

Marriage and Family Life of Workers in Industrial Zones

(The case of Song Than Industrial Park in Binh Duong province)

Dang Thi Hoa

Assoc. Prof., Dr., Institute for Family and Gender, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Bui Thi Huong Tram

Dr., Institute for Family and Gender, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Vu Thi Cuc

MA, Institute for Family and Gender, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Received 18 August 2020; published 5 December 2020

Abstract: *Vietnamese families are facing many challenges in the context of development and integration. In particular, families of workers have many unique characteristics and are strongly affected by the national industrialization and modernization. Marriage and family policies have not completely covered migrant workers in industrial zones. In fact, there are several problems of social management and sustainable family development in relation to their marriage and family life. This is the focus of this article in order to clarify further their obstacles and challenges in industrial parks.*

Keywords: Marriage, Family, Workers, Industrial Parks, Binh Duong Province

Introduction

As an important institution of the society, family contributes to the sustainable development of society and provides the environment for personality nurturing and development and for preservation and promotion of cultural values. In the process

of urbanization and industrialization, a significant part of migrants from rural villages have become workers in industrial parks. They have to face many obstacles, which pose critical questions regarding the strategy of building and developing worker families towards progressiveness, prosperity and happiness.

Migrant workers in industrial parks often bear pressures from their working schedule, low income, poor living conditions and accommodation. Tightening a small budget also causes problems to their marriage and

¹ The article is part of the 2019-2020 state-level research project "Marriage and cohabitation of workers in industrial zones in Binh Duong province" led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dang Thi Hoa and Dr. Bui Thi Huong Tram under the management of Institute for Family and Gender.

family life as family needs are minimized (Bui Thi Phuong Chi, 2016). The industrial working routines affects greatly their family relationships, especially the relationship between parents and children (Hoa Huu Van et al., 2017), loosening the family cohesion. In addition to financial issues, the cultural and spiritual life of workers is not either satisfied.

Song Than Industrial Park in Binh Duong province was established in 1995, attracting investments from about 30 countries and territories in different fields of production, business, and services. More than 1,000 enterprises located in the park and its surroundings have employed hundreds of workers nationwide (Nguyen Van Nam, 2010). According to Binh Duong's Labor Confederation, migrant workers accounts for above 70% of the employments in the province, mostly concentrated in the industrial parks of Thuan An, Di An, Tan Uyen, Ben Cat and Thu Dau Mot town (Nguyen Van Nam, 2010: 23, 24). Housing and other social issues have posed management questions to Binh Duong authorities for the stabilization of worker life, and particularly the social security for workers and their families (Binh Duong Provincial People's Committee (Binh Duong's PPC), 2019).

The article provides an analysis of two prominent issues regarding the marriage and family life of workers in Song Than Industrial Park: (i) workers' partner selection and marriage life; and (ii) workers' family life. The analysis is aided with 312 questionnaires for workers in Song Than industrial park. There were also seminars, focused group discussions (FGDs) and

key informant interviews (KIIs) involving workers, landlords, and trade union officers from enterprises.

1. Spouse selection and marriage life

According to the survey by Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, 20.1% of the surveyed workers were unmarried for the following reasons: not owning a house (23.3%), unstable employment and income (17.7%), and not wanting to get married (23.4%) (as cited in Bui Phuong Chi, 2016). One among causes for workers for not wanting marriage was obstacles to friend making in the industrial environment. Apart from the working pressure, their friends and acquaintances were only from the industrial park, restricting their choices of partners for marriage. Moreover, difficulties of accommodation, living facilities, and low incomes also affected greatly workers' selection of partners.

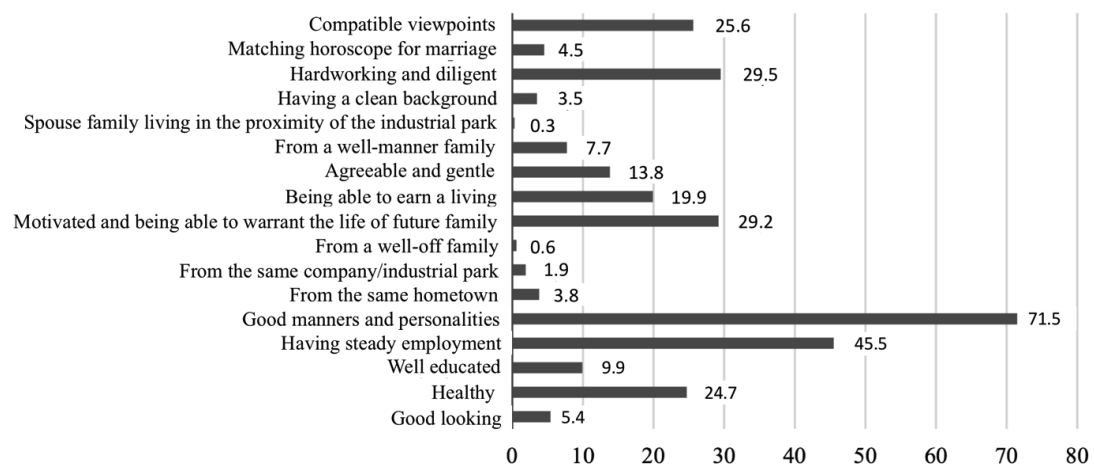
Data analysis reveals workers' selection of their spouse is mainly attached to economic issues and ethical qualities, followed by health conditions. There were six priorities out of 17 criteria for spouse selection, including having good manners and personalities (71.5%), having steady employment (45.5%), being industrious (29.5%), being motivated and able to warrant the life of future family (29.2%), and compatible viewpoints (25.6%) (Figure 1).

Workers make friend and date in different spaces. Most of them made friends with other workers of the same firms and the same industrial parks. Some acquainted with their partners at social events or through traveling, matchmakers, or social networking sites. Only a small number of

them had their dates and marriages arranged by parents (3.2%) (Figure 2).

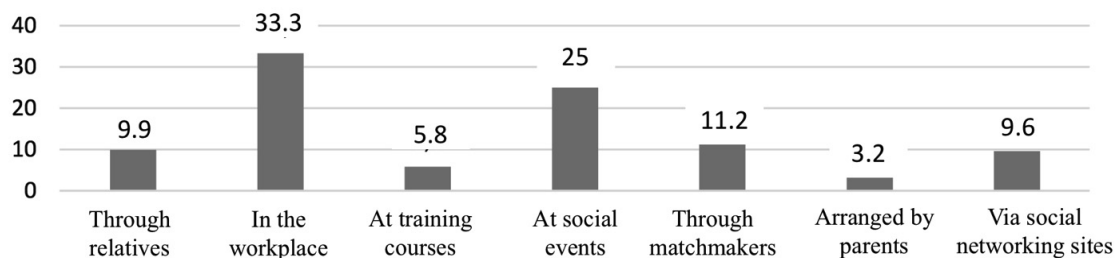
ratio of seven to three,” said a union officer at an FDG with the provincial trade union.

Figure 1. Industrial workers' criteria for spouse selection (n = 312; %)



Source: Authors' calculations from the survey results, 2019.

Figure 2. Reasons for getting acquainted



Source: Authors' calculations from the survey results, 2019.

The workers' spouse selections were considerably limited in practice. While not only women outnumber men in industrial parks, their poor cultural and spiritual life and low living standard also restrict workers' choices. Female workers therefore often have less opportunities for marriage than their male counterparts. "As for marriage and family life of workers in industrial parks, it is more difficult for females than males to find a partner because they are dominant in number at the current

The average work day in the industrial park lasts for nine hours and might be up to 11-12 hours if working overtime. Thus, most employees spend time after work resting and recuperating. Chances of workers going out and dating are very few also due to the shortage of either public spaces for entertainment and socializing activities for workers. "I am working 10 to 12 hours per day for a timber processor. After work, I only sleep and do not have time to go out and even do not know where

to go during my off-shift hours. Here is distant from parks and the city while there are no entertainment spots nearby or local events for friend-making. So, I do not have any acquaintances and just go home from work and sleep for recovery” (Male, aged 24, migrant worker from Ca Mau province.)

A high proportion of couples with registered marriage (91.3%) was evidenced by survey results. However, it is hard to confirm whether before or after marriage registration had they started to cohabit. FDGs and KIIs with firm managers reveal premarital cohabitation is quite popular among workers. “The current situation of workers’ relationships is worrying. Many couples live together and do not register for marriage. A prolonged cohabitation without resulting in a marriage is very common. Consequently, many female workers have become single mothers or had abortion, creating a double burden on their shoulders” (FDG with labor union officers). Most workers, due to low income, prefer shared housing with one or many others to reduce living costs. Survey results show 74.1% of the respondents in Song Than industrial park are migrant workers from outside Binh Duong. A majority of them came from the Southwest provinces, such as Tien Giang, An Giang, Can Tho and Ca Mau, while some others from the Central provinces like Nghe An and Quang Binh. When first arrived in Binh Duong, they often gathered in large groups living in small inns to find jobs. There were even up to five or six people sharing a room of only 10 square meters with modest furniture.

Cohabiting couples often started to know each other through their acquaintances in those inns. “Rooms in here are always occupied. Renters were initially countrymen living together, then they split to cohabit with their partners in private rent rooms. They live like husband and wife without a wedding or marriage registration. Some couples last for several months, some for a few years and then broke up. They just live a temporary life like that” (Female, aged 64, landlord). The marriage life of the workers in Song Than industrial park faces many critical issues. The instabilities in their life, in fact, have affected greatly their spiritual life and work performance.

2. Family life

Family arrangement forms of industrial workers vary. A significant number of respondents were living with their parents,

Table 1. Industrial workers’ family arrangement forms

Family arrangement form	Number of respondents	Proportion (%)
Cohabitation	10	3.1
Married couples living together in their own house	195	62.5
Single parent	16	5.1
Married couples living apart	16	5.1
Living with parents	75	24
Total	312	100

Source: Authors’ calculations from the survey results, 2019

including those who owned or rent a residence. Married couples living together in their own house accounted for 62.5% of the total respondents while those living apart from each other made up 5.1%. Single parents and cohabitating couples represented 5.1% and 3.1% respectively (Table 1).

The family life of workers in industrial parks is also challenging. On average, a worker earns VND 5.2 million per month (Binh Duong's PPC, 2019), with overtime wage included. Those who work for foreign companies, their work day plus overtime is around 10-12 hours. The average monthly income of the surveyed workers is VND 9.5 million. However, there is a significant difference in earnings of office workers (VND 12 million/person/month) and factory workers (VND 7.8 million/person/month).

More than half of the survey respondents (51.6%) already have a residence while the rest of them (48.4%) are paying rent.

Among those who own a house, only 9.3% are living in private and permanent houses and 39.4% living in private and semi-permanent houses. Most of them can afford fundamental living amenities for their families. A smaller number of workers with rented accommodation also have such facilities in their home, like computers (15.9%), water heaters (2.6%), air conditioners (10.6%) (Table 2).

As for living expenses, workers living in rented residence have to pay an average rent of VND 1.5 million per room monthly, excluding charges of power, water, and other services. In order to cut costs, they often share room with their coworkers or countrymen. A couple who have been long working in Binh Duong, they have two children and are living with the husband's mother and their younger siblings to save money and to be assisted with homecare of their children. It is noticeable that in such difficulty conditions the cohabitation among unmarried couples is popular, especially

Table 2. Industrial workers' housing types and living amenities

Housing type	Number of respondents	%	Living amenities (%)				
			TV ***	Computer ***	Smart phone **	Water heater ***	Air conditioner ***
Private and permanent	29	9.3	89.6	86.0	96.4	71.4	82.1
Private and semi-permanent	123	39.4	90.2	60.2	95.1	52.8	69.1
Private and impermanent	9	2.9	55.6	44.4	66.7	55.6	55.6
Rented	151	48.4	38.7	15.9	96.0	2.6	10.6

Statistical significance: ***<0.01; **<0.05

Source: Authors' calculations from survey results, 2019.

in the areas close to the industrial park (Binh Duong's PPC, 2019). Our survey in Song Than indicates industrial workers are still striving for their family life. "The workers' current struggle is for their daily bread and butter, children's schooling fees, remittances to family in hometowns, savings, health care, and so forth. A lot of expenses to cover so they have to live a very economical life" (Seminar at provincial level).

Concerning the workers' relations with their hometowns, their visits back home are not frequent: 34% of them made several visits per year; 25.5% for once a year; 14.4% for none in the previous year; and 11.8% for several visits per month. Many workers did not send remittances home (31.1%), some sent it monthly (28.9%), and others for once in several months (28.1%). At the average level of income, about 90.3% of surveyed workers reported to have a living income, 8.3% had savings, and only 1.4% made insufficient for living. Facing many difficulties, workers still have a positive outlook when migrating to work in Binh Duong's industrial parks. They saw their life here much better than in their hometown because their family members have employment, even as workers, and have monthly incomes, though low. "The living in here is better than in my hometown when my children have jobs and monthly incomes. Back at home, sometimes they could not make a penny and were unemployed for a month... Our house there was also shabby and surrounded with mud. Here our living space, though a little cramped, is more

comfortable and cleaner without roof leaks. Our daily meals have more foods, much better than when we were in our hometown" (Male, aged 57, Binh Chuan ward, migrant worker from Ca Mau province).

Another issue about the workers' family life is the increasing number of single mothers and cohabitating couples. "The current situation of workers' family life is worrying. Not many cases of divorce but breaking up is common. Some workers live together and do not want to register for marriage because they are afraid of being legally bound. Many couples cohabitated for a while and then broke up. Women, particularly those with pregnancy and giving birth alone, often suffer consequences. Some chose to have a termination at private clinics. The current tendency is disregarding marriage registration and not knowing fully about partners, leading to higher number of single mothers" (FDG with labor union officers).

According to Nguyen Hoang Bao Tran (2020), most single-mom workers in Song Than were as young as under 35. A major part of them (65%) had one child; 86.7% having children under 6; 47.3% having children outside marriage; 30.7% being separated and divorced; and 75% migrating from outside Binh Duong. Single-mom workers in recent years tend to increase in number.

Our survey results confirm the situation. "There are many cases of young female workers undergoing abortion, or being pregnant and giving birth and then

abandoning their children in this ward. While disposing trash the other day, I was told by the trash collectors that they found a plastic bag with a dead premature baby inside. It happens quite often here, mainly to young female workers from remote provinces, who have no support or relatives and fell in love-trap and got pregnant. No one to rely on, so they had to abandon their babies” (Female, aged 67, Binh Chuan ward, landlord).

The survey by Binh Duong’s Labor Confederation (2019) showed 49% of workers saying number of people having premarital sexual relationships had increased; 38.5% thinking there was an increase in premarital abortion; 24.6% saying there were people getting married and not having children due to financial difficulties; 19.3% thinking there were more and more bachelors; 20.2% thinking there were female workers giving birth and raising children alone; and 11.7% thinking there were couples who had children but did not register for marriage.

3. Discussion and conclusion

It can be seen that many obstacles face industrial workers, especially the migrants from outside Binh Duong province. Although they have employment, incomes and a better living than in their hometowns, to have “a stable settlement and a sustainable family” remains a challenge to migrant workers. They have to bear many pressures and disadvantages and lack also opportunities for marriage and finding their suitable mates. Difficulties in the life of workers, especially the inferior groups living temporarily in inns, lead to

significant disadvantages, particularly for female migrant workers (Nguyen Manh Thang, 2016).

Both physical and mental obstacles in marriage and family life have affected workers’ psychology, growing their distrust in love, marriage and family life. The cohabitation of workers without getting married reflects a way that they seek temporary support from each other in their daily life. Among female workers with premarital cohabitation, many had and have encountered issues like pregnancy, abortion, or single-parentship, which tend to become more common in recent years.

There is a significant disparity between the groups of workers owning house and paying rent. Those who live in their own houses often have more living amenities than those who live in rental accommodation. Most workers who are paying rent migrate from other provinces. Their disadvantages, especially for female migrant workers, have become barriers to their development in industrial parks. Meanwhile, policies and regulations over unmarried cohabitation with consequences like abortion of mature fetus, abandonment of newborns, or gender-based violence have not been fully developed. There is also an absence of policies to support migrant workers in health care and child care as well as in recreation activities. Migrant workers in industrial parks in general and in Binh Duong in particular still have to carry those burdens themselves.

The current situation of marriage and family life of workers in Song Than industrial park is an evidence for the importance of

policies for supporting industrial workers' families. In addition to paying attention to employments and incomes for workers in industrial parks and export processing zones, welfare policies concerning their marriage and family life should be also taken into account. It is necessary to ensure workers' opportunities to have a stable life and accessibility to the government's sponsorship policies □

References

1. Bui Phuong Chi (2016), *Solutions to improving the quality of marriage and family life of workers in today's industrial parks*, Vietnam General Confederation of Labor research project, No. XH/ TLĐ.2015.04.
2. Binh Duong's Labor Confederation (2019), *Report on trade unions in industrial parks in 2019*.
3. Nguyen Van Nam (2010), *Development of Binh Duong's workforce: current situation and solutions*, Binh Duong's Labor Confederation research project.
4. Nguyen Manh Thang (2016), *Critical issues facing workers in industrial parks and export processing zones: current situation and solutions*, Vietnam General Confederation of Labor research project, No. XH/TLĐ.2015.03.
5. Nguyen Hoang Bao Tran (2020), *Life of single-mother workers in industrial parks from the perspective of social policy: a case study of Song Than industrial park in Binh Duong province*, Doctoral thesis, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences.
6. Binh Duong Provincial People's Committee (2019), *Report on socioeconomic and cultural situation of Binh Duong province in 2019*.
7. Hoa Huu Van et al., (2017), *Family education for children in industrial parks*, Ministry-level research project, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.