Making a Living in Rural Vietnam from (Im)mobile Livelihoods: a Case of Women’s Migration
Vu Thi Thao*
Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT
Women’s labour has come to play a remarkable role in Vietnam’s development since the introduction of Đổi Mới renovation in the 1980s. Although many rural households send their women members to cities to seek an off-farm income, other households seem to be immobile. Drawing on a case study of women’s migration in two rural villages located in the Red River Delta, this paper explores how mobility, immobility, and gendered life courses interact in shaping household livelihoods. The findings highlight the intermingling of mobility and immobility in constructing the livelihoods of both mover and stayer households over the gendered life course. Although women work in the informal sector, their migration not only secures but also enhances household livelihoods. The paper also reveals the diverse backgrounds of stayer households and their activeness in making a living. Given its emphasis on gendered life courses, the paper provides a more nuanced understanding of the economic impacts of migration at the household level. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The migration of women has considerably changed the lives of many rural households in the villages of Binh Ho and Phu Khe, located in the Red River Delta, 40 km southwest of Hanoi. The most visible change is housing. Two-storey and three-storey houses have increasingly been constructed by migrant households. In recent years, migrants have started a trend of building new houses with running water, hand wash sinks, and flush toilets. These houses symbolise the families’ wealth.

Like many rural areas of Vietnam, local households face severe pressures of land shortages, epidemic animal diseases, frequent price fluctuations on agricultural products, and lack of financial credit. Also, there are few options for off-farm activities in local communities. Meanwhile, the market reforms in the 1980s known as Đổi Mới created new employment opportunities in export-oriented manufacturing, trade, and services in urban areas. Consequently, many households seek jobs in large cities such as Hanoi to diversify their livelihoods (Dang et al., 2003; Resurreccion and Ha, 2007; Pham and Hill, 2008). In the late 1990s, a markedly increasing flow of rural farmers migrating to large cities was witnessed (Dang et al., 2003). Over the 5-year period of 2004–2009, there were 3.4 million interprovincial migrants, accounting for nearly 4% of the country’s population. Of which, rural–urban migrants make up the highest proportion (45%), and female migrants slightly dominated all migration flows (Author calculated from GSO, 2010). The increasing participation of women in rural–urban migration is due to labour markets mostly favouring female workers. Women constitute the majority of workers in light manufacturing, health, and social work (Ha and Ha, 2001;...
Dang et al., 2003; ActionAid, 2005) as they do in many occupations in the informal sector (Ha and Ha, 2001; Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Duong, 2007; Resurreccion and Ha, 2007).

The above phenomenon has been found common in Southeast and East Asia. In recent decades, the region has experienced a remarkable increase in rural–urban female migration, which has resulted from an increasing demand for female workers because of the relocation of low-skill manufacturing operations, rapid industrialization, and urbanisation. Whereas large numbers of young female migrants find their jobs in the assembly and garment industries (Fan, 2003; Elmhirst, 2007; Fernandez-Kelly, 2007), their more mature counterparts often end up in other types of jobs in the informal sector (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Jacka, 2005). Although women’s migration plays a crucial role in household livelihoods, the migration of women, especially of those working in the informal sector, is often assumed to be a family survival strategy (Ha and Ha, 2001; Clawn, 2002; Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Jacka, 2005; Resurreccion and Ha, 2007).

Yet this interpretation is based on ‘snapshot’ studies, which likely overlook the consequences of women’s migration on household livelihoods. As De Haas (2008) argued, explorations of migration need to pay more attention to the different roles that migration plays in successive stages of family life courses. Similarly, De Jong and Graefe (2008) stated that the interaction of the family life course and migration events produces new knowledge about the economic impacts of migration on families.

It is often claimed that migration opportunities are not open to all. Those left behind or staying put in rural areas are likely to be the poor. However, many factors other than financial reasons may hinder households in adopting migration as one of their livelihood strategies (Moen and Wethington, 1992; Kothari, 2002; Kothari, 2003). Also, whether a household stays put or is on the move varies across the family life course (Rogaly, 2003). Yet most studies imply that individuals and households are compelled to remain in villages; it is not a matter of choice (Kothari, 2003; de Haas, 2008).

The central concern of this paper is to explore how mobility, immobility, and gendered life courses interact in shaping household livelihoods. To achieve this goal, I ask: What characterises the migration patterns of female migrants and how it impacts on household livelihoods over the gendered life course? What are the linkages between migrant and stayer households? How do stayer households make their living? The analysis is based on a case study of women’s migration to Hanoi from two rural villages, Binh Ho and Phu Khe, located in the Red River Delta of Vietnam. The fieldwork was carried out in the villages and Hanoi from 2008 to 2010. The paper begins by examining the literature on the intersection of life courses, women’s migration, and household livelihoods. It then presents the methodological approach adopted before turning to the analyses of how gendered life courses influence women’s migration and its impacts on household livelihoods, and how stayer households make their livings. In conclusion, the paper highlights the complex dynamics of (im)mobility in shaping household livelihoods over the gendered life course.

LIFE COURSES, WOMEN’S MIGRATION, AND HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOODS

Migration is seen as ‘an action in time’ (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993). This explains why a life course approach, with its time perspective, is increasingly gaining importance in migration research. The life course approach assumes that social change and the movement of individuals through time and place are interdependent. An individual’s life course is shaped by not only social norms and cultural meanings but also interpersonal commitments (Heinz and Kruger, 2001). Time, place, human agency, and ‘linked lives’ elements make this approach appropriate in migration studies (Jasso, 2003). According to De Jong and Graefe (2008), the life course approach to migration views the causes and consequences of migration behaviour as the results of transitions in family and socio-economic status occurring over the life course. As families make the transition from one stage of the life course to another, family resources tend to undergo a reallocation to accommodate the changes in family circumstances, demands, priorities, and preferences (Wilkes, 1995; Malmberg and Tegenu, 2007); subsequently, the needs and roles of individual family members also change (Bailey and Boyle, 2004). As a result, the transition in family life courses causes...
changes in the motivations and consequences of migration (Bailey and Boyle, 2004; Hapke and Ayyankeril, 2004; De Jong and Graefe, 2008; Geist and McManus, 2008) and influences who takes responsibility for migration (Pacione, 2009). Therefore, family life course transitions are often a key momentum to migration behaviour (Kobayashi and Preston, 2007).

However, life course researchers often neglect gender dimensions in their analyses. They have a tendency to follow simple sequences of stages of individual life courses standardised by social institutions, with little distinction between men’s and women’s life courses (Kruger and Levy, 2001). Hence, there is a need to incorporate gender and family life courses, especially in studying women’s migration (Kruger and Levy, 2001; Moen, 2010). Research by Fan (2003) in China has shown that for single rural Chinese female migrants, getting married usually translates into returning to the village and the termination of their urban migration work, whereas their male counterparts do not follow this pattern. Drawing from a study in southern India, Hapke and Ayyankeril (2004) also found that female fish traders tend to work less continuously over their life course. They often stop working for several years upon marriage, then returning after childbirths and care for young children. Similarly, it is not uncommon that female porter migrants in Ghana move back to their village for childbirths then return to the city (Awumbila and Ardayo-Schandorf, 2008). In her study of migration from a rural village in Indonesia, Rodenburg (1997) found that fewer married women with children were involved in migration, even though they had migrated before their marriage. They could not leave their children in the care of their husbands; only if other female members were able to take over this task could they migrate again. Women therefore usually experience an interruption in migration during their life course because of their gender roles (Heinz and Kruger, 2001; Hapke and Ayyankeril, 2004). The interruption of women’s migration raises an interesting question of how mobility, immobility, and gendered life courses interact in shaping household livelihoods.

As migration is a key element of households’ livelihood strategies to diversify sources of income and to minimise risks (Stark, 1991; McDowell and De Haan, 1997; Massey et al., 1998; Rigg, 2006), women’s migration is a part of household livelihoods as well. According to Ellis (2000), household livelihoods are shaped by institutions, social relations, and economic opportunities. A livelihood comprises the assets, the activities, and the access to these, which jointly determine the living gained by the household. Hence, a household’s livelihood diversification strategies may lead to an accumulation of assets or may only meet the household’s immediate needs for survival. According to Jensen and Peppard’s study (2003), an annual remittance of a woman street vendor in Hanoi not only met the basic needs of a family of four but exceeded them by one-fourth. Migration and remittances also enhance well-being and improve the economic status of migrant households (de Haas, 2007). Some households acquire and farm more land, whereas others are able to invest remittances in husbandry, fishery, and forestry (Ping and Shao-hua, 2008). Therefore, migration is considered to be not only a means of survival but also part of an accumulated livelihood strategy, involving investments in production and education. However, the impacts of migration on household livelihoods are far from uniform. Migration does not improve income security, and/or it continues as a survival strategy (Clawn, 2002; Awumbila and Ardayo-Schandorf, 2008). Poor households may fall into further debts because the remittances cannot pay off for migration expenses during moving and transit periods (Mosse et al., 2002). Also, remittances are mainly used for consumptions, with a little investment in productive activities (Islam, 1991).

Although migration is not an option for all households (Kothari, 2003; Rogaly, 2003; de Haas, 2008), it does impact the livelihoods of those households that stay put as migration contributes to the diversification of livelihood activities in local communities. Much evidence shows that remittances are invested in house building, thus providing construction and carpenter jobs for non-migrant households (Skeldon, 1997). Returned migrants have also established enterprises in their hometowns that absorb thousands of local surplus rural labourers (Murphy, 1999; Zhu, 2003). Furthermore, migration provides households with a means of staying put in villages. With remittances from previous migration, households can make a living in local communities (Rafique et al., 2006). Yet the outcomes of
migration depend on the conditions under which it takes place and the forms of migration (De Haan, 1999).

The preceding summary has discussed the interaction of family life courses, women’s migration, and household livelihoods. In the following sections, I examine how gendered life courses, mobility, and immobility interact in shaping household livelihoods. This emphasis on family life courses is increasingly gaining in importance in population mobility literature; however, gendered life courses may provide a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of migration in relation to household livelihoods. Before turning to the analyses, I briefly introduce the location and methodology of the study.

LOCATION AND METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in the villages of Binh Ho and Phu Khe in Hung Yen province, located in the Red River Delta, and Hanoi city, the destination of migrants from Hung Yen (Figure 1). Hanoi city was selected because it is the most attractive destination in Northern Vietnam, having drawn an increasing number of female migrants from surrounding provinces. As estimated, the number of migrants to Hanoi in 2010 alone was almost equivalent to the number of migrants to the city in the period 1994–1999 (UBNDTHPHN, 2010). Hung Yen province has been well known as a source of migration. In the period of 2004–2009, the province had experienced a considerable rate of inter-provincial out-migration, with a high prevalence of female migrants. A majority of women migrants move to Hanoi city. Hung Yen has faced high population pressure and a rapid urbanisation process, which have been found common in many rural areas of Vietnam. The province’s population density ranked the third in the entire country (GSO, 2010). During the period 1996–2003, Hung Yen’s annual urban population growth rate was 26% (GSO, 2006). As of 2009, the province had

Figure 1. The location of study sites.
six industrial zones that comprise a total area of more than 1,000 ha (Ngoc, 2009). The loss of agricultural land for urbanisation has affected 31,000 households (Ngan, 2008). Additionally, most farmers are unqualified to work at factories in the industrial zones. In the face of the increasing land shortages, lack of skills, and un(der)employment, thousands migrate to Hanoi to seek work because of well-established social networks between Hanoi and Hung Yen, the flexibility of informal jobs, and the employment opportunities in Hanoi’s labour market (Agergaard and Thao, 2011).

Binh Ho and Phu Khe villages characterised by a high prevalence of female migrants to Hanoi city were selected. Binh Ho is a medium-sized village with 464 households (1,780 people) and ranked an average level of socio-economic development, whereas Phu Khe is much smaller with only 256 households (1,056 people) and has a relatively high socio-economic development. These villages are therefore representative for a diversity of rural areas. Yet the two villages have many commonalities. First, the households often consist of four to five members and two-thirds of them are nuclear families. Therefore, the terms ‘family’ and ‘household’ are used interchangeably in this paper. Second, the households in both villages face land shortages, though Binh Ho has a larger area of agricultural land per capita compared to Phu Khe: 1.9 and 0.85 sào (1 sào equals 360 m²), respectively. Young families face more severe land shortages because their children born after 1 April 1993 (when the land allocation policy was implemented) are not allocated land. Third, migration and agriculture (primarily rice production) are crucial elements in the livelihoods of many households. The rural–urban out-migration rate is high in the two villages. More than two-thirds of the households have at least one member who is currently practising migration in Phu Khe; the same is true to half of the households in Binh Ho (focus group discussions with local authorities, 2009).

There are also many commonalities in migration characteristics from the two villages. First, the distance from the villages to Hanoi can be covered by car within 1.5 hours. However, for reasons of costs and time, people employed in Hanoi do not commute but stay in the city on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. Second, women migrants outnumber their men counterparts. Almost all of the female migrants are married. Third, in Hanoi, migrants from the villages work in the informal sector. In Phu Khe, female migrants work as traders and street vendors, and their male counterparts work as fruit porters and taxi drivers. In Binh Ho, both male and female migrants work as fruit and fish porters (focus group discussions with local authorities and women migrants, 2008–2009).

The fieldwork was conducted over a total of 8 months in two periods in 2008–2010. It started in the villages, then simultaneously in both the villages and Hanoi. A mixed methods approach to collecting data was adopted to capture the complex consequences of migration. The purpose of a survey of 121 households randomly selected was to identify household characteristics in terms of demography, migration, assets, and livelihood activities. The survey also served to select 35 married women migrants for in-depth interviews aiming to understanding their migration process and patterns, as well as it impacts on household livelihoods. Additionally, I undertook in-depth interviews with six returned women migrants. All the in-depth interviews were undertaken by the author, a native Vietnamese speaker, and took place at a respondent’s house in the villages, except for 18 interviews with current female migrants carried out in Hanoi city. In each village, four focus group discussions were held with four groups of 5 to 10 participants: male and female local authorities, women from non-migrant households, female migrants, and children of migrant and non-migrant households. Participants in children’s group were from 10 to 18 years old; all the other groups ranged in age from 30 to 60 years. The discussion with children was conducted in a presence of the village’s guardian – the head of Women’s Union and agreed by their parents. All the interviews and focus group discussions were note-taking as the respondents were more comfortable without being tape-recorded.

To date, there is no unifying definition of migration. Obviously, migration involves the mobility of a person between two places for a certain period, yet it is problematic to define how far and how long that mobility is considered migration (Boyle et al., 1998). This suggests a difficulty of making a clear cut between mobility and immobility. Furthermore, it would be misleading to do so because mobility and immobility is intermingled (as we will see in the case...
study). Nevertheless, in this paper, migration is defined as ‘the movement of a person from rural to urban areas to seek work. The movement lasts for at least 3 months and involves crossing provincial boundaries’. This paper aims to understand the impacts of migration for household livelihoods; thus, it concerns only migration for work purpose. As mentioned earlier, rural–urban migration usually involves provincial border crossing and has been identified as the main flow of internal migration in Vietnam. Although restrictions on rural–urban population movement have been loosening, rural–urban migration is often regarded as negative issues by policy decision makers. The government is still attempting to restrict this mobility form (Chinh phu, 2007). This paper therefore particularly concerns consequences of this migration flow.

WOMEN’S MIGRATION OVER THE FAMILY LIFE COURSE

Women are strongly tied to reproductive responsibility. Therefore children have significant consequences for the arrangement of families’ production and reproduction tasks, which considerably affect families’ labour availability as well as needs for migration. As children grow older, they are more likely to participate in migration decisions (Miller, 1976) and to take responsibility for migration (Pacione, 2009). Of the 35 married women migrants interviewed in the villages of Binh Ho and Phu Khe, two-thirds interrupted their migration because of childbearing, and the rest had ended their childbearing before first migration. Hence, a transition in the family life course is based on the development of children to illustrate the life course of women’s migration. It is worthwhile to note that married migrant women often make one or two home visits a month.

The data presented in Table 1 is a common case synthesised from the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews with the female migrants. As can be seen in Table 1, at the earliest stage of the family life cycle, there is little room for migration until a couple of years after the wife gives birth to the first child. At this point, the wife/mother migrates to Hanoi city while her husband stays in the village to do agricultural work and takes care of the child. After migrating for several years, the wife returns to the village to give birth to the second child. The family stops pursuing migration for at least 2 years; then, the wife migrates again. Similarly, her migration is interrupted by subsequent childbirths. When the eldest child drops out of high school or finishes it but is not able to enter university, which often happens in the villages, he or she joins the mother on her migration. Other younger siblings (if they fail in their education) join and take the older children’s places on the migration when the older ones move out of the natal family to form their own families (see also Pacione, 2009). In the case of the children pursuing university degrees, there is a little demand for the family to continue to engage in migration after the children graduate. Hence, the mother returns permanently to the village. Regardless of her children’s education, at the late cycle, the mother will return permanently to the village because of old age and responsibilities towards grandchildren; thus, families are more likely to stay put at this stage (Focus group discussion with women migrants, 2008–2009; Female migrant interviews, 2009).

Nga and her husband migrated together to Hanoi in 1993 when their two sons were 7 and 6. The sons were looked after by the grandparents who lived next door. One year later, Nga returned to the village together with her husband to give birth to their third child. Almost two years later, after she had weaned her baby, she and her husband re-migrated to Hanoi. In 1998, when their first son entered secondary school, they decided that one of them must return to the village to take care of their children. Her husband returned because he earned less than Nga. Unfortunately, their children’s education was not successful. The first son ended his education in grade 8 when he was 14. He migrated to the south of Vietnam at age 18. The last two children dropped out of school in grade 9. The second son migrated to Hanoi when he was 21. He is working as a taxi driver. The daughter joined the mother’s migration right after she dropped out of school. Currently, Nga, her second son and her daughter stay together in one lodging room in Hanoi. (Interview summary, Nga, 42-year-old lime trader)
These life course stages in Table 1 were a sort of common experience of female migrants. Yet there exist some diverts from this pattern. For instance, a newly married couple migrates together, and the wife returns to the village for childbirth while her husband remains in the city; or a father may also take a responsibility to migrate, especially when the children enter university as education expenses are too high that mother’s remittance alone cannot cover them. Besides childbirths, there are other family events and strategies that interrupt women’s migration such as caring for sick and elderly family members, divorce, death, or pursuing livelihood opportunities locally than to remittance investment. Therefore, women’s migration is usually interrupted over the family life course. This implies that the role of women’s migration changes throughout the gendered life course. Working in the informal sector and well-developed social networks help migrant women mitigate the difficulties of labour market re-entry.

### The Life of Women Migrants’ Households

#### Uses and Impacts of Remittance

Women migrants’ households spend a large share of remittances on children’s education because providing their children with favourable education conditions is their top priority. In addition to the classes organised by schools, families often send their children to private tutor classes (Focus group discussions with women migrants, 2008–2009). Their children also receive new school supplies each school year. Some households even pay children’s tuition fees for the whole school year, even though this is not required by schools. Conversely, children of non-migrant households nervously ask their parents to pay tuition fees. They have to inform their parents well in advance about when the fees are due so their parents can manage to pay them (Focus group discussions with children, 2010). In general, children of women migrants’ households receive better material care for education than those of non-migrant households.

Y and her husband have been migrating to Hanoi since 1994. They have invested heavily in their children’s education. Their twin sons are studying at universities in Hanoi. The youngest son is in grade 8. In 2009, they spent well above 50 million VND on the twins’ education expenses. They also bought one desktop computer and one laptop for them. Y’s family is still living in a 30 square metre semi-concrete house built before 1990. Except for a motorbike, domestic facilities in her house are of little value. (Interview summary, Y, 44-year-old fruit porter)

Mai is a 56-year-old return migrant. She migrated for 14 years, from 1992 to 2005. Similar to Y’s family, her family still lives in a
semi-concrete house with poor domestic facilities. Most of her remittances were invested in the education of her son, who graduated from Hanoi University of Technology in 2005. The same year, he got a job at a private computer company, which provides Mai’s family with a much better secure income source. The son asked Mai to return to the village because he can support the family now. (Interview summary)

It seems that Y’s and Mai’s migration over more than a decade has not improved their families’ financial situations. This is often the case for those households whose member(s) are pursuing education at high schools and universities. Family members staying behind in the villages may never receive remittances because they are sent directly to members studying in cities. However, it is incorrect to conclude that migration makes no impact on those households’ livelihoods because the positive effects of remittance investments in children’s education on household livelihoods are seen in the long term, as in the case of Mai’s family. In this case, migration is an accumulated livelihood strategy for households.

Remittances are also prioritised to cover daily expenses and agricultural inputs. With remittances, women migrants’ households can spend comfortably on food, whereas most non-migrant households have a tight food budget and often prioritise better food only for their children. Women migrants’ household also use remittances to hire labour for agricultural work, fertilisers and seedlings (Focus group discussions with women migrants, 2008–2009).

Our meals have improved. For instance, if I go shopping for food with a budget of 10,000 VND for pork and the butcher cuts a quantity of meat which costs 15,000 VND I still can take it. If I stayed in the village, I would have to ask the butcher to sell me exactly 10,000 VND of pork. (Tuyet, 42, cook)

For those households whose member(s) has/have been away on migration for only a couple of months, the remittances are usually small. Therefore, accumulations are barely made after the children’s education costs and daily expenses have been covered and agricultural inputs have been purchased. Only after the migrants have settled more permanently in Hanoi and moved up in the occupation hierarchy can the households make accumulations (see also de Haas, 2007). Note that upward occupation mobility differs from migration streams. Women porters from Binh Ho village rarely move up the occupation ladder because of the nature of the porter job, which helps them maintain their reproductive role (see also Agergaard and Thao, 2011). In contrast, in Phu Khe, traders have more likely improved their occupation from petty traders/street vendors to wholesale traders. This upward occupation mobility does not hinder their reproductive role as they remain self-employed. They use part of their accumulations to further improve their occupation and create a better start-up job for their children. Women migrants’ households also make accumulations from selling rice because remittances cover all agricultural inputs.

Hen worked as a street vendor selling ginger, garlic, and onions for the first 15 years, until she rented a kiosk. She has become a wholesale trader selling dried fish at her own kiosk for the last 10 years. Hen said, ‘Our lives have changed a lot since I migrated. We built two houses after 10 years of migration. In the following years, we bought three motorbikes. We purchased furniture and televisions. Recently we bought a kiosk at the Long Bien market to rent out. It costed 100 million VND. All of it came from my migration’. (Interview summary, Hen, a 55-year-old fish trader)

It is usually after 2–3 years of continuous migration that women migrant households start investing remittances in domestic facilities. After 5–10 years of migration, they spend accumulation remittances on improving their housing while still continuing to cover their essential needs (Focus group discussions with women migrants, 2008–2009, Household survey data, 2008). However, the strategies of remittance investment also depend on transitions of the families as family priorities and demands shift (see also Conway and Cohen, 1998). As described earlier, when children are at school, remittances are used to pay for the children’s education. After the children drop out of school or finish high school,
families use accumulation remittances on housing improvements, creating employment for children and enlarging animal husbandry production. In the later stages, they invest the remittances in their children’s weddings and savings for old age.

Before the children joined Nga’s migration, her family used remittances on children’s education, daily expenditures, agriculture inputs and housing construction. When the children dropped out of school and migrated, the family continued to spend remittances on daily expenses, building a new bathroom with a flush toilet, and to save for the children’s weddings and for Nga’s and her husband’s old age. They also spent 20 million VND on the second son’s training as a taxi driver. (The family rented out all their agricultural land when the father was left alone in the village). (Interview summary, Nga, 42-year-old, lime trader)

In brief, the consequences of women’s migration for household livelihoods change over family life courses because strategies of remittance investment shift. Also, the returns of women migrants’ households’ heavy investments of remittances in children’s education are seen in a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, migration of women not only secures but also enhances household livelihoods.

Livelihood Comparison of Women Migrants’ and Non-migrant Households

Drawing from a survey of 121 households, this section aims to paint a broader picture of how women’s migration impacts household livelihoods. Before turning to the livelihood comparison between households with female migrants and households without migrants, I will briefly discuss some differentials in household assets among women migrants’ households, men migrants’ households, households in which both women and men migrate, and non-migrant households. As can be seen in Table 2, in terms of the assets owned by households, migrants’ households are better off than those of their non-migrant counterparts. Households where both women and men migrate are the wealthiest because their households receive remittances from more than one migrant. Men migrants’ households are less wealthy than households where both women and men migrate but better off than women migrants’ households because men migrants are paid more than their women counterparts because of their higher ranking occupations, for example, as drivers and factory workers. Also, some of women migrants’ households consist only of the mother and her children; thus, there are fewer earners – sometimes only one.

Even so, women’s migration has considerably enhanced household livelihoods. Table 2 shows that women migrants’ households are more likely than non-migrant households to live in concrete houses of one to two storeys. To build houses, migrant households use accumulated savings from remittances and agriculture, with a large share of construction costs financed by the former. Yet some women migrants’ households, particularly those in which the woman migrant is a wholesale trader, do not invest remittances in building new houses. Instead, they have bought or plan to buy houses in Hanoi.

Women’s migration does improve their households’ access to communication and transportation assets in comparison with non-migrant households. Except for access to television, they are more likely to own the same communication assets as non-migrant households. Among four households who do not own televisions, three are single-mother families; in the last household, the father has mental health problems. These households are among the poorest group in the villages. The women migrants’ households have started to stop using standard telephones; instead, they increasingly use mobile phones. This explains why the percentage of migrants’ households that own standard telephones is less than that of non-migrant households. Women migrants’ households also have better access to transportation assets; they are more likely to own motorbikes, bicycles, and cars than their non-migrant counterparts are. In addition to investments in the construction of housing, migrants’ households use accumulation remittances – supplemented with agricultural income – to purchase household improvements.

In terms of total cash income, migrants’ households are relatively better off than non-migrant households (Table 3). Note that remittances make up 60% of total cash income of the migrants’ households.
Table 2. Percentages of households that own housing and domestic assets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing type</th>
<th>Total households (n = 121)</th>
<th>Non-migrant households (n = 32)</th>
<th>Migrants' households (n = 89)</th>
<th>Women migrants' households (n = 49)</th>
<th>Men migrants' households (n = 21)</th>
<th>Women and men migrants' households (n = 19)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete house of 3 floors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete house of 1 floor</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tile-roof house</td>
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<td>84</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
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Main domestic equipment

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Total households (n = 121)</th>
<th>Non-migrant households (n = 32)</th>
<th>Migrants' households (n = 89)</th>
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<th>Men migrants' households (n = 21)</th>
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<td>53</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassette player</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorbike</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size (person)</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3. Differentials in income among different types of households (in percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income/year (million VND)</th>
<th>Total households (n = 121)</th>
<th>Non-migrant households (n = 32)</th>
<th>Migrants' households (n = 89)</th>
<th>Women migrants' households (n = 49)</th>
<th>Men migrants' households (n = 21)</th>
<th>Women and men migrants' households (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–15</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–45</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–60</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income (million VND)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size (person)</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


households. Again, among migrants’ households, women migrants’ households are the least wealthy but are better off than their non-migrant counterparts, earning 30% more in total cash income per year. However, in reality, it is very likely that the figure is higher because the migrants’
households tend to report an amount of remittance that is less than what they actually received (Focus group discussions with migrants and non-migrants, 2010). Moreover, more than 60% of the non-migrant households fall into the lowest income level, whereas more than 40% of the women migrants’ households do. However, non-migrant households are not absolute poor (see details in the following section). Furthermore, the income of non-migrant households is distributed unevenly, with a bigger gap between the rich and the poor. Here, the limitations of presenting snapshot results and generalisations have been indicated.

Migration contributes markedly to poverty reduction. The findings of interviews of the 35 married female migrant households in which the wives/mothers had been migrating for about 11 years indicate that above 40% of these households moved out of poverty as a result of migration. One-third of the households stated that their households are better off since the women migrated, whereas only one household claimed that this was the case when households stayed put. Although migration is the crucial element of households’ livelihoods (see also De Haan, 1999), the success of moving out of poverty and of enhancing economic status is a combination of migration and agriculture. As the village’s headman concluded: ‘We coordinate our “walk by two feet”: agriculture and migration. Thus we can achieve this sort of life!’ (Excerpt from focus group discussion with local authorities, 2008). This can be seen in the case of Thien’s family:

The livelihood activities of Thien’s family in 2008 were as follows: Thien’s second son has been migrating to Hanoi for four years. He works as a taxi driver. In the village, Thien raises four sows, which produce 40 piglets a year. Her husband is a commune official. In addition, he provides transportation services using a small ferryboat. In 2008, their family had a total cash income of 67 million VND, of which 50% came from remittances and 25% from agriculture. According to the villagers, Thien’s family is well off. Thien migrated for 12 years (1985–1997). Her family had been poor until 1990 when remittances from her migration covered most household expenses. Thien said, ‘without migration, my family would have remained poor’. (Interview summary, Thien, returned migrant)

In 2008, a small proportion of migrants from Phu Khe village who worked as street vendors had to return to the village because of the national regulations issued in 2007 that banned street vendors from selling goods in public spaces and because of harsh competition from migrants from other villages (Focus group discussion with women migrants, 2009). They claimed back their agricultural land, which had been rented out. Hence, agriculture also acts as a safety net in cases where migration fails.

STAYER HOUSEHOLDS: HOW DO THEY SURVIVE?

So far, we have seen that migration is a promising opportunity to sustain and enhance household livelihoods. However, in the high out-migrating communities of Binh Ho and Phu Khe, more than one-third of the households stay put. Why do those households not migrate? In the two villages, the social networks are well-developed because of the longue durée of migration and the high rates of out-migration. Potential migrants from the villages face few difficulties in finding employment information; they can receive help in searching for jobs and adapting into host communities (Focus group discussions with migrants and non-migrants, 2009; female migrant interview, 2008–2009). Furthermore, the financial costs of migration are relatively low; villagers can sell a couple of chickens or 10 kg of rice to finance their migration. The inexpensiveness is due to the fact that villagers engage in unskilled labour. Therefore, it is not the case that households stay put because they have no access to social networks and/or they are so poor that they cannot afford the financial costs of migration. In fact, some women villagers attempted to migrate but had to return to the villages because they could not bear the harsh life of a migrant (Focus group discussion with non-migrants, 2009; see also Agergaard and Thao, 2011).

I am in good health but I am afraid to migrate to Hanoi because I will have to compete with other migrants to get a job. . . . Living conditions are harsh. Lodging houses are dirty. No toilets! Getting these details made me afraid like that. . . . (laughs), to be honest, I have tried to migrate two to three times but each time I only stayed in Hanoi for one day, then I went back straight to the village. I am even so afraid
that I do things like this: I made an appointment with my neighbour (a migrant) that I would join her to go to Hanoi in the next morning; when she came to call for me at my house, I refused to go with her. Staying in the village, planting a couple of rice sào, not well-off but earning enough to live on. (Ha, a female farmer, 36 years of age)

Hence, some potential migrants like Ha remain in the villages because they are reluctant to engage in migration as a livelihood strategy as long as they are able to rely on alternative livelihoods in the local communities. Besides rice production, they rent more agricultural land from migrant households to cultivate rice; this is a common practice among non-migrant households, except households in the late cycle, which engage in sideline production. Although they are not well-off, they earn enough to live on. Nearly one-third of non-migrant households fall into this type (see Table 4).

Nearly one-third of non-migrant households that stay put are affluent stayers, with a total average cash income of 50 million VND (the income ranges from 31 to 96 million VND). These households have crucial and secure sources of off-farm income in the local area, which migrants’ households usually do not have access to. Among these households, some have young adult children or young couples working at a factory in town. In other households, the members are state officials and/or pensioners. Households that have no income from salaries or pensions engage in sideline production or business, for example, construction work and shopkeeping. Construction work is rapidly increasing in the villages because migrant households invest remittances in housing improvements. Additionally, migrant households increase their consumption demands of food, communication, transportation services, and hired labour for harvesting and transplanting rice. Hence, non-migrant households with capital open shops, provide taxi and motorbike taxi services, and hire out labour to meet these demands. The affluent stayer households also invest considerably in the production of sows and poultry.

Cuong’s family is staying put in Binh Ho village; they have never migrated before. His family consists of five members and three generations live together. His children are at high school and secondary school. His wife is a local teacher. Cuong does casual work as a construction worker. In addition to the 6.2 sào of agricultural land they own, they rent 1.8 sào from a neighbour who migrates year-round to Hanoi. The family raised 100 ducks for sale. In 2008, their total cash income was 38 million VND. Cuong ranked his family economy above average. (Interview summary, Cuong, 2009)

Some affluent stayer households actually have migrated in the past. With remittances, these households invest in animal production or in doing services that provide them with opportunities to earn a secure income in the local communities; thus, they are able to stay put (see also Rafique et al., 2006).

I first met Lien in Hanoi in 2008 when she was working as a fish porter. Lien first migrated to

Table 4. Livelihood strategies of non-migrant households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of non-migrant households</th>
<th>Percentage ((n = 32))</th>
<th>Livelihood activities</th>
<th>Average income/ year (million VND)</th>
<th>Previous migration (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Enough to live on’</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Rice production; sideline production</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Rice production; animal husbandry (poultry &gt; 100 heads, &gt;10 sows); factory/state work</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-mother households</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Rice production; casual work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old couple</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Rice production; financial support from children; pension</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hanoi in 1994 when she was 22 years old, leaving behind her husband and one-year-old son in the village. Her migration was interrupted twice because of childbearing. In early 2010, I met Lien again at her house; at this point, she was a returned migrant. Nobody in her family migrates elsewhere. The family invested 120 million VND from Lien’s remittances and from a loan into marquees, tables and chairs, dishes, loudspeakers and cassette players to rent out for weddings, funerals and housewarmings. They can earn around 1–2 million per month from providing this service. With this income source, Lien’s family are able to remain in the village. Lien has no plans of migrating in the future. (Excerpt from field notes, Lien, 38-year-old woman)

Households at the late cycle, consisting of old couples (aged 55+ years), constitute another type of non-migrant households. They remain in the village because of their age. Yet two out of nine households had returned migrant members; they returned to the villages because of old age, elder care, and child care (grandchildren). These families rent out part of their agricultural land. Some of them also receive pensions or financial support from their children. With a total cash income of 7 million VND, their economic status is rather poor, but not absolutely poor because they need to cover the living costs of two persons only.

Finally, households remaining in the villages also include single-mother families. They account for the smallest percentage (13%) of the stayer households. The households consist of a single mother and school-aged children. As single parents, the mothers have to stay put to bring up their children. In two out of four households, the mothers stopped migrating because of separation from or the death of the husband. The main livelihood activity of the single-mother families is rice production. Although they rent more agricultural land from migrant households to cultivate rice, they live below the poverty threshold.

The households that remain in the villages are quite diverse in terms of background and economic status. It is not necessarily because households are poor or excluded from migration opportunities that they remain in the villages. It is not uncommon that members of ‘non-migrant households’ have migrated before.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on a case of women’s migration from the villages of Phu Khe and Binh Ho in the Red River Delta, this paper has explored how mobility, immobility, and gendered life courses interact in shaping household livelihoods. Its key findings and implications are illustrated in Figure 2. As can be seen in this figure, mobility and immobility is intermingled over the life course in constructing livelihoods of both migrant and non-migrant households. First, women’s migration is often interrupted because of their reproductive role such as child bearing and rearing, care for sick or elderly family members, and family dissolution. They are mobile at one stage but immobile at another stage of their life courses. Second, stayers are drawn into the lifeworlds of the movers through remittances that the former send and through the job opportunities that they provide. The intermingling of mobility and immobility challenges the binary

![Figure 2](https://example.com/figure2.png)

Figure 2. Migration linkages change over the gendered life course.
opposition of the presence and the absence of migration. As Jónsson (2011) also claimed that this binary is too artificial as capturing and analysing the absence of migration without concurrently acknowledging its presence is very difficult.

The purpose and use of remittances alter depending on the life course. In families with school-aged children, remittances are spent on the children’s education. When children drop out of school or finish high school, households invest remittances in housing improvements, creating employment for children and enlarging animal husbandry production. In the later stages, they use remittances on children’s weddings and savings for old age. The use of remittances as a fulcrum around which life transitions occur is an important aspect that needs to be considered in understanding the impacts of migration. Also, the findings challenge a conventional assumption that migration of women, especially those working in the informal sector, is a household survival strategy (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Ha and Ha, 2001; Clawen, 2002: 62; Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Resurreccion and Ha, 2007) and that remittances are often used for consumption with little left over for productive investments (Dang et al., 2003). In the case studies of Binh Ho and Phu Khe, women’s migration not only secures the survival but also enhances the wealth accumulation of households. With remittances, female migrant households move out of poverty and improve the quality of their lives.

Finally, this paper has showed that contrast to the image of ‘passive’ stayers who are excluded from migration opportunities and ‘left behind’ in poor lives (Kothari, 2002; Kothari, 2003), those households who remain in Binh Ho and Phu Khe village are active in constructing their livelihoods. They come from a variety of backgrounds and do not necessarily concentrate on a poor group. They stay put because of many and varied reasons (see also Werner and Barcus, 2009; Jónsson, 2011), including reproductive responsibilities, reluctance to take risks, previous migration history, no economic compulsion, and family dissolution.

With its emphasis on gendered life courses, the paper has provided a more nuanced understanding of the economic impacts of migration at the household level. It challenges migration literature today that has a tendency to focus on the contrast between mobility and immobility, migration and non-migration, movers and stayers, and so on. For instance, migrants/movers are active and better off, whereas non-migrants/stayers are passive, poor, and being left behind. This paper hence raises interesting theoretical questions of the intermingling of mobility and immobility.

ENDNOTES

1. The area of land was allocated to each household on the basis of the number of household members on 1 April 1993.
2. Of these are 40 out of 256 households in Phu Khe and 81 out of 464 households in Binh Ho.
3. Out of 121 households, 85 had at least one member migrating elsewhere. Among those, there were 46 female migrant households, only six migrants were unmarried women. Thus, I excluded the latter and selected all 35 households whose wife/mother migrates to Hanoi for the in-depth interviews.
4. Two of them were among the 35 married female migrants interviewed; the rest were randomly selected.
5. The two-child policy has been officially implemented in Vietnam since 1988. However, today in the villages, it is not uncommon for a family to have more than two children (born after 1988).
6. 1 million VND equals about USD 60 (exchange rate in 2008).
7. Education expenses are the greatest concern of local households. In 2008, the cost of having one student at high school was over 2 million VND/year and at university, 1.5 million VND/month. On average, a migrant earns 1.5 million VND/month (net income).
8. See Agergaard and Thao (2011) for more information.

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