migrants worked in abroad. Working abroad in the agricultural sector predicted the best improvements, followed by manufacturing, then work in restaurants, and finally domestic work – and as noted above, work sector while abroad was heavily predicated by province of origin.

One finding in chapter 3 was that the women migrants' work experience abroad appeared to yield smaller increases in decision-making power over their employment-related decisions, as compared to other forms of decision-making power, upon return to Viet Nam. This runs contrary to what might be expected, that greater work experience abroad would lead to greater agency over the women's work choices at home. Women who had never migrated reported a greater degree of power in this arena than women migrants. There were a few general factors associated with increased power over employment. Having a work permit, training before migration, and migrating through a government agency were strong predictors of power over employment choices on return.

This provides evidence that further implementation of Law 72 to enable easier access to regular migration will increase the potential positive effects of migration. It also implies that, despite being the most likely to report increased skills as an empowering result of migration, women from Hà Tĩnh – most of whom migrated irregularly – were less likely to feel empowered over their employment. High unemployment in 2018 was a feature in the sample of women migrants from Hà Tĩnh, indicating that more-focused investment in reintegration programmes could help returned migrant workers employ in Viet Nam the skills they learned in the service sector abroad. In addition, the income women earned during migration was a poor indicator of increased power over employment decisions, adding further evidence to the low impact that migration can have on employment back home without support upon return. This is corroborated by the experience of one returnee to Hà Tĩnh:

“ Back in the day [i.e., while working abroad] I worked at a sewing factory. But now, you know, since I came back, I am not young anymore so they don't take me. So now I don't really have any plan. I don't have enough capital to do any business myself.

In addition, women who decided to migrate after discussion with their family were less likely to feel empowered over their employment after return. While it is obvious that discussions affecting an entire household should be inclusive, this finding shows that the manner in which programme and policy interventions frame gender empowerment is important. As discussed in chapter 4, “family discussion” is a vague answer that does not necessarily imply equal participation of women or equal respect given to their interests. Indeed, family discussion was correlated with migration to Saudi Arabia, and therefore with return to rural Thanh Hóa and nearly 50 per cent unemployment.

It would be short-sighted, however, to dismiss the question of employment decisions as being determined by economic conditions alone. The question asked women specifically about their power over employment decisions, not just availability of jobs. While the economy has featured much slower growth in rural areas, it is possible that the higher proportion of female unemployment is a result of women lacking power to make employment decisions in the household – or choosing to remain at home after a migration experience. For instance, while the Thanh Hóa–Saudi Arabia migration corridor

corresponds to high unemployment upon return, it also exhibited lower gender empowerment in other indicators, such as less power over housing decisions. The frequency of this result speaks to a larger socio-economic connection, and implies that pushing for family discussion in lieu of women's capacity to make independent decisions can be well intentioned but misguided. As one woman from Thanh Hóa said in describing her own experience:

“ Last year I came back. I renovated the house and built another small one. ... The houses and the land are under my husband's name [because] he is the head of the household.

Marriage and family planning were the only two empowerment indicators where the migrant workers featured a significant growth, such that they started lower but ended higher than the non-migrant women. However, it was difficult to detect causes for power over marriage decision-making because, while higher than non-migrants, the absolute change was smaller than others in this study. One of the few indicators that were able to predict improvement over marriage decisions was income earned during migration, an interesting spill-over effect.

This is especially interesting as income abroad did not predict improvements in employment, income upon return, or influence over housing purchases. It is sometimes believed that migration should be disincentivized because it will have deleterious effects on family relations. Extended time abroad can have negative effects on some families, and is a legitimate concern. The data from this study thus implies that, in order for the Government of Viet Nam to pursue migration as a strategy to alleviate poverty while reducing potential negative effects on family life, recruitment should provide equal access for all women, regardless of province, to destinations where income is higher.

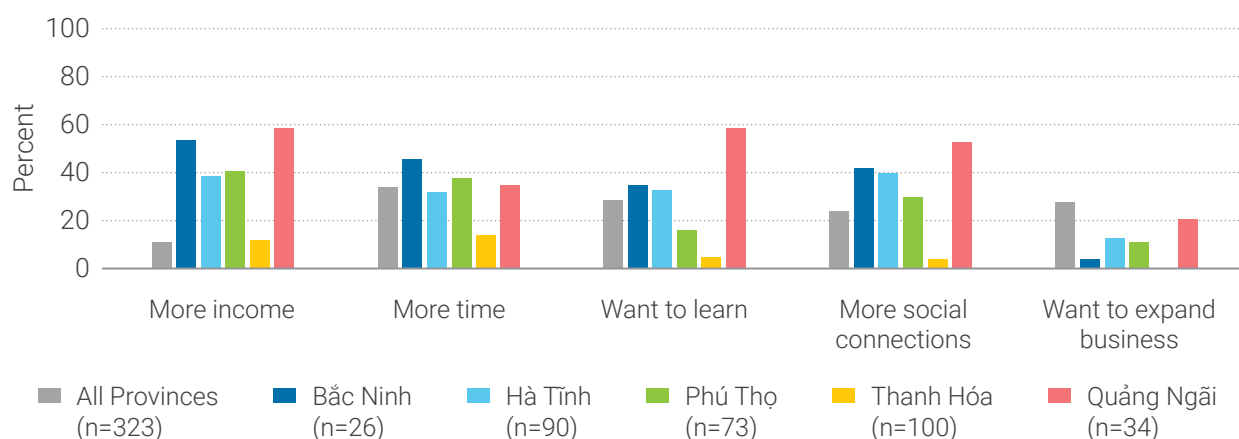
Women's influence over family planning also showed interesting results. The most powerful effect came from the Quảng Ngãi–Republic of Korea migration corridor, showing well over two-to-one odds in improving women's power over family planning relative to all other destinations. This was reinforced by the predictive power of several variables highly correlated to migration to the Republic of Korea, such as work in agriculture. Meanwhile, having suffered labour rights abuses – a metric correlated with migration to Saudi Arabia – predicted less improvement in influence over family planning.

As stated in the discussion about improved power over employment decisions, this speaks to a more general social issue of women's empowerment in the Thanh Hóa–Saudi Arabia migration corridor. While it may be suggested that the rural nature of Thanh Hóa could explain more patriarchal attitudes, this does not seem a sufficient reason by itself. The metric in question looks to changes in attitude, and while migrant respondents from Thanh Hóa may be more resistant to change, the question sought causes resulting from conditions in migration to other countries. It is just as reasonable to assume that working conditions in the Republic of Korea exposed women to more forms of women's empowerment than work in Saudi Arabia did.

The most frequent explanation – about a quarter of the sample – given by the women migrants to explain their improved power over decisions was increased knowledge. The second-most frequent response was that they were more respected; while the third-most frequent response was that they had more income (figure 27). This shows that, while money is an important factor in the women's own understanding and ability to influence family matters, women migrants found other outcomes – such as the connection between learning, self-efficacy, and respect – to be more empowering in some social indicators.

An interesting phenomenon was the difference between the sample groups from the two predominantly agricultural provinces: Thanh Hóa and Hà Tĩnh. The women migrants living in Thanh Hóa were less likely to report their increased knowledge as a significant cause of increased power over decisions. Meanwhile women migrants from Hà Tĩnh felt their increased decision-making power was due to increased respect, implicating possible consequences deriving from their different migration experiences in the predominant destination for each sample group: Saudi Arabia (for Thanh Hóa women) and Thailand (for Hà Tĩnh women).

Figure 27. Women migrants' explanations for improved decision-making power in 2018



7.3 Time spent on household work

Another critical aspect of gender equality is their women's share of household tasks and capacity to manage finances and social relations. Women migrants reported more work as a share of the family time – in all metrics used in this study – than they experienced before migration. In comparison to the women who did not migrate, the most significant changes were in categories of reproductive labour – housework, raising children, and caring for the sick and elderly. This indicator had particularly complex results, shedding light on the difficulties in how empowerment can be interpreted.

There were clear gender dynamics influencing time spent on household chores. For the first and only time in the study, the person who decided remittance spending predicted changes in one of this study's empowerment metrics. When the husband chose how remittances would be used, the woman was less likely to have an increase in household chores. This finding is reinforced by another – women who worked in domestic work or restaurants, sectors repeatedly correlated with lower economic and social empowerment, were less likely to experience an increased burden of domestic tasks. Conversely, and perhaps counter intuitively, more years of schooling, more pre-departure training, and higher migration income all predicted an increase in chores.

All of these findings point to a scenario in which more empowered women were reporting more time spent on household tasks. Indicators that have been repeatedly associated with gender equality actually predicted a greater household burden, and indicators associated with inequality appear to have caused a more equal distribution of tasks. For example, migrating with a tourist visa (indicating irregular migration to Thailand) was also more predictive of fewer household chores. This is an indication that women who migrated to Thailand are enjoying greater equality in the sharing of household tasks – perhaps due to the higher correlation of family migration in this corridor, where almost one third of

the women migrated with their husbands. A similar phenomenon was found in a previous study on the construction industry in Thailand, wherein families who migrated together engaged in more equal sharing of tasks, reworking gender norms within the family (Napier-Moore and Sheill, 2016).

The overall picture painted by this report is of migration leading to partial or impermanent changes in power. It is likely the case that deep-rooted norms within societal and family structures are resistant to change. Even bearing this in mind, it is still difficult to interpret why it is that indicators that predicted greater social learning and decision-making power also correlated to increases in household chores. The picture is made more complex by the fact that the same indicators that were correlated with increased reproductive labour were also predictive of increased time managing financial and social capital.

A possible interpretation is that the increase seen in every category of household work is partially a result of giving more weight to recent experience compared to events remembered from five to ten years prior. At the same time, that fails explain how these changes were regularly correlated with some indicators – such as education level and rights abuses experienced abroad – and not correlated with others – such as positive migration experience. Another possibility is that women who feel more empowered are more likely to notice inequalities in familial relations or feel empowered to report this to the surveyors in an official setting or around authorities. Similarly, it is possible that the women who feel less powerful, due to their socio-economic environments or difficult migration experiences, were less likely to perceive their workload as inordinate, or that they felt less able to say what they truly think.

Control over finances and expenditures yielded results that are more intuitive. Women migrants who had received more education were more likely to have increased agency over finances. Women migrants who were recruited through a government-run migration agency were more likely to spend time managing finances than those who used a private broker. Women migrants who had the power to make remittance-spending decisions were also more empowered to manage finances after migration. Interestingly, however, the amount of money women made during their migration and the amount they remitted were not predictive of any change in control over finances and expenditures, another indication that social norms are resistant to any purely economic explanation.

The amount of time women migrants spent in managing social relations also follows the more general pattern of empowering effects seen elsewhere in this study. Increases in education, costs paid to migrate, and the size of income earned abroad were all found to predict increased time managing relations with authorities and social connections outside the family. The migration destination also had a strong predictive capacity on the time women spent interacting with authorities. The women who migrated to the Republic of Korea were the most likely to have increased time dealing with authorities, followed by Japan, followed by Thailand, followed by Taiwan (China) and Malaysia, and finally Saudi Arabia showing the lowest increase in time spent with authorities. Findings by work sector abroad (which was largely determined by migration destination) support these findings, with agriculture predicting the most growth, followed by restaurants and manufacturing, followed by domestic work.

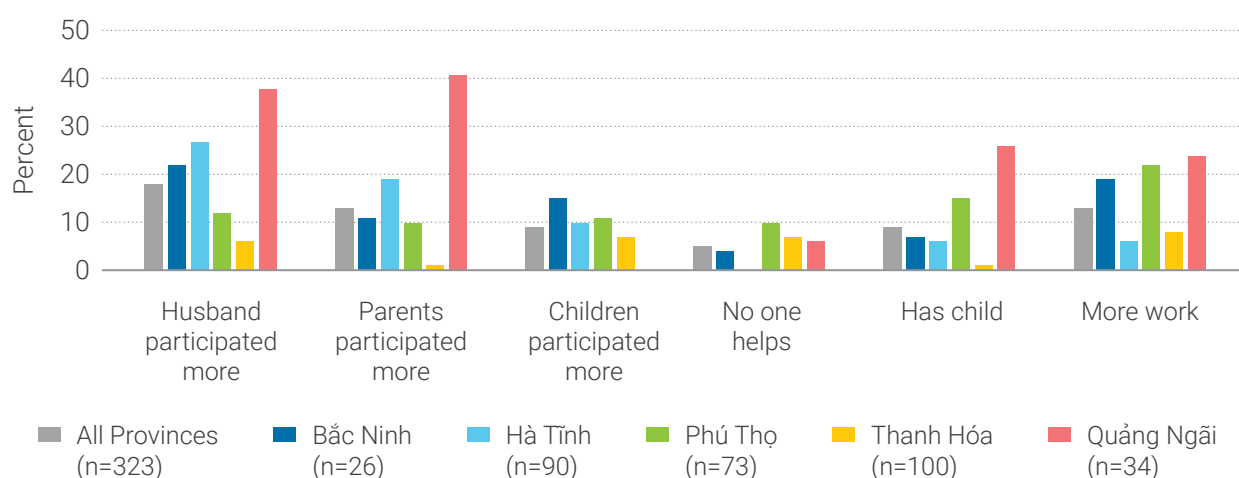
Increased participation in political activities and managing relations with authorities are necessary conditions for political empowerment. However, they do not make it sufficient. Without the presence of other empowering factors, interacting with authorities may represent more of a burden, rather than an opportunity for women to exercise power. While the predictive pattern witnessed in this study is

correlated to empowerment in other indicators, it is unclear whether these increases of time spent dealing with social connections should be considered empowering or an unnecessary burden. There is some evidence that some forms of managing social relations are empowering. For example, dealing with authorities was the only metric of household work that both groups of women, on average, reported doing less than their family – indicating a possible form of exclusion from systems of power. If this is the case and interacting with authorities indicates a potential form of power, it is interesting to consider the case of those women who migrated to Thailand. The Hà Tĩnh–Thailand corridor was associated with low economic empowerment, but in mixed social empowerment throughout the study. This finding is even more significant given the number of categories – including improved income, social knowledge, and decision-making power – in which women from Hà Tĩnh reported better social relations as a cause of improvement

The most common response the women migrants gave to account for the changes in their proportion of household work was that their husbands participated more (figure 28). It is unclear how this response can be reconciled with the increases in time the women themselves reported spending, relative to their family, in every metric in this study. In connection to the particular corridor from Viet Nam to Thailand, the women migrants from Hà Tĩnh were more likely to have husbands who participated more and less likely to report that no one helps them. In contrast, the women from Thanh Hóa, migrating almost exclusively to Saudi Arabia, were less likely to report their husband’s participation as a cause. As the women migrants from these two origin provinces share comparable economic factors – both during migration and after – these outcomes may be related to very different social and working environments.

The women from Thanh Hóa were also less likely to report that their parents were taking up more of the workload and reported that they had significantly more sick family members. These two findings shed light on important lived experiences for women in Thanh Hóa – increased illness and fewer family members available for support indicate quality of life issues that are likely connected to the worsening economic conditions in their province. They were also less likely than women in other provinces to report that having new children was changing their workload.

Figure 28. Women migrants’ explanations for changes in proportion of household tasks over the study period

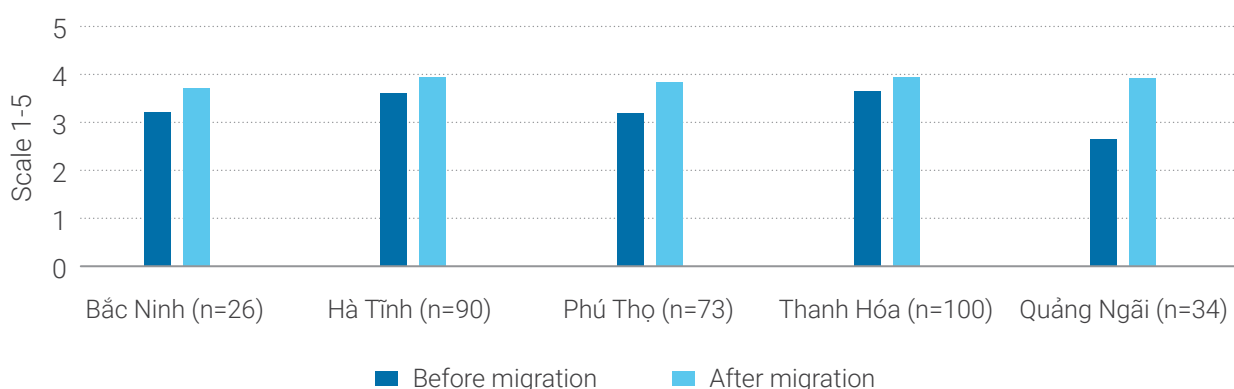


7.4 Life improvement

Finally, the respondents were asked to rank how much their life had improved generally. These questions focused on general power within the family, positive life changes, and how proud the women were of themselves. These questions provide a rough indication of how much power women felt they had gained vis-à-vis their social environment, their material well-being, and their personal development. As such, they provide an interesting point of comparison to the more “objective” statistical analyses used to detect significant change over time and predictive correlation to migration experiences.

The answers provided by the women support many of the findings of this study, but also highlight important differences in how women understand their empowerment. For example, there is a marked difference between the absolute values for pride and family power and the change in these indicators. In addition, there is a difference in way these measures indicate power in social and personal life compared to the indicators previously addressed in this report. For example, the women migrants from Bắc Ninh ranked surprisingly low on positive life change, despite the impressive economic growth women migrants from this province experienced (figure 29). These contrasts provide interesting questions for how women’s power should be understood and fostered.

Figure 29. Improvement in general family power among women migrants by province



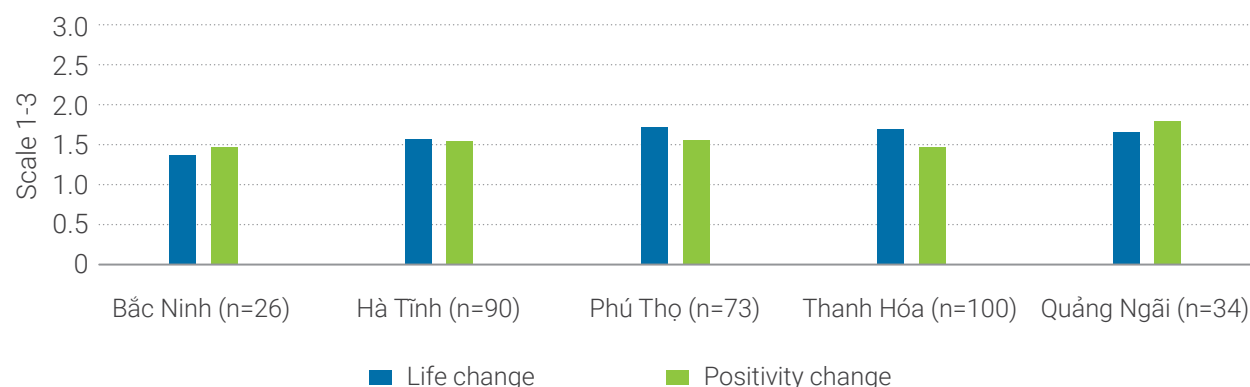
The women migrant workers reported high scores for the overall power they had within their families, which were equivalent to those reported by the non-migrant women. The average score was roughly four out of five, representing “I have good power”. Their answers also exhibited a relatively large shift between the period before migration and 2018, increasing by 0.5 across the entire sample of women migrants. The migration destination proved to be a poor fit in predicting these changes, but origin significantly predicated improved power within the family – women from Quảng Ngãi exhibited the best odds for improvement, followed by Bắc Ninh and Phú Thọ, followed by Hà Tĩnh, and finally Thanh Hóa with the lowest odds.

Sector of work during migration tells a similar story to that of province of origin, with agriculture demonstrating the most improved power within the family, followed by manufacturing, then restaurant work, and finally domestic work. Who had power over the spending of remittances was also a good indicator of family power, with “women migrants making the decision” predicting the best odds for improvement in family power, followed by cases where the husband made the decision, and “discussing together as family” indicating the least improvement. These findings suggest important ties to destination and origin – that the context in province of origin to which women migrants return

modifies the degree to which migration outcomes are empowering for the women. At the same time, it implies that encouraging women to take power over their work and income during migration may lead to changes of family dynamics upon return.

Finally, earning larger migration income was seen to predict more power within family relations. This implies an important connection with an earlier finding that larger incomes earned abroad predicted improved family relations. In addition, education predicted improved power within the family, perhaps indicating that a better education supported women migrants in taking their experiences working abroad and applying them toward more equal gender relations. These findings also indicate pre-departure training as a strategic focal area for empowering interventions. As income was found to improve family relations, and control over finances increased family power – pre-departure training provides an excellent opportunity where women can be encouraged to take ownership over money earned abroad.

Figure 30. General life change and positivity of those changes reported by women migrants for the study period, by province



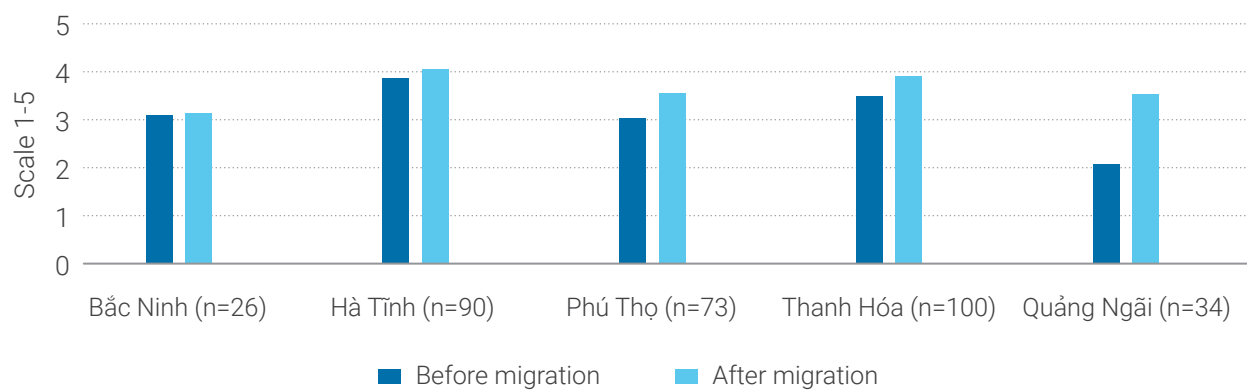
The women migrant workers also indicated that their well-being had changed halfway between “some” and “a lot” over their migration (figure 30). Those who traveled to Japan reported that they felt the greatest degree of change in their lives, while those traveled to Saudi Arabia felt the least degree of change. Many migration factors were not predictive of the degree of change in well-being, including: who made the migration decision; who decided remittance spending; what type of visa was obtained; the type of recruitment agent employed; and even training received. Income earned abroad was also unable to give reliable predictions, but increases in sent remittances were correlated with changes in well-being.

The women migrant respondents also indicated on average that they felt the changes they experienced were between “mainly” and “entirely” positive (figure 30). The women migrants from Quảng Ngãi showed the most significant results – offering responses that rated their life improvements significantly more positive than those reported by women from other provinces. Most of the indicators used in this study had no predictive capacity on how positive women thought their life changes had been – even remittance yielded negligible results. Having suffered abuses abroad, however, was significant. Understandably, the more abuses the women experienced, the less likely they were to feel the changes in their lives were positive. This provides important evidence that the negative experiences women face abroad can have lasting effects, inhibiting any positive effects that their increased income may bring.

When asked about the reasons behind the quality of their life change, the most common responses for the women migrants were: being more confident; having more knowledge; and having higher income. Non-migrant women gave the same answers, but, importantly, ranked increased knowledge below higher income. Indeed, women migrants were statistically more likely to say that increased knowledge caused the overall changes in their life and in their feelings of pride; while non-migrant women were more likely to report better career advancement and more free time. One migrant worker from Bắc Ninh said:

“ I feel a lot more mature. Before I felt unconfident; I had to ask before doing anything. But after I migrated I feel more proactive and mature. ... Because I had to live far away from home. ... Whatever I wanted to do, I had to decide for myself; no one else could do it for me.

Figure 31. Improvement in pride among women migrants, by province



The women also ranked their pride before and after migration (figure 31). In absolute terms, the provinces settled into two groups, with women migrant workers from Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa the most proud at the time of the survey. They were also, however, the women who reported the lowest increase in pride over time. Even so, it should be noted that working in the restaurant sector predicted larger improvements in pride than working in manufacturing or in domestic work, and restaurant work was strongly correlated to work in Thailand, the main migration corridor for Hà Tĩnh women in the survey.

While it is possible that the high initial level of pride among women from Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hóa made increases less likely, it seems likely that change in pride is the more meaningful indicator of empowerment. It is hard to conceptualize what absolute pride would mean when not relative to another time or person. The difference between an average of 3.5 and 4 might be somewhat arbitrary, or related to the same conceptual difficulties faced when ranking positive experience during migration or change in amount of time spent on housework. It is easier to conceptualize the current amount of pride one feels compared to before, and subtracting the earlier time from the present gives a better indication of the pride one feels now, rather than current and remembered amounts of “absolute” pride being independently meaningful.

Across the migrant sample, the women in Quảng Ngãi showed the most improved pride, by a significant margin, as a result of their accomplishments, reporting an improvement three times greater than the average. In comparison, women migrants from Bắc Ninh and Phú Thọ reported the second highest improvement in pride, despite Bắc Ninh demonstrating much higher income and lower unemployment in 2018. Comparing how the women ranked life changes and pride by province, the empowerment indicators show a much closer connection to pride than they do to life improvement. Pride thus seems to be a better general measure of empowerment, at least as defined in this study, than life improvement.

Another important outcome is that, once again, “having discussed the migration decision with her family” was correlated to lower improvements in the women’s pride, even compared to cases where the husband made the decision unilaterally. Having experienced rights abuses also predicted lower improvements in pride. The combination of these findings suggests that working in the domestic sector of Saudi Arabia under current conditions inhibits the empowerment that migration can provide. Given that Saudi Arabia does not provide significantly higher wages than other destinations in this study (including irregular migration to Thailand), more material support and transparent information needs to be made available to the women in all “poor districts” to facilitate equal access to other destinations and to enable them to make migration choices without being constrained by economic conditions.

Finally, regardless of their destination or origin, the women migrants indicated that migration was a major contributor to the changes they saw in their life. While not all the findings of this study are optimistic, it is reassuring to report that only five of the 323 women migrants reported worse conditions in their lives compared to the period before migration, and of these five, only two indicated this was due to worse economic or social conditions. This was put well by one woman who had returned from working in Saudi Arabia:

“ I feel that if I didn’t go, I would have never escaped poverty. ... Now we are not living in poverty anymore, we are among the middle-income families.

In comparison, one non-migrant woman from Hà Tĩnh said the following:

“ I wish to go abroad for work once. ... Because here at home I work from morning to evening but still the income is insufficient – I have nothing. I want to go one time to see, to change my life a little. For my children’s education, to treat my dad’s illness.



8. Conclusion

This report has established that women are achieving some positive outcomes from migration, but the outcomes of migration are not equally beneficial and many women migrant workers have yet to reach the same level of power as women who did not migrate. Further improvements in the standards and implementation of labour migration are needed to improve empowering outcomes resulting from migration.

8.1 Summary of main findings

- Women migrants showed significant differences to non-migrant women, and reported less power before migration/2012 in almost every empowerment metric in this study. Demographically, the women who migrated had lower incomes, higher unemployment, and less post-secondary education.
- By 2018, the women migrant workers had achieved significant improvements in power over the economic and social aspects of their lives. Economically, their income had become equivalent to that of non-migrant women – although levels of unemployment had increased among the women migrants, while unemployment among the non-migrant women had fallen. Women migrant workers were able to use their large incomes abroad to invest in assets, resulting in greater legal ownership of land and motorcycles, and more frequent improvements in the quality of their housing, sanitation, and transportation.
- Women migrants reported increased capacity in every metric of social skills, and improvements in decision-making power within their families. In particular, women migrant workers were able

to improve their social communication; understanding of languages and cultures; and knowledge of the law and methods of migration. They also saw larger increases than non-migrant women in every decision-making metric, specifically those regarding housing, marriage, and family planning. Women migrant workers, however, also saw increases in the proportion of time, compared to their lives before migration, that they spent managing household needs relative to their family. This was true of all household need metrics, but was strongest in household tasks such as cleaning; caring for family members; and village social connections.

- There were strong connections between origin and the migration destination, with women's choices constrained by what destinations are accessible. Province of origin also had a strong effect on what sector the women worked in and their income. These factors seemed resistant to changes brought by migration, with province of origin predicting employment and income both before migration and in 2018. Improvements in assets, however, was more connected to destination.
- The migration destination was more predictive of social outcomes than origin. Destinations in East Asia were correlated with better improvements in social learning, decision-making power, and self-confidence. Women who migrated to East Asia had better economic and social outcomes despite having to pay more for placement, as they received enough salary to avoid remaining in debt.
- Destinations in South-East Asia predicted fewer improvements in these indicators, with migration to Saudi Arabia providing the lowest amount of improvement. The different levels of improvement are correlated with and follow the pattern of: quality of pre-departure training; decent work; and lack of abuse in the destination. This matches the women's reported intent to migrate again, with women who had migrated to Saudi Arabia being less interested in re-migration despite high levels of unemployment, and if they did plan to re-migrate, more interested in migrating to a different destination.
- The irregular nature of migration to Thailand demonstrated mixed results. While it yielded fewer economic benefits and low improvements in some social empowerment metrics, it also ranked high in improvements in managing relations with authorities; understanding law; and improvements in social connections and management skills. It also features some of the most positive migration experiences, with an absence of workplace abuse and more equal sharing of household tasks within the family. These findings are likely the outcome of characteristics connected to irregular migration, namely greater freedom of movement, ability to change jobs, and prevalence of family migration.
- There is also some evidence of the local social norms in provinces of origin resisting change. This was true in the case of household management, where rural provinces saw smaller increases in women's time managing finances and dealing with authorities. This matches other data disaggregated by province, where fewer women from rural provinces were empowered to choose their migration or to control how remittances were spent. This was also true for reported general improvement in family power, with women from most rural provinces – Thanh Hóa and Hà Tĩnh – reporting a smaller change in family power.
- The overall picture of this report is that migration has led to positive outcomes for women migrant workers, allowing many women to “catch up” to the levels of power over economic and social aspects of life reported by non-migrant women. Improvements, however, were different depending on the migration corridor. Empowerment was strongly correlated with place: women's

place of origin influenced which destinations they could access and much of their outcomes. Women were therefore unable to find power in their place of origin or the work destination alone, but rather power emerged from the confluence of local and foreign factors of migration.

8.2 Recommendations

One of the most important recommendations emerging from this research is to increase women's migration and mobility options, making migration easier and cheaper, enabling women to have greater agency over their migration. This can be achieved by improving existing laws and policies the Government of Viet Nam has created to facilitate labour migration and support women to escape poverty and develop local economies. These include:

- Add gender-responsive components, to both labour migration laws and MOU agreements with countries of destination, that recognize the different effects legislation has on women and the different experiences women have in migration. Making legislation gender-responsive can catalyse transformative access to destinations and sectors with high wages, decent work, and skill development, resulting in favourable conditions for Vietnamese citizens abroad while enabling development and poverty reduction goals.
- Increase the implementation and monitoring of the standards of pre-departure training, so that all women regardless of origin, age, ethnicity, or income gain knowledge, skills, and support. Greater skills development for women's soft skills, such as negotiation and financial literacy, as well as gender-specific issues will enable Vietnamese women to create better work conditions abroad.
- Increase access to different destinations and work sectors for all provinces, and make all destinations practically available in targeted "poor districts" so that women have equal opportunity and increased choice in planning their migration and realizing its positive outcomes. This could include creating more corridors for regular migration and working with foreign government to promote equal access to women to all work sectors.
- Reduce, with the aim to eliminate, worker paid recruitment costs and fees (in line with the ILO definition) within all corridors. This would make migration to destinations that are currently expensive accessible to all women, including those from the poorer provinces/families. By reducing recruitment-related costs and fees, women can also chose destinations that will suit their skills and economic needs. While taking these steps, increase awareness and make more accessible existing subsidized loans available under Decision 71 for residents in "poor districts", especially those in "poor households" and "ethnic minority peoples".
- Develop and implement reintegration programmes to support women's social transition and to recognize skills gained abroad and match them with Vietnamese enterprises. Women have the knowledge and skills to support economic development, and they learn even more in their work abroad. Increasing the economic linkages between work abroad and at home, giving more attention to local economic conditions, and focusing on what skills are needed and where will enable women migrant workers to build better outcomes for themselves, a higher quality of life for their families, and more sustainable development for their communities.
- Make information about available destinations and work conditions more understandable to prospective migrant workers – including specific outreach to potential migrant women – to facilitate their ability to make the best choice for their needs. This can be supported by harmonizing MOUs and decent work standards, insofar as possible, so that migration opportunities in all destinations

require similar processes, are more equally accessible, and support similar standards for work conditions. Making the migration process simpler to understand, easier to achieve, and more equally implemented will support needs that are particular to those who migrate out of financial need, and help them reach better outcomes.

- Provide more information about migration destinations, including those accessible by women migrant workers, so prospective migrant workers understand the differences in regulations and working conditions. When migrant workers know they will be able to re-migrate in case of future need or pursue livelihood opportunities abroad, they will feel more secure in returning to Viet Nam to reinvest the gains of migration. This will enable women to make the most informed and rational decision; reach the most positive outcomes; and make migration a sustainable means for Viet Nam to dispel poverty.
- Create mechanisms for returned women migrant workers to provide expert information, support, and training to help prospective women migrant workers, and to give evidence for migration policy adjustment. Using evidence-based policy supported by returned migrant workers will help women migrate with increased social support and ease the transitions to working abroad and returning home.
- Ensure systems exist to place women in positions of authority to ensure the different effects women experience are incorporated into institutions and policy. This will enable labour migration governance and implementation that are driven by responses to the needs of women migrant workers. Where women migrant workers can better harness positive outcomes from labour migration, benefits will flow to all stakeholders.

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More choices, more power: Opportunities for women's empowerment in labour migration from Viet Nam

Labour migration in South-East Asia is an increasingly powerful force in national development and livelihood strategies, and is set to increase with the growing economic integration of ASEAN. The Government of Viet Nam is promoting migration as a strategy to eliminate poverty and support the needs of disadvantaged demographics located in government-identified “poor districts”. While progress has been made, many women remain in a disadvantaged position compared to men. This is especially true for women located in the targeted “poor districts” who sit at the disadvantaged intersection of gender, geography, and ethnicity. Labour migration thus provides an important opportunity for women in Viet Nam to reach higher levels of social and economic empowerment.

The research in this report provides an analysis of the nexus of labour migration and women's empowerment in Viet Nam. It assesses how the experiences and outcomes of migration influence and are influenced by local conditions in five of Viet Nam's “poor districts”. Through an in-depth analysis of survey data and qualitative interviews, the report proposes that the key to increasing women's power cannot be found in any one place, whether it be a place of origin or work destination abroad. Instead, power can be found within a confluence of local and foreign factors of migration. This research therefore emphasizes that the best strategy for improving the outcomes of migration for women and provincial development is in removing limitations to women's agency and enabling access to more options from which they can choose.

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