

## **Renegotiating gender roles: social norms in migration decision making in rural Vietnam**

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Despite the importance of economic factors in migration processes and the dominance of economic approaches to migration research, it is first and foremost a social process. This paper looks into how social norms and relations influence the way individuals and households strategise their migration. Labour migration in rural Vietnam is more often a household than an individual strategy. Migration decision-making is never a simple and straightforward process as it involves different household members, whose preferences and interests are not always the same. More importantly, these individuals are bound together by contractual arrangements and responsibilities between themselves and refer to certain social norms and expectations as guidelines for their actions. The paper emphasises that migration is a gender process, during which men and women seek to renegotiate gender roles in order to assert their preferences. The Vietnamese society has been undergoing significant transformations followed the Doimoi reforms introduced in late 1980s and insights into how traditional gender norms and expectations are being reproduced in the transitional period have meaningful implications for policy-making and future research in the field.

A mixed methodology was employed in the empirical investigation of a village case study in the Red River Delta of Northern Vietnam, where out-migration from rural areas is an important livelihood strategy for rural households and has been predicted to be more important in the years to come. Although both quantitative and qualitative data was collected and used for analyses, the main part of the research draws on narratives of a randomly selected sample of migrants, non-migrants and their household members in the researched community. By using a comprehensive theoretical framework grounded in structuration approaches and a combined set of quantitative and qualitative research tools and methods, the research aims to address important aspects of rural labour migration that have been neglected and/or misunderstood.

### **OUTLINE OF MY WORK**

This paper is drawn from my PhD research ‘Social structures and the ability to choose: migration decision-making in the rural Vietnamese household’. It is based on the understanding that migration choices reflect not only the subject’s identities but also his/her household context and the social norms and expectations that s/he adheres to. The way individuals and households strategise their labour migration is examined at three

different levels: (i) individual level – how social identities shape one’s ability to exercise agency in migration decision-making; (ii) household level – how intra-household dynamics influence individual and households’ migration choices and; (iii) how social norms structure the migration decision-making process.