

The new market economy (Doi Moi) in Viet Nam and its impact on young people

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Abstract

The new market economy in Viet Nam has had a profound impact on the socio-demographic dynamics among young people in rural areas. Much of Viet Nam's wealth rests within the larger cities. The widening gap of prosperous urban areas and poorer rural areas has caused significant migration from rural to urban areas. The increase in wealth in the cities has also given rise to increased monetary expectations at the village level; these expectations and needs are both real and perceived. Numerous families draw upon their daughters' unskilled labour through migration to urban areas. This study aimed to better understand the recent demographic changes in youth migration and employment and the effect on young women. The study found that parents, key informants and young women migrant women now working as sex workers, universally cited the new market economy and wealth in the city as the reason for migration and work.

Introduction

In 1986, Viet Nam began a profound social and economic ideological change and/or renovation, termed "Doi Moi". The Communist Party initiated the Doi Moi with the intent to develop a market economy in order to stimulate economic productivity, 'but keep the social and political structure intact' (Nguyen T.L. 2003; Wagstaff et. al. 2002; Chung A 2001). While the ideological shift towards a new market economy was developed in 1986, the actual practice and implementation of the policy did not fully take place until the mid-1990s. The economic reform appears to have been successful, as Viet Nam's overall economic growth rate has been high (8%) (as of 2001), making it one of the fastest growing economies in the region (Vu Ngoc Binh 2002; Chung A 2001).

Nearly all literature based on Viet Nam cites the Doi Moi as a significant factor in the development of the country. The Doi Moi and the opening of Viet Nam to the world market have been both advantageous and detrimental to Vietnamese

society. The principal advantage is the increase in the economy, including additional jobs and industries. However, the detriments encompass areas of social degradation, introduction of school fees and health service fees, and the ever-widening gap between rural and urban economies (Kaime-Atterhog 2000; Le Bach 2002).

Much of the wealth in Viet Nam (like other countries) rests within larger cities. The expanding gap of prosperous urban areas and poorer rural areas has caused significant migration from rural to urban areas – particularly by youth (Helliard and Hocking 2003). Migration from poorer rural provinces and communes to the cities in search of work is now a common occurrence. In addition, in select provinces, migration is government sponsored¹. This is in contrast to patterns of migration pre-Doi Moi.

Historically, a system of public/communal land was the norm. High values were placed on 'the protection of the spirit of the community', traditional values and respect for nation and community (Havanon and Archavanitkul 1997). During this time, more stringent government doctrines (regulations regarding the restricting of mobility) helped to assure close ties between communities, families and households. It was this former 'community spirit' that afforded the well-being of all its members (van de Walle 1998). However, the new economic reform has been attributed with a dramatic shift not only in the economy, but more notably in the culture of Viet Nam. It has been noted by the government to affect negatively all aspects of Vietnamese life, including family relations and traditional values, potentially leading to an increase in social evils (Nguyen T.L. 2003; Wagstaff and Nguyen N. 2002).

The new market economy has also been said to weaken the social welfare of families, creating dependence on urban job opportunities and economy. The

¹ The government of Vietnam began a sponsorship of migration during the economic reform to alleviate poverty in rural areas. The government sponsorship programme pays a family 2 million Vietnamese dong to relocate to new economic zones (factory areas) in order to work and set-up a household in urban areas.

traditional safety nets that were once in place have depleted significantly, leaving families and predominantly women and children to suffer the burden. In particular, the swift economic development in Viet Nam has left girls faced with recently emerging social issues such as increased independent mobility and household reliance of wage earnings, which they previously may not have experienced (Vu Ngoc Binh 2002). The Doi Moi can then be argued to play in two directions, it helps people survive, but it also makes money more attractive and needed.

Wealth and Poverty

While the government views the Doi Moi as a positive asset to the development of Viet Nam, it also recognises that it has brought about these recent negative changes, including social evils (drug use, prostitution, gambling and HIV/AIDS) in society. The government maintains a policy of encouraging migration, but government sponsored migration must occur with permission and documentation. The majority of migration, especially of young people, does not occur in this way. The government migration policy was set in place to reduce poverty in rural areas. However, often this has not assisted in reducing poverty, as it potentially adds to the loss of labour force at the rural level and to promotion of unskilled/unstable labour at the urban level. So while the government encourages migration as a means to alleviate poverty, it also recognises that these new policies affect society and promote 'social evils'. In this way, problems and solutions appear to cyclical.

The increase in wealth in the cities has given rise to increased monetary expectations at the village level; these expectations and needs are both real and perceived. They also infiltrate the family's economic decisions based on survival or more commonly, material wealth (Le Bach 2002). Poverty alleviation programmes aimed at reducing the gap between rich and poor have had limited success. Villagers continue to migrate to urban areas in search of job opportunities (Rushing 2002).

Universally, literature from both Viet Nam and the region cite poverty and indebtedness as the principle reason for migration of young people (Anker and Melkas 1996). While poverty is most commonly reported, some authors emphasise that it is not the sole impetus for migration. The decision to migrate, the migration process and the eventual exploitation of girls are complex issues influenced by various contextual factors and coping strategies.

Many girls migrate 'voluntarily' or with encouragement from family, friends or relatives. The sense of obligation and responsibility as income earners for the family often results in the decision or acceptance of the parent's decision for the child to migrate (Kaime –Atterhog 2000).

"Inadequacy of male income is a fact of life for the majority of households, as is the importance of women's earnings to the survival of many families" (Havanon & Archavantikul 1997). As a result, numerous families draw upon their daughters' unskilled labour through migration to urban areas. While boys are also encouraged by their families to migrate, they are generally not exposed to sexual exploitation. Requesting a daughter to migrate and work of course has gender implications.

Labour market demand

As in the rest of Asia, migration of young people in Viet Nam is not only confined to girls. Both boys and girls migrate to assist their families. However, 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 facilitate a female child's migration and her obligation to remain in the city.

The feminization of migration has increased dramatically worldwide within the past decade. It is estimated that nearly 50% of approximately 175 million migrants globally are women (Haour-Knipe & Grondin 2003). This trend of

feminisation of migration has been occurring in Viet Nam as well. The new market economy is often blamed, but societal and communal values and variables also need to be taken into account.

The complexities of migration are many and varied. However, the experiences and risks of migration differ between men and women. Unskilled work and migration networks are often gender specific. In this study, no 'mixed migration' occurred. Villages either sent only young men or only young women due to strong migration networks.

In addition, there continues to be an increase in demand for unskilled female labour (Anderson and O'Connell 2003) 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 young women for labour and sexual exploitation.

The demand for unskilled and 'free' labour creates a constant flow of migrants to urban areas. As Anderson (2001) points out, people have disregarded the need for sustainability of goods and labour, assuming there will be a constant supply which 'simply appears and is maintained free of charge'. In light of the situation of migration and unskilled labour supplies in Viet Nam, this assumption is not surprising. Often very little effort is put forth to encourage the migration and exploitative labour of girls in Viet Nam. The young women exploited for sexual services seem to be expendable and renewable at little to no cost to the employer and with profit to the parents and hotel owner.

In a World Bank study conducted in Asia and the Americas, it was found that numerous push and pull factors promote female migration. These factors, which are common to those found in Viet Nam include: "Gender stereotyping of women in work situations which traditionally echo their role as caregivers and 'entertainers', i.e., sexual objects; growing poverty that push more women to migrate into the labour force; growing family dependence on women for income;

and the economic boom in larger cities” (Raymond et. al. 2002; Kelly & Le Bach 1999). It is these gendered dimensions of the push and pull factors that cause and increased number of young women to migrate (Archavantikul 1998; Raymond et. al. 2002).

This paper describes young women’s migration for employment in the city due to changes in the economy of Viet Nam as identified during a larger study. This research is part of a formal qualitative study on understanding the process of young Vietnamese women’s migration and entry into sex work.

Methods

The study took place in two sites, rural households and urban ‘red light’ districts. Separate guidelines for interviews were developed for the 3 groups included in the study: households in rural areas, young women in the city (working as sex workers) and key informants. The guidelines were designed to be complementary, with each exploring issues of decision-making, influences leading to migration and the migrant girls’ life in the city. Different translators and sampling were used for the two interview sites.

Three rural provinces (Nam Ha, Phu Tho and Quang Tri) were selected for interviewing households and key informants because they were NGO project areas and were known for child migration, in part due to their location close to larger industrial cities. Nam Ha, Phu Toc and Quang Tri Provinces were chosen and then 2-4 communes selected within each province. The communes were selected from the NGO project areas and had documented statistics on increased migration of young people in these areas.

This interviews in urban ‘red light’ districts were conducted in two areas of Hai Phong Province, Viet Nam between March 2002 and September 2003. While Hai Phong Province is typical of other provinces throughout Vietnam in many ways, it differs as it has the second highest HIV/AIDS rates in the country.^{1,20}

The first interview site was Do Son Township, in Hai Phong Province, a location that is known for both its casino and hundreds of hotels and karaoke bars offering the services of young female sex workers. Each of the hotels in Do Son commonly employ between 4-10 girls, depending on the size of the establishment. The young women working at the hotels are generally between the ages of 14-24 years.

The second site where sex workers were interviewed was Thien Loi Street, Hai Phong City. This is another popular location where young migrant women are exploited into sex work.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 young migrant women, between the ages of 16-27 years, currently working as sex workers in hotels and bars in Do Son Township and Thien Loi Street, Hai Phong. Interviews took approximately one hour and were conducted in private in a combination of English and Vietnamese (the interviewer asked the question in English, that was then translated into Vietnamese by the fieldwork assistant, who also translated back the responses into English). The fieldwork assistant was an experienced program officer for an NGO working with sex workers and drug users, who had received training in qualitative research methods. All participants gave verbal informed consent for the interview, with the ethical approval of the study from the Ethical Review Board at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and study clearance from the Vietnamese government (Provincial AIDS Committee).

The interviews were not tape-recorded as the young women stated that this made them feel uncomfortable. Therefore, the interviews were recorded manually. A topic guideline was used to guide the general flow of the interviews, and helped ensure that broadly, the same topics for each participant, but also ensuring that each woman could speak about what was important to them. The

interview began with basic demographic data such as age, home province/commune and when she migrated from her village, and then moved on to open ended questions about how she ended up on the city, the decision-making processes at the household level, entry into sex work, experiences and impacts of sex work (including condom use and negotiation, etc).

Data were transcribed, and sorted both using a manual process and a qualitative software package (NUD*IST), according to emergent themes identified by the primary researcher.

This study was conducted with logistical support from non-government organizations (NGOs) working with sex worker populations in Viet Nam: DKT International, a condom social marketing NGO and Family Health International (FHI) Viet Nam.

Results

A dominant theme throughout the study was that of poverty as the key force behind migration. When asked about the reasons for migration, universally, parents, community members and children cited poverty as the main factor for migration. The majority of the community representatives also agreed that families sent their children due to the economic situation. However, many families interviewed had a television, VCR and radio (common wealth ranking indicators), which may indicate that the newly acquired wealth was a result of employing child migration in their family. In this way, the money may be profitable enough to supplement family income for necessities and material 'luxuries'.

Many parents and community members viewed youth migration as a positive solution to poverty, as a result norms and attitudes adopted by communities may have facilitated youth migration with the acceptance of migration as a panacea for family poverty.

"The community understands a poor family's situation and the need to send their child to work in the city." (Chinh Ly commune)

Others reported that their community *“understands the situation of poor families and understands the need for parents to send children regardless of the dangers”*.

Additional Reasons for Youth Migration

One issue commonly raised as a reason for migration was that of school fees which were introduced as a result of Doi Moi. Although the majority of families interviewed had children who were sponsored, school fees were reported as being too taxing on the family income and were a main reason for children leaving school, therefore increasing their chances of migration.

Households reported children generally leaving school from age 12-15 years. In addition, households and young women reported that the children who migrated commonly sent money home for the school fees of younger siblings.

Reports from one of the young women concurred with the parents; she migrated and began sex work to support her younger sister as illustrated in the following quote:

“If you are older sister and have younger sister who would like to continue studying – what would you do?” (Lien – Thien Loi Street)

This illustrated how the expense of school fees forced some young women out of school and into migration, young women also felt obligated to assist their siblings to remain in school.

Employment prospects

Young women were also asked about perceptions of their employment before leaving the village. As most young women rarely arrive in the city without a job offer or connection, it was through these connections that many of the young women began working at entertainment establishments (including restaurants). As the quotes below illustrate, although some young women were tricked into

being brought to the hotels or karaoke bars, the majority thought that they would be working as a server in a bar.

“My friend told me that I would work in a restaurant.” (Lien – Thien Loi)

“She (her friend) said I would work in a karaoke bar. My friend introduced me to this bar.” (Phuong – Do Son)

The young women often reported ‘knowing the situation, but not the reality’ of their work. When they discovered the reality of the type of work they would be doing in the city, they frequently reported keeping this information secret from their parents, instead telling their parents that they worked as servants or in another occupation other than sex work, as illustrated in the quotes below:

“I tell them (her family) that I work as a server in a restaurant.” (Phuong – Do Son)

However, some of the young women speculated that friends in the village may be encouraged to follow them to the city because they are able to bring money back to their family and the young women now act and dress in a ‘city manner’.

In contrast to the parents, community representatives were more open about what work they believe young women migrants do in the city. Their responses more openly acknowledged that some young women went into sex work:

*“Girls who go to the city will eventually become prostitutes and will not return.”
(Don Xa commune leader)*

While families reported that their daughters worked in the service industry, and daughters reported to their parents that they worked in the service industry, community members appeared to have an idea of the reality of the situation for some young women. Therefore, parents may argue that they did not understand the implications for requesting their daughters to migrate to the city in order to supplement or increase the family income.

Recruitment Networks

People, notably female youth, would not have been able to migrate without opportunities and networks to facilitate their migration and work.

When asked about how they knew about migration and work in the city, families reported that they frequently found work (in the city) for their child through a relative, friend or neighbour.

“A neighbour introduced my daughter to someone in another province over one year ago and we believe she is living there.” (Quang Tri)

When young women were asked the same question, how they found out about migration and work in the city, they most often reported that they were introduced to the idea of migration and work at the village level by a ‘friend’, sibling or villager. The following quotes illustrate this.

“My sister told me to come here (to the hotel/bar) to wash bowls.” (Dao – Thien Loi)

“The (hotel/bar) owner came to my village to ask me to work here (Do Son) as a servant. He asked other girls in the village too.” (Nga – Do Son)

Data from the community representatives concurred with that of the families and the young women, that relatives may either initiate or facilitate migration:

“The family often has relatives that will assist the child in finding employment.” (Phu Tho)

In addition to family and relatives encouraging youth to migrate, it appeared from the interviews, from the households, community members and the young women, that returning migrants often either directly or indirectly influenced the decision of other youth in the village in the migration and work process. The quotes from community respondents referred to reports that returning migrants may have actively encouraged others to migrate:

“They will often return and encourage others to migrate.” (Phu Tho)

In addition, another issue that emerged during the interviews was that a family or individual’s decision to migrate may be influenced by the increased financial status of her friend’s families in the village. Reports from the young women, parents and community members also agreed with this concept.

“Families receive a lot of support from their children. As others in the community see this, they also want to send their child”. (Phu Tho province)

Generally, the data illustrated the way in which social and family networks facilitated migration; with those returning from the city recruiting within their village, and in this way networks and specific patterns of migration were formed in each village.

A number of factors were at play which pushed a girl from her home and pulled her to work in the city. These factors included parental decision-making, need for additional income and networks which facilitated migration. However, the main theme overriding these factors in Vietnam was the new market economy's essential role in migration of youth from rural to urban areas.

Discussion

Although sex work is not new to Viet Nam, this mass migration of young women to the city and into sex work is relatively new. Since the economic reform in the late 1980s to mid-1990s the wealthier, more industrialized cities now attract people from poorer rural areas. Parents and community representatives were asked how long youth have been migrating. They commonly reported 'within the past 5-10 years, *"before that time everyone was poor the same"*.

The gap between rich and poor continues to widen while increasing expectations produce both real and perceived needs among populations, principally those in poor rural areas. These expectations may be used to base a family or individual economic decision for survival or upward social mobility (Le, 2002). Poverty alleviation programs are not necessarily the answer as many of those interviewed in this study fell under the category of perceived poverty rather than absolute poverty. Therefore policy makers must address economic issues and policies related to poverty alleviation to find more effective strategies in dealing with poverty and migration.

In the past, Viet Nam's answer was to create new economic zones (factory zones) and encourage migration of rural people to these areas. However, this

has significantly increased the numbers of youth migrating to find employment in the unskilled labour sector. As young women continue to migrate they will also continue to be sexually exploited by others. In this way, policy and interventions must be aimed at protecting migrants.

Much of the literature points to sex work as the 'only option' for many young women. However, if it is conceivable that this is a best option then it should also be apparent that there must be changes in international laws and policies which aim to protect women and promote equitable work for them. In this way sex workers may have increased access to services, legal representation and documentation. "Rights instruments should not contribute to the vulnerability of populations to disease, they should aim to diminish this vulnerability" (Loff et. al. 2000).

The decision to migrate and more importantly entry into sex work is complex. For some young women this employment is seen as the only viable option, for others it is a means to make more money than could be earned in a factory or rice field. Young women and their families should be made aware of the actualities of potential work in the city and the reality of sex work in order to make an informed decision.

Interventions for preventing youth sex work and assisting those already in sex work should be addressed at multiple levels; national, communal, familial and individual levels in order to ensure that programmes are comprehensive and to address root causes.

Finally, as Parker (1996) stated, we all vary greatly as individuals in terms of context of risk, social vulnerability, survival strategies, stigmatizations, local rationalities, religion and social structures. Planning, research, policy and interventions for working with sex workers must reflect all of these dimensions in order to be effective.

Conclusion

Migration of young people can and should take place in a way that benefits both migrants and society (IOM 1999). However, more information is needed to understand the gender inequality and the gendered dimensions of migration policies (Raymond et. al. 2002) in order to ensure migrants benefit from the process. Migration policies must work to protect women and girls rather than to exploit them.

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