

VUONG NGOC THI*

ETHNIC MINORITY WORKERS, BOARDING HOUSES, AND LANDLORDS: AN UNDERSTUDIED RESEARCH TOPIC¹

Abstract: *The relationship between ethnic minority workers and boarding house landlords in industrial zones plays a crucial role in the lives of these migrant laborers but remains understudied. Drawing on a literature review and field data collected in Bac Ninh in 2024, this study sheds light on the dual nature of this relationship: landlords both support workers by reducing rent and assisting during hardships, while also exploiting them economically and imposing cultural norms. Although finding boarding houses has become easier due to improved information networks, ethnic minority workers continue to live in low-quality conditions, which hinders their ability to accumulate social capital and integrate into urban areas. The article suggests further research directions on this topic to provide a scientific basis for policy solutions aimed at improving the lives of migrant workers and promoting sustainable urbanization.*

Keywords: *Workers, industrial zones, ethnic minorities, boarding houses, landlords.*

Date of submission: 15/8/2025; date of receipt of peer reviewer comments: 22/9/2025; date of approval for publication: 15/11/2025.

Introduction

In the context of rapid industrialization and urbanization in Vietnam, becoming a worker in industrial zones (IZs) has emerged as a common livelihood choice for ethnic minority (EM) people. This labor migration not only reflects the need for income generation but also results from the labor market dynamics driven by income

* Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Email: vuongngocthi@gmail.com.

¹ This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 504.04-2021.09.

disparities between rural and urban areas, rural labor surplus, and the growing demand for labor in industrial centers (Dang Van Minh, 2022; ISDS, 2021). However, this transition also poses major challenges to living conditions, particularly housing - an essential factor that affects their economic stability and social integration.

Housing for migrant workers is not merely a matter of material necessity but also a lens through which deep socio-economic inequalities can be observed. More than 50% of approximately seven million workers in IZs across the country are in need of accommodation; however, the current social housing system only meets about 30% of actual demand (Thanh Xuan, 2024), forcing the majority of workers to rent private boarding houses. The lives of workers in IZs are shaped not only by wages or working conditions but also by new social networks, among which the relationship with landlords has become a key factor. Although various studies have examined labor migration and workers' lives, this topic remains significantly under-researched - especially concerning the distinctive cultural characteristics of EM workers, who are simultaneously influenced by general migration trends and constrained by cultural integration barriers. This paper explores the relationship between EM workers and boarding house landlords in IZs, based on a literature review and field data collected in Bac Ninh province in 2024. The study aims to clarify the impact of this relationship on workers' stability and development, thereby laying a foundation for policies that promote sustainable urbanization in Vietnam.

1. Research Methods

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted within the NAFOSTED-funded project "*Social welfare and cultural identity among some ethnic minority groups migrating from the northern mountainous region to work in industrial zones in the Red River Delta*" (2024-2025). The project investigates the lives of EM workers in Vietnam's IZs, focusing on aspects such as living conditions, social welfare policies, access to and utilization of benefits, and their support networks. Fieldwork was conducted in Bac Ninh province - one of the most representative localities of industrialization and migrant labor concentration. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, including 142 survey questionnaires targeting EM workers (mainly Tay, Nung, Muong, Thai, and Hmong) currently working in these IZs. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholders-workers, company managers (HR departments, trade unions) to capture detailed information on personal experiences and workplace environments. Focus group discussions were also organized with officials from various administrative levels (provincial, district, commune, and IZ management boards); including

representatives from the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Planning and Investment, provincial Labor Federation, IZ trade unions, and local authorities; to obtain perspectives from the government and supporting organizations.

To elucidate the role of the relationship between EM workers and boarding house landlords, this paper combines fieldwork findings from Bac Ninh with a review of both domestic and international studies. This integrative approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how this relationship influences migrant workers' lives, while also identifying directions for future in-depth research.

2. Overview of the Tenant - Landlord Relationship

A keyword search for “workers” (công nhân) on the electronic resource portals of the National Agency for Science and Technology Information (lhtv.vista.gov.vn) and the Institute of Social Sciences Information (opac.vass.vn) reveals a large body of domestic publications related to workers. These studies have addressed many important aspects such as wages, spending, housing, policy access, social welfare, social networks, work attachment, and the challenges workers face. However, while workers' social relations have been studied, in-depth monographs on this topic remain scarce. Most analyses appear only in journal articles or as sub-components of broader research. In particular, studies focusing on EM workers are limited, and research on their social networks is even rarer. Existing studies on social relationships of workers in general, and EM workers in particular, mainly examine ties within family, kinship, friendships, ethnic groups, or religious communities. Meanwhile, other types of relationships - such as with colleagues, supervisors, neighbors of different ethnicities, and especially landlords - have not been systematically analyzed. Notably, searching with the keyword “landlord” (chủ nhà trọ) yields zero results in both databases.

Among the domestic works accessible to the author, two studies partially reflect the significance of the relationship between workers and landlords. First, “*The Lives of Minority Migrant Workers in Urban Areas: A Qualitative Perspective*” by Le Anh Vu (2023) is a monograph synthesizing articles based on fieldwork to Khmer workers' boarding houses in Binh Duong since 2015. Using a “life story” approach, the author followed several Khmer workers to understand their motivations, challenges, perceptions of themselves and relationships with others. Although landlords were not frequently mentioned in these narratives, they appeared in distinct roles: establishing boarding clusters primarily for Khmer migrants, acting as “gatekeepers” who helped tenants-whose language, culture, and religion differed markedly-integrate into the host community and maintaining neighborhood security (for example, one landlady

stationed herself at the rear gate of the boarding area while her relative ran a small shop monitoring the front entrance). Landlords were also found to provide support through rent reductions, loans during hardships, or assistance to newcomers, which left lasting impressions in the tenants' memories.

Second, the volume *"Social Welfare: Current Situation and Accessibility of Migrant Workers in Binh Duong Industrial Zones"* edited by Nguyen Duc Loc và Nguyen Van Hiep (eds, 2015) emphasizes the landlords' role more clearly. Conducted between 2011 and 2013 in four districts/towns (Di An, Thuan An, Tan Uyên, Ben Cat), with 800 surveyed workers and in-depth interviews using participatory tools such as problem trees and Venn diagrams, the research assessed the state and accessibility of social welfare among workers. Focus group discussions with workers (male, female, single, married) revealed that landlords had small-to-moderate positive influence on tenants, with a medium to high degree of intimacy compared to other actors. Landlords appeared most frequently in the four Venn diagrams drawn by participants, and in-depth interviews indicated that they often supported tenants during crises such as illness, financial shortage, or accidents. The authors concluded that this relationship "goes beyond mere transactional exchange to encompass emotional ties" (Nguyen Duc Loc, Nguyen Van Hiep, eds., 2015: 248). However, both studies stopped short of fully exploring the tenant-landlord relationship, leaving a research gap that merits further investigation.

International studies examining the relationship between tenants including migrant workers and landlords offer valuable insights that can be related to the Vietnamese context. However, a Google Scholar search for the keyword "tenant-landlord relationship" produces surprisingly few relevant results. Two seminal works on this topic are Matthew Desmond's (2016) *"Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City"* and Doug Saunders' (2010) *"Arrival City"*, each offering a distinct approach to the role of housing and landlords in the lives of migrant or urban poor populations. Unlike most domestic studies, these works tend to emphasize the negative dimensions of tenant-landlord relationships.

Desmond's (2016) Pulitzer Prize-winning sociological study, conducted in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (USA), follows the lives of eight renter families in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods over the course of a year, exploring the complex interplay between poverty, housing, and eviction. He argues that eviction is not merely a consequence of poverty but also a cause of it: nearly half of poor renter households spend at least 50% of their income on housing, and one-quarter spend over 70%. This

reality prevents them from saving or escaping poverty. Among Desmond's key ethnographic cases are: Arleen, a single mother evicted twice due to circumstances beyond her control; Lamar, a disabled father exploited for unpaid labor by his landlord before being evicted for arrears; and Crystal, a young woman with mental health issues evicted after calling the police about a domestic violence incident upstairs. Desmond describes landlords such as Sherrena, who profit enormously by renting low-quality housing at high prices, exploiting tenants' desperation while wielding unilateral eviction power. On average, 1 in 14 renter households in Milwaukee is evicted annually, amounting to millions of U.S. households nationwide. Housing instability, Desmond concludes, undermines tenants' ability to maintain employment and family stability; among those the most severely affected are Black people, women, and children - highlighting clear racial and gender inequalities in the housing crisis.

Meanwhile, in "*Arrival City*", Doug Saunders (2010) provides a sharp analysis of global migration and the function of "arrival cities" - urban districts such as Kibera (Nairobi, Kenya) and Liu Gong Li (Shenzhen, China) - where migrants from rural areas or other countries seek new opportunities. Drawing on research in over 20 arrival cities worldwide, Saunders describes these places as both launchpads (with jobs and housing support networks) and traps (due to poor infrastructure and exploitation by intermediaries like landlords). For example, in Kibera, Grace, a migrant cleaner, rented a mud-and-tin hut with no basic utilities for 2,000 Kenyan shillings/month (about 500,000 VND). Her landlord initially supported her by providing low rent and job connections, but also demanded a high deposit and abruptly raised the rent once her income increased, which kept her in a cycle of precarity. Similarly, in Shenzhen, Li Mei, a factory worker, rented an 8 m² room for 300 RMB/month (about 1.150.000 VND), which was later raised to 400 RMB, with electricity and water fees double the market rate, leaving her unable to save. Saunders argues that landlords in arrival cities reflect the informal economy system, both enabling urban entry and extracting most of migrants' income, thereby eroding their potential to accumulate capital and achieve long-term integration.

Together, these international cases illustrate that the tenant-landlord relationship is a crucial yet deeply ambivalent social mechanism, which provides access to urban life while simultaneously reproduces inequality.

3. Housing Difficulties and the Perspective of Ethnic Minority Workers

Worker housing remains an under-addressed issue in Vietnam's industrialization process. According to Thanh Xuan (2024), about seven million workers are currently employed in industrial zones, and over half require housing. However, to date, neither domestic nor foreign companies are obligated to provide worker housing or rent allowances (Nguyen Duc Loc, Nguyen Van Hiep, eds., 2015). The limited social housing system meets only 30% of demand, forcing most workers to rent privately under poor conditions (Thanh Xuan, 2024).

Bac Ninh province, one of the northern industrial hubs, has attracted hundreds of thousands of migrant workers to zones such as Yen Phong, Tien Son, and VSIP. As of 2023, roughly 240,000 non-local workers were employed there, most relying on private boarding rooms or public housing. Yet the official housing supply remains insufficient over 4,000 apartments built for workers, more than 1,300 of which remain unoccupied due to cost and design mismatches with workers' needs (Duc Minh, Anh Tu, 2023). Private boarding houses thus dominate the housing landscape, though many lack amenities or fire safety standards (Bac Ninh Provincial Police, 2021).

The perspectives of EM workers on boarding houses and their relationship with landlords, based on in-depth interviews and a survey of 142 cases in Bac Ninh IZs in 2024, reveal both conveniences and challenges in finding and maintaining accommodation. Finding boarding houses is no longer too difficult today, thanks to networks of relatives and acquaintances in the locality and the prevalence of phones and the internet. Typically, EM workers only take 1 to 3 days to find suitable accommodation, with the average boarding location 2.5 km from their workplace. However, for EM workers who have never left home, this is still a daunting issue. Taking advantage of the anxiety and lack of knowledge of first-time workers coming to IZs without relatives or acquaintances, some job consultation centers arrange accommodation and job introductions but charge exorbitant brokerage fees.

Survey data show that 94.4% of respondents rent in residential areas, and 57.7% reported no major housing problems. Their top priorities are low rent (51.1%), proximity to work (44.6%), and closeness to relatives/friends (24.5%), while only 23% valued a good living environment. About 7% lived in apartments or mini-flats, 47.2% in self-built concrete houses, and 35.2% in one-story level-4 houses, averaging 10.1 m²/person. The average household income among surveyed workers (1–5 members living together) was 14.6 million VND/month, with 1.18 million VND spent on rent and

434,000 VND on utilities - 11% of total income². Following the *30% Rule* (National Housing Act, U.S., 1937, cited in Desmond 2016), rent should not exceed 30% of pre-tax household income to ensure they have enough for other essentials and savings. In comparison, surveyed EM workers spent 1.31 million VND on education, 1.42 million VND on food, and 2.05 million VND on remittances to families, leaving almost no savings. Additionally, only 47.2% planned to remain in IZ jobs for at least five years. Contrary to the situation of poor U.S. households - who spend over 50% of income on housing (Desmond, 2016) - the low investment in housing, choice of cheap housing and lack of attachment to work and place result in poor living quality for workers. Simultaneously, it hinders building sustainable relationships at the migration destination, creating limitations in their personal social capital; one manifestation of which is their relationship with landlords. The following qualitative observations and interviews will further clarify this argument.

Field observations and in-depth interviews revealed that many rent cheap, low-standard rooms to minimize costs. New workers with meager wages or those in difficult family circumstances often rent level-4 houses without separate sanitation for under 1 million VND/month. Shared bathrooms are often dirty and overcrowded. One female worker confided: *“My friend and I share a room without a bathroom because it’s cheaper. The shared toilet isn’t clean - some people are careless. Sometimes when I come home late, I have to wait until midnight to bathe. It’s inconvenient but I can’t afford better”* (Female worker, 21, Tay ethnicity, Bat Lu Hamlet).

During summer, the temperature inside small, cramped tin-roof rooms exceeds 40°C, with poor ventilation and no air conditioning. Thus, many workers, especially those in electronics assembly companies, prefer overtime shifts in the cooler, clean and spacious factory environment. At the company, they also get meals during extra hours, which reduces cooking and living expenses. As a result, the boarding room becomes merely a sleeping space rather than a true living environment. Some minimize electricity and water use because landlords charge higher than regulated rates (3,000 - 4,000 VND/kWh compared to 1,500-2,500 VND/kWh official rates). Two 17-year-old

² These figures include both individual workers living alone in IZs (66 out of 142 cases) and those living with their families (58 households with 2 members, 10 with 3 members, 4 with 4 members, and 4 with 5 members). For individual migrants, the average monthly expenses were as follows: housing - 1,110,160 VND, electricity and water - 281,820 VND, food - 1,837,880 VND, and remittances to families - 2,719,050 VND. With an average monthly income of 8,590,910 VND, rent and utilities accounted for 16.2% of their income, while remittances constituted 31.6%. This demonstrates that single migrant workers experience greater financial instability and less sustainable livelihoods compared to those living with family members, as their savings are almost negligible.

Dao female workers reported not turning on their fan despite the 38°C heat to save money. Their 10 m² damp room contained only a double bed, a portable gas stove, a fabric wardrobe, and a small fan. Working seasonally during summer break, they have no labor contracts and earn lower wages than formal workers. After two weeks, each saved about 500,000 VND, surviving on rice and tubers brought from home. Their landlord allowed them to delay rent until the first payday.

Boarding conditions vary across Bac Ninh. For example, rooms in Phuong Lieu Ward are roomier and cooler than those in Bat Lu Hamlet (Dai Dong Commune) at similar rents, particularly when located within landlords' homes. Detached houses are usually smaller and poorer. Workers depend on landlords' flexibility such as rent deferrals but are also vulnerable to economic and labor exploitation. Some assist landlords on weekends (watering vegetables, sorting recyclables, repairing wiring) in exchange for reduced rent. Rent hikes especially after Tet (Lunar New Year) are common. *"Our landlord is too greedy. We pay 1.4 million VND, but when we asked to install an air conditioner, she made us pay half the cost and raised the rent by 200,000 VND. Thus we decided to move out"* (Male workers, 20 - 24, Hmong ethnicity, Bat Lu Hamlet). The same landlord later offered a 8 m² room upstairs for 1 million VND, windowless and without a kitchen, warning that rent would rise if tenants installed air conditioning.

It can be seen that the relationship with landlords, where workers are in a weaker position, further complicates housing issues for EM workers. Yet, some cases reveal positive support that fosters integration. One female Muong worker shared: *"When I first came here, few people from my hometown worked in the IZs. I came here knowing no one, initially shy and sad because I was different, slow, didn't know the work, and people laugh at me. But gradually I got used to it; I worked hard and diligently, so the landlady liked and cherished me. When there was extra work, she told me to do it, and to participate in village and hamlet activities. Now, I take part in village festivals, cooking and playing all day"* (Female, 44, Muong ethnicity, Giang Lieu Hamlet). Landlords sometimes also help with childcare, enabling mothers to keep their jobs: *"The landlord couple here is very kind. After my six-month maternity leave, I had no one to watch my baby. Without their help, I couldn't have continued working"* (Female, 25, Thai ethnicity, Giang Lieu Hamlet).

Additionally, sharing premises with landlords also improves security, especially as theft in worker areas has increased. For women, the risk of insecurity when staying alone in boarding room is a concerning issue. One young female worker said she had

been harassed by some men in the boarding area, touching sensitive body parts, but she silently endured without telling anyone: *“Some are married, with wives right in the rooms, but they still follow and touch me when I pass by. So I was terrified and always kept my door locked”* (Female, 20, Hmong ethnicity, Que Vo Industrial Hub). Proximity to landlords helps deter such misconduct, as their presence reinforces neighborhood order and safety.

Living scattered across diverse neighborhoods, EM workers find it difficult to sustain ethnic identity, and prone to social isolation due to lack of family or co-ethnic support ties. In Bac Ninh, the Hmong ethnicity has demonstrated many distinctive cultural features with wide coverage. They have organized their own Hmong markets, Hmong New Year at the beginning of the year, and relatively concentrated residence points. The Hmong have left their mark on several locations in Bac Ninh, such as Lam Lang Park, where large numbers of Hmong gather for cultural activities on weekends, or even Hmong clothing rental spots and Hmong cafes. However, other ethnic groups have not created such distinctive events, locations, and features; thus their cultures remain largely invisible in the local landscape.

These findings indicate that the relationship between EM workers and landlords in Vietnam’s IZs is not merely an economic transaction but a complex social structure, embodying both opportunity and constraint. In Vietnam, exploitation tends to occur in more subtle forms than in the US—through sudden rent increases or by requiring tenants to bear the costs of housing upgrades and repairs reflecting the absence of an effective legal protection mechanism.

4. Landlords’ Perspectives

Insights from landlords in Bac Ninh collected through in-depth interviews and field observations in 2024 reflect the multifaceted nature of their relationships with EM tenants. Most landlords in Phuong Lieu Ward described themselves as caring and supportive, especially during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A 48-year-old male landlord, who also served as a local official, said: *“We helped a lot during the pandemic visited each house, offered support, reduced rents, gave money and supplies. The landlords here are good people. Thinking back, I feel proud of our community”*. Similarly, a 54 year old female landlord managing eight rental rooms shared: *“Here I have spacious rooms; so I choose tenants carefully and only let the ones with good personality stay. Some have been with me quite long, for five to seven years. If they have any issues, I help. I give advice, and if they face difficulties and can’t pay a month’s rent, I can let them delay rent or even lend them a few million*

dong. Once, when a tenant's husband needed emergency surgery, I gave them 500,000 VND. During COVID, when they couldn't go home, couldn't work and having no money, we bought instant noodles for them. Every landlord here did the same the people in this area are very kind". These accounts show landlords' flexibility and economic support, suggesting that the relationship often extends beyond purely financial transactions.

Landlords also assume responsibility for security and order within their boarding compounds. A 63-year-old woman managing a detached boarding house explained: *"Before, we used regular locks, but now most landlords here have installed fingerprint locks for safety. There are also frequent scams coming to the house. There are newcomers who know nothing, and even long-term ones still get scammed".* Field observations confirmed that tenants generally trust and feel familiar with their landlords, as shown by their openness when introduced by them to the research team. However, most landlords showed little awareness of tenants' ethnic or cultural backgrounds: *"They just said they're from far away province, from mountainous areas. I didn't ask what ethnicity they are sometimes I can't even tell if they're ethnic minorities"* (Female landlord, 54 years old, Giang Lieu Hamlet) or *"I saw some of their ethnic clothes when they did laundry, but I don't know what group they belong to"* (Female landlord, 63 years old, Giang Lieu Hamlet).

In some cases, landlords' own cultural differences and taboos created difficulties for tenants. One 54-year-old landlord (Giang Lieu Hamlet) said she required pregnant tenants to move out before giving birth: *"I had to tell her early - otherwise she wouldn't know or even pay attention. I told her clearly: after giving birth, she must return to her hometown immediately; she was not allowed to deliver the baby in my house or come back here afterward. As her due date approached, I reminded her to pack up all her belongings and be ready. When she went to the commune clinic to give birth, I told her husband to take everything with him. After delivery, they had to take a taxi straight back to their village. I couldn't just let her give birth in my house, could I?"* This reflects traditional Kinh beliefs that childbirth brings spiritual impurity to the household, thereby directly infringing upon tenants' rights but leaving them little choice. A subtle class-based discrimination also emerged. For example, higher-quality rooms located within the landlord's own house, in quite, safe, clean, and well-ventilated areas, usually accommodating one or two tenants (over 20m², priced over 2 million VND/month) were prioritized for white-collar employees or managers. In

contrast, smaller, more degraded rooms with limited amenities may accommodate up to five tenants (8-20m², costing 0.7-1.5 million VND/month) and are reserved exclusively for manual workers.

The perspectives and behaviors from landlords further clarify the social position of these EM migrant workers. They often fall into dependency in this relationship, but they can also build social capital through landlord support.

5. Perspectives from Local Authorities and Management

Interviews with government officials and trade union representatives in Bac Ninh suggest that authorities recognize housing as an important issue but tend to overlook its relational and exploitative dimensions. A 42-year-old male trade union officer noted: *"Normally, we visit workers' neighborhood to assess living conditions and understand their needs. Especially during COVID-19, we went frequently, along with commune cadres, to mobilize landlords to reduce rent and support quarantined workers. In reality, landlords were quite supportive and compliant with regulations"*. This indicates that boarding houses and housing issues are indeed a concern for local authorities and trade unions-particularly during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, matters related to the relationship with landlords are rarely examined from the perspective of their potential negative impact on workers. Instead, landlords are often regarded as a group that actively cooperates with local policy implementation.

Temporary residence registration is another issue where landlords play a key role: *"Most workers register through their landlords because they're busy working all day. They photocopy their ID cards and other documents and submit to the landlord to handle with us. About 90% of tenants have registered temporary residence. We conduct regular checks, and unregistered cases are fined 750,000 VND. For landlords, under the new law: not reporting 1-3 residents is 750,000 VND, and 3-5 is 1,500,000 VND. There are full penalty regulations, but we mostly give warnings"* (Group interview, Dai Dong Commune official, 28 years old). However, according to survey results, only 11.3% of respondents said they had asked landlords to report temporary residence.

Local administrators in Phuong Lieu Ward confirmed the uneven scale and regulation of the rental business. Large landlords with dozens or hundreds of rooms must register as businesses and pay taxes, but these are few; most operate informally,

without business registration or tax compliance, making management difficult. The government mainly relies on ward cadres to mobilize landlords to support workers during the pandemic and monitor tenants to prevent criminal acts such as drugs, prostitution, or disturbances (drunkenness, fighting). Focus group interview results with government levels show that boarding house quality and tenants' rights are not a core priority for them. Consecutive fires in 2023 and 2024 in Hanoi and Bac Ninh have increased attention to fire prevention and fighting, leading some landlords to build escape routes for boarding houses/areas. Although there has been a change in awareness about boarding house safety, it still does not reflect comprehensive concern for living conditions and the relationship between workers and landlords from management levels.

In Vietnam, current legal regulations focus on protecting tenants' basic rights and providing some support, but lack comprehensive direct subsidies. The Housing Law 2014 (amended by the Housing Law 2023, effective from August 1, 2024) stipulates that landlords must ensure safe housing, enter into written rental contracts with information such as rent price, term, rights and obligations (Article 121), though notarization is not mandatory unless requested by the parties. Landlords have the right to terminate contracts if tenants seriously violate them (such as owing rent for 3 months, Article 132), but cannot invade tenants' living spaces, with such acts punishable by imprisonment from 3 months to 2 years under Article 158 of the 2015 Penal Code (amended 2017). Regarding electricity and water prices, Circular 25/2018/TT-BCT requires applying tiered household electricity rates (1,549 - 2,701 VND/kWh) for tenants residing over 12 months and water prices not exceeding local regulations. Tenants have the right to request repairs if damage is not their fault (Article 123, Housing Law 2014). In practice, enforcement is ineffective, with many landlords charging high electricity and water rates (3,000 - 4,000 VND/kWh) and facing minimal fines (200,000-300,000 VND under Decree 134/2013/ND-CP), leaving migrant workers heavily dependent on landlords. Compared to international examples, such as in the US, Vietnam has a basic legal framework (Housing Law, Residence Law) but lacks direct and regular subsidies for workers to reduce financial burdens for tenants (Desmond, 2016).

Conclusion

The relationship between EM workers and landlords in Vietnam's IZs is not merely a simple economic transaction but a complex social network that both opens opportunities and poses barriers to the stability and integration of millions of migrant

laborers. Landlords, in their dual role, both provide support manifested through rent reductions, loans, or food provision during difficult periods like the COVID-19 pandemic and exploit by imposing unreasonable price increases or culturally imposing norms on tenants, becoming a link in the chain of housing instability for EM workers. By spending only a small portion of their income on boarding houses, workers are trapped in dilapidated rooms, affecting their health and social integration capacity in exchange for minimal savings and home remittances. While the government focuses more on security than quality of life, current housing policies lack key elements such as rent subsidies or standards for boarding houses (a gap that leaves Vietnam lagging behind international support models). In-depth studies on the relationship between workers, landlords, and housing are essential to formulate more appropriate housing policies, aiming to build a sustainable urban future where migrant EM workers can integrate and become drivers of development./.

References

1. Bac Ninh Provincial Police (2021), *Monitoring Pandemic in Worker Boarding Houses* (Kiểm soát dịch tại các khu nhà trọ công nhân), Retrieved 14 March 2025 (<http://conganbacninh.vn/news/kiem-soat-dich-tai-cac-khu-nha-tro-cong-nhan/>).
2. Dang Van Minh (2022), *Migration and Social Integration of Ethnic Minority Youth in Industrial Zones* (Nghiên cứu di cư và hòa nhập xã hội của nhóm thanh niên dân tộc thiểu số tại các khu công nghiệp), Hanoi: Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs & Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry.
3. Desmond, Matthew (2016), *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, New York: Crown Publishers.
4. Duc Minh, and Anh Tu (2023), *Why 1,300 Worker Apartments Remain Vacant in Bac Ninh's Industrial Hub* (Lý do thủ phủ công nghiệp Bắc Ninh ế 1.300 căn nhà cho công nhân), Retrieved March 2025 (<https://vnexpress.net/ly-do-thu-phu-cong-nghiep-bac-ninh-e-1-300-can-nha-cho-cong-nhan-4658823.html>).
5. Government of Vietnam (2013), *Decree No. 134/2013/NĐ-CP on Administrative Penalties in the Electricity Sector* (Nghị định số 134/2013/NĐ-CP Quy định xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong lĩnh vực điện lực), Issued 17 October 2013.

6. Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS) (2021), *Domestic Migration of Ethnic Minority Women in Vietnam* (Tình hình di cư nội địa của phụ nữ dân tộc thiểu số tại Việt Nam), Hanoi: Vietnam Women's Publishing House.

7. Le Anh Vu (2023), *The Lives of Minority Migrant Workers in Urban Areas: A Qualitative Perspective* (Đời sống của lao động thiểu số nhập cư ở đô thị: Góc nhìn từ tiếp cận định tính), Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.

8. Ministry of Industry and Trade (2018), *Circular No. 25/2018/TT-BCT on the Regulation of Residential Electricity Pricing* (Thông tư số 25/2018/TT-BCT Quy định về giá bán lẻ điện sinh hoạt), Issued 12 September 2018.

9. National Assembly of Vietnam (2014) (amended 2023), *Housing Law* (Luật Nhà ở), Hanoi: National Political Publishing House of Truth.

10. National Assembly of Vietnam (2015) (amended 2017), *Penal Code* (Bộ luật Hình sự), Hanoi: National Political Publishing House of Truth.

11. Nguyen Duc Loc, and Nguyen Van Hiep (eds.) (2015), *Social Welfare: Current Situation and Accessibility of Migrant Workers in Binh Duong Industrial Zones* (Phúc lợi xã hội: Hiện trạng và mức độ tiếp cận của công nhân nhập cư tại các khu công nghiệp tỉnh Bình Dương), Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Press.

12. Saunders, Doug (2010), *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

13. Thanh Xuan (2024), *Housing Shortages Discourage Workers from Staying in Cities* (Thiếu nhà ở khiến lao động không mặn mà ở lại thành phố), Retrieved March 2025 (<https://vneconomy.vn/thieu-nha-khien-lao-dong-khong-man-ma-o-lai-thanh-pho.htm>).

Tóm tắt**CÔNG NHÂN NGƯỜI DÂN TỘC THIỂU SỐ, NHÀ TRỢ,
VÀ CHỦ NHÀ TRỢ: VẤN ĐỀ NGHIÊN CỨU CÒN BỎ NGỎ****Vương Ngọc Thi***Viện Dân tộc học và Tôn giáo học**Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam*

Mối quan hệ giữa công nhân người dân tộc thiểu số và chủ nhà trọ tại các khu công nghiệp đóng vai trò quan trọng trong đời sống của nhóm lao động di cư này nhưng còn ít được nghiên cứu. Dựa trên tổng quan tài liệu và tư liệu thực địa thu thập tại Bắc Ninh năm 2024, nghiên cứu làm sáng tỏ tính hai mặt của mối quan hệ này: chủ nhà trọ vừa hỗ trợ công nhân bằng cách giảm tiền thuê, giúp đỡ trong thời điểm khó khăn, vừa khai thác kinh tế và áp đặt văn hóa. Dù việc tìm nhà trọ ngày càng dễ dàng hơn nhờ mạng lưới thông tin phát triển, song công nhân dân tộc thiểu số vẫn phải sống trong điều kiện chất lượng cuộc sống thấp, làm giảm khả năng tích lũy vốn xã hội và hòa nhập đô thị. Bài viết đề xuất những hướng nghiên cứu sâu hơn về chủ đề này, làm cơ sở khoa học cho các giải pháp chính sách cải thiện đời sống công nhân di cư và thúc đẩy đô thị hóa bền vững.

Từ khóa: Công nhân, khu công nghiệp, dân tộc thiểu số, nhà trọ, chủ nhà trọ.