

## **Session 408: Rural exodus of youth in developing countries**

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### **Migration of Young Women in Northern Viet Nam and its consequences**

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#### **Introduction**

##### **Gender and Migration**

Many rural girls in developing countries feel it is their duty to migrate to urban areas to help relieve family poverty. Women and girls who migrate are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and to sexual violence. They have left their familiar environment and now live in a city without support. It is here that they are often exposed to high risk situations for which they have inadequate skills.<sup>1, 2</sup> This state of instability and vulnerability often leaves female migrants prey to exploitation.

Unskilled work and migration networks are often gender specific. There continues to be an increase in demand for unskilled female labor<sup>3</sup> in both the private sector (factories) and the sex industry. Moreover, the inequalities relating to the social and economic status of women ensure a steady supply of women for labor and sexual exploitation.

It is the gendered dimensions of migration, such as demand for young women in the sex industry and perceived higher profit from daughters, which make them more vulnerable to exploitation. In addition, traditions of filial piety in Viet Nam may facilitate a female child's migration and her obligation to remain in the city.

##### **Filial Piety**

*"Having an elder daughter is better than having deep paddy fields and female buffaloes"*  
Vietnamese proverb (pg. 1).<sup>4</sup>

Filial piety or obligation (the sense of duty towards one's parents) is primary to Confucian doctrine in Viet Nam.<sup>5,4</sup> Girls in Viet Nam are conditioned to believe in obligations towards parents and in their duty to honor and assist their parents. They may also believe that it is the parent's wish for them to remain working in the city, as they have often been asked to migrate by the parents. In this way, they may be forced to accept risk situations as part of their obligation, as 'filial piety is the compass by which these girls direct their actions'.<sup>5,4</sup> Additionally, in Viet Nam, self-perception of risk may be altered by filial piety.<sup>4</sup>

##### **Methods**

This study aimed to better understand the process of young women's migration and entry into sex work. This research is grounded on the premise that female youth exploitation through migration and sex work is not determined by one factor, but is influenced by a complex interaction of multiple (social) factors functioning at a national, communal, familial and individual level.

This research was conducted between March 2002 to September 2003. It consisted of four complementary components: interviews with key informants, focus group discussions with community members, interviews with 23 household members from villages known to be sources of migration, and interviews with 20 young women working

as sex workers in Hai Phong province. The families and young women gave verbal consent to participate in the study due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The study was approved by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Ethical Review Board.

The study began by interviewing parents in rural provinces who were known to have sent their children to the city to work. The researcher sought to understand the migrant daughter's perspective once she had already been living and working in the city. A comparison between parent and child was examined.

The main aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and underpinnings of migration and exploitation and through this gain a more profound understanding of female migrant sex workers and their families. Purposive sampling was used as it permitted the choice of the case (migrant sex workers and families with migrant children) and the setting in which the process being studied took place.<sup>6</sup>

Separate guidelines for interviews were developed for households in rural areas, girls in the city (working as sex workers), and key informants. Different translators and sampling were used for the two interview sites. The guidelines were designed to be complementary, and each explained issues of decision-making, influences leading to migration, life in the city, and the effects of exploitation.

## **Results**

### **Youth Migration**

While youth migration is common in most developing countries, girls are more vulnerable to being exploited through the process of migration from rural to urban areas. The majority (18 of 20) of the young women interviewed for this study had been tricked or lured into sex work. This often took place through a job offer at the village level. The women were told they would work as a dishwasher or waitress and once they arrived in the city, they were forced into sex work. This is illustrated in the following quote by a sex worker:

“A woman from my commune told me to go to the city with her to work as a dishwasher. I discussed with my parents and they agreed I could work as a servant. I came with the woman and she gave me to the bar owner. When I got there I was forced to sell sex. I was locked in a room and after one week they sell my virginity to a middleman” (Bian – Thien Loi).

Bian's story is reflective of what took place with nearly all of the young women interviewed. While young women reportedly felt the decision to migrate was based on a legitimate job offer, it was only once they arrived in the city that they comprehended they would be selling sex to supplement the family income. Often the girls felt that it was their duty or obligation to stay in the city and accepted risks associated with sex work in order to help the family.

Children who work in the city are an important part of the family in assisting with monetary support for parents and siblings. While not all of the children send money home, money sent home by some children was commonly used for repaying family debts, purchasing food and paying for sibling's school fees. Although not reported by families but observed and supported by literature, material luxuries such as television and radio were also purchased with income from daughter's earnings.

Migration was reported to have both negative and positive aspects. The majority of the families and community representatives in this study reported that the main advantage to migration was an increased income. The main disadvantage was an increased exposure to social evils (gambling, prostitution, drug use and HIV/AIDS) and the possibility of bringing social evils back to the community. While the majority of parents and community members stated that migrant children (especially girls) are at an increased risk of social evils, they were also adamant that they 'still must go'. It then appears that the need or desire for increased income overrode the potential harm to their daughter.

The majority of migrant sex workers interviewed reported informing their parents erroneously of their work in the city. Parents may have been misinformed by their daughter in order to avoid the shame and stigma attached to sex work. As a result, nearly all of the parents stated that their daughter reported working as a domestic servant in the city. None of the parents reported ever having visited their daughter to confirm this. Additionally, parents may suspect that their daughter works in the entertainment industry but do not want to disclose this information. It was found that many community members reported awareness that girls often lied about being domestic servants and were known to work in karaoke and other entertainment establishments. As a result, the networks and webs of deception continue to obscure a true understanding of the scope of female youth exploitation.

Creating awareness about youth migration and helping community representatives and families find alternative options to sending a child to work in the city may help to decrease the continued exploitation of youth through migration and sex work.

### **Policy Implications**

Increased awareness on youth migration and sexual exploitation is necessary so that families and girls can make an informed decision about migrating and work opportunities for unskilled labourers in the city.

In this study, many of the families and communities had a cursory understanding of risks involved in female youth migration and agreed that the risks outweighed the need for income. However, if they truly understood the exploitative forms of labour their child was engaged in to assist the family income would this become a protective factor? Included in the perceptions and understandings of risk are the findings that indicate parents may be aware of their daughter's work in the city. This denial or lack of openness facilitates the exploitation of female youth.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Resolution 923 (LXXI-November 25, 1995) states: "IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society..." (IOM 1999: 4-5). Migration exists globally and can be beneficial to an individual and society. However, more information is needed to understand the gender inequality and the gendered dimensions of migration policies (Raymond et. al. 2002). Migration policies must work to protect women and girls.