

# Wen Fang Mao Gender and Migration: Theoretical Approaches and Practical Issues

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Received on 2 October 2023. Accepted on 11 November 2023.

**Abstract:** Conventional migration theories have, so far, largely ignored a gender perspective or treated gender as a variable in the analysis of migration, despite the growing number of female migrants worldwide. This paper addresses the neglected relationship between gender and migration in migration theories and policies. It examines the gender dimension in migration decision-making with reference to Vietnam's situation. The analysis reveals that integrating the gender perspective into theories on migration will help better understand the complex nature of migration. It is important to take into account gender as part and parcel of a broader migratory process. In Vietnam, women empower themselves through labor force participation and gender equity ideology. Their representation among international labor migrants is significantly increasing. The migration of Vietnamese women, both internally and internationally, is increasingly influenced by gender-segregated labor markets, a trend accentuated by the country's rapid process of renovation and international integration. As the gender-based approach is not captured in current migration policies and programs, effective measures must be designed to reduce the vulnerabilities of female migrants. In this regard, gender-disaggregated data and more research on gender and migration are extremely needed to reflect the current situation and forecast potential gender impacts at various levels.

**Keywords:** Gender, migration, women, theory, policy, Vietnam.

**Subject classification:** Sociology.

## 1. Introduction

The movement of people within and across nations is one of the most important processes shaping the spatial structure of the economy and society. Migration represents a significant life decision, potentially altering the future of an individual or a family. However, the decision to migrate is complex, characterized by interrelationships between opportunities, information, and costs (Tilly, 1974). Over the past decades, migration has become increasingly feminized, with the number of female migrants rising both in sheer

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numbers and as a percentage of the migrant population. Women and girls accounted for over 48% of migrants in 2020 (UN, 2021), comprising roughly half of the world's 272 million migrants. Female migrants, moving abroad independently for work or education, have made valuable contributions to families, economies, and societies in various ways (UN Women, 2022).

A growing number of women are migrating independently for personal reasons, including young unmarried individuals, rather than as dependents of male migrants. The feminization of migration is expected to persist, even as gender-based attitudes and perceptions change slowly (WEF, 2019; IOM, 2020). While migration may offer possibilities for changing gender relations, it is not gender-neutral in its impact. Migration experiences often differ by gender, with varying effects on women and men. Migration can positively and negatively impact women and their families; nevertheless, women generally view migration as a positive experience socially and economically. In many instances, migration is characterized by emancipating and empowering impacts for women workers. However, it may also exacerbate gender inequalities, leaving female migrants more vulnerable to stress and exploitation due to underlying gender discrimination.

Gender plays a crucial role in all stages of migration, from the decision to migrate and transiting across borders to working or settling in the destination and choosing to return home. However, our understanding of how gender and migration intersect remains inadequate. Introducing gender into migration discussions raises several research questions: "Does migration empower women migrants in households and communities?"; "Does migration influence gender relations and decision-making between men and women?"; "How do women's relationships with family members, including spouses, change with migration?"; "How are migrant women's remittances used?" Answering these questions would enhance our understanding of gender and migration.

This paper examines the current discourse on gender and migration relevant to the development of migration theories and policies. The gender dimension is discussed in migration decision-making with reference to Vietnam's situation. Due to the scarcity of gender-disaggregated migration data and statistics, this paper primarily focuses on female migration and relies on findings from previous research. It begins with a summary of theoretical frameworks used to understand motivations for migration, followed by a discussion of issues regarding gender and migration decision-making. The paper concludes with research suggestions and policy implications based on the results.

## **2. Theoretical approaches on migration**

People move for various reasons, and they can either be permanent or temporary migrants. The reasons for migration have been theorized and studied for decades (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022). Migration patterns often differ between those seeking economic opportunities and those moving for non-economic reasons. The distinction is sometimes blurred because some individuals seek both economic and non-economic reasons, and their

motivations may change after the move. Three mainstream migration theories can be briefly summarized as follows:

Neo-classical migration theory views migrants as atomistic individual agents, undifferentiated by gender, making rational decisions to maximize economic benefits from migration. Assuming free choice and full access to information, migrants are expected to go where they can be most productive. They are driven by the potential for higher wages, better job opportunities, and improved access to social services (Todaro, 1969; Harris and Todaro, 1970). With a general functionalist perspective, the theory explains migration as resulting from disequilibrium between labor demand and supply and emphasizes the rationality of individuals. Migration is seen as an optimal allocation of labor and production factors, benefiting both sending and receiving areas (De Haas, 2010). “Intervening obstacles” or barriers, such as the financial cost of migration, distance between origin and destination, languages and culture, and the presence of dependent children and dependents, exist between migration aspiration and migratory action (Lee, 1966; Van Hear et al., 2017). Notably, the neoclassical migration theory has been criticized for overlooking non-economic determinant factors of migration, particularly neglecting the gendered social norms that can hinder women’s migration.

Structuralist theory on migration examines how structural factors, such as changes in patterns of production and international relations, give rise to migration. Unlike individual economic theory, structural theory focuses on socio-political and economic forces driving and shaping migration. It explains migration as a result of structural changes in institutions, policies, laws, markets, security, education, and other forces that drive migration as integral results of these changes. While neoclassical theory perceives migration as a way to create more equality within and between countries, structural theory sees migration as a way to maintain and reinforce existing inequalities between and within countries (De Haas, 2010). This structural approach has been criticized for underplaying people’s motives and neglecting a gender perspective in understanding migration.

In response to critiques of both neo-classical and structural theories on migration, the household strategy or household investment model was developed. This model focuses on household hierarchical power and migration decision-making that takes place at the household level. Migration is seen not only as an individual response to economic opportunities or deprivation but also as a household strategy. Migration decisions are often not made by isolated individuals but by households, where people act collectively to maximize incomes and minimize risks and constraints faced by the household (Stark and Taylor, 1991). Household models have been criticized for obscuring intra-household inequalities and conflicts of interest along gender lines (DeJong, 2000). Men are often granted greater autonomy and freedom of movement by their families and society at large. Concurrently, gender norms promote men's roles as family protectors and breadwinners, preventing women from claiming such status even when they might be more effective.

Network theory emphasizes the importance of social relations among migrants and between areas of origin and destination. People do not move in a vacuum; social and personal relationships connect migrants in destination areas and link them with non-

migrants in origin areas. Migrants tend to move to places that are already home to other migrants of their community or nationality. Once migrant networks are formed, they are likely to further develop, making migration to that destination even more likely. As defined by Massey et al. (1993), migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties connecting migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. Migrant networks in the destination area can enhance migrants' employment opportunities, and kinsmen can provide security and protection, reducing risks and costs associated with migration and helping migrants adapt to their new environment (Boy, 1989; Haug, 2008). Economic reasons and migration-facilitating networks often interact and reinforce each other, leading to migration. As social networks grow, migration can perpetuate itself without intervention (Massey et al., 1993). Migrant networks can support newcomers, protect them from risks, and make migration more likely. Today's new technologies and telecommunications can enhance migrants' access to information and social networks for support.

Each theory has its strengths and weaknesses in explaining migration, and there is a certain level of variation among these theories. This variation is inevitable because migration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon with diverse causes and impacts. Although gender is critical for understanding migration, existing theories have been indifferent to gender and failed to incorporate gender aspects into their explanations of migration. The question of "how can gender be incorporated into our understanding of migration?" remains unclear. The feminist approach to gender and migration (Zlotnik, 1996; Chant, 1992) partly answers this by emphasizing the invisibility of women in the migratory process. A gender perspective in migration research can offer new theoretical insights. Correcting the "invisibility" of the gender dimension in migration theories, gender-specific analysis in the migration decision-making process may promise a new research agenda and significantly advance the theoretical foundation of migration.

Individuals' migration decisions may change over time, and the specific stage at which migration policies and programs are likely to play a role in shaping migration outcomes. Many factors come into play in making such decisions, including both economic and personal considerations. At the micro level, individuals eventually settle for the option most likely to help them achieve their objectives in terms of economic prospects, social wellbeing, and psychological wellbeing. At the meso level, decisions to migrate are made within the context of opportunities and constraints faced by households. At the macro level, structural factors affecting decisions to migrate include the market demand for low-paid labor and services. This process is primarily seen as an operation of gender relations within the household. Overall, gender roles and relations can play a significant part in affecting migration decisions, but our understanding of how exactly gender and migration intersect in making decisions to migrate is still inadequate.

The feminization of migration is reflected in the increasing number of female migrants and changing male-dominant migration patterns. This feminization of migration has not been accompanied by more gender-targeted policies and programs for migrant inclusion, reflecting

the particular obstacles faced by female migrants. These barriers are especially apparent when it comes to labor market inclusion. Compared with male migrants, female migrants may also have familial and childcare responsibilities, which become opportunity costs for migration.

### **3. Practical situation of female migration in Vietnam**

Regarding the practical situation of migration in Vietnam, the household strategy approach and network theory may be more relevant for understanding migration decision-making. Migration in Vietnam is determined by household resources and structures, facilitated by social networks. The patterns in Vietnam may differ from those in other countries, where different forms of decision-making for female and male migrants have been observed. In contrast to other nations, Vietnamese women tend to have a voice in decision-making rather than mostly being directed by others (Dang, 2005; Hoang, 2011). Married women are likely to make joint decisions to move with their husbands, while single females may negotiate with their parents to move alone for work. This highlights Vietnamese women's influence in migration decisions compared to their counterparts in some other Asian countries (Chant, 1992). The high level of female migrants' participation in the domestic labor force and their ability to remit funds home have empowered them to negotiate for migration opportunities and work in other locations.

#### *3.1 International migration of females*

International migration from Vietnam includes a predominantly female migrant population engaged in various roles such as workers, caregivers, students, spouses, and, unfortunately, trafficked victims in several countries worldwide. In Vietnam, both men and women seeking employment abroad are on the rise, with destinations including Taiwan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Japan, China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Libya. The number of enterprises licensed to send workers to work abroad is 456 units, comprising state-owned enterprises and joint-stock companies, are licensed to send workers overseas. Women and men experience labour migration differently by virtue of gendered labour markets at home and in destination countries. Gender disparities in labor markets and cultural norms influence migration experiences, limiting women's opportunities in higher-paying European destinations.

Vietnamese workers are present in over 40 countries and territories globally, with female workers constituting a significant proportion. According to the Department of Overseas Labor Administration (DOLAB) 2023 report, from 2013 to 2021, nearly one million workers were deployed abroad, averaging around 80-100 workers annually. In 2022, the country sent 142,779 workers abroad, with female workers representing approximately 36.5%. Currently, more than 700,000 workers from Vietnam are employed

abroad under contracts, with female representation among international labor migrants steadily increasing. According to DOLAB (2023) in 2022, over 34 percent of a total of 142,779 migrant workers are women. They went to Japan (20.8 percent), Taiwan (12.4 percent), South Korea (1 percent) and other countries (1 per cent). Young females also migrated as students, servants and brides, making up about half of all outgoing female migrants in recent years. Demand for women migrants will increase in destinations such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea where Vietnamese women's skills and their reputation for hard work are reportedly in demand. These patterns reflect the gendered nature of migrant labour sectors in these destination countries and territories.

Vietnamese women going abroad to work face more obstacles and challenges than men do. They got little information about the country of destination and do not know the working conditions at time of departure, depending largely upon brokers or recruitment companies. Before leaving Vietnam, female workers have a limited access to information on life and work abroad. The short training they received does not pay attention to gender roles and specific issues regarding female migration. Migrant workers are only required to familiarize themselves with the language of their destination country. When joining the host labour market, many of them experienced the risks of exploitation, discrimination and abuse associated with mental disorder, loneliness, fear and stress. Working as care givers, nurses, domestic workers, garment workers, etc, female workers have difficulties seeking legal assistance. The difficulties faced by female workers can be classified into the following categories: i) low wages with arbitrary cut; ii) vulnerable working conditions and violence; iii) difficulty seeking legal assistance; iv) stress, loneliness and fear. The biggest difficulty faced by women working in low-income jobs is the lack of human services. When conflicts or troubles occur, they often fall into disadvantaged positions. The legal systems of host societies often do not provide relevant assistance to migrant workers because there are no agreements on legal support between Vietnam and these countries.

While there is existing legislation for Vietnamese workers abroad under contracts, it lacks a clear commitment to gender equality and women's protection. The amendment of the law from a gender equality perspective is crucial to establish a comprehensive legal framework for better protecting female workers abroad. Additionally, promoting information and raising social awareness about the pros and cons of female migration, as well as their rights and empowerment, is necessary. In order to support and protect female workers, an effective coordination between relevant agencies in law enforcement and policy implementation is essential to support and protect migrants, particularly female workers.

Despite the above hardships, female workers still increasingly participate in the overseas workforce. The financial return has significantly contributed to their national incomes, and directly to their own households, thereby raising the overall quality of life. For many female workers, migration abroad has a pronounced impact on gender roles, changing the power relations within the family, switching the patterns of childrearing and childcare. Migration has also brought about changes in the gender division of labour and empower

women in household decisions thanks to their economic contribution. After returning from abroad, female workers had a greater voice and position in their families and local communities. Along with this process, perception and practice of gender roles is changed.

The remittances can be saved or used to build houses, pay off debts, or invest in production and livestock. Many families buy computers and cover tuition fees for their children's schooling. Valuable assets such as motorbikes, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, air conditioners, mobile phones are also purchased by the remittances. In many households where the wives work abroad, family life is maintained by the husbands such as childcare, child education. Many men initially feel uncomfortable to play such roles, most difficult tasks for them is to feed young children, but after a certain period of time, they have become proficient in managing household affairs, childcare and become a role model for their teen children.

### *3.2 Internal migration of females*

Regarding internal migration within Vietnam, the results from the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey (GSO and UNFPA, 2016) indicate that female migrants often define their migration purpose as earning enough money to support their left-behind families or starting a small business. Internal migration is essential for the development process, particularly in a country that is accelerating the process of industrialization like Vietnam, increasing the speed of urbanization, the flow of migration from rural to urban areas which is an inevitably increasing trend rapidly industrializing and urbanizing.

The survey reveals that, when deciding to migrate, females, compared to males, seem to rely more on others, with 36.2% of female migrants indicating their husbands' involvement in the decision to move, and 31 percent of female migrants reporting that their parents were involved in the decision on migration. These percentages are higher than those for male migrants, where 26.8 percent of male migrants moving under the influence of% are influenced by their wives and 27.2% by their parents. The survey data also revealed that internal female migrants are also more likely to rely on social networks at their destinations, with over 32 percent of female migrants as% compared to 27.6 percent of male migrants. Family members, relatives, friends, and people from the same areas of origin accounted for the high level (30.2 percent) among people that female migrants reported to know at the areas of destination, mainly big cities. Male migrants make up 47.6 per cent, which confirms an ongoing trend of the "feminization of migration", as noted in previous studies on migration. The feminization of migration is also reflected in sex ratio of migrants aged 15-39 and 40- 44, with sex ratio less than 100. Overall the percentage of female migrants among all migrants aged 15-59 is 52.4 percent, meaning that the number of male migrants is fewer than the number of female (GSO and UNFPA, 2016).

Female internal migrants are predominantly engaged in factory work, street vending, waste collection, services in shops and restaurants, and domestic work. Similar to international migrant counterparts, women moving to urban centers and industrial parks experience stress and worries about their families and children left behind. Strategies are employed by husbands or elderly parents to adjust household care arrangements while

maintaining gendered roles. Migrant women often seek to provide care for their families from a distance. They employ various ways to visit home, especially in the time of needs such as wedding, funeral, accidents and illness of their household members. They also tend to choose their destinations within their range. The proximity distance between workplaces and home villages allows them more flexibility and a smoother transition from being at home to being away. While international migration separation for the entire length of their migration with few or no visits, internal migration can afford migrant women to visit home, thus gender roles in their families are less disrupted. The ability to move back and forth is an advantage which explains why many rural women choose to migrate within a short distance from home villages rather than to go overseas, even though international migration may offer a much higher financial return.

The 2015 National Internal Migration Survey (GSO and UNFPA, 2016) indicates that 86% of migrants have equal or higher incomes post-migration. On average, monthly income for migrants is slightly lower than that of non-migrants (VND5 million versus VND5.4 million). Male migrants earn more (VND5.5 million) than female migrants (VND4.5 million). Urban migrants have higher incomes than rural migrants (VND5.3 million per month versus VND4.6 million per month). The survey results also showed that nearly 30 per cent of migrants send earnings back to their families within 12 months prior to the survey. Accordingly, with an average remittances from one migrant to his or her family household are VND 8.3 million per year. While female migrants are more likely to remit home, males send higher amounts (VND9.4 million versus VND7.5 million). Most remittances sent by migrants are spent on the daily living expenses of their families rather than on production or business expansion.

The feminization of migration necessitates comprehensive assessment and policy attention, integrating gender-based migration data into national surveys and statistical systems. Gender and migration information should be regularly updated and made available to inform planners, managers, and policymakers on labor, employment, income generation, and social protection. It is necessary to raise the awareness about migration impacts is crucial to achieving a consensus and a positive view of gender and migration's contribution to development.

In the 2019 Population and Housing Census, females accounted for a higher share than males in the total migrant population by the time of the 2019 Population and Housing Census. Women accounted for, with women making up 55.5 percent out of the total migrant population and men made up 44.5 percent (GSO and UNFPA, 2022). The Census also revealed that migrants became younger, with 63% of female migrants aged 20-39. The median age of female migrants is 27 years old, which means half of the female migrant population is less than 27 years old, while male migrants have a median age of 29 years (GSO & UNFPA, 2020). The 2019 Census collected information about usual residence five years ago and compared this data with their currently usual residence to determine cases of long-term migration within five years from the time of the census. If information on short-term migration was collected, the age of migrants would be much younger.

Development policies, strategies, and regional plans must consider gender and migration to maximize the contributions of female migrants to both sending and receiving areas while safeguarding their families' interests. Social security policies should support female migrants in the informal sector, providing them with access to information and services to enable young migrants to settle down and building their lives. Thematic surveys on migration, focusing on gender-based data for different population groups, are necessary for planning and policy formulation. Gender statistics aid policymakers in identifying differences and inequalities between females and males, informing the development and promotion of policies and programs for substantive gender equality in all fields.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The migration of Vietnamese women, both internally and internationally, is increasingly influenced by gender-segregated labor markets, a trend accentuated by the country's rapid process of renovation and international integration. The destinations for female migrants from Vietnam are expanding. In the domestic labor market, segmentation persists, with men concentrating in the construction and manufacturing sectors, while women predominantly work as service providers, housemaids, and entertainers in the informal sector (Dang, 2014). Simultaneously, many female workers are venturing to work worldwide, with some limited to informal sectors, such as domestic or care giving roles, often in precarious conditions. There is a pressing need for policy support to mitigate vulnerabilities and risks.

Policies aimed at influencing migration well-known and have been widely developed in the realm of migration, aim to influence migration, they often overlook existing migration theories and neglect the gender dimension. While migration theories effectively explain the reasons for migration and its perpetuation, the current theories of migration often ignore and fail to incorporate gender in their explanations. It is crucial to consider gender as an integral part of broader migratory processes at all stages of migration. Over the last decades, although these theories of migration have been used as models to explain migration, these theories have remained indifferent to and overlooked the critical gender perspective that is critical for understanding migration. Therefore, developing and updating current theories to incorporate the gender dimension and gender patterns of migration is vital.

Female migrants not only migrate as part of a household but also independently. However, women encounter fewer opportunities to work away from home compared to men, influenced by gender norms shaping rights and obligations, as well as domestic roles and duties. Even though women have gained opportunities and rights, they typically have less power in migration decision-making than men. High migration costs and difficulties in socio-legal integration at the destination areas make social networks essential in assisting migrants, particularly migrant women.

Despite the ongoing feminization of migration in Vietnam and other Asian countries, migrant women continue to face challenges. Earning income, a key driver in migration decision-making, positions migrant women's moves as a duty rather than a right, extending from their traditional roles as nurturing daughters, responsible sisters, supportive wives, and caring mothers. Women's migration is perceived to earn money and support families, posing additional challenges and vulnerabilities due to women's lower income and control over income, this situation can bring additional challenges and vulnerabilities for migrant women compared to men.

Gender remains marginalized in mainstream migration research, with women's experiences have not been appropriately integrated into migration studies. It is therefore necessary to carry out research on gender and migration to reflect the current situation and forecast potential gender impacts at various levels (society, household, and individual). Migration should ideally be a voluntary choice rather than a necessity or force. For safe migration, decisions should be well-informed about the economic, social, and psychological costs and risks involved. While social networks can help reduce these costs, policymakers should actively integrate gender into developmental plans and strategies for sustainable outcomes. Voluntary and non-profit organizations, collaborating with academics and the media, should assist female migrants in training, networking, disseminating information, and improving their capacity and skills to empower themselves. To better inform policymakers and formulate effective measures, gender-disaggregated data and further research on gender and migration are imperative.

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