Social change for women workers in garment factories in rural Vietnam

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

In the last five years an increasing number of garment factories in Vietnam have relocated to rural areas in the country, as has also occurred in other countries in Southeast Asia. In large part, the purpose of this has been to recruit a workforce from the peasants currently working in family agriculture. Workers in these factories are mainly women who are older than 25 and have children. Some of these women had been working in factories in large cities who returned home. These factories also opened up employment opportunities for "left-behind" mothers, women who had never migrated out of their village. Previous research has explored why young women migrated to work in factories in cities, the ways they struggled with aspects of modern life in urban areas, how this changes their gender identity, and forms of exploitation they experienced. Rural women workers with children have rarely been included in these studies. Rural factory work is quite distinct, partly because women are able to stay in their homeplace while also working in the formal labour force.

This thesis draws on feminist approaches, in particular Third World Feminism, to examine the ways women experience these changes and negotiate new roles in their families and communities because of this work. Further, the thesis examines how the move from family agriculture into the formal workforce creates cultural change in their communities. Using an ethnographic approach, I spent time in a Vietnamese village and during this time I worked alongside women to observe changes in this context and I conducted semi structured interviews with women factory workers. In this study I have occupied the role of both an "insider" and "outsider," because I grew up in a village nearby but left many years ago. Thematic analysis was used to develop themes across the interviews, with fieldnotes providing thick description about the factory setting and community context.

The shift to paid work has had a dramatic impact on the lives of these women workers. Women's work is valued in a new way. Family agriculture was a form of 'invisible' work, but their work in the formal sector is valued as 'real' work, both by their families and their communities. This is the starting point for changes to individual, family and community roles and dynamics. This study shows that the factory becomes a public homeplace, a flexible working environment that has brought rural women together and strengthened the relationship between them. Mothering working women, as a result of increased income and a shifting social status, have become active

powerholders and decision makers, resulting in increased agency (choice and control) over who they are, what they look like and how they resist, maintain, and negotiate their place and role in the family and community. Whilst women's work in factories is exploitative, it opens up many possibilities for the women themselves and triggers an incremental change process that could have important flow on effects for their daughters' generation.

Declaration

I, Thuy Trong Duong, declare that the PhD thesis entitled: Social change for women workers in garment factories in rural Vietnam is no more than 80000 words in length, including quotes and exclusive of tables, appendix, footnotes, and references. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the publication or paper references. This thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics, approval number: HRE18194.

Signature  Date: 18 March 2022

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Stitching together my story and this research topic

I was born in a family of three children, I am the oldest daughter, following me is a sister and a brother. My father was a veteran in the Vietnam-US war and like many other people he went on to work in a broadcasting agency in the *Lý Nhân*-my local district. My mother was a salesperson in a state-owned store and after the *Đổi Mới* Renovation in 1986, she rented that store and continued running it in the local market by herself. My childhood was associated with the ancestral village, my *quê* [homeplace], where my parents and many of my relatives are still living. When I had a summer holiday between grade 7 and grade 8 (at the beginning of the 1990s), I decided to go to *Phủ Lý*, a provincial town that is around 20 kilometres away from my village, to live with my uncle and learn how to sew. Every day I rode my bicycle to the tailor's shop owned by my uncle's friend, and she taught me the steps of sewing—from how to cut the clothes on the table to how to thread the bobbin and use the sewing machine. At the age of twelve, it was the first time I had lived out of home for a long period of time, (over two months). While there I learned new skills and had a small taste of independence and a glimpse into the lives of people in other places. It also gave me experiences linked to work. I can still remember the time I made a mistake with a customer's clothes. The owner reprimanded me and asked me to go to the market to buy the same cloth (at my own expense) in order to resew the piece correctly. At that time, I was worried, sad and I cried. But by that time, luckily for me, I could cut and sew simple clothes.

When I came home at the end of that summer trip, my mother bought me a sewing machine which she told me later would be a dowry when I got married. In the daytime, I went to school, and in the evening or on weekends, I sewed clothes and mosquito nets (*màn*) for my mother, and she sold them in the local market. To be honest, I preferred sewing to studying because I instantly saw the benefit of sewing, as my mother told me about each product she sold and how much profit we earned. Moreover, for me, sewing was a way to relax, in contrast to the stress and pressure of studying at school. As a teenager, I almost stopped participating in all other outside entertainment activities, I was lured by the cycle: cutting clothes—sewing products—

packing, all of those activities were done by me and took place in my study room on the second floor of our two-story house. I had a sense of pride and accomplishment.

However, my mother's store didn't last long. I did not really know the reason—she might not have had much capital to invest in orders to compete with the other larger shops or perhaps she could not afford to pay the many taxes and fees linked to the stall, like the market cleaning fee and commercial licensing fee. It could have been a case of "*chợ thì ế, thuế thì cao"* (the market was empty, and taxes were high). Whatever the case, to my total dismay she closed the stall when I was in grade eleven. This meant that I stopped sewing. Undoubtedly, this was a shock for me, but and it led me to focus more on my studies in the last two years of high school and ultimately pursue an opportunity rarely afforded to many women in rural Vietnam. The result was that I successfully passed the entrance exam to enter university, which was rare for a girl like me in my village. At time I was happy and busied myself preparing to go to Hanoi (the capital) to study. Almost all my girl friends who were the in same class with me at secondary school remained in my village, as they had stopped study after getting the secondary certificate at Grade 9. Some combined selling small goods at our local market with agricultural activities, some got married and moved in with their husband's family in nearby communities.

A mirror and a window: My research work in rural communities after university

After finishing university, I worked as a researcher and lecturer in Vietnam Women's Academy in Hanoi, where I had many opportunities to come back to the countryside to do research and work with rural women through the projects launched by Vietnam's Women Union. One of the most noticeable things for me was that garment work for rural women had recently boomed in rural areas and factories that were previously only found in urban areas and big cities were locating themselves in our towns. I saw myself in that setting as it was relevant to my childhood experience. Through my work experiences at the Vietnam Women's Academy, I had many opportunities to come back to the countryside to work with local women's associations and become involved in programs that financially support these women as well as provide training programs to help them to get a job in order to escape poverty. Other programs were dedicated to increasing their knowledge about gender related issues such

as “Enhancing the power and status of rural women”, “Building up rural women’s role in poverty alleviation and sustainable development” (Vietnam Women's Union, 2012). I again witnessed the life of rural women, many of whom lived in poor conditions and under the poverty line. I reflected on my experience and the opportunities I had available. This raised questions such as, “If my mother had continued to run her stall, would I have continued sewing as a career or become a stall owner? Why did my parents support me to do that work? If I was a sewer in the village, what would my life look like? Why do most rural women prefer to remain in their home place?” These deeply personal questions that are imbued with a complex web of gender relations, expectations and power dynamics ultimately motivated me to carry out this research. On reflection I thought about how my parents most likely wanted to me to become a tailor or simply thought that a girl should be good at sewing, and that it was a skill that ensured a livelihood. And I understand that the deepest reason that my parents had supported me to learn sewing was that they had probably believed that tertiary study was unnecessary for a girl and that with sewing work I could maintain my life in my homeplace, and then marry someone nearby. They would have believed that this kind of life was enough for me as a “daughter”. They may also have expected to lean on me as later as they aged. In Vietnam there is the saying, “*Có con mà gả chồng gần, có bát canh cần nó cũng mang cho*”, which translates as, “If the daughter marries near her parent’s house, she will easily serve her parents”. This saying is of one of the main contributors to the type of parental thinking that framed the lives of my village friends.

Piecing it all together: my motivations for this project

At the beginning of the research process for this thesis, I had questions that emerging from my situated knowledge as a [now] mothering woman. I wondered about the women my age that were working in the new factories in rural areas—had their lives changed? What did the community think? There was an intersection between research and my own historical and cultural situatedness. This “fusion at the centre of understanding means that we must see knowledge production as a flexible, creative, historically influenced process” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2008, p. 23). Thus, this study was motivated and informed by my experiences, dreams, passions, and curiosities and ultimately the desire to create change for other women. As someone who was born in and grew up in rural Vietnam, I have experienced and witnessed the rigidity of gender

roles and expectations because I too take up the role of daughter-in-law to my husband's family, the role of mother and wife. But I have also had the privilege of taking up a role as a PhD student in Australia and seeing and doing things that are very different to my upbringing. I cannot ignore the fact that without a stable job, many women's lives and those of their daughters will remain the same as previous generations—traditional norms and gendered prejudice will continue to limit opportunities, restrict dreams and in even in some situations enable violence against women. Vietnam is experiencing a period of rapid social and economic change in its quest for industrialization and economic, in particular, rural economic development and the purpose to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas. One of its most significant changes has been this surge in garment work in rural areas in the last five years. Mothering women (who are raising children or getting married) have become a new class or workers in these factories, and there are significant changes to their lives and the community as a result. Documenting these changes is both a responsibility and a political project that informs all aspects of this research. As Fine and Torres (2019) stated:

> We are a "we" made at all times of revolving "us" (nos) and "others" (otras), connected by a hyphen of mutual implication. Our lives and histories and the "false" binaries that position us are produced in relation to each other, and these dynamics are part of what we interrogate and seek to disrupt with our praxis. We understand the "we" of our collectives as nos-otras, where our many intersecting differences come together; we share the gifts and challenges of our distinct standpoints; and we commit simultaneously to reckon with power and imagine new possibilities, to share, and to build new knowledge and new futures (p. 436).

1.2 Women and rural garment factory work

In Vietnam women make up a significant portion of the workforce (48.1 percent) and recent data shows that this is significantly higher in rural areas, with women accounting for nearly 70 percent of the working population (FAO, 2019; Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2020). Rural Vietnamese women's work and lives have, for many years, been intricately tied to agricultural systems and other forms of informal

work, such as street vendors, small traders, domestic workers (Jensen & Peppard Jr, 2003; Nguyen, 2014; White, 1982). These occupations have largely been rendered invisible and not viewed as work, and therefore undervalued. Over the past five years garment factories have been moving to rural areas and have been hiring women in these areas. This has dramatically changed the lives of women and their families as they are able to increase their income. The women's social identities have altered as they have moved into 'visible' work and have also become more visible and engaged in public space.

The movement of factories to rural areas occurred in the period after the 1986 economic reforms referred to as the Đổi Mới Renovation. Following the Renovation, the development of the textile and garment industry became one of the highest priorities of the Vietnamese government. Textiles and garments emerged as the largest and fastest growing export since 2013 (World Bank, 2014). Women comprise more than 80 percent of the workers in this sector. Approximately 3.5 million women are employed in this sector, primarily in private garment enterprises (Ministry of Labour-Invalids and Social Affairs, 2017). The vast majority of these garment factories are located in big cities and industrial parks, with their main workforce being women, many of whom migrated from rural areas. However, some factories are now moving to rural areas. On the one hand, this attracts women workers who have children and faced with the high cost of living and childcare in big cities come back their hometown where they have support from family, especially their parents-in-law, in taking care their children. On the other hand, subcontracting is considered a way to support "left-behind" peasants as it allows them to seek employment and increase their income without leaving the countryside or the land. Industrial subcontracting in rural areas thus becomes a tool for underdeveloped regions to help peasants escape from poverty and respond to the problem of rural surplus labour.

The feminized nature of factory employment and the specific working conditions of women workers have been the focus of several previous reports in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. There have been many projects focusing on informal women workers in both the formal and informal sectors in Vietnam (Nguyen, Nguyen, Tran, Vo, & Nguyen, 2014; Nguyen, 2014; Van, Tuan, Van, Trang, & Nga, 2011). In Vietnam there is a significant body of work examining the experience of young women migrated to work in factories in cities, and the impact on their gender identities.

However, given it is a very recent phenomenon, there is little research into the experience of women who work in rural factories. There are many factors that shape their experience, which differ from those impacting on women who migrate to city factories. In part this is because women migrating to the cities for work are usually young and without children, while most women working in rural factories are older and have children. Women in rural Vietnam have "burdened shoulders". That is, they undertake paid work while also having primary responsibility for the caring and housework responsibility that are ascribed to the roles of wife, mother and daughter in law. Additionally, they negotiate changing gender roles in their families, which also involves negotiating community dynamics and expectations. Rural women's lives in Vietnam tend to be constrained by traditional gender roles which emphasise women's family obligations and offer very limited livelihood options. Studies focusing purely on the economic, factory conditions neglect the potential for increased agency and empowerment that factory work might offer women moving from traditional rural settings and patriarchal family structures to more independent living conditions in community and society.

My study examines the experience of women who work in factories in their hometown in rural Vietnam. It examines the experience of changing social roles and identities for these women in their family and community, and how their identity changes through engaging in this work. These women are older than the women that migrate to work in urban factories (they are mostly over 25) and they all have children. The research investigates the formal work of these women, the gendered division of labour in subcontracting systems and women's experiences, roles and identities in this context. In order to explore that social change, I combine three theoretical frames that are used to analyse the changes that take place as a result of women's work in factories in rural Vietnam. This includes Butler's (1988; 1990; 1993; 2004) work on gender and performativity, intersectional dimensions of identity, oppression and privilege through Third World Feminism, and development theories of gender, and Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework. In this thesis I examine how the employment of these women creates cultural change in their community, with particular attention given to these women's understandings of their roles and identities and how they negotiate the two. The ways women themselves experience these changes and negotiate these new roles within their family and in their community are examined through semi-structured

interviews with women workers and an ethnographically based study in a Vietnamese village. The research illuminates an aspect the gendered division of labour in subcontracting systems of the garment industry.

1.3 Findings of the research

In interviewing women for this study, it became clear that the garment working environment is a new kind of work in this community, and that it has social as well as economic implications. Factory work is visible work, it is undertaken in the public sphere and is part of the formal economy, which is different from most of the work women in the village do in the private sphere of domestic labour and agriculture. Women work in factories because it brings a stable income into their household. This work brings social change to women, their families and their community. In the first instance, factory work connects rural women with each other, and they forge strong bonds. They create a visible group of women workers in their own community, and a range of social changes follow from this.

The women I interviewed all spoke about the way their factory work led to gender norms being challenged in their family for both practical reasons and because the women's status had changed. In particular the women did less domestic work as other family members—even husbands—voluntarily shared household chores with them. Their social status changed, and many commented on the way their relationship with their mother-in-law, which is traditionally the most difficult of family relationships, improved. These women workers reported that they had more involvement in the major financial decisions of the household, suggesting that their work and income had allowed them to claim more authority in the domestic sphere. Importantly, some of the women said that they had a greater say in the education of their daughters.

Changes in women's work also lead to changes to the ways in which gender roles are visibly performed via the body, and the shift in the role of women's bodies in community life. It is through this newfound income and the space the factory creates as a site of change and resistance, that women experience greater agency and ultimately empowerment in the community. This group of women form a middle-class-in-the-making, where neoliberal and patriarchal dominance continues to dictate and shape new performances of femininity in rural Vietnam.

However, whilst enhancing their economic and social status, this work in the global subcontracting system of the garment industry is undoubtedly exploitative. Factory owners move their factories to rural villages where there is a ready supply of potential workers, and they are paid less than their counterparts in the cities. The women I interviewed worked hard, as their wage was based on the number of products each completed. As the women wanted to sew as many items as they could, quite a few women worked extra time and took products home to work on after hour.

Navigating changing gender identities is hard. The women who participated in this research did not want to give away some of the aspects of their identities that were changing in their households. Some women struggled with new ways of doing gender in public spaces due to their increased visibility. They wanted to keep their traditional dignity in order to be viewed as a "good woman" who always worked hard, yet they also did not want to be the object of judgement from the prying gaze of other villagers. Finally, some women also had a feeling of being isolated from aspects of their community that were important to them. They missed the affection that accompanied the manual activities the used to perform in relatives' and neighbour's local events. Due to having limited time their contribution had become financial. From some perspectives this change could be considered as breaking up and disrupting the traditional structure of the villages—directly and indirectly affecting the village love and neighbourliness (moral community).

1.4 Outline of the chapters

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the economic, social, and cultural context of the research. In particular, it outlines Vietnam's economic reform following the Đổi Mới Renovation and the neoliberal changes associated with this. It gives an overview of the garment and textiles industry, with a focus on the connection between this and rural diversification strategies in Vietnam. Government policy called for the economic development in rural areas, and I discuss the potential opportunities of this for women. This chapter establishes an understanding of the history and context that has led women to take rural factory jobs and explores the background, experience, and the mobility limitations of rural women. The way this experience and history has then shaped their lives and status in the family as they undertake paid work in factories is discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 establishes a theoretical framework by drawing on several areas of literature that are concerned with women workers' experience in the Global South in general. First is a review of gender and work in Vietnam, then a review of literature on women workers in factories. I then go on to examine women in the Global South more generally, and to establish a theoretical context for women's situations and their livelihood choices in Southeast Asia and in Vietnam, in particular. Finally, I review the research on the process and impact of rural women's factory work, which defines the conceptual framework for approaching the questions of social change of rural women in this context. For that purpose, the research is based on a third world feminist approach, gender development perspectives and an empowerment framework in order to fully explore the social changes that these rural women are challenging in their community. In particular, I draw on Butler's (1988; 1990; 1993; 2004) work on gender and performativity, and the framework of empowerment defined by Kabeer (1999).

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology of the research, including the research questions, the aims and scope of the research, the methods chosen and the ethical considerations. The first section covers the feminist methodological approach, with a focus on the theoretical rationale and methodology. The second section discusses how an ethnographic approach was part of my research in order to gain a full picture of the researched setting. The third section details my approach to data analysis and locating and working with the research data to develop codes, themes, and broad insights, which then form the findings for this research. I also examine my role as an insider-outsider, with knowledge of the context and gender roles from my own upbringing in Vietnam, as well as a research lens, which provides new, complex and, at times, challenging elements to the work. I also reflect on the ethical considerations of this research its limitations.

Chapter 5 explores the experience of working in a rural factory. I unpack the reasons women who are mothers choose to do this type of work. Alongside the economic purpose, I suggest that the garment factory also brings about significant social changes for these women. The factory brings women together and is a space where women can socialise with each other, gaining knowledge and sharing life experiences. I explore these relationships and the supportive work environment, a 'public homeplace' characterised by reciprocity and often described as a 'family' by women factory workers. I combine data from my interviews with ethnographic observations and

feminist theory to propose that the garment factory can be conceptualised as a space of resistance where dominant power dynamics and structures can be unpacked and challenged.

Chapter 6 examines how women's roles in their households have changed as a result of their participation in factory work. In this chapter I examine family dynamics, specifically how household work, which traditionally has predominantly been women's responsibility is now being split more evenly with others in the family. This is a result, of not just the availability of time but also of the meaning that is given to that work. In taking on factory work women are moving from 'invisible' work in private and informal spaces to 'visible' work. Visible work is recognised as work by the community and is usually in the formal sector rather than in the informal sector, or domestic context. I first explore the traditional division of household work then look at the shift to visible factory work for these rural women workers. Finally, I examine how employment in this setting affects the redistribution of domestic work.

Chapter 7 explores the impacts of factory work on women's empowerment and decision making, within what is a hierarchical family structure, one in which a woman is subservient not only to her husband, but also to her mother-in-law. In this chapter I explore the relationship between women and their mothers-in-law. This relationship is often considered the most difficult to reconcile in the family due to the difference in status and power. I also focus on how the role of mother is changing for some of these women. Many women felt that they were gaining a more significant voice in their children's education and career, especially, their daughters' education. These women were also significantly contributing to changing the norm of preferring sons to daughters by demonstrating that women are as economically valuable as men.

Chapter 8 builds on the findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and explores the ways in which paid factory work leads to changes in rural mothering women's gendered identities and performances and their place and roles in community life. In this chapter I draw on Butler's (1988; 1990; 1993; 2004) theory of performativity and focus on the body as a site of change for gender identity. More specifically, this chapter discusses how rural women's engagement in paid work leads to new practices that are played out on the body, specifically the refashioning the self and occupying new spaces in public for leisure purposes. Similarly new performances of traditional gender specific community roles (in events and rituals) are explored. This chapter shows how small and

everyday shifts to the performance of gender lead to significant changes to gender scripts, creating new subjectivities through refashioning the body, daring to occupy public spaces previously deemed off limits, for leisure and socialising, and showing their value and narrowing the hierarchical structure in public space. This chapter points to the ways in which mothering working women have become active powerholders and this has resulted in increased, but still constrained agency (choice and control) over who they are, what they look like and how they resist, maintain, and negotiate their place and role in the community.

Chapter 9 provides a final summary and review. This chapter opens opportunities for discussion about relative advantages and disadvantages factory work affords women. Whilst women experience exploitation, they are not helpless victims of capitalism and I consider the extent to which they can meaningfully negotiate the factory floor, as well as use this work to re-negotiate their lives beyond the factory. The last section connects the research with potential future—suggesting that perhaps what is most significant about factory work is the foundation for these women to ask for more equality for their daughters' generation. With an awareness of gender inequality, the process of change is not limited to changing their own working lives but rather to improving the situation for their daughter's generation.

Chapter 2: Work context and gender relations in Vietnam

Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the economic, social, and cultural context of the research. Specifically, it outlines Vietnam's economic reform and the impact of neoliberalism; the profile of the garment and textile industry; the rural livelihood diversification; the role of women in this industry and opportunities for them to work in the countryside. I provide a brief discussion of the background, experience, and the mobility limitations of rural women, and the government policy that called for the economic development in rural areas, which led to the relocation of garment factories. This chapter establishes an understanding of the history and context that has led women to take rural factory jobs. The way this experience and history has then shaped their lives and status in the family as they undertake paid work in factories is discussed in the subsequent chapters.

2.1 Đổi Mới –economic renovation and neoliberalism

One fundamental piece of history in Vietnam that has arguably affected every facet of society is the Đổi Mới program meaning "economic renovation" that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam initiated in 1986. In the face of growing economic crisis, including increasing poverty, Đổi Mới involved an ongoing process of market reform in Vietnam focused on promoting economic and social development (Mallon & Irvin, 2001; Luong, 2003). This policy has a direct correlation with neo-liberalism, which is associated with trade liberalization, deregulation, and privatization (Manzetti, 1994) and the state taking a back-seat role, ensuring the conditions for development but not 'intervening in' or 'distorting' the market (Hoogvelt, 2001). In Vietnam Đổi Mới involved a shift away from a relatively closed-command economy to a more market-oriented system, through the de-collectivization of agriculture towards household-based production, opening up the economy to foreign trade and investment, price liberalization, reduction of public sector employment and a promotion of private sector enterprise (Mallon & Irvin, 2001; Tønnesson, 2001). These factors dramatically reshaped agricultural production in North Vietnam, impacting small-holder farmers and rural populations and contributed to large-scale social change.

After Đổi Mới, especially, in the early 1990s, there was the rise of new state business interests which laid the foundation for the subsequent development of Vietnam's political economy. These interests are "new"—either they involve existing state enterprises diversifying into areas distinct from those in which they were originally founded to operate, or because they involve the setting up of new companies (Gainsborough, 2013). Some companies associated with new state business interests operated in light industry, for example, textiles and garments, food processing and construction. The sector in which these companies are concentrated generally saw rapid growth during the 1990s and as a result the potential for the profits was high and opened up employment opportunities for many Vietnamese people (Gainsborough, 2013; Tran, 2012).

However, there still remained a conflict in the political strategies of the Vietnamese Communist Party, while the Communist party is in power political philosophy and practices remain largely unchanged. On one hand, they called for integration/collaboration with external stakeholders for example, private sectors or private investors, for social and economic development, in which the role of government must not dominate the market rules. On the other hand, however, many policies were not changed or adjusted to adapt with the rules of market economy, for example, there was lack of progress in reforming the financial sector (Mallon & Irvin, 2001). In the first half of the 1990s, Vietnam was generally believed to be a new Asian tiger (Barker & Üngör, 2019; Mallon & Irvin, 2001), and a great number of prospective investors came to Vietnam to explore opportunities. However, they complained about red tape, corruption, slow handling of license applications, failure to implement announced reforms, maintenance of protection of policies and other matters such as limitations on the reach of the private sector (Tønnesson , 2001). Vietnam was viewed as not following the rules of market-based economy, whereas other developing countries were significantly promoting privatization during the 1990s (Parker & Kirkpatrick, 2003). In February 1999, faced with pressures from foreign donors such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, investors, and Western ambassadors, Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải said the country could not go its own way while the rest of the world was globalizing (Tønnesson , 2001). With pressure to raise the efficiency of the economy, Vietnam removed restrictions on foreign and domestically owned private companies. This was accompanied by financial sector reform, which focused on

the dissolution of the cosy relationships between state banks and state-owned enterprises, tariff reductions and measures to make credit available to the private sector. The Prime Minister stressed that it was essential to define sectors and products that could fully utilize the country's natural resources (Tønnesson, 2001; Vietnam Communist Party, 2001). The stated aim was to turn Vietnam into an industrialized country by 2020 (Voice of Vietnam in Vietnamese 4 February 1999 according to BBC Worldwide Monitoring). Vietnam has a number of rich resources, which the state can exploit in the global market—the two main resources are the fertile soil and the low-cost workforce. The reason most often cited abroad for investing in Vietnam has been the country's skilled, disciplined, and low-cost workforce (Freeman, 2002; Mallon & Irvin, 2001; Tran & Jeppesen, 2016). The reforms were highly successful in creating rapid economic growth and reducing poverty. According to the World Bank, annual growth rates of gross domestic product (GDP) rose from 2.3 per cent in 1986 to an average annual rate of 7.0 per cent for the period 1993 to 2019 (World Bank, 2005; 2019) and only slightly reduced to 5.4 per cent in 2014, this growth has been led by manufacturing for export (World Bank, 2014).

However, in respect to human development, there has been an unequal benefit between different population groups—the shifts towards a market-based economy has created greater inequalities in income and opportunities than ever before (World Bank, 2014). The greatest economic disparity is between rural and urban areas. Since Đổi Mới, there has been a dismantling of the cooperative agriculture in the countryside, which has had positive results of increased productivity and poverty reduction; however, poverty remains a rural phenomenon. At the beginning of the 1990s, 80 per cent of the population lived in rural areas, and 90 per cent of the population was poor (Quan Xuan, 1999). Although, the poverty rate fell gradually, from over 70 percent to less than 7 percent, between 2002 to 2018, the quantity of people working in agriculture was still nearly 70 percent the entirety of Vietnam (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

Reduction of rural poverty and creation of employment opportunities therefore has remained one of the major challenges for the government and job creation and improvement of education levels in rural areas is a priority.

2.2 Profile of the garment and textile industry in Vietnam

The textile and garment industry has always been considered a key economic development sector for Vietnam (Anh, 2012; Tran, 2012; Tran & Jeppesen, 2016). Prior to Đổi Mới, when it was largely state owned, it had a substantial presence in the economy, producing for the domestic market and for export to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Beresford & Tran, 2004). Since Đổi Mới, the combination of domestic economic reforms and a changing international political-economic environment has resulted in a major restructure of the Vietnam textile and garment industry (VTGI). Increasing global integration brought about a rise in foreign and private investment and control in the VTGI, and a relative decrease in state production. In particular, there has been an increasing role for foreign and private firms; during the second half of the 1990s, it occupied 25 percent and 45 percent in garment output (Beresford & Tran, 2004) and then 55 percent in the early 2000s (Tran, 2012). Direct state control over the VTGI diminished over time and stabilized after state consolidation took effect in 1996 (Beresford & Tran, 2004). An interesting trend was the rise in production from foreign-invested firms with consistent contribution from Vietnamese private producers. The state sector is strong in textile production, whereas the non-state sector has a stronghold in garment production, mostly for low value-added capital market export (Beresford & Tran, 2004; Tran & Jeppesen, 2016). Vietnam has actively reached out to capitalist markets to compensate for the loss of its traditional socialist markets, signing a major trade agreement with Europe countries-EC in December 1992 which established the system of gradually rising export quotas. Access to this relatively large market was crucial to the survival of the VTGI, especially in light of the then US trade embargo (lifted in July 1995) (Tran & Jeppesen, 2016), which isolated Vietnam from the biggest and richest pool of consumers in the world.

The garment industry played a very important role at the beginning of the industrialization process in the newly industrializing countries, for example, Taiwan and South Korea in the 1970s. In those countries the majority of workers in the garment industry, especially in export-processing zones and/or in garment firms for export, were women (Beresford & Tran, 2004; Tran, 2001). The same was true in Vietnam, the evidence is that it is the only manufacturing industry on the top ten export commodities list dominated by extractive (oil) and foodstuff (rice and food processing) industries. It

is one of the top foreign exchange earners, having advanced to second place after oil and gas (Beresford & Tran, 2004; Nghiem, 2004).

However, in term of production chain, producers in Vietnam face many challenges and uncertainties both in terms of structure and potential markets. The triangular subcontracting framework provides a static characterization of the trading structure with the EU markets. It reflects the unequal power relationships between the three main actors: the Vietnamese garment producers and workers (assembling inputs); the middlemen from East Asian countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore who provide all inputs; and the capitalist corporate buyers—from the European Union, Japan, Canada, and the United State who place orders. Over time the triangle has become flatter as more corporate buyers deal directly with Vietnamese producers to gain greater value and cut out the middlemen's cost, with the middlemen moving up the subcontracting ladder to become corporate buyers themselves (Beresford & Tran, 2004; Tran, 2012). But from the Vietnamese perspective, capital market does not facilitate backward linkages (inability to provide inputs by themselves) or forward linkages (no direct marketing links to final consumers). For that reason, the corporate buyers and middlemen still have primary control over the sources of inputs.

Since 2000 the garment sector in Vietnam has put effort into both international economic integration and development stages and these efforts have sometimes been in competition with each other, rather than being. In 2001, Vietnam Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải highlighted the goal of developing the textile and garment industry to become one of the key export-oriented industries; satisfying increasing domestic consumption demand; creating more jobs; improving competitiveness and firmly integrating Vietnam's regional and global economy. In particular, the government encouraged all economic sectors including foreign and private enterprises to invest in the garment industry, with a focus on places with a large population and a surplus of labour (Vietnam Communist Party, 2001). However, one of the most significant challenges that the garment industry is facing worldwide is extreme competition with worker's wages and the quality of labour. This places great pressure on suppliers as they are forced to find ways to reduce labour cost. Consequently, workers are the ones who suffer the most from these pressures, they have to accept low wages, bad working conditions, and unfavourable terms in labour contracts, etc. In particular, the time pressure on the delivery of orders as well as the frequent changes in the size of orders

has often resulted in overwork, irregular working hours, and unattended work. As a result, the number of protests against rising wages and for improved working conditions have increased in most garment exporting countries such as China, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Quang, 2018; Schoen, 2019).

Over the past three decades since Đổi Mới, the development of the textile and garment industry is still one of the biggest priorities of the Vietnamese government and has become stronger and larger with as a result of increasing privatization. Textiles and garment exports continue to sustain solid growth, emerging as the largest and fastest growing export items since 2013 (World Bank, 2014). According to statistics from Ministry of Labour-Invalids and Social Affairs (2017), there are about 6,000 companies operating in the textile and garment sector in Vietnam. About 70 percent of these enterprises are in the garment sector with small and medium enterprises accounting for a large proportion. In terms of ownership, about 84 percent of textile and garment enterprises are private; 15 percent are foreign invested enterprises and about 1 percent is SOEs (Ministry of Labour-Invalids and Social Affairs, 2017).

2.3 Livelihood diversification in rural areas

Given that a high proportion of the population remains in rural areas, agricultural land is a vital asset for millions of Vietnamese farmers for their livelihood. However, income from agricultural activities is unreliable, plus the level of urbanization and industrialization is rising rapidly, which directly affects to the use of land as well as brought the diversification of rural livelihood in many perspectives. As Scott (2008) indicated the reforms of economic and property rights have stimulated rural income diversification sources and the beginnings of an agricultural land market (Scott, 2008). These fundamental shifts are bringing greater economic opportunities, but also marginalization and vulnerability for some regions and many rural residents. Thus, countless famers have no choice but to leave the land behind and sell their agricultural land to migrate to big cities for employment (Holroyd & Coates, 2021; Nguyen, Rigg, & Derks, 2020). In a government document launched in 2006, the Prime Minister stated, “Unemployment and underemployment are now pressing issues in regions where many agricultural land has been being converted.” (Vietnam Communist Party, 2006), Research led by International Labour Organization—ILO (2011) indicated that underemployment has been an issue of concern in rural areas. As noted above, women

are traditionally attached to the family farm, however due to the industrialization process and the conversion of agricultural land, the proportion of the women labour force involved in agriculture overall is declining. The percentage of women working in the agricultural sector has reduced from 56 percent in 2010 to 31 percent in 2018 (Liem, Kiem, Chung, & Quan, 2018).

Villagers in my research setting could be divided into three groups; those who have sold their land, those that still owned their land but let others used it, and those that still farmed but had sold some of their land. This is a similar pattern to that in many other villages. As Chau (2020) has argued, the first group, those that have sold their land, suits the State's expectation that those unable to become large-scale farmers should sell their arable land and commit to other forms of production such as craft for export, or large-scale factory farms (Chau, 2020). The second group consists of people who don't want to sell land, viewing land as an invaluable asset which helps to maintain a sense of security and enables them to produce food for their family and to sell. Some people in this group borrow or hire land to carry out (alone or by hiring others from neighbouring communities) farm work. As Nguyen, Rigg, & Derks (2015) has argued, this is usually arranged through verbal agreements and has resulted in the redistribution of land between households. In the third group are people that sell a small proportion of their land for profit and keep some to maintain their livelihood through small scale farming—normally rice production. For this group, work outside the home and farm is undertaken that is enough to provide for their family, which is reduces the risk of food insecurity substantially.

Creating jobs for rural people in their community has always been the priority of the Government. At the 7th plenum Central Party in 2008, the Government reaffirmed that, "creating jobs for farmers is a priority task throughout all socio-economic development programs of the whole country" (Vietnam Communist Party, 2008b). And women not only play a role in development, but are also the target of development (Barry, 1996). Speaking at the 7th National Congress of Vietnamese Farmers Association (term 2018-2023), General Secretary and President Nguyễn Phú Trọng said "The trend of farmers abandoning fields and rural areas is a concern for government" (Duong, 2018). People should be able to stop working their land but remain in their hometown (Thoi, 2017). Data from ILO (2011) showed that own-account labourers (working on their own account or with one or more partners, and have not engaged any

employees on a continuous basis are defined as "self-employed") comprised almost half of rural labour in 2009, however, "each increase of 1 per cent in the number of enterprise owners per year is coupled with a 0.5 per cent reduction of the number of own-account workers" (ILO, 2011, p. 42). For that reason, rural factories could become the leading setting to create local jobs and improve unemployment as own-account workers become waged workers. Given the particular engagement of women in family agriculture, gender relations in rural Vietnam are an important context to this.

2.4 Win-win-win solution-satisfying the needs of rural women

The relocation of garment factories from urban to rural areas, which supports a private and subcontracting system, has been framed as a win-win-win strategy for the state, workers and company (Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2014; Vietnam Communist Party, 2008a). For rural women, industrial subcontracting work has been framed as an empowerment strategy because it brings more autonomy and improves their social and economic position within the household (Oanh, 2019; Thanh, 2021). This work also satisfies their need to remain in their "home place" (quê), and in gendered roles as mother, wife and daughter-in-law where they also play the role of "bridge"—connecting the spiritual world with the contemporary world in order to keep peace, happiness, wealth for all family members (Bergstedt, 2015) and in maintaining relationships with neighbours as well as other villagers and community members.

As part of the tripartite strategy, individual enterprises and the industry as a whole benefit from factories moving into rural areas. The Vietnamese government offers a number of economic incentives for enterprises that set up businesses in rural areas. For example, enterprises benefit from lower land rental costs in comparison to big cities, government tax incentives, loan support with low interest rates, support human resource training, simplify administrative procedures, etc. (Holroyd & Coates, 2021; Vietnam Communist Party, 2018a). Thus, these enterprises can save significantly on production costs by moving to rural areas. Instead of spending hundreds of billions of VND to buy and rent land in large cities, waiting for workers from the rural regions to flock, and experiencing of labour shortage (Duong, 2012). Moreover, garment work is "nimble"—requiring refined fine motor skills, which can be offered by rural women.

For the State, relocating rural factories helps to ensure a stable livelihood for rural populations, and reduce poverty. A decrease in migration from rural to urban areas

has also contributed to State-wide improvements, with 8.7 percent population migrating from rural to urban areas in 2010, with this rate reducing to only 5.6 percent in 2018 (Liem et al., 2018). This also attracts women workers to stay/come back to their hometown as it allows them to seek employment and increase their income without leaving the countryside. The goal "*ly nông không ly hương*" which translates to "leaving the fields but not leaving countryside" is a core part of the New Rural Construction program's focus. Specifically, industrial subcontracting has become an effective tool for underdeveloped regions to help peasants escape from poverty and also solve the problem of rural surplus labour (Chau, 2018; Kabeer & Trần, 2006). It is also considered a way to support 'left-behind' peasants who have never left the village or mothering women with children who can carry out dual roles as mother and worker.

The result is that, from the first half of 2010, many garment factories started to operate in rural areas in Vietnam. The 2020 data showed that there are around 8000 garment factories in rural areas (Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2020). There is a trend for workers, especially women, to return to their hometowns and work near home (Duong, 2012).

2.5 "Phụ nữ luôn là hậu phương vững chắc"—"Women: the "solid back"

The division of work in a family is performed through the different types of work men and women do. Women undertake the largest amount of farm activities and labour as well as household chores. Traditionally, a typical day in a Vietnamese woman's working life would include long hours in the fields, preparing dinner for the family, and other domestic chores. Even at these most busy times, there was washing to do, children and elderly to care for and pigs and chickens to feed. As introduced earlier, one of four virtues "công" (labour) focuses on women's work. Acclaimed characteristics of femininity include women's ability to work swiftly with their hands, "working in a bending position for long periods of time", and "being careful and painstaking in their work" (Bergstedt, 2015, p. 137). Men were generally perceived to possess greater analytical abilities than women, thus their 'work' in family life was based on the belief that they are the centre-pillars (*cột trụ*) of the household. The disparity of power between genders in a family context has been widely noted in research (see Bergstedt, 2015, p. 137; Dang, 2007; Rydstrøm, 2010). As Bergstedt (2015, p. 137) has observed, "Men are supposed to be leaders, like countries have

leaders… women are women and men are men, and a man should be the director". A man is expected to know how to do everything in theory, but he does not do it all in practice, therefore his duty is to organise, lead and manage the work of the household. Meanwhile, women's 'small' farm work included chores that were perceived as "light, easy, and delicate, i.e. work that did not require great muscle strength but, on the other hand, required the assumed feminine capabilities of endurance and patience" (Bergstedt, 2015, p. 137).

Although agricultural activities or working at home can both involve hard manual work, these tasks traditionally performed by rural women, are considered to be equivalent to unemployment. Women's household chores and farming activity have been ascribed to the 'inside'. The association between a spatially demarcated female labour realm and the 'inside' can be traced back to Confucian morals, where Vietnamese women's work traditionally was confined to the 'inside' of the household—a place where the dignity and morals of the female household members could best be safeguarded (Rydstrøm, 2004). Farming duties are also considered 'inside' as they only offer a low-level of income, are not recognised as professional and the fields are in close proximity to the home (Bergstedt, 2012). In line with these perspectives, Leshkowich (2014) observed that "officials tended to view women's wage-earning activities as low status, routine tasks necessary for a family's subsistence" (p. 56). Thus, for the above reason, women's work is likely to be an invisible activity from the perspective of her community, as well as in the view of society.

In a broader context, 'inside' means not only inside the house but also inside the village bamboo border (*lũy tre làng*) that contains women, farm, land, and home place. As stated earlier, rural women play a very important role in maintaining a close connection between family homes and residential land, ancestors and the spirit world in order to ensure the comfort and safety of the family members (Bergstedt, 2015). Ancestors and deities are offering incense, votive paper and certain foods at an altar in the home, and at pagodas and community houses. The relationship between the material, human and spiritual worlds is a vital part of life in Vietnam, and is performed through the ritual ceremonies (Derks, 2015; Kato & Luong, 2016). A house is not an isolated unit but stretches out into a broader societal context, thus linking the inhabitants to state politics and economy (Carsten, 2004).

Notions of community sentiment and spirit (*tình cảm*) have, for a long time, been vital ingredients for the image of the 'traditional' northern Vietnamese village. This conception is a significant part of the idea of 'home place' (quê) that denotes an area which is essentially rural and holds a central position in the lives of those living in both urban and rural areas.

2.6 Married women's care and the kinship system

A married woman's role in her husband's family differs from a man's. While building a house is men's business, the responsibility of making a home belongs to women. It means men are responsible for financially supporting family, and women remain at home and nurture relationships (Dong, 2016). A rural woman's marital status generally determines her sphere of belonging: a daughter "belongs" to her natal family until marriage, then, after her marriage, she "belongs" to her husband's family where she has numerous and specific responsibilities to her husband, children, and in-laws. These spheres shape women's daily lives and influence how and to whom women channel their time, labour, and earnings. Kato and Luong (2016) pointed out that Vietnamese women's everyday stresses and worries seem to be related to two central facets of their lives. The first is overwork—a woman does hard physical work in the fields and has responsibility for all domestic tasks including the management of the household economy. The second is submission—a woman is obliged to "please" (*chiều*) her husband and his family. Pleasing her husband and his family means being especially attentive to the needs and wishes of her husband and parents-in-law, as well as respectful of them (Kato & Luong, 2016). Accompanying this is the responsibility of carrying and rearing children. In the first years of children's life, the mother is considered to have the most influence on their development. The traditional norm is that "naughty children are the responsibility of the mother; naughty grandchildren are the responsibility of the grandmother". In other words, the father has no responsibility for his children's behaviour at all. In the view of Confucian ideology, if women have the lowest position in society in general, this is even lower for the daughter-in-law in every family (Dang, 2007).

An additional pressure and responsibility are the kinship system. Married rural women cannot easily separate from families and kinship systems, and they have to be able to perform the tasks allocated to them. Most rural women start their married life in

their husband's family. The emphasis in Vietnamese society on the continuance of lineage through marriage is one of the reasons for this (Kleinen, 1999; Werner, 2004). In the Vietnamese view, it is sons, not daughters that are preferred because whereas daughters leave their original family to join their husband's family, sons attract a wife who enters into their family. As a result, married women have a responsibility to care for their parents-in-law and maintain a good relationship with other in-laws. Traditionally, individuals were identified primarily by their connections through the father's male bloodline, and kin groups larger than the family—clans and lineages—were formed by kinspeople who traced their relationship to each other in this manner (Nguyen, 2010). A family member's life was caught up in the activities of a multitude of relatives (Hays, 2018). For rural women, caring for relatives who share a common ancestor takes quite a lot of time. Caring for relatives is not only performed in the way they provide economic support for others, but also illustrated clearly through the way one member in the lineage serves other members when they have family events such as anniversary ceremonies. The more time they spend with others, the tighter their bond. The level of feeling for family members is measured by how much a woman works and serves in the relatives' events (Schlecker, 2005).

2.7 Context of the research location

The field work for this research took place in a village in *Hà Nam* province, North Vietnam, 70 km south of Hanoi—the capital and 100 km southwest of Haiphong—the second biggest port of Vietnam. Hà Nam is located in the centre of the Red River Delta, a location that was included in the national target program on new rural establishment, during the period of 2010 to 2020. The outcome of the policy has been shown in the increased number of garment factories in this province. Before 2010 there were 26 garment enterprises, mostly located in Phủ Lý provincial centre. The numbers increased rapidly after 10 years; in 2020, there were 166 garment enterprises and factories operating, including 129 garment factories in rural areas. Many of these garment factories were located in villages and operated by Vietnamese owners, rather than being located in district industrial parks (Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2020).

Like other villages in the North of Vietnam, this village has traditionally been the home of farmers who grow rice and maize on family-owned farms. Surrounding their houses,

you often find chickens picking about, maybe a pigsty, some vegetable beds, fruit trees and decorative plants. Most likely, all are guarded by at least one ferocious dog. On the main road to the village, there are five or seven shops which are family-owned small-scale businesses with mostly no employees. These offer a variety of goods, including haberdashery such as needles and thread, items of clothing and fresh food such as vegetables and meat. People pay cash for the things they want. This village was chosen for the location of this garment factory because it is the centre of the commune. From a strict administrative viewpoint, a village is not an administrative unit in Vietnam (Van Luong, 2010). The lowest administrative level is the commune (*xã*) and in most cases, the communes are made up of villages (*làng*) that the inhabitants perceive and refer to as separate communities, and this was also the case here. The commune's administrative centre was situated in this village and most likely that was why this village was home to more workers than the other villages. In particular, in this village, there are around 1500 households, and 1000 household offer labours for factories in the village, which employed nearly 1000 thousand workers in this community.

Chapter 3: Framing women's work in Vietnam

Introduction

In this chapter I draw on several areas of literature that are concerned with women workers' experience in Vietnam. First is a review of gender and work in Vietnam, where gender roles are ascribed for women, then a review of literature on women workers in factory work. The "globalization process" has created a huge number of jobs for women. This has been understood in terms of forms of exploitation, but it likewise has been understood as giving women a higher status, and independence. Both these perspectives are pertinent frames for rural women who frequently undertake work which is considered to be unskilled and who have previously been without access to waged employment. I then go on to examine women in the Global South more generally, and to establish a theoretical context for women's situations and their livelihood choices in Southeast Asia and in Vietnam, in particular. Finally, I review the research on the process and impact of rural women's factory work, which defines the conceptual framework for approaching the questions of social change of rural women in this context. My research is based on a third world feminist approach, gender development perspectives and an empowerment framework to fully explore the social changes that these rural women are initiating in their community.

3.1 Gender relations and work in Vietnam

There has been a long and unique history of different ideologies and forms of colonial rule that have influenced the gendered structures, roles and scripts, particularly in relation to work. Confucianism, feudalism, socialism and more recently neoliberalism have, over time, blended to shape the values and social norms of Vietnamese society. The state's defining and redefining of femininity in Vietnam has led to contradictory and opposing feminine ideals that have had an impact on gender relations and work. This has played out very differently in urban and rural areas, but also regionally, with Northern Vietnam being more affected by Confucianism brought with ten centuries Chinese colonisation in Vietnam (Nghia, 2005). Thus, femininity and feminine ideals in Northern Vietnam have been heavily influenced by Confucianism, traditions of matriarchy, French colonialism, socialist discourses of gender equality, as well as modern global discourses of femininity (Do & Brennan, 2015; Kabeer & Tran, 2002;

Werner, 2009). While the communist leadership has proclaimed eradication of gender differences and elevation of the status of Vietnamese women, they have simultaneously expressed ideas—in line with Confucian doctrine—concerning women's inherent capacities as mothers and their 'natural' aptitude to selflessness, faithfulness and industriousness which reinforced has social hierarchy and patriarchal values (Bergstedt, 2015; Scott & Chuyen, 2007). Any mention of gender issues often meets with a response that Vietnam has already achieved gender equality (Scott & Chuyen, 2007).

Confucian ideology and feudal dynasties have deeply affected Vietnamese society at all levels and has shaped the definition of femininity, and the roles of women and girls. Both the Three Obediences (*tam tòng*) and the Four Virtues (*tứ đức*), part of Confucian ideology and profoundly patriarchal, act as a moral and social code for unmarried and married women. Women and girls have been traditionally prescribed four virtues including labour, appearance, speech, and behaviour (*công, dung, ngôn, hạnh)* (Binh, 2004; Minh-Ha, 1992) which dictate:

> *Phận gái tứ đức vẹn toàn,*
>
> *Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh giữ gìn chẳng sai*
>
> (Every young woman must fully practice and scrupulously conform to four virtues: be skilful in her work, modest in her behaviour, soft-spoken in her language, faultless in her principles) (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 83).

A young woman was supposed to strive her entire life to reach this feminine ideal and was thus always subject to the surveillance of her elders. The demand to master the four feminine virtues could restrict women's personal freedom, advancement and require a great deal of self-sacrifice on her part. Achieving the four virtues was believed to be more important for a woman than her education and talent, especially for becoming a wife, a mother, and a daughter-in-law. It was believed that a wife and mother who showed a lack of the four virtues would sooner or later cause the disintegration and degradation of her family (Binh, 2004). Traditionally, women were expected to stay at home–being outdoors doing anything not connected to a household task or 'hanging around' on the way to or from some engagement was largely a male privilege. A woman could find it difficult to leave her home without risking being accused of neglecting her

household responsibility. As the saying went, a woman/girl should not commit the following things:

Ngồi lê là một,

Dựa cột là hai

Ăn khoai là ba

Ăn quà là bốn

Trốn việc là năm

Hay nằm là sáu

Hay ăn dỗ cháu là bảy.

(The seven deadly sins of a girl: 1. Sitting everywhere; 2. Leaning on pillars; 3. Eating sweet potatoes; 4. Eating treats; 5. Fleeing work; 6. Lying down too often; 7. Wolfing her nephew's sweets.) (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 82).

Obedience and submission are performed throughout a woman's life phase. In particular, as a wife, she must obey her husband and parents-in-law and remain a minor depending on her husband as on a central axle:

Tại gia tòng phụ

Xuất giá tòng phu

Phu tử tòng tử

(Daughter, she obeys her father

Wife, she obeys her husband

Widow, she obeys her son (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 83).

These Confucian-influenced expectations of women began to change with socialism in Vietnam; the state promoted female emancipation as a duty as much as a privilege. As Vietnamese women have been instructed to enlighten themselves and, contest diverse forms of 'backwardness' such as patriarchy, ignorance, and immorality. The right of the state to define female characteristics and labour, depending on purpose, time and need, has led to complex, contradictive and elusive feminine ideals (Pettus, 2004). Thus, rural women of contemporary Vietnam have frequently been reminded that

they are the allegedly proud inheritors of the national female tradition of intense work. From this perspective, rural women were part of a traditionally recognised femininity of hard-working and morally respectable women. In creating images of national identity, both on the international and the domestic scene, definitions and depictions of 'proper' Vietnamese femininity have been central (Nguyen-Vo, 2012; Pettus, 2004).

During war time, Vietnam government mobilised women from all walks of life, reformulated the values of Vietnamese women, to support this mass mobilisation, many standards were ascribed for women, such as "Five goods"[1], "Three readies"[2], "Moral education of the new women". These strategies aimed to raise women's consciousness (*giác ngộ*) of the oppression nature of the "feudal" family and equipped them with new cultural standards to become the "new socialist woman". However, scholars indicated that the utmost purpose of these above movements was to make the most use of women's labour and potential for the revolution rather than feminine rights (Binh, 2004; Pettus, 2004).

During the period of Đổi Mới, there was an emphasis on traditional feminine qualities (four virtues) in government discourse. These traditional gendered scripts—their enactment and embodiment are still very relevant in present-day Vietnam. Many contemporary Vietnamese women agree that four virtues should be preserved or inherited, however, they should also be developed to adapt to the new social context of Đổi Mới (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 2000 cited in Binh, 2004). Some scholars suggested that while Vietnamese society is ready to accept this new "preserve and develop" concept of female identity, it is creating additional pressure on women (Binh, 2004, p. 54; see also Pettus, 2004). For example, maintaining the right balance between qualities may be viewed by some as contradictory and unobtainable: "enrich your family, but avoid excessive ambition, modernize your appearance, but remain modest; put your domestic duties first, but continue to advance your 'scientific knowledge'" (Pettus, 2004, p. 5).

In reality, the four virtues are applied strictly to a married woman in her husband's family, where any behaviour and attitude that is deemed unsatisfactory is not

[1] The five goods were good production, good solidarity, good implementation of policies, good study, and good education of children (this strategy was launched by the 3rd National Women's Congress held in Hanoi, March 1961).

[2] Three readies were: (1) responsibilities for production and civil service so that their men folk could feel assured to fight at the front; (2) responsibility for running the family and encouraging their men to take part in the revolution; (3) responsibility for giving a hand when there was a need (this strategy was launched by Vietnam Women's Union, March 1965).

easily tolerated. The daughter-in-law's quality of "công" can be assessed through her performance of routine chores. If she demonstrates a lack of industriousness, it is considered a lack of devotion to her husband's family. Failure to meet in-laws' expectations in this respect, especially her mother-in-law's, will greatly affect her family relationships and impact her in a multitude of ways (e.g., psychologically and socially). The gap between the mother-in-law's expectations and the daughter-in-law's ability to meet those expectations is one of the main sources of conflict in the Vietnamese co-residential household (Binh, 2004; Sun & Lin, 2015; Werner, 2004).

Gender inequality in the division of labour in the extended family is affected strongly by the virtue of công. A husband typically does not perform many household chores or contribute in any significant way to domestic work, and this is supported and even enforced by his mother. As O'Harrow (2021) has pointed out, this is typical, as when young women marry, in line with the 'three submissions,' or tam tòng they must submit to their husbands, but it is often the mother-in-law who is the "enforcer of the submission" (p. 163). Many mothers-in-law object strongly to their married sons' sharing household tasks with their wives on the grounds that housework is entirely women's responsibility (Binh, 2004; Wang, 2007; Werner, 2004). It is noted that, the daughter-in-law's work outside the home is usually not counted as her virtue of công (labour) if her employment does not serve to increase the extended family's budget (Binh, 2004).

In terms of work, Vietnamese women have historically been located in the worlds of agriculture and small trade (Devasahayam & Yeoh, 2007; Leshkowich, 2014). Since Đổi Mới, with the eradication of the State subsidy system, cutting down of State enterprises and their staff, and the abandonment of collective agriculture production has created difficulties for many women who have lost their jobs and must seek new occupations (Barry, 1996; Bergstedt, 2015). Mothering women have especially suffered as a result of Đổi Mới's programs due to the diminishing level of resources that are being invested in day-care, preschools, and public education in general. This has led to the increasing vulnerability of women, particularly young women with children, many of whom choose to work part time at home because it allows them to supervise their children whilst working. For others it is preferable to working outside the home, especially in low-level jobs because this kind of work does not require high levels of education and offers flexible working hours (Summerfield, 1997; Tran, 2001). In the

late 1990s, there was a markedly increasing flow of rural female migrants to large cities (Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Sinh & Thuy, 2019; Thao, 2013; Tran, 2001) and many young women took up jobs in the assembly and garment industries (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010; Nghiem, 2004; Thao, 2013; Tran, 2012). Their more mature counterparts often ended up in other types of informal sector jobs such as street vending or *Ô sin* (domestic work) (Jensen & Peppard Jr, 2003; Nguyen, 2014). However, many others still remain in rural areas, especially women with children, as there are social, cultural, economic and political factors that prevent them from being able to migrate to urban areas (Kothari, 2002). And finally there are also those who choose not to move (committed non-migrants), because as explained by Thao (2013) they adhere to tradition, believing that women should remain in their homeplace to look after their children and elderly. Many women who have migrated from rural to urban areas for work still face difficulties in finding employment information, adapting to, and remaining in host communities. It is also often the case that women who have left must come back to fulfil their gendered roles of reproduction and caring including childbearing and rearing, caring for sick or elderly family members, and family dissolution. For example, Nguyen (2014) indicated that married female migrant domestic workers encountered a variety of problems to do with their absence such as new care arrangements with other family members, which they came to realise, were not ideal. While they are able to be mobile when young, as they gain gendered responsibilities, immobility is an inevitable life stage (Thao, 2013). In brief, it is a struggle for older rural women to find a stable job, which can contribute to their life, as well as meet the demands of their role of wife, a mother, and a daughter-in-law.

3.2 Feminised industry

Most studies on gender equity in garment and textile production in Vietnam, but also elsewhere, find a bias against women in both working conditions and remuneration because there is a tacit assumption that this is women's work (Kabeer & Trần, 2006; Mies, 2012; Ong, 2010; Ngai, 2005; Schoen, 2019). Garment and textile production are labour-intensive and offer entry-level jobs for unskilled labour in developing countries. Job creation in this sector has been particularly strong for women who previously had no income opportunities other than in the informal sector (Keane & te Velde, 2008; Nordås, 2004; Schoen, 2019; Tran & Jeppesen, 2016). In terms of wages garment and

textile employment are usually better than alternatives such as agriculture or domestic services.

Overall, the percentage of female workers in the textile and garment sector globally is average, but particularly high in the clothing and garment industry (ILO, 2018). Women often enter the industry without qualifications, particularly in Asia. Women now represent more than one-third of the manufacturing labour force in developing countries, and up to one half in Asian countries (Barrientos, Kabeer, & Hossain, 2004; ILO, 2018). This is particularly so in the garment and textile industry. There is an international shift of garment and textile production to the Global South, demonstrating that the qualities most valued in export-processing workers as well as in shopfloor workers by industry owners are an integral part of how productive femininities are produced rather than pregiven. As Salzinger (2003) has noted:

> The notion of an 'always-already' docile, dextrous, and cheap woman, that is, of a potential worker whose productive femininity requires not creation but recognition, is thus a transnationally produced fantasy with consequences, for it is precisely within these gendered discourses that decisions about production are made and shopfloor subjects whether productive or resistant-are constituted (p. 10).

The qualities ascribed to women factory workers and women of the Global South are "docility, dexterity, disposability and low cost labour" (Wright, 2013, p. 2). The fact that women are often those selected to be labourers in the garment industry replicates gender and ethnic stereotyping of Global South women as "naturally" more suited to this type of work. Moreover, roles that are considered to be women's roles (globally) are generally poorly paid, and this lesser pay rate in turn means that they do not attract men. These endemic popular views have led to low-paid labour being feminized, which is, as Chapkis and Enloe (1983) suggested, is a situation perpetuated by governments in developing countries wishing to attract foreign capital into garment production. However, while these views undoubtedly contribute to numerous labour practices which reinforce the same ideologies women have also used such views to their own advantage, particular in gaining employment, especially in rural areas, where there are limited opportunities for both genders. Women in this context are not just passive victims of

exploitative labour practices but actively engage at many levels of struggle at the margins of power both locally and globally.

Gender roles relating to the division of paid and unpaid work, and the tasks undertaken within these spheres are influenced by cultural-religious interpretations and historical and environmental factors. Gender is a crucial socio-economic identity and gender norms, and roles are located in households, communities and the economy. But these identities and norms are intertwined with other socio-economic identities such as age, status, income, class, education and skill levels, nationality, ethnicity and race (Butler, 1990). Therefore women as a group share similar opportunities and constraints but the extent, articulation and consequences may be quite different for different groups of women (Bamber & Staritz, 2016). However, in most societies women are primarily responsible for undertaking unpaid domestic and care work. As well as a distinction between women's work in the domestic and unpaid sphere and men's in the formal sector, within the paid workforce gender ideologies naturalize differences between 'women's work' and that of men. Again, this occurs differently across the globe (Connell & Pearse, 2014).

3.3 Women workers in global production

The earlier system of globalised production, the New International Division of Labour was a reconfiguration of global trade patterns and the geography of industry (Fernández-Kelly, 1983). In particular, the garment industry is one of the oldest, largest and most global industries in the world. It is the typical 'starter' industry for countries engaged in export-orientated industrialisation and is labour-intensive. This industry plays an important role as a 'spearhead' of industrialization and, taking a Global Production Network (GPN) approach, an important aspect of this industrial arrangement (Gereffi, 2002; Tran, 2012). Policy makers view integration in global production as a means of driving development, including generating employment and raising incomes (Shepherd & Stone, 2013). This integration is also being seen as a way to reduce poverty and support gender equality through incorporating women into the workforce (Hollweg, 2019). This is particularly so for marginalized groups such as unskilled workers without previous access to waged employment (ILO, 2011). What is significant about this process from a feminist perspective is the fact that the relocation of light manufacturing to the global South was accompanied by a widespread mobilization of

female labour (Bair, 2010). Women have continued their engagement in this sector of the economy. Research showed that women take on a larger share of jobs in labour-intensive, global, value chains (Bair, 2010; Ramamurthy, 2004; Schoen, 2019). Research by Tran (2001) in garment factories in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan demonstrated that men were in charge of higher-skilled, higher-paid tasks, including fabric cutting, pressing, supervision and quality control. Men were not engaged in sewing tasks and usually held management jobs, while women sewed and earned, on average, four-fifths of the pay of male workers in the apparel industry (Chen & Parker, 2007, p.142). On average, 60-80 percent of production workers in the apparel chain in the top 27 apparel exporting countries are women (Barrientos, 2014). Gender differentiation is used to deliver flexibility and raise productivity for global production (Morton, Klugman, Hanmer, & Singer, 2014).

As Tsing (2009) argued, capitalism looks for, and mobilizes, differences as a way to find profit. For example, Mies's *The Lace Makers of Narsapur* (1982) is a study of three groups of women home workers India. In Mies's view, the emergence of export-oriented production in that setting depends on the intersection of the caste system and a set of patriarchal ideologies and practices, which together create a particular opportunity structure for exploiting female labour. Mies also referred to the ideology of the housewife, and the naturalization of the social division of labour between women and men that it implies, as the sociocultural foundation on which the lace trade depends. These women workers were located between the reproduction of patriarchy and the accumulation of capital. Following Mies's study is Wolf's *Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics, and Rural Industrialization in Java* (1992), like Mies, Wolf (1994) examined the relationship between agrarian production and industrial production, as well as the relationship between the patriarchal household and the process of capital accumulation. She discovered that family dynamics and household relations fundamentally shape the way in which female labour power is made available to capital in Java, Indonesia. This phenomenon is reaffirmed in recent work. Schoen (2019), for example, examined how rural women in Bangladesh faced with cultural norms and patriarchy ideology which challenge them while engaging in ready-made garment factory work in their own community.

The critics of globalised production argue that multinational and international subcontracting systems exploit the cheap available labour market in developing

countries to reap high profits at the expense of decent wages and conditions and that this is supported by complicit host country governments (Campaign, 2005). Abundant studies of women workers and the functioning of the global political economy emphasise women's burden and exploited position (Bari, 1991; Kien, 2021; Lim, 1990; Mezzadri, 2016; Ngai, 2005; Schoen, 2019; Trask, 2013). Based on the gender segmentation of the labour market, women workers become the victims of global production network supported by national cultures that disadvantage women. Studies of the impact of globalisation on women have pointed to the feminisation of employment in export-oriented production, typified by the garment industry (Hollweg, 2019; Ramamurthy, 2004). A range of evidence showed that women workers have experienced hazardous work environments, under-payment of wages, long working hours, harsh discipline, lack of job security, suppression of trade union rights, confinement to factory grounds and slum-like living conditions (Campaign, 2005; Mezzadri, 2016; Ngai, 2005). Despite multiple disadvantages experienced by women workers, "globalization is often depicted as an authorless force, all powerful and irresistible, creating a sense in which states have no alternative but to bend to its logic" (Gainsborough, 2007, p. 2). Globalization has precipitated new 'transnational' problems which are beyond the ability of states to solve on their own. As Mayer and Phillips (2017) argued, "states have in some cases engaged in promoting inequality, usually in the name of 'competitiveness', through less progressive tax policies, relaxation of competition policy and reductions in social programmes" (p. 136). In the context of Asian development, Asian firms have become "gradually dis-embedded from state apparatuses and re-embedded in different global production networks governed by competitive inter-firm dynamics" (Yeung, 2014, p. 70).

Other research has focused on the social and economic benefits for women. Legrain (2004), for example, argued that the contractors for multinationals such as Nike in Vietnam, provide better wages and working conditions than local companies and that these jobs are making a strong contribution to reducing poverty. There are also positive benefits in terms of improved incomes and changing gender identity (Kabeer & Trần, 2006; Lim, 1990). In particular, women are using engagement in factory work as a way to change their social and economic status. Various studies have focused on the phenomena of young women from rural areas obtaining precarious work in cities (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010; Lee, 1998; Ngai, 2007; Taylor, 2004). On the one hand,

these young women wanted to widen their horizons and seek opportunities for a better more modern life (Ngai, 2007), where they could emulate the style of urban women (Taylor, 2004). On the other hand, women workers also hoped to escape pressure from forced marriage at a young age in their community, family conflicts, and traditional demands such as living with their mother in law (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010; Bowen, 2008; Ngai, 2005; Taylor, 2004). Mothering women migrant workers, only turned to urban employment for survival, as their tiny arable holdings and other livelihood options were no longer capable of maintaining their modest subsistence needs. Women workers in this context and others may have been exploited, but they were not without agency (Bair, 2010, p. 216). Ong (2010), for example, demonstrated that young Malay rural women workers negotiated both the new demands of factory life and the cultural construction of an Islamic society. Malay-rural women workers were therefore implicated in processes of subject formation that entailed the emergence of a "class sexuality" (Ong, 2010, p. 180).

Mothering women have struggled to get more permanent jobs, because of many reasons such as their low education and restricted flexibility. They have little opportunity to enter the labor market, as most urban enterprises do not want to recruit women who are over 35 years old (Trang, 2018). Additionally, migrating to the city is impossible for women with children due to a number of reasons; the high cost of childcare and living, without support from family and community, leaving their children in their home without their supervision is one of their most concerns (Nguyen, 2014), as teenagers, who lack education, and emotional input and care and from their parents and who are then more likely to be affected by social issues (Shouyun, 2017). In contrast, men who lack political connections or good local employment opportunities tend to migrate to escape their low status and unprofitable grain cultivation. In order to make ends meet, married women also have to earn money. Jobs in the garment industry are considered to be better paid and more reliable than farm work (Kabeer & Trần, 2006).

The participation of rural women, who have children, in factory work not only has economic benefits, but also impacts on identity and gender roles. In the past, if young women workers in large cities dared to become "others", it meant that they dared to emulate urban style and dress (Taylor, 2004, p.321). Now rural women workers not only change their appearance but have opportunities to challenge their gender roles in their community, where their identity has been judged by traditional norms for many

generations. These women have moved from working in the family sphere, to an identity as a formal working woman. While they still play a role of mother, wife, daughter-in-law, but working a visible work, their contribution is valued, they do not do it per se but a group with other workers, thus, potentially forming a class in this context.

3.4 Framework

Examining this changing conditions for women in relation to work, their status, identities and subjectivities is a feminist project. The conceptual and theoretical framing for this project informs the research questions, what is asked and why; but also, the methodological and analytic approach. In the sections below, I bring together three theoretical lenses that are used to understand, examine and analyse the changes that take place as a result of women's work in factories in rural Vietnam. This includes; women's gendered identities through Butler's work on gender and performativity, intersectional dimensions of identity, oppression and privilege through Third World Feminism and development theories of gender and empowerment.

As a starting point, Butler's work on collective gender identity and how it is created, maintained and reproduced within patriarchal societies is crucial for this feminist research. In chapters 2 and 3 I have discussed much of the historical context, including the different ideological influences in Vietnamese society that have shaped gender identities, roles and what Butler refers to as "performances". In her conceptualisation of gender identities, Butler viewed identities as being culturally construed, not biologically determined or decided. She noted that it is the political and sociohistorical influences that operate through dominant social discourses are central to the regulation of gender and how it is performed. In other words, it is our cultural traditions, norms, representations through images and language, and our everyday actions that are internalised through socialisation and repeated over time and across place. Butler (1990) stated:

> The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. The repetition is at once a re-enactment and reexperiencing of a set of meaning already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation…there are temporal and collective dimension (p.191).

Butler (1990) talks about this as a "practice of signification" (p.144). Interestingly and of special importance for my research, is that Butler's theories of gender identity (1990; 1993) were largely advocating for intersectional understandings, taking into account how other identities and even ascribed identities are part of what informs acceptable performances of gender–heteronormativity, race, ethnicity, geographic location. Thus, women who are differently positioned and in difference locales, are held to different nuanced expressions of what is considered acceptable for women. However, across experiences of gender and the places they are performed, women experience repression as a result of patriarchal structures and discourses. According to Butler (1990; 1993), women perform gender because there is a fear of reprisal through "normative violence[3]" but also shame and other psychological distress that comes from being ostracized for stepping outside the boundaries of acceptable gendered identities. The body, Butler (1993) asserted is central to understanding gendered power relations, identities and roles, which should be understood as "the effect of a dynamic of power" (p.12). The body is a key part of the production of gender and many feminist studies have since sought to understand the ways in which women's bodies are controlled, regulated, fashioned, styled and otherwise politicised (Butler, 1988; 1990; 1993; Ranade, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2010; Minh-Ha, 1997). In Butler's writings on the body, bodies become a site for which ethos and values about femininity (and masculinity) play out, with some bodies having more cultural capital that others. Butler (1988) contended that it is the repetition, re-enactment and ultimately the daily performance of gendered identities that that "which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p.519). Butler also positioned bodies as one of the key sites of transformation of gendered identities and performances, in which new identities can be expressed and explored under constrained agency. Through her idea of "resignification" she explained that gender identities are not a stable and consistent, but rather they are constituted through repeated acts, meaning that they open to change through "subversive" acts that women do to 'trouble' dominant gendered categories or scripts. Subsequently:

[3] "Normative violence"—slurs, insults, ostracization—that women perform gender in accordance with cultural norms and scripts, avoiding pain and discomfort (Butler 1990; 1993)

> Women may choose to 'subvert,' challenge, or overthrow such rigid expectations, by engaging in other performances that may or may not lead to increased ostracism, pain and violence. Therefore, one is forced to engage in some type of performance in order to conform, be accepted, and gain rewards in a society that honours the performance of "intelligible subjects" or, choose the alternative and potentially suffer increased psychosocial tension (Hough, 2010, p. 46, discussing Butler).

Moreover, Butler argued that the change in women's identities does not happen in isolation, but is connected to the ties they have with other women and their surroundings:

> These ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. ... Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do (Butler, 2004, p.22).

I have used Judith Butler's concepts of gender identities, performativity and constrained agency to understand how gender identity is constructed through interaction and socialization within a normative paradigm that supports rigid gender scripts and social categories. Butler's work is particularly useful in understanding, how the rural women who participated in my research, formed their identity as a class of working mothering women, whose performance of gender diverged from previous generations of women in their community. Women are constrained by slurs and ostracization which Butler (1990) called "normative violence". Therefore, I discuss how the rural women in my research acted out the most 'appropriate' identity to bring them the most rewards and least harm.

A third world feminist approach

In order to examine these rural women workers' experiences, my research employs a feminist approach that aims to investigate the gendered aspects of the

division of labor in the garment subcontracting system and Vietnamese cultural norms, particularly paying attention to how these women have created cultural change in their community. This approach is useful because the experiences of women differ across countries, particularly in an investigation of how gender and economics are interlinked. Moreover, feminist researchers have played an important role in analyzing poverty and class inequality through a gender lens to reveal the social and political aspects of phenomenon that first appear to be purely economic in nature (Kabeer, 2015, p. 190). Feminist approaches have shown that gender asymmetries affect all aspects of women's lives. One of them is evident in the inability to translate labor effort into income in the marketplace. These reflect gender inequalities in endowments, such as education and productive assets. They also reflect the gendered organization of economic opportunities.

My research draws particularly on third world feminism. Importantly, third world feminists and others have pointed out not all women are shaped by gender inequalities in the same way. Rather gender intersects with other statuses such as ethnicity and religion (Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991). Mohanty, a prominent third world feminist, critiqued western feminists who understood women's experience as universal. In 1984 in *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty argued that:

> Women are considered as an constituted, coherent group with identical interest and desire, regardless of class, ethnic or radical location or contradiction, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally (Mohanty, 2003b, pp. 336-337).

Women also have been labeled "powerless, exploited, sexually harassed", by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourse (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 338). Third world feminists have analysed third world women's oppression and resistance on the ground in their historical specificity by paying attention to intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nation pertaining to their locations (Mohanty, 2003a). In terms of the participation of female labor in global production, feminists have identified and raised questions about global economic, social, and cultural impacts on women in different localities by race and ethnicity, and have explored what globalization has meant for gendered ideologies, practices, and political organizing (Hesse-Biber, 2011). In line with this, Kabeer also pointed out that the world labor markets tend to be

organized along hierarchical lines which reflect the intersection between income and group-based inequalities. As a result, "women from poor and socially marginalized groups (lower castes or minority ethnic group, for instance) tend to be concentrated in activities at the bottom of the hierarchy of the risks, stigma, and exploitative working conditions associated with them" (Kabber, 2015, p.195). Women have often able to find jobs even when men cannot, because they are willing to work for lower wages and to take up jobs wherever they can find them in order to ensure that household basic needs are met (Kabber, 2015, p. 199). Industries often present the best survival strategy for women workers who are the only breadwinners in their large families (Hesse-Biber, 2011). The spread of informal work can be seen as one of the longer-term changes at the macro-level, and feminism provides an important lens to use to analyse the significance of informal work. The fact that men and women fare very differently in the informal economy is evident from the fact that, in most developing country contexts, women are more likely than men to be in what the ILO terms 'vulnerable employment' (Kabber, 2015, p.201). Along with poverty, these women have experienced disempowerment in their family as well as in community. As Kabeer (1999, p. 437) has stated, "there is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because of insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice". In order to understand women in specific settings, cultural and economic factors require analysis. In both visible and invisible ways, culture has impacted on women's rights and freedom for example their freedom of movement, and ability work outside of the home (Okin, 1998). Moreover, many women in the global South are affected by kinship systems (Mohanty (2003b). In the current research, integral to understanding women's role in informal work is an understanding of kinship structures which constitute women as mothers, wives, sisters. Third world feminists analyze the effects of kinship structures on the organization of labor. Feminists also examine the differing positive and negative impacts of economic development on different groups of women (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 343).

Gender and Development perspectives

In order to deal with the existing issues above, this thesis picks up gender and development (GAD) perspectives that focus on a feminist approach to understanding and addressing the disparate impact that the global production network has on people

based upon their location, gender, class background, and other socio-political identities. The GAD concept emerged in the 1980s out of the criticisms of the earlier Women in Development concept, and has its roots in socialist feminism:

> Socialist feminists have identified the social construction of production and reproduction as the basis of women's oppression and have focused attention on the social relations of gender, questioning the validity of roles that have been ascribed to both women and men in different societies (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 494).

GAD focuses primarily on the gendered division of labour and gender in relation to the power embedded in institutions, and one of the goals of GAD is to challenge existing gender roles and relations (Baden & Reeves, 2000). The GAD approach is concerned with the way in which a society assigns roles, responsibilities and expectations to both women and men. In the effort to create gender equality, GAD policies aim to redefine traditional gender role expectations, so that women will not be expected to fulfil household work, home-based production as well as bearing and raising children and taking care for other family members.

GAD argues that women's weakness in socio-economic and political structures as well as their limited bargaining power puts them in a very disadvantageous position. One of the solutions suggested by the GAD approach is the self-organization of women at local, regional and national levels. Additionally GAD sees women as agents of change rather than as passive recipients of development efforts (Rathgeber, 1990). This is compatible with Mohanty's assertion, that "Third World feminists must recognize the agency of Third World women and respect their diverse viewpoints and activisms" (Mohanty, 2003b, p. 515).

However, in order to eliminate gender inequalities, and to strengthen the position of women, GAD urged an institutional change within socio-economic and political structures. This is an extremely demanding task which makes the GAD concept difficult to implement (Tasli, 2007, p. 25). As said above, with the spread of a global production network, the state has a lacklustre role, sometimes promoting inequality in the name of "competitiveness" (Mayer & Phillips, 2017, p. 136). GAD therefore needs to be combined with another framework which motivates women to change by themselves. This framework is analysed in the following section.

Empowerment

I am interested in what factory work might mean for mothering women's life options, and their ability to make choices that improve their quality of life and negotiate the gender constraints that operate in Vietnam. I explore the contribution of gender and development studies to the analysis of agency and empowerment to further develop a framework for analysing rural women workers' experience in Vietnam. Within gender and development studies, researchers and activists concerned with social justice and women's equality have devoted much attention to developing theories of women's empowerment. This effort is evident in the analysis of women's situations as well as the identification of effective ways of enabling women's empowerment. The concept of empowerment starts from the understanding that women, in different ways but in virtually every society, are disadvantaged by the way that power relations shape their choices, opportunities and well-being (Mosedale, 2005). Kabeer's ideas on empowerment are central to many approaches, and for her, empowerment is a process by which those who lack power gain it, in particular the ability to make choices about important areas of their lives. She defined empowerment as "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). In other words, "Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions" (Rahman, 2013, p. 10).

The concept of "strategic life choices" refers to important choices such as choice of livelihood, the choice to invest in education for daughters, the choice to live the life people want and so on. This coincides with the definition of empowerment offered by Bélanger and Pendakis (2009): "an increased capacity to make choices, a sense of having agency or control over one's life and increased powers of negotiation within significant relationships" (p. 268). This definition covers two vital elements that are commonly identified in the women's empowerment literature. The first is the focus on a process of change, from a condition of disempowerment to one of greater empowerment. The second is "agency", the idea that to be considered empowered, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change.

For Kabeer (1999), the ability to make life choices has three inter-related dimensions: "resources", material, human and social; "agency", or the ability to define

one's goals and act upon them, and "achievements" of outcomes that women value themselves. Kabeer adopted Giddens's (1987) use of the term "resources" to refer to access and control of those human and social resources which enable the individual to exercise choice. "Agency" is closely related to power, including the sense of "power within", encompassing self-confidence and inner strength that individuals bring to their activity and "the power to", the capacity to define their own life-choices and pursue their own goals. Kabeer (2005) argued that, access to paid work is significant as it "can increase women's agency in strategic ways" and lead to "positive changes in women's own perceptions of themselves, and their role in household decision making" (p. 18). Kabeer also found that factory jobs gave women a greater sense of independence and new social networks. Additionally, "married women workers reported improvements in household relations as a result of their greater economic contributions, with greater sharing of decision making with male partners" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 20).

While some analysts concluded that Third World women are worse off with factory employment spurred by capitalist development (Chapkis & Enloe, 1983; Mezzadri, 2016), others argued that women are better off in such situations (Kabeer et al., 2013; Lim, 1990; Ong 2010; Pham Thi, Kappas, & Faust, 2019). Roldan (1984) found that while women's incomes were low, earning money gave them some autonomy in consumption and a sense of more control over their lives, thus facilitating the "renegotiation of the terms of interaction within the family" (p. 279). Women gained more decision-making power in some areas although they were unable to bargain for significant change in gender relations within the home (Benería & Roldan, 1987; Gates, 2002; Fernández-Kelly, 1983). Despite the fact that their income was small, and they were in the most subordinate level of the proletariat, Wolf (1994) found that women's sense of self and their willingness to confront men increased. Thus, female employment in multinational factories (or other factories feeding global markets) reaps some benefits for female workers in the familial sphere—for instance, more participation in family decisions or the creation of new boundaries that allow an escape from traditional Mmothers-in-law's control and supervision. Indeed, study of contemporary industrialization in the "Third World" suggests that women may gain more autonomy or say in family decisions because of their factory employment and wages.

These dimensions of agency are distinguished from agency that is exercised in a negative sense such as "power over" or domination of one group over another. In

Kabeer's view, resources and agency together, lead to wellbeing outcomes. This is based on Sen (1999)'s theory of capabilities, in which resources and agency together constitute a person's capabilities, the potential that people have to live the lives they want and to choose and achieve socially and personally valued ways of "being and doing".

However, some writers separate access to resources as pre-conditions for achieving empowerment, rather than part of empowerment itself (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002), and similarly treat achievements, not as empowerment per se, but as the outcomes of the process, whereas Kabeer treated them as indivisible and fluid elements. This may lead to some difficulties for operationalisation, however, in order to deal with these issues, Kabeer indicated there is a need to cross-check evidence to ensure the intended meaning of indicators of resources, agency and achievements. Thus, many writers agreed that the exercise of agency is the central part of empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002). Basing on Kabeer's work, a concept of women expanding the boundaries and spaces of what it is possible for them to be and do, in various defined spheres, again focusing on the agency aspect of empowerment are used by both Mosedale (2005) and Heerah (2006). Mosedale (2005) defined women's empowerment as "the process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing" (p. 252).

Although Kabeer's approach is particularly useful for conceptualising individual women's empowerment, it lacks clarity on the place of collective action in a theory of empowerment. While Kabeer (2005) recommended that transformation of power structures is more likely to occur when it includes collective action, she does not specify whether it is necessary for women to engage in collective action to challenge structures. On the other hand, Malhotra et al (2002) argued that, whether conscious or unconscious, individual changes in practices that differ from social norms gradually have an impact on wider social relations.

There is an assumption in the feminist literature on empowerment that to be empowered women must in some way challenge the traditional gender norms of their particular society and that this challenge is always positive and liberating for women. This involves an unresolved contradiction if self-determination is the goal, as women may choose not to challenge such norms. This question deserves further attention in our

thinking on empowerment and is one which I considered in my analysis of the mothering women's worker's experiences and expressions of choice.

From the above issues, it is clear that the nature of agency and empowerment and how these should be assessed is still contested. For the purposes of my analysis, I have adopted the process element, which identifies the situational constraints, and opportunities for, action and choice that existed in rural women's lives before the factories appeared. Areas of constraint included the limitation of movement and the lack of paid work in rural areas. The primary opportunity was available work in factories in the women's hometown which gave access to material and socio-cultural resources such as an increase of status in the private and household sphere, and psychological benefits such as self-confidence and self-esteem. This is evidenced in data from observation and semi-structured interviews. Secondly, I use the concept of agency to explore the ways in which these mothering women exercised choices to expand the possibilities of their lives. I consider the extent to which they challenged traditional norms and what this means for their position and status in family and community.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological design of the research—the research questions, the aims and scope of the research, the methods chosen and the ethical considerations. The first section covers the feminist methodological approach used in this study, with a focus on the theoretical rationale and methodology. The second section discusses how an ethnographic approach was part of my research in order to gain a full picture of the researched setting. This approach is discussed in relation to participant recruitment and data collection, looking at the initial engagement of rural women workers as participants and my status as a PhD student. The third section details my approach to data analysis and locating and working with the research data to develop codes, themes, and broad insights, which then form the findings for this research. Section four reflects on key aspects of trustworthiness in this qualitative study, taking into account ethical considerations and the limitations arising from the research. In this chapter, I also examine my role as an insider-outsider, with knowledge of the context and gender roles from my own upbringing in Vietnam, as well as a research lens, which provides new, complex and, at times, challenging elements to the work. The fieldwork data and the interview materials are referred to as 'tales from the field'/ '*chuyện trong nhà ngoài đường*', a Vietnamese phrase used to describe stories collected from the grassroots for research purposes. By calling these stories 'tales from the field' I acknowledge and honour the experiences and in-depth knowledge of the rural women interviewed for this project. It is from this experience and situated knowledge that the arguments of this thesis are formed.

4.1 A feminist approach to knowledge-making

This thesis draws on a feminist epistemological and methodological approach to ethnography. Feminists, although diverse in their beliefs and positions, claim that society has been male dominated. Jackson and Jones (1998) argued that gender is a marker of social differentiation in most societies and many feminists argue that women's perspectives, voices, and knowledge-making have been silenced and undermined (Jackson, 2018; Purkayastha, 2021). Therefore, feminists need to develop knowledge-making approaches that reflect their lived experience and position in the

social world. Thus, to understand gender relations in women's lives means to understand how the social reality of women is conceptualised and understood (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 2). In important work around 'situated knowledges' Haraway (1988) argued that individual women's circumstances be explored as a confluence of power relations, with women's ways of seeing at the centre of knowledge production (p. 583). Indeed, DeVault (1996) claimed that the purpose of feminist methodology is to 'reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many lives invisible' (p. 320). DeVault (1996) also noted that "Feminists seek a methodology that will support research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women" (p. 34). More recently there has also been increasing attention to the intersectional nature of identities and power, considering the ways in which women of colour have been further marginalised as a result of epistemic forms of injustice (Collins, 2017). Thus, feminist knowledge-making projects should centre the ontological, epistemological and methodological values and commitments that consider how 'race', gender, economic/social class and sexuality influence women's lives and uncover differences amongst women's voices and experiences (McDowell & Sharp, 2014, p. 262). For instance, Jackson (2006) claimed that feminist methods should be based on testimonies that question "who is spoken to, how they are spoken to, what expectations are held about who can speak on behalf of others, what can be voiced and how meanings are understood" (p. 529). Vietnamese women in rural villages have not often been positioned as knowledge-makers in their own right, with the exception of a few studies. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I situated myself in relation to the reader, and to my position to this complex and constantly evolving topic. By placing my experience and my story at the forefront, I hope to convey, at least in part, the importance of not only my own situated knowledges, but also those of the women I interviewed for this study.

A number of researchers have also focused on the ways in which data gathering methods can align these with epistemological and ontological commitments in feminist research (Ackerly & True, 2019; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Fine, 1992). Jackson (2006) noted that in listening to or observing women in feminist research, 'feminists can use any method, but how they use them may be distinctive' (p. 529). Others have looked specifically into interviews to explore experience (Oakley, 2013) as well as through inductive fieldwork approaches (Reinharz, Bombyk, & Wright, 1983) and participant

observation (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001). Across many of these methods, a focus on relationality and trust has been core (Ann, 2017). In addition, women's' shared interests and concerns provide resources for dismantling the hierarchies, fictions, and avoidances of research based on positivist frameworks; the argument is that women can talk together more freely and reciprocally, using shared experience as a resource for interpretation (DeVault, 1996; Oakley, 2013). In bringing a focus to the dialogic and relational nature of feminist and albeit all forms of knowledge production, a feminist ethics (living well) and politics (practices of domination, privilege, and oppression) are brought to this project with a focus on hearing from rural Vietnamese women, who have been overshadowed and unseen for far too long. This PhD research centres the knowledge and experience of Vietnamese women in rural areas to enact what Haraway (1988) described as:

> A more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions (p. 579).

In order to bring understandings of culture, religion, 'race,' ethnicity and rurality into conversation with a gendered analyses, I needed a methodological approach that was sensitive to how rural women workers experienced social change in family and community, and within a broader sociohistorical context of patriarchy and burgeoning/emergent capitalism. The reason I used a feminist approach was the direct focus on lived experience and knowledge that is produced through interactions between women. Indeed, I was conscious of the fact that the gendered roles or 'traditions' prescribed to Vietnamese rural women are longstanding, women's families have been practising these norms, rituals, and ways of being for generations. This perspective shaped my research strategy in the sense that I was aware of the fact that participants could be experiencing dramatic social changes as gender roles and traditions are changing rapidly as a result of economic development, particularly in North Vietnam where Confucian oriented traditions have been the cornerstone of family life. I decided to immerse myself in participants' environment by living in their community, working alongside them in the garment factory and taking part in activities in the village such as going to the local market, weddings, local ritual events, etc to examine all dimensions of

work and community life. I visited some of their homes and took my children to play with their children with the simultaneous aims of not disturbing their work and more genuinely witnessing their daily life. I then moved to the step of conducting qualitative interviews, thus giving ample space and time to interviewees to narrate their lives freely.

4.2 Ethnography as a feminist knowledge-making endeavour

Ethnography "bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 2) and is concerned with understanding culture. It has long been used to delve into the social and cultural particulars of human existence (Madden, 2010). Ethnographic fieldwork includes systematic observation and participation in the lives of the studied people, with writing about these groups of people (i.e., fieldnotes) as a core part of data generation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Madden, 2010). Atkinson et al. (2001) defined ethnography as a theory of the research process—an idea about how we should do research. Ethnography usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork conducted over a period of time; utilising a variety of research techniques; with an understanding of how the context informs the action; involving the researcher in participation and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes. Given that the task of ethnography is to investigate some aspect of the lived experience of people who are being studied and the cultural context, ethnography was chosen for its focus on "… discovering and investigating social and cultural patterns and meaning in communities, institutions, and other social settings" (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p.1). Thus, in this study the focus on rural women and the organisations and institutions they are embedded in—family, community, work (factories)—were central to examining the cultural patterns that were reflective of gendered, economic, and geographic dimensions within these everyday spaces.

Feminists have been attracted to ethnographic approaches to research partly because they offer possibilities for situating the lives of women within a broader social, patriarchal context with attention to role of culture and power (Sanger, 2003; Visweswaran, 1997). Ethnographic approaches have often been seen as ideally suited

to feminist research because the focus on the cultural and experiential nuance to knowledge-making eschews the false dualisms of positivism and draws upon traditionally female strengths such as empathy and human concern, allowing an egalitarian, reciprocal relationship between knower and known (Atkinson et al., 2001; Reinharz, 1992; Stacey, 1988). For Reinharz and Davidman (1992) it is ethnography in the hands of feminists that renders it feminist. Such approaches provide insight into the complexity and texture of gendered power relations at the individual and community level. In regard to the study of culture, ethnography has become a more established tradition in cultural studies (Atkinson et al., 2001). Feminists in cultural studies have generated a form of ethnography which pays close attention not only to experience in context, but also to the ways in which representations shape the lived context (Atkinson et al., 2001). Ethnography has provided an excellent methodology for feminists, with its emphasis on experience and the words, voice and lives of the participants (Atkinson et al., 2001). This is why feminism and ethnography can be crafted into an approach that holds true to feminist knowledge-making commitments. As with any feminist research, the ethnographer maps out the physical, cultural, and economic possibilities for social action and meaning. For some feminists the focus is not just on the interaction between the structure and agency at the site of the social, but on enabling participants to establish research agendas so that they have some say in how they are studied (Atkinson et al., 2001).

My rationale for using ethnography is that culture is imbued in lived experiences, not only in the making of a meaningful story by a particular subject, but also in ways that others understand and retell that story within a specific cultural time and place. With a focus on one particular village in North Vietnam, in combination with the exploration of one unique garment factory, I am able to examine the story of this place, institution and the women and others within it in much more detail. As the growth of garment factories in rural areas increases, people mostly view it as the increase of productivity and modernisation, with a dominant narrative and assumption that it helps rural women to escape poverty. However, this economic specific perspective that privileges the material angle is overly simplistic at best and there is a danger of misrepresentation of complex identities and community dynamics. In reality, after doing field work, I realised that significant social change has been triggered by the development participation of women in factory work in this community and that it will

change the social, economic, and political landscape for women in the generations to come. My aim as a researcher has been to understand rural Vietnamese women's stories, which are not so distant from my own and have strong resonances with feminist understandings of objectivity and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Having been born and raised in Vietnam, I have witnessed the cultural shifts and the slow erosion of particular gendered traditions within the family, but also in the psyche of men and women in the community more broadly.

However, it is also important to recognise that ethnographic approaches are historically anchored in anthropology and qualitative sociology and have been seen as problematic due to a focus on:

> The indigenous, the exotic, the subaltern, the disadvantaged, in other words, people who stood as some sort 'other' of to the well-educated and resourced Westerners who dominated the practice of early ethnography (Madden, 2010, p.1).

Other issues that have been raised within this approach are those associated with: 'going native'; lengthy unfocused forays into the field setting; superficial, random data collection and; the reliance on disciplinary stock categories (Atkinson et al., 2001; Dewan, 2018). Anthropology has also historically been a tool for the patriarchy and contributed to women being represented and having their lives narrated in ways that furthered the patriarchy.

In order to break such forms of epistemic violence, feminists have used anthropology as a political tool for representing important issues around inequity in women's lives. They have challenged the idea of the 'objective gaze', which in traditional anthropology created an us/them dynamic with the anthropologist characterised as a dispassionate and detached observer (Fine, 1992; Fine & Torre, 2019). As Haraway (1988) so pointedly noted that gaze was simply performing the 'god trick' in which predominantly Western male researchers enact "a perverse capacity […] to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), erasing embodied meanings generated from the bottom of the power structure. Attention to gender is significant in the work of the earliest women anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Hortense Powdermaker and Peggy Golde, as was reflection on their own impact, effect and power

in the discipline of anthropology (Atkinson et al., 2001). Abu-Lughod (1990) argued that what feminist ethnography can contribute to anthropology is an unsettling of the boundaries that have been central to its identity as a discipline based on the colonial method of 'studying the other'. In particular, in cultural studies, Feminists have generated a form of ethnography which pays close attention not only to experience in context, but also to the ways in which representations shape the lived context. Atkinson et al. (2001) reaffirmed that, ethnography provides an excellent methodology for feminists, with its emphasis on experience and the words, voice, and lives of the participants. In carefully bringing together ethnography and a feminist frame, my approach to knowledge-making is one that pushes back upon Western ways of 'doing' research that present 'difference' across raced and gendered lines as something 'to-be-captured, to-be assimilated, and to-be-wholly eradicated' (Minh-Ha, 1997).

4.2.1 Ethnographic Fieldwork – Participants and Data gathering

As part of this ethnographic research, I lived in the Northern Vietnamese village for three months. Over the last five years this village has had several factories built and the factory I researched for this PhD study currently employs more than 400 rural women workers. I interacted with and observed rural women workers inside and outside the factory, and 12 participated in the interviews. Additionally, I had informal conversations with the factory manager and other women outside factory as part of my immersion into community life. As part of ethnographic fieldwork, I also attended events and went to places where important gendered community dynamics play out in Vietnamese villages, including local market, weddings, pagoda events and so on. Data was gathered through two primary methods, participant observation and interviews which I discuss in detail in this next section.

4.2.1.1 Recruitment and participants

Recruitment process

I recruited participants through two settings, a local women's association, and a factory. A purposive sampling strategy was employed because of the focus to "intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2002, p. 206). Thus, it was central to recruit participants with the right knowledge, experience, and willingness to engage in conversation

about their work and gendered aspects of the identity, family, and community life. The criteria for individual participants were that they be workers aged over 25 years old with children. The rationale for these criteria was to capture those at intersecting roles across gender and new economic development. Thus, these women were mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law, experiencing changes and challenges within their roles having recently begun working in garment factories.

First, I approached leaders of the local women's association and asked for permission to speak at a women's association meeting to talk about my project and to invite women to participate in the research. The local women's association in this area had about 400 members and approximately 80 to 100 women are in attendance at each meeting. As such, I had the opportunity to inform potential participants about the project, specifically to stimulate some interest. At the meeting, I gave a 15-minute presentation about the research and left information about the project (in Vietnamese) for women to contact me for further details. Speaking to the participants allowed me to ensure that potential participants understood what the research was about and what kinds of questions would be asked in the interview. I emphasised the voluntary nature of the project and that they were under no obligation to participate.

As another recruitment strategy, but also as part of my ethnographic fieldwork, was working in the factory, which gave me the chance to become familiar with more women in the village. This opportunity to work alongside them and speak to them more about who I was and the research I was undertaking sparked their interest and many of the women were keen to participate. I provided these women with handouts which provided information about the project and advised that if they wished to participate, they needed to complete the appropriate section of the form they had been given and send it back to me or tell me privately. There was also an "Information for Participants" form that participants were given beforehand to ensure they understood the project.

The research participants

The research participants play a very important role in fully understanding the lives of rural women in a broader community. According to Johnson (1990), it is not enough for contemporary researchers to know how to get information from participants, or even how to get along with them. They need to know "the informant's structural

position in a social network, functional role in an organization, or level of competence in a field of knowledge" (Johnson 1990, p.1)

Twelve women workers were interviewed, in the factory they are co-workers, and outside the factory they are neighbours, as they came from the village where the research is carried out and other nearby villages. Each one has their own unique situation. They are all experiencing motherhood, carrying roles as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, and did all kinds of invisible work before working in this factory. In order to keep the principles of privacy and confidentiality, the participants' names have been changed. Here are their brief biographies.

Hoa is an active women worker, she works as an assistant for group leader, she previously worked as a worker in a paint factory in the city. She came back to work in this garment factory right after this factory operated (2014). She lives with her two children and husband who is a secondary teacher in the village.

Hồng started working in this factory in 2014, she previously worked in a factory in the city. She is skilful and hardworking; thus, she is delivered difficult stages of production. She lives in an extended family with her two children, her husband and her mother-in-law. She always looks happy and seems to have a good relationship with other workers.

Huệ is one of disability workers in the factory, this factory work is considered her best choice as other factories do not accept her as she is disability and of high age (45 years old). Even working in a garment factory, she has never been in the position of sewing. Her duty is to arrange and attach labels for sewing products, cutting thread. She previously did family agricultural farm and run a small stall at home.

Đào is quite discreet, she also lives with an extended family, including her husband, children, and parents-in-law. Đào is one of four workers who worked in the city before. But like most other rural women, she does not want to work far from home. She wants to work in this factory for a long time as it is convenient for her to do the role of mother, wife. She is very modest; she sacrifices herself for her family.

Mai is a quiet and timid woman, as she has never worked out of the village, only did family farm. She only finished grade 10. She carried out easier steps of production, her work speed is slower than other workers. She wants to work near home as she can come back home every day to see and take care of her children.

Cúc is an active, flexible woman. She previously worked in a garment factory in Ho Chi Minh city (8 years). The reason she came back is that the childcare cost in the city is very high, and she did not receive support from other members in her family in carrying her children (twin) if she remained in the city.

Cam is a traditional rural woman, plain and quiet, like Mai, she previously only did agriculture in the village, after marriage she gave birth to three children. She started working here right after this factory opened. For her, this job is one of the best opportunities, it brings her stable income, and it is much better than farming.

Bưởi's hometown is very far from this village, she lived in the centre of Vietnam, she moved here to live with her husband family after getting married. She is flexible, and she is straightforward and dares to speak out about what she thinks. She carried out many jobs before, such as agricultural work, construction assistant work, worker.

Táo is quite young in comparison with her co-workers (26 years old), she got married after finishing high school. Since she only stayed at home and gave birth to two children in four years after getting married. At that time, she had experienced pressure that came from her parent-in-laws as well as her neighbours. They thought she was lazy and the clinging type.

Lê is a woman who looks older than her age, her skin is dark from working long days under a hot sun previously. She had experienced financial difficulty, her husband died and left her a huge loan for his cure. She has two children, and they study in Hanoi, she lives with her mother-in-law who is quite strict and supervises almost all her activities.

Mận, unlike other women workers, holds the highest degree of all participants. She graduated from a college; she has a bachelor's degree in management. The reason she

works in this factory is that she could not find an office job after graduating, she needed a job before getting married in order to avoid being viewed as unemployment, living dependently on her husband's family.

Mơ is Lê's friend, she has two children, the oldest one got married and another child is living with her. She lives with her husband and parents-in-law. Like many other workers here, she only did family agricultural farming previously. She came here to work as a suggestion from Lê.

4.2.1.2 Data gathering methods

Table 1: Overview of data gathering activities and participants

Method	Settings/Participants	Timeframe
Ethnographic observation	Inside factory, outside factory, neighbours' home, birthdays, weddings, death anniversaries, local pagoda events, local market, rice fields, surrounding village	December 2018-February 2019
Interviews	*n* =12	January, February 2019

Participant observation

Participant observation is the primary method for data gathering in ethnographic approaches, with an emphasis on understanding time, place, and culture—the local knowledge, values, and practices (Brewer, 2000). Participant observation places emphasis on describing existing situations using the five senses—providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) as well as documenting through fieldnotes and other techniques (e.g., mapping and drawing). In addition there is an emphasis in ethnographic participant observation on being in the natural setting so that one can learn as much as possible about the people involved and their activities (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, pp. 2-3). Thus, in order for me to really understand the new working life of rural Vietnamese women in garment

factories, I needed to be immersed in this setting. As Fine (1992) argued in her seminal work on feminist methodologies:

> If you really want to know either of us, do not put us in a laboratory…watch me with women friends, my son, his father, my niece, or my mother, and you will see what feels most what authentic to me (p. 16).

Whilst I did spend three months in this village for my fieldwork and was exposed to many settings and spaces, two settings—the factory and everyday community activities/events— were more focused in terms of my systematic observation. Lueger noted three possible areas of focus in participant observation sessions which are present in any social situation (Lueger, 2000, p. 107 cited in Müller, 2021, p. 41): (1) actors, (2) events and actions, (3) objects and products. These different areas guided my observations and fieldnotes in terms of general structure, however, as Harrison (2018) has noted, ethnographic jottings include "descriptions, dialogues, characterizations, and narratives" (Harrison, 2018, p. 25) that involve analysis and meaning making as it unfolds.

Participating in factory life

In order to explore how this rural factory work changed working women's lives and what their experiences of undertaking this work were, I realised that the best approach would be to become their co-worker in their working environment and. This would enable me to naturally observe their actions, gestures, and words. As Fine and Torre (2019) argued "No research on us without us" and "marginalized bodies and tongues carry stories untold" (Fine & Torre, 2019, p. 435). Hearing the women's stories in this shared context demonstrated vulnerability and solidarity, showing that I was willing to be there and to learn. Whilst my use of ethnography in this study falls more in line with traditional ethnography, some conceptualisations of institutional ethnography (see Devault, 1996; Quinlan, 2009) were a useful starting point as the focus is on understanding people's everyday lives, while also uncovering how particular institutions organise, govern, and rule their lives. For women taking up factory life, this experience, the setting, the structures, and those in positions of leadership and power that govern them are all important in considering change around other institutions (marriage, family) and their identities and community life. It was important to take up

this work and to see from the inside and to carry out the 'actions' of work that many women were performing every day.

In my fieldwork role as a factory worker for three weeks, I was particularly curious to find out how hard this work is and whether there were any particular features of this working environment that kept the women faithfully working here. I had an agreement with a factory owner that I was able to work for a short period (five days a week, from 7 am to 6 pm) in a garment factory in the village for research. I worked there for three weeks with the purpose of investigating the working conditions and gender dynamics. On my first day I started at 7 am alongside other workers and left at 3 pm (three hours before the end of the working day) due to exhaustion. I was so tired I left my bicycle at the parking area in front of the factory gate, only remembering it after a two-hour sleep and a good dinner. I returned to the factory to pick up my bicycle at 8 pm and noticed that there were some workers who had stayed behind to finalise their work or complete extra products. I wondered how they could work continuously for such long hours bent over the machine. In the following days, I continued to connect with other workers as I worked alongside them or at break time. I learned how to copy their work, and many were very friendly and enthusiastically guided me how to do simple tasks like loading the bobbin and threading the needle to sewing the draft fabric. After three days I started to sew the real product, at the simple stage. Luckily for me it took a very short time to copy their work because it is the kind of work, I was familiar with in the past. While we shared these tasks the women freely talked about their past work, their family life, and their relationship with members of their family and so on. I also observed the whole working environment inside the factory.

Observation beyond the factory: involvement in everyday community life

A central part of my fieldwork involved participant observation in settings beyond the walls of the factory in order to understand the broader sociocultural context in the community. So much of community life and specifically gendered roles and power relations are defined through longstanding traditions, rituals and in specific setting such as marketplaces (O'Harrow, 2021). During my fieldwork to obtain a sense of community life I went to weddings, birthdays, death anniversaries, pagoda events, the local market, and neighbours' houses where my son played with their children. These visits enabled me to observe and participate in public contexts and spaces where

women have traditionally performed their duties outside the home for generations. I attended rituals and celebrations imbued with traditional Northern Vietnamese village culture, which comes from long standing cultural and spiritual beliefs as well as centuries of Chinese and French colonialism. The informal conversations with neighbours, participants' mothers-in-law and other workers' mothers-in-law offered a diverse range of perspectives of past and present community life. As a participant-observer I was able to link the historical contexts of the lives of rural women in this community to their current situation.

These social gatherings allowed for observation of changes to the gendered roles that women often play in community life. These roles are typically behind the scenes and are almost always heavy with domestic and invisible work—cooking, cleaning, and preparing a space for an event. Goffman (1956) proposed that there are 'front' and 'back stages' in a field observation which provide insights into different identities, with place being intimately tied to social identity. The kitchen is backstage in community events in rural Vietnam and women 'perform' gender quite differently there to how they perform it on the 'front stage', where gender roles in rituals and events are performed in accordance with deep seated traditions. Frequent attendance at social functions and facilitated active observations, also enabled me to enlist interviewees. Attending formal and informal gatherings as well as getting involved in listening to some of the community's challenges through these social settings further refined my understanding on how to frame interview questions prior to and during the interview stage, as it highlighted additional areas that needed further study. In these settings I was quite seamlessly positioned as an 'insider' by local women, unlike the factory setting where it was quite obvious that I was not as practiced, knowledgeable or familiar with the work or workplace. In community spaces, I was at home, or at least very close to it. As Narayan (1993) noted there are multiple planes of insiderness and outsiderness in ethnographic research and across fieldwork settings that we may easily move between with little attention paid to us.

I remember when I was a child, I was very happy going to the *chợ quê*—local market— with my grandmother where she bought some food and other things for the family. She also brought with her a bundle of vegetables or fruit to sell. The local market is more than just a place to sell agricultural or handmade products, it is also a place for meeting and chatting. I recall the women's bustle as they worked—laughing

and sharing stories, something which provided a sense of women's life in the community. At that time, I only watched, however, it was those moments with my grandmother that gave me the knowledge about life around me and women's housework. As a saying goes in my culture "the local market is where we can see women working with so much love and suffering.". In doing my PhD research back in a village very similar to my own ancestral home, I had the chance to observe this space again with a renewed sense of purpose and curiosity. Chợ quê—the local market now is quite different from the past. The sellers and buyers are still mostly women, but the way they buy things is quite different, in particular, time spending on buying is shorter. For example, I remembered that once when my grandmother bought a bamboo basket, she stopped by three different stalls, asked the price at the first, then repeated this at the second and at the third, where she got a bargain, in that way, her conversation with sellers and surrounding people was longer. Women still do this but spend far less time comparing prices, but the conversations between them might be shorter but still the significant role in their trading. These informal conversations between women in the marketplace have brought women closely and offer important insights into the changes they feel are taking place for women in their village.

Markets are thought to be women's places, because according to Kawarazuka, Béné, and Prain (2018) there are distinct gendered practices in trading and selling agricultural produce. Markets epitomise how "women are embedded in the social structures of their family and village" (Kawarazuka et al., 2018, p. 241). They are also vital to the economic survival of those in rural Vietnam. As O'Harrow (2021) stated:

> Peasants now as always look to the local market for the margin that sustains life, ... What goes on in the village or city market determines to a large extent how well the average family lives. It is here that most farm surplus is sold and it is here that the most significant prices are negotiated: how much for some onions, for a pair of slippers, a piece of cloth… Nearly all market stalls are run by women (p. 164).

I acknowledge that participant observation was a crucial aspect of my approach. The careful use of senses during the actual observation process enabled me to piece together aspects of the lives of rural women in historical and current contexts.

Ethnographic interviews

Interviewing is a cornerstone method in ethnographic research, which focuses on the subjective meanings that participants ascribe to the world around them (Atkinson et al., 2001, p. 369). Interviews provide important context and links between individual and cultural elements of ethnographic fieldwork and were used in this PhD research to gather the life stories and experiences of rural women. Qualitative interviews are considered an active process where knowledge is produced through interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) and are windows through which we can hear about the emotions, attitudes, and behaviours about the phenomena being explored (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Stories from participants emerge naturally from interviews—"out of worlds that exist outside of the interview itself" (Silverman, 2020, p. 58). A focus on enabling a narrative to emerge rather than adhering to a structured interview is considered to produce more truthful and trustworthy data (Elliott, 2005). Importantly, "narratives do not simply provide evidence about individuals, but provide a means to understand more about the broader culture shared by a community of individuals" (Elliott, 2005, p. 12).

In traditional communities of the past, storytelling played a central role in human communication—the timeless elements of life were transmitted through stories. Atkinson (1998) noted that "stories told from generation to generation carried enduring values as well as lessons about life lived deeply" (p. 2). Stories were part of my childhood, but they are also central to Vietnamese culture. As Huỳnh (2004) has pointed out, stories, in their many forms in books, fables, plays proverbs and songs were, and continue to be important in the everyday lives of women. I grew up with storytelling; my earliest memories are of my grandmother telling me stories while she and I lay down in the same bed and prepared for sleep. Her stories were about incidents from long ago but which she told as certainly as if she had been there. I feel the power of stories to bring people together. As Minh-Ha (1989) stated:

> If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and place, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecific time and place (p. 120).

For that purpose, I built the interview questions based around the spheres of family, community, garment factory environment. The themes were focused on the status of women with regards to choosing this type of job, how women's role was perceived in the past compared to today, cultural factors and government policy constraining women's job opportunity. Questioning about a model that is best to support for women's participation in workplace in rural areas. There were twelve women workers participated in interviews, their demographic details are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' demographic details

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of Children	Living with family	Previous job	Current position	Husband's job
Hoa	33	Married	2 boys	Husband, children	Paint worker in city	Vice-group leader	Teacher
Hồng	34	Married	1 boy, 1 girl	Husband, children, mother-in-law	Garment worker in city	Worker	Motorbike repair
Huệ	45	Married	2 girls	Husband	Agriculture work, did small business at home	Assistant worker	Builder
Đào	34	Married	1 boy, 1 girl	Husband, children, parents-in-law	Garment worker in city	Worker	Motorbike repair
Mai	38	Married	3 girls	Husband, children, parents-in-law	Agriculture work	Worker	Builder
Cúc	37	Divorced	1 boy, 1 girl (twin)	Children, parents	Garment worker in city	Worker	Builder (ex-husband)
Cam	26	Married	2 girls, 1 boy	Husband, children,	Agriculture work	Worker	Driver

				parents-in-law			
Bưởi	31	Married	2 girls, 1 boy	Husband, children, parents-in-law	Agriculture work, builder assistant, worker	Worker	Builder
Táo	26	Married	1 girl, 1 boy	Husband, children, parents-in-law	Agriculture work	Worker	Builder
Lê	44	Widow	1 boy, 1 girl	Mother-in-law (evening)	Agriculture work, did small business at home	Worker	Died
Mận	27	Married	2 boys	Husband, children, parents-in-law	No work/Unemployed	Worker	Driver
Mơ	44	Married	1 boy, 1 girl	Husband, children, parents-in-law	Agriculture work	Worker	Builder

The interviews often started with questions participants could easily answer and then moved to the more difficult and sensitive topics, particularly those about gender roles, following recommendations in the literature (see Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviewing is the innovative and exciting form of ethnographic interviews. It enables the researcher to explore new domains, obtain orienting information about the study context and build understanding, positive relationship between the researcher and the participants (Schensul et al., 1999).

The interviews were conducted at times chosen by each participant, at places such as a private room in my mother in law's house and a room in the factory at lunch time. The women appeared more confident and comfortable talking to me while doing something at the same time. As such, there was no control over the noise level, lighting, total privacy, and other factors that would cause difficulty in documenting the

interviews. It was important in these interviews to ensure that participants did not have disruptions in their everyday activities or commitments (Oakley, 2013). The private room or factory room with no one else around created a more relaxed atmosphere, making it easier for them to confide their intimate stories. On the downside, a few recorded interviews were very difficult to hear later as there was noise from the sewing machines constantly humming in the background. As a precautionary measure, immediately after the interview I scribbled down anything that I recalled as important during the interview, to ensure I had a record. I decided to do this because of the difficulty of concentrating on note taking when interviewees were telling highly emotional stories. Moreover, keeping eye contact also improved the quality of the conversation.

Although the task of translating and telling participants' stories may seem uncomplicated, I encountered dilemmas linked to my position as researcher—whose own subjective lenses and familiarity with the culture could jeopardise the integrity of the stories I was listening to and documenting. For instance, while the majority of participants were quite friendly about sharing about their difficulties in dealing with family and work, some simply looked at me in silence in response to a few question. This body language evoked a number of possible interpretations. Perhaps, these women were unwilling to expound something of importance, or had difficulty in finding words to express their situation, or assumed that because I was a rural woman, I was capable of figuring it out.

Each interview took approximately one hour, but in every case less than two hours, and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent in accordance with the National Human Research Ethics Standards relating to participant recruitment and research procedures.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are a really important form of data that emerges from observation and interviews in ethnographic approaches. As Hoey (2014) noted "Ethnography happens through the fieldnotes" (p. 8) in line with Walford's (2009) assertion that "fieldnotes are the basis on which ethnographies are constructed. They are the record from which every article and book about the ethnographic research draws, and against which every ethnographer tests developing ideas and theories" (p. 117). Whenever I

went out, I had a little book in my pocket, that I wrote shorthand notes—of one or two sentences— in. I arranged it for time happened. For example, while observing inside the factory room, I took notes such as: "Hồng wore a new jacket (7.05 am);" "the manager talked via the speaker (8 am)"; "Hoa went across, made a joke, and had a talk to Đào (11 am)". I wrote fieldnotes in every place I visited outside the factory, such as, the wedding party and local market and so on. Even though my handwriting was very poor, they were very useful for me when recalling what had happened. As Walford (2009) has indicated "fieldnotes are usually viewed as being very personal and idiosyncratic in nature and our knowledge of the detail of what is recorded and how the record is used is limited" (p. 117). In the evening, I spent a couple of hours expanding and enriching my main fieldnotes with the ideas I had noted during the daytime. I added in details about the things I felt, such as the atmospheres, the weathers, the points of silence in women's stories and so on. For example, "It was a cold December day in this village, the atmosphere signals the Lunar New Year is coming, everyone rushed to buy things to decorate their houses and for themselves, new clothes were included, Hồng was one of them". As Hoey (2014) has argued, "fieldnotes are where patterns emerge" (p. 6). The images I recorded provide insight into the lives of the women and, as the fieldnotes were used alongside interviewees' answers, contribute to readers being able to have an in-depth insight into the research settings.

4.2.2 The 'insider/outsider' researcher

This research aims to weave a complex picture of women garment workers in rural Vietnam and the social changes that arise from factory work for this group. The examples provided by Minh-Ha in her book (1989) "*Woman, native, other: writing post coloniality and feminism*" and Oakley in her essay (2013) "*Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms*" have been very helpful tools in negotiating my relationship with this topic, with the women whose stories I have gathered, and the responsibility I have as someone who straddles the position of knower and known. Discussion of these issues related to the tensions of being both an insider and outsider have been contentious in ethnographic studies (Madden, 2010). For example, the degree in which the researcher is able to immerse him/herself into the culture being studied so that he/she can blend his/her the outsider perspective with the insider

perspective of the studied community has been problematised. More recently a large body of work has been concerned with the power and politics of such an approach, prompting a deeper look into these issues of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Hou & Feng, 2019; Yeo & Dopson, 2018).

In my research, I did not conduct the observation and interviews solely as an 'outsider', and it is important to understand that there is no neutrality in qualitative feminist research (Leinius, 2020). I was born and raised in a rural area in North Vietnam, and I grew up in the same region as the participants in this study and I have experienced most of the things that my participants have experienced. Gender roles and family dynamics have always been in my line of sight because they have so deeply shaped who I am, and their residue remains as I raise my own daughter. I still remember at the age of fifteen, I was taught by my parents and grandparents about the duties and responsibilities of the daughter-in-law. The key principle of their teaching was that as a women after marriage you have to work hard and adopt a kind, polite, respectful way of being with your husband and other members in his family. In rural Vietnam the saying that guides your mentality and behaviour as a daughter-in-law, is: "A bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit", which means you should accept everything no matter if you are right or wrong. My parents reminded me to follow this later when I moved out of my husband's family's home, and we migrated to the city for work. Stories, songs, proverbs, and lessons about gender relations follow you no matter where you go, whether in your own mind or in the minds of others. My own embodied experience as an educated Vietnamese woman researching the lives of Vietnamese rural women workers has enabled the deployment of an indigenous knowledge valuable to this research project. I shared much with my participants including gender, ethnicity, regional language—tools that enabled access to intimate stories. I usually shared aspects of my own experience with them, such as: "I grew up in this community"; "In the past I used to work in sewing industry but in my time, it was a manual sewing machine, not an electric one"; I too experienced long hours sitting in front of the sewing machine". Women were excited to share their stories with me and I was guided again by Minh-Ha (1989) who said of her role, "I dwell in them, they dwell in me and we dwell in each other, more as guest than as owner" (p. 123). My sympathies and resistances appear at the same time familiar and unfamiliar to me. So, as the researcher, I stand in a borderlands of sorts.

Inevitably, research participants wanted to know who I was outside of this research. On first meeting, it was common for them to ask what I did, where I lived and why I had chosen this particular research topic and for what purpose. Although some questions were highly personal, the manner and tone of their enquiry was polite, sensitive, and never offensive. The questions brought tensions about my research intentions to the surface I informed participants that I was a PhD student, that I was born in another community nearby, but my husband was born in this village, however we do not live in this village, and that I am doing research at university in Australia. In answering their questions honestly and being open about my intentions for the research, I felt that I had gained their trust and confidence. Becoming involved with participants through empathy and friendliness, and answering their questions as thoroughly and honestly as possible is not to be equated with 'dangerous bias' (Oakley, 2013, p. 58). As a prerequisite to feminist research, Oakley (2013) purported that personal involvement "is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (p. 58).

On further reflection, I realized that while sewing with the women every day at the factory, I sometimes shared experiences, opinions, and perspectives with my participants, and at other times I did not. This behaviour, which followed normal patterns of socialising, rather than adhering to a formula helped me deeply immerse myself in their context. As someone who has the same culture and background as the women participants, I can deeply sympathise with them. Therefore, the participants perceived me not just as a researcher but also as a compatriot and friend. Their kindness and openness were reciprocated with sympathy and sharing of knowledge whenever appropriate. They could freely and comfortably share their life experiences, their desires and future hopes, as our stories were bound up in many ways. Writing as an ethnographer, Naples (1996) explained, "our relationship in the community is never expressed in general terms but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in particular, everyday interactions; and these interactions are themselves located in shifting relationships among community residents" (p. 84).

Thus, my role as an "outsider/insider" was conditioned by the degree of rapport with the participants and opportunities to meet again within and outside the research. I equated my "outsider" status with being a postgraduate student studying in Australia and as a new member in this particular village where the research field was located.

But this “outsider-ness” dissolved and was reconfigured over the period of candidature through my incorporation into village life and participation in the work at the factory. As Rai (2020) has noted it is cultural familiarity, often defined by language among other things that creates a degree of familiarity and trust with participants who share a cultural background with the researcher. In the role of outsider, particularly in my work in the factory where I am far less experienced and efficient, it allowed me to ask the simple questions that lead to rich ethnographic accounts (Sattari, 2018). Importantly, as I was often perceived as an outsider to the village, who would return abroad after collecting data, participants did not hesitate to share sensitive stories about the shifting power relations that almost always showed up in their marriages and intimate family settings. They were confident I would not share their stories with other villagers. Yet as a number of researchers who have navigated these tensions before me, I have also been engaging in reflexive praxis to consider the politics of representation in being so closely invested in their stories, lives, and our place as women in society (Reyes, 2020). I have had to tease out and work through the ways in which my own stories and experiences intersect, digress, and entangle themselves with participants’ stories and change the plotlines in analysis or interpretation (Dewan, 2018; Millora, Maimunah, & Still, 2020).

In short, such an approach shifts the dynamics because I am an insider who has grown up within the culture and experienced the sewing work they are doing. However, my role as a researcher and an educated woman with access to certain privileges, also makes me an outsider and this means I can learn from participants experiences and offer others an insight into their lives. In order to capture women’s life experiences. I have investigated how cultural norms constrain the development of rural women, through observation and description/interpretation of their lives. It is my hope that this research illuminates the contribution of this group of women by acknowledging and valuing their voices and status, and that this in turn contributes to the step by step narrowing of the gender inequality gap.

4.3 Data analysis

Analysis of qualitative data does not just focus on the data, rather it is an active process of meaning making that draws on all knowledge available to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although Braun and Clarke (2019) and Byrne (2021) offered

six steps of analytical process, including familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; generating themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming theme; and producing the report. I decided to use thematic analysis (TA) as it is 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). However, Braun and Clarke (2019) have recently gone so far as to 'rebrand' the method as 'reflexive thematic analysis' (RTA). As RTA is not about "working through a series of steps, rather it is about the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with the data . . . and the analytic process" (p. 594). Moreover, according to Trainor and Bundon (2021), reflexivity is an "integral component of conducting all qualitative research…where the author(s) provides a brief paragraph describing their social identities and some comment on their relation to the topic or population being studied" (pp. 706-707).

The first step of RTA is to familiarise oneself with the data (Clarke & Braun 2016). All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language, and I listened to each recording before transcribing. I then translated and transcribed them into English line by line, first by handwriting while listening the audio, and then typing. I also recalled and took note of what I observed in that interview, then I read the entire the whole interview transcript a couple of times in order to become intimately familiar with it. This formed the first step of the initial coding. This process played a very important role in producing my findings sections, as I understood that whether my 'picture' is good or bad would be largely dependent on this before initial coding, I recalled everything I felt and observed about each participant and wrote one to two pages about each. This gave me a deep understanding of each participant's circumstance as well as the broader context. The second step was generating codes—I started by reviewing all of the interviewee's words and selecting non-verbal features such as crying, laughter and long pauses. I manually coded the data on printed paper transcripts as I felt this would be most practical. I also used various colourful highlighters, with a different colour used for each initial code, for example, red for all words that are relevant to the 'reciprocity' code. I made further analytical notes in the margins in order to work through and understand what was being revealed in the interviews. These initial coding processes were conducted occurrence by occurrence, due to the large amount of data, and this helped in the process of initial conceptualisation of ideas. From these early codes, as well as by informed discussion of significant and frequent themes, I also constantly

challenged my first original feelings/ideas by drawing comparisons through sampling various cases. For example, while writing the initial code ‘household chores’, I followed all the notes which I had highlighted in the interview translation draft, such as ‘cooking’; ‘washing’; feeding children’ and so on. When line by line coding was completed, the initial codes were collated and compared throughout the interview transcripts and between interviews in line with the comparative analysis process. The final transcripts were coded manually by categorising common themes. Although these subsequent analytic processes are presented in a linear manner, it is important to note that the process was in fact concurrent with engaging the rural mothering workers, data collection and analysis. This approach allowed me to constantly revisit each step of the data collection and analysis.

Coding is a fundamental step of what later become themes (Byrne, 2021). This process helps to identify patterns within the data and thus assists the analysis by grouping segments of the participants’ texts into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Coding the interview data was challenging as most of the audio recordings were conducted in Vietnamese language, resulting in the need to first translate them into English. A further challenge was that some of the words do not have an English equivalent. In these instances, I had to find the words closest in meaning to the participants’ comments. Again, the ability to speak both languages was helpful in the coding process. I also employed my experiences of working with rural women—I was aware of how I was constructing my emergent analyses and how my personal history might affect my interpretations. While reflecting on my experiences assisted in understanding the participants’ comments when I was seeking thematic meanings, I remained conscious of the need to maintain a high level of self-awareness to avoid any countertransference. Regular discussions with my supervisors were also extremely helpful in the process of coding the comments into themes.

After the first round of coding, I found there was an overlap with many codes. As a result, I reread my research questions and identified which codes were related to the research questions. This process helped me to reduce the scale of my initial codes. It is important to note that themes do not emerge from the data; rather analysis is an active process where themes are generated or developed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I rewrote codes so that I could begin grouping codes to a relevant theme. For example, when talking about women’s identity, codes like ‘changing appearance’, ‘changing the type of

leisure activities', and so on were cluttered. I realised that these themes could be incorporated into a theme like 'changing identity'. The third step is developing themes, as themes contain "something important about the data in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 82). Although I had condensed codes in the previous step, I still did not feel completely confident of their accuracy. Therefore, I wrote down all the codes on paper, highlighted them the same colour as in the original version, cut every code out, and then arranged the codes in clusters. I reviewed each cluster and moved some codes again. I then repeated this process. The fourth step is reviewing and refining themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016), an existing theme may be removed if there is not enough data to support it, themes may be gathered into one theme, or themes could be separated into two different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I continued to ask myself, and discuss with my supervisors, whether the themes I had identified were relevant to the research questions. This strengthened my ability to create themes. The fifth step is defining and naming themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). In this step I identified a story that the theme captured and how this fitted with the whole story of the data. For example, the theme 'Women's empowerment' was formed from sub-themes: 'Right to spend money'; 'Their voices are more respected'; 'An economic asset of a family'. Themes were arranged in order based on the changes in relationship such as from inside family to the outside-community life. This aimed to enable readers to go from the details to the whole and as a result gain a deep understanding of the entirety of the research setting. This was fundamental to understanding rural women workers' practices and transitional experiences within their families and community. The sixth step involved producing the report (Clarke & Braun, 2016)—in my case, the 'report' was this PhD thesis. I spent sufficient time to ensure that I made use of all data to offer a full picture of the life of these rural women engaged in industrial work.

4.4 Ethical considerations

My research deals with human subjects and an ethics application was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC), application ID HRE18-194. Even though the data was collected through an ethnographic approach, the research aimed for participants to be anonymous and ensured that they were not identified by the context described in the methodology. Their involvement was entirely

voluntary and based on the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and the choice to withdraw at any time from the study.

However, there are always ethical issues when conducting study that is relevant to humans, especially in relation to confidentiality and potential emotional distress during interviews. This research involved talking about participants' problematic relationships with husbands or mothers-in-law and other sensitive family issues, as well as the way they perform their new identity in public space in a rural context. Thus, participant identities were protected by ensuring that all data was de-identified. In the event of being possible risks to confidentiality for participants, for example, if it had have become evident that a participant would be identified in a publication via details of their story, the interviewee would have been referred to the counselling service on the consent form, and the issue would have been discussed with the local contact person who would have come to the research site to speak to the person involved and ask them for ways to minimise the issue. This may have involved speaking to others in the community. While such a possibility was planned for, it did not occur during the research.

Since all participants did not write or speak English, I always ensured that the research, the participants' roles and rights in this research, and its ethical guidelines, were clearly and fully explained in Vietnamese language that they understood and that they were confident about participating in the research. In the case of any concern or discomfort triggered by involvement in the project, participants were provided with relevant information about where they could get some help and advice.

As stated above, ethics approval was granted for this project through the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were given an explanation of how to direct any queries about their participation in this project, and for ethical complaints, to contact the Ethics Secretary at the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee Office and counselling support services.

Chapter 5: Factory work: 'The factory sometimes looks like a market, and sometimes like a kindergarten'

Introduction

This chapter explores the experience of working in a rural factory and unpacks the many reasons women who are mothers choose to do this type of work. The foremost is economic; the stable income from factory work helps women escape poverty and improve their family's economic position. However, there are also other benefits when making a comparison to the two main alternatives of remaining in family agriculture or migrating to the city for employment. In comparison to family agriculture (which most women have been working in before joining the factory), the garment factory brings women closer together. It is a space where women can socialise with each other, gaining knowledge and sharing life experiences. In this chapter I explore these relationships and the supportive work environment, a 'public homeplace' characterised by reciprocity and often described as a 'family' by women factory workers. I combine data from my interviews with women factory workers, with ethnographic observations and feminist theory to propose that the garment factory can be conceptualised as a space of resistance where dominant power dynamics and structures can be unpacked and challenged.

5.1 Introducing the factory

I visited the factory in the province of *Hà Nam* in December 2018, the middle of winter in North of Vietnam and a busy time for villagers. It is a time they rush to prepare products for the approaching Lunar New Year, in early February. Amongst the bustle in the centre of the populous village small groups of women enter a narrow alley. This alley, which looks like any other in the village, leads to the garment factory. The factory is a simple single-story building surrounded by local houses. As is generally the case with garment factories in the countryside, it is a medium size factory with about 400 workers. This factory is owned by a Vietnamese family, the owner established his first factory in Phủ Lý city in 2002 (60 km South of Hanoi capital). For more than ten years their business has been making clothes and other garment products for export. As well as the main factory in the city, they now operate three subsidiary garment factories in rural areas, one of which is where I conducted my research. While the main factory in the city still makes much profit, the owners have decided not to expand that factory but

to set up rural factories. This fits the trend, discussed in chapter two, of the movement of factories from the big cities to rural regions to take advantage of labourers who have been made redundant, cheaper land, and other support from the state government. While I was in the village, I spent three weeks working in the factory.

> *The sewing area of the factory is primarily a women's space. There are six sewing groups, almost all (about 90 percent) of workers in the sewing groups are women. Alongside the sewing groups there are three other groups who do the cutting, ironing, and packing and these three groups are comprised mainly of male workers. In the sewing groups, while their main duty is sewing, but cutting threads when completing a product is compulsory for all workers. Each sewing group is separated by a small corridor. Corridors are also the places to put boxes of finished and unfinished garment products. Within these rooms workers sit close to each other working on their own sewing machine. The rooms have a female milieu. For example, in group four where I worked, there were 55 women workers and only three male workers sewing. The male workers in this room had all recently finished high school and had not got good enough results to enter a university or college and this was as a temporary job. On the first day in the factory, I was struck by how hardworking and enthusiastic the sewers were. I noticed that workers could sit beside the sewing machines for many hours. However, when they pick up or deliver their products, they are talkative, joking with other workers. This reinforced the impression of a peaceful, friendly atmosphere (Fieldnote, December 17, 2018).*

A few days later, when I had become familiar with that group of workers, I was guided to do some simple steps in completing the product, for example, cutting thread. I sat and worked with two other women in a corner of the room, and while we worked, we talked about the products and the working environment, as well as sharing stories beyond work. Importantly, I learned about how work is allocated on the factory floor:

> *The workers do not know what type of product they are doing next until there is a new signed contract with foreign customer. It is piece work, each worker is being made one stage of garment product, for example, collar, sleeveless, when completing their stage, they deliver them to other workers. Group team leaders are responsible for delivering and distributing unfinished products to workers. There is an implicit skilled work hierarchy in workplace, workers who have high*

> *skill and work fast will be given the more difficult pieces with the higher numbers of product to sew. This means that they will get more paid because the more difficult the piece they work the more they are paid. In contrast, low skilled workers will get easier pieces that pay less. Extra money is given according to individual productivity. Competent, motivated workers could earn a lot through their own effort. Wage incentives are an important part of the factory's ideology. Those with 'quick mind, nimble fingers' and those who work for long hours can do well here (Fieldnote, December 19, 2018).*

I observed that the workers consider patience to be the most important skill for the job. Women are considered more industrious and conscientious, and better at the job than males because of traditional feminine qualities. For example, Cúc, showed her skill and resilience through the amount of time she remains at her sewing machine. In contrast, one of the male workers in the sewing group seemed to prefer doing the simpler stages of the garment, or to working on stages that afforded him chances to get accessories such as labels and elastic strings. Women learn the skills of patience, accuracy, and dexterity through their general socialization and by the type of work tasks they are given during childhood (Lie & Lund, 2013; Rydstrøm, 2003). Women are then preferred for certain types of jobs because employers demand the specific skills and socialisation that women have acquired. However, the preference for female workers is not thought of as a demand for specific skills, but as a question of "natural abilities" and traditional qualities. Because the women were taught how to sew, to mend a torn shirt or sew a new one as a child it is seen as something familiar. One woman—Hoa—said, "I have become familiar with this type of work because it is repeated daily". Another—Đào—observed, "I like sewing, I find it suits me, I like diligence and meticulousness. This job doesn't use your brain much, you can do it even if you're ignorant. While working here I am loved by everyone".

Given that the job is considered of low skill, most of the women had only graduated from high school. A few had graduated from college but had not found a suitable job yet. While there is quite a high level of education in rural areas in Vietnam (though not as high as in the cities), there is still some disparity between the level of education girls achieve in comparison to boys (Liu, 2001). A higher formal education is not a prerequisite for a job as an industrial worker in rural Vietnam (Cuong, 2019). Women with mid-level education (high school certificate) are likely to be preferred. A few with

tertiary education also work here but may be temporary. For example, Mận, one of participants who had graduated from college, hoped to use her college degree in the future:

> I studied office management, but after graduating I couldn't find a suitable job in what I had studied, so I came here to work as a factory worker before getting married. In the future, when I save enough money, I would like to have my own business, such as a food store or restaurant.

For Mận, doing this work was a temporary solution that helped her to deal with financial issues, and importantly, it meant she would not be considered unemployed before marriage.

Three of the women had previously worked in city factories, and found that rural factories had some comparatively advantageous attributes most notably, less strict rules:

> Before working in this factory, I worked as a factory worker in a teddy bear factory near here. The factory's rules are very strict. For example, they gave me a notebook. Every hour I had to write down how many products I had made. If I didn't make enough of the products they delivered, the owners would complain or even shout at me. The owners are Chinese. We were forbidden to talk while working (Bưởi).

Cúc made a similar comment, even while noting that factories in the city pay more:

> I worked as a garment factory worker in Ho Chi Minh city for eight years. Working conditions in that factory are different from here, compulsory working hours are from 8am to 5 pm, and sometimes I worked an extra two hours. The salary was based on the working hours, but they paid much higher than they do here. But their rules were very strict. If I want to go to the toilet, I'd have to wait until the other worker comes back from it and get a card from her, then I can go. Many times, I had to hold my pee, it really affected my health, I still flinch when I recall it.

For many of the women I interviewed, factory work was considered a safe and stable job in comparison with other kinds of outdoor work outside. A popular saying about factory work is: “rain does not reach the face and sun does not reach the head” —one is protected from the elements. Moreover, women who do factory work, have the status of ‘workers’.

5.2 Why choose factory work?

Providing economic security for the family

The primary motivation for women to choose factory work is economic. Factory work can give women the opportunity to have a stable income, to escape poverty, and to develop their family economically: for example, create opportunities for their children through education, or save money to build a new house. In the factory I visited, the wage was based on the number of products an individual completed, therefore the women wanted to sew as many items as they could. However, if workers were absent for more than two days per month, they would not get the bonus 300.000 VND. There was no basic wage for workers, but a worker with low skills and a good work ethic could earn around four million VND per month. Many workers learned that it was worth trying to win incentives but sometimes they gave up as the workload was too much. Therefore, many workers preferred to keep a moderate speed and bring down their expectation to an average but stable wage. However, quite a few women took products home and work after hour. As Hoa commented, “When the factory has a lot of products, I ask to bring them home to work on them in the evening, sometimes I sew until 10 pm. It gives me an opportunity to earn money".

Most women workers seemed satisfied with their factory income and found it to be more financially rewarding than the work they did previously. While the women who worked in factories in the cities earned more, they ended up with less money to spend or save because they had greater expenditure, especially on rent. Given this, most women found the income to be okay. Hồng stated, “It is piecework, so I am paid on finished products. However, I also have to follow the compulsory working hours. My salary is around 7 million VND per month, and this is worth my effort”.

Some women said that they were able to save some of their wages and so it was not only used to support their family, but they could also save for future and for ‘big events':

> My income is around 5 million VND per month. I can save nearly half of that. On average, I can buy one ounce of gold every three months. I have a new house, so this will be saved for my children's education, or a dowry for my daughters when they get married (Bưởi).

But other women were not able to save on this income, it was only enough for day-to-day expenses. Mai said, "I spend my salary on basic things for my family such as school supplies, milk, clothes…. I only give small sums to my parents when they get sick. I still have not saved any money". And Táo commented: "My wage is about 4 million VND a month. I think that's okay. I spend money on buying food and milk for my children".

Research demonstrates that a diversity of livelihood strategies can balance risks to household income such as crop failure, for those who work in family agriculture (Chau, 2018; Marzin & Michaud, 2016; Nguyen, Rigg, & Derks, 2015). This is the case for most of the participants in my study. For these women factory work is important not only because of the economic value of the income per se, but also because it is a reliable source of income, and one that adds to the other livelihood strategies undertaken by household members. It is not that factory work is without risk – a worker can lose her job or be paid less. However, it offers a reliability of income that compliments family agriculture that is reliant on factors outside of the farmers' control, most especially the weather:

> When we had to face crop losses because of bad weather, we could not buy enough seeds and pesticides from our income from farming. At that time, my husband and I encouraged each other to try to get over this difficult plight. Thanks to working in this factory my average salary is from 5 to 6million VND per month. I am quite satisfied with it (Mai).

Mơ made a similar comment: "Working here is not as risky as doing other casual work outside, I have experienced the loss of harvesting due to bad weather". She explained the risk of being a petty trader:

> My relative works as a petty trader in a local market, her income is precarious. As people say, doing business (*đi buôn*) is like fishing—you may catch the fish

> or not. It is out of your control. I think garment work is good for me, I do not have to invest money like doing outside business and I work here independently and have a stable income. The harder worker you are, the more money you get.

Additionally, another woman—Bưởi)—explained that an element of security from this work was that they were given insurance, "This factory offers me a stable income, and they also pay me insurance, so I continue working here". This was usually different to the case of their husbands. Many participants' husbands worked in informal work, such as in construction or as taxi drivers, where they were not guaranteed work hours and were not provided with insurance.

Staying in their hometown

All the women said that they worked at this factory, rather than in a factory in a city, because it is close to their family home. To do so allowed them to fulfil their traditional maternal obligations such as overseeing their children's education, household gardening, caring for relatives and taking on roles at community events. When women remain in their hometown, they are expected to spend time on the daily maintenance of their households' ancestors' shrines in order to ensure the comfort and safety of the family members. Many women from rural Vietnam—including from this village and those surrounding— have left their hometown to work in city factories. The experience has not always been positive, and many women have found that they do not get paid much and are unable to save much money (Bowen, 2008; Nghiem, 2006). Both the women who had never left their community and the three women who had previously migrated to factories in cities, Hồng, Đào and Cúc, said that they preferred to work close to home. Hồng explained how costly living in the city had been for her:

> I previously worked far from home, the salary was higher but the cost of renting a house and travelling to my hometown was too much, because sometimes there were significant events and occasions in family or relatives that I had to come to, so I only had a little savings left.

Noting the convenience, Hoa said that she moved home from the city when she heard that this factory had opened:

> When this factory opened [in 2014] I immediately left my job as a painter in the city to come back here. Working here I have a short walk between my workplace and home. When there is an urgent need, I can come home immediately. My children are still small, they need my supervision. There are many convenient things, sister.

Cam, who had never worked in the city, felt that migrating to work in a city would be a last resort:

> This factory is near my house, other factories are far from here, so I don't like to work anywhere there because it takes a lot of time travelling. Some people said to me, 'the wage for working in big cities is much higher,' but I don't care. You know how people say '*Sểnh nhà ra thất nghiệp*' [Leaving home is to feel miserable on all sides, lacking everything]. So, it is my last option. Working near my house I can come back home in the evening and see my children and that makes me happy.

In Hoa's case, she was forced to leave her two young boys in village in the care of her husband. As was discussed in chapter two, prescribed gender roles mean that women have the responsibility of caring and attachment to homeland (quê). Therefore, men are given priority if one person in the family must work far from home.

Working close to home is also expected of elderly family members, especially those who are not in good health. A woman's parents-in-laws are likely to want their daughters-in-law to work in the village so as to help them both in daily life and in emergency situations. In an informal conversation, an elderly woman who is the mother-in-law of a woman working in the factory, explained she wanted her daughter-in-law to stay in the village because she felt safer, "Sometimes my legs hurt, and I cannot move at all … This factory is close to my house, so I feel she is always available at home, especially at night-time, I can call her if something happens to me". This woman also wanted her daughter in-law to stay in the village to look after her grandchildren. She said that because she was tired and illiterate, she could not teach her grandchildren. She would worry about her children's studies, she said.

The factory suits mothering women

Most women described the factory as having a positive work environment even though the factory manager exerted his dominance in the factory and tried to ensure women worked harder and faster:

> *At around 10am, the manager's voice suddenly rang up from the speaker. His voice was very loud but sounded a bit difficult for me to hear. What he actually said was that group 1 was getting the goal, in contrast, group 4 where I worked was slower and we needed to speed up. Since I couldn't make out what he said, I was a bit worried. I turned my head to Hoa who sat next to me and asked for clarification. Hoa slowly explained, 'Ah, he normally reviews every group, whichever group work fast he encourages, otherwise, he urges to work fast'. I asked, 'He is complaining about our group working slowly, what should we do now?' Hoa replied, 'I don't care (kệ), it is the leader group's responsibility'. She implied that the leader with a higher salary should be responsible for allocating work to the other employees, as he (manager) would work directly with group leaders. As a worker Hoa doesn't care much about it as it does not affect her benefits directly. While we were on the topic of the manager, I wondered out loud to Hoa, however since I had been at the factory, I had never seen the manager come to our group. I asked Hoa 'Has he ever checked on how you work, or complained about taking too long, for doing private things and so on?' Hoa smiled and said: 'Very rarely sister. When he wants to inform us of something he speaks through the speaker, he also has cameras installed in the corner of the room. I think he's quite busy, even if he looks at the cameras, we are still working, that's ok, he can't hear what we talk or laugh about' (Fieldnote, December 26, 2018).*

The women said they were treated well. Hoa stated, "We are treated equally, there is no discrimination between manager and workers, each person concentrates on their work". Hoa also observed that it was a harmonious work environment characterised by good working relationships:

> I've never had any conflict with anyone, including the managers. Both the manager and the group leader love me because I have high skill and work hard.

> Anyone who has low skill but has a good working attitude will be guided by them enthusiastically.

Likewise, Lê said she was shown respect: "The manager respects me because I work hard, I can do all stages of making products". Hoa, noted that the rules were less strict at this factory than at another factory she had worked at:

> This garment factory's rules are more pleasant than the paint company's rules where I worked before. Here, I can talk to other workers when working, walk around for a few minutes if I feel tired, or even eat some snack.

This sentiment was echoed by a number of other women.

Newcomers are usually recruited by friends or relatives, for that reason the experience of work directly influences who the factory owners are able to recruit. Mơ explained that this is how she got her job in the factory:

> In the past, I was Lê's friend, we are about the same age, and we all worked on our family agricultural farm. Lê started working here before me, and then she told me the wage was good, the manager is not very strict, and the more products I make, the more money I'd get. I think this is good, so I came here to work.

Moreover, for many women factory work was a suitable choice because it accommodates mothering responsibilities. This is a key reason why women begin working at the factory and why they remain. Although the factory rules state that eating, leaving the shop floor during working hours, using private devices, talking and bringing children inside are not allowed, I saw many of these things occurring. In particular, there was laxity about brining children to the factory:

> *At around 5pm, one worker rode a motorbike through the factory gate, and behind her were three children, I guess, two of them about five years old, and the other about three-year-old. She stopped at the yard in front of the entrance to the factory and took them inside. When they went along the corridor, I asked her if they were her children. She pointed at two and said they are hers and another five-year-old girl is her co-worker's. Her co-worker asked her to pick up the girl for her because her parents-in-law were busy today. I turned back to my work but still kept an eye on what the kids were doing. They followed the woman to*

where she worked and the older one said something to her mum, after that, the two older children played with each other along the corridor, while the young one sat on the chair next to his mother, concentrating on his toys and even ignored what was happening around him. I was sitting far away from them and I asked a worker who was beating cotton near me whether workers bring their children to work. I asked, 'Do the children come here often?'. The woman was a little hesitant but said 'No, only today I see them, children normally play at home or outside'. After answering me, she hurriedly resumed the conversation with the woman sitting opposite to her (she may think I am a customer, supervisor, contractor or so on, I guess). Later, Hoa— my group vice-leader—told me that whenever there is a customer or contractor who visits the factory, the manager will inform us in advance and we would have to follow all the working rules, of course, children would not be allowed to come in on that day (Fieldnote, January 2, 2019).

There is implicit negotiation between women workers and the manager which means that there is a relaxation of some factory rules. The manager said to me: "This factory is sometime like a market, a kindergarten". He was referring to the open market in rural areas, where village women meet to buy food and agricultural products but also to chat, and to share aspects of their lives, which contribute to closer relationships. I observed examples of this in the factory:

12.20pm, on the way back to the sewing room from the lunchroom. Hoa asked me 'Would you like some fresh sweet corn? Thao's family (one of the workers in our sewing group) grew corn', and Hoa said, 'Whoever wants to purchase she will bring them here.' I replied 'Yes, how much per unit?' Hoa said, '2000 VND.' I was about to open my pocket and give her a 10000 VND note but Hoa said, 'Tomorrow she will bring in the corn and she will get the money'. When we came back to our place, Huệ opened her nylon bag and took out a pink shirt. She bragged 'Last Sunday, I bought it at Ca market, I thought it fit me, but when I came home and tried it on, it's a bit tight. Moreover, this colour looks quite young. Even though I like it, I am afraid I might look ridiculous.' Hoa laughed then continued, 'Some days ago I told Binh (worker in this sewing group) about this shirt and Binh asked me to bring it here for her to try on and if it fits her, she will buy it from me.' Huệ stood up and looked around, and said, 'Hey, Binh'.

Binh came over to where Huệ was sitting, and they continued their conversation (Fieldnote, January 3, 2019).

Likewise, the factory takes on the role of the kindergarten because after finishing school, many children go to there and play together in a small group, while they wait for their mother to finish work. Along with this there was a degree of laxity about when women left work, or if they needed to take a break during the day due to a household contingency:

> I became familiar with this job. The workplace is also close to my house, which is very convenient if I need to return home for a short time, like 30 minutes or one hour, if an unexpected incident occurs. If I had another job with a higher salary, but it is far from my home, I would refuse (Hoa).

While factory owners are able to pay workers less because of the advantages for these women of not having to leave their village, the flip side of this is that the manager will have great difficult recruiting other workers to replace them. There is no competition in getting this kind of work as there is a shortage of workers. On the other hand, the manager knows that if the rule is tightened significantly, workers will leave this job and move to other factories nearby. Leaving a bit of laxity, which makes this work particularly convenient to the needs of these women, benefits both sides.

For reasons such as above, whilst this is hard and low paid work, the women I interviewed were reasonably happy working in this factory and most said they were intending to work there for the rest of their working lives. This is different to garment factory work in the cities and many women in rural areas consider this to be better than other option in rural Vietnam. Mostly women said they would continue working here because of the proximity to home: As Đào stated, “I continue working as a garment worker in this factory. I am familiar with this type of job and the factory is near my house”. Similarly, Cúc observed, “I continue working here, because this factory is near my house so I can stay with my children and my parents can help me”. Other women such as Hồng, gave reasons to do with health and physical ability, “I want to work here for a long time because I don’t like doing business. Moreover, I think working as a garment worker is suitable for my health. And I don’t want to work far from my home”. Huệ stated:

> I am quite old now, I do not want to change, moreover I have a disability in my hand-you see, I cannot apply to other factory jobs, and they also do not recruit workers who are over 35 years old. In this factory, they recruit everyone if they can work, even people with a disability. You see, there are lots of dumb and deaf workers work here.

5.3 The emergence of a public homeplace

For many women, working in the factory has placed them in closer contact with other women outside of their families, and for longer and more consistent timeframes than in the past. Whilst there were always village festivals and family gatherings that offered space for socialising, women were also kept busy preparing meals, cleaning, watching the children and caring for parents or grandparents. Other than stolen moments over a stove or with children wriggling in their arms, there were few opportunities to talk about their lives and share stories of struggle or conflict in their families or other aspects of their experience.

In this section, I explore the ways in which the factory setting has begun to emerge as a "public homeplace" for rural women. Whilst previously they were doing solitary work in paddy fields, with little interaction with each other, let alone time and space to socialise, the factory has brought women together in ways that reflect feminist understandings of public homeplaces (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Hooks, 1991). Public homeplaces have their roots in Black feminist thought and literature, with Hooks (1991) identifying homeplaces as the safe spaces of resistance that African American women created to be affirmed and unpack the impacts of poverty, hardship, and racism. Such places are formed in response to oppressive conditions of dominant patriarchal culture and are foundationally relational and supportive, with an aim to restore dignity (Hooks, 1991). In Vietnam, 'home places' are rural ancestral villages (quê*)*, the site of your mother's birth and are places of deep emotional and social attachment (Schlecker, 2005). As Schlecker noted in his study of rural northern Vietnamese villagers who leave, quê is defined by the kinds of relationships you have there, especially with kin (*có họ)* and it represents a "specific ideal of belonging and relatedness" (Schlecker, 2005, p. 510).

In this study it is clear from the women's accounts and stories about their workplace and each other that over time the workplace it has become a hybrid space, a blend between factory work and a place of vibrant social connection. Of course, this space is very different from homeplaces that emerge within community or women's groups because the primary activity—work—that has brought them together is one based on capitalist principles of competition and is driven by productivity. As such, connection exists within a context that may still be considered exploitative.

However, the factory setting women describe in this study is very different to factories described in other research in which workers said the work and workplace were "painful", "exhausting" and "extremely strict" (Chau, 2018). In fact, women's reflections on the factory I visited indicated that it was an escape from rural work, domestic duties and a space where they could share their stories and experiences. As I reflected in one of my fieldnotes, the type of work and physical set up of the workplace is part of what facilitated women's connections. Additionally, the flexibility and relaxed workplace culture encouraged interaction and conversation:

> *They are together while working and during the lunch break. During the working hours, each worker sits at her own machine, but the machines are placed closely together, so while working one woman can speak easily with the person who sits next to her in the same line, and the person who sits in front of her in the next line. When they need something, they can walk around to the other workers. The working environment is bustling with walking, talking, laughing and the noise from the sewing machines. The women can easily keep in touch, they can also keep up to date with what is happening around them, for instance, when new products are introduced, chatting about how easy or difficult these items will be to make. How much is paid for that piece of the garment, are group leaders reprimanded or called to the office, and so on.* (Fieldnote, December 27, 2018)

This work set up and culture defined part of the hybrid space, but it was the ways in which women supported and helped each other in their work that was unique. As Huệ said:

> I can talk with workers who sit around me when working, the topics of stories are very diverse, from small things like what food will be eaten today to big events like where someone's girls get married. In other garment factories which

are run by foreign managers, their rules are very strict, and we can't talk like that. Talking and being listened to make me happier and more relaxed [laughs].

The nature of this talk may be dismissed as light or humorous or jokes, but as Huong (2007) suggested, humour in the workplace may turn to a form of resistance against management. I also observed a high degree of reciprocity amongst the women in their factory work—they assisted each other with tasks, gave advice and even finished each other's garments when they may not be done on time. Reciprocity in the factory was something that was commented on by a number of the women, "We have a good relationship, for example, when I can't finish a product on time, I can ask for help from others" (Đào). Reciprocity extended to women filling for each other and helping each other understand the requirements of the job:

> I think everyone is treated well, many of my relatives also work here, in this group. For example, when I am busy with attending a wedding or funeral, they can help me do my job —I offer to pay them money, but they refuse—in exchange when they are busy, I work for them (Bưởi).

> Everyone helps each other, for example, if I do not understand the instructions from the group's leader, other workers will carefully explain them again for me, or if I cannot complete my products on time, other workers will help me do it... If at any stage I am not sure how to do it, I can ask for help from other workers who sit around me" (Mai).

In conceptualising homeplaces, different scholars have noted that these spaces often formed or emerged in particular gendered spaces (e.g., in kitchens or marketplaces) or they have been deliberately created as spaces of refuge (Belenky et al, 1997) and in this study it was clear that participants felt this sense of safety with other women, who they felt had the sympathy to hear and understand them. I observed that the companionship of the women was quite personal, extending beyond their conversations about work. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, women earning an income via factory work impacts on the rigid patriarchal structure and dynamics of the family, and this is something the women navigated in

conversations with one another. Đào and Mai, reflected the sentiments of other women in saying that they were pleased to be working in a space with women:

> I prefer to work with women workers because I can talk freely, men workers can't understand women's situations, in addition, we work independently, and it is not hard physical work, so we do not need help from men workers (Đào).

Mai noted that shared experiences of being women and gendered dynamics and roles were something they often spoke of, "I like working with women workers because it is easier to talk, the topics are familiar, such as the relationship with husband or parents-in-law. Male workers might not want to talk about these topics".

Huệ said she felt a sense of comfort in discussing problems that arise in her family, "I feel working here is very comfortable as having other women workers here to chat, helps relieve stressful problems that happen in my life". The support and reciprocity women spoke of was a thread that ran through many women's reflections of their experiences at the factory. Hồng observed:

> Almost all of the workers are female. I get along with everyone here. I consider them family. Everyone protects and helps each other. Because each person is in charge of a different job, there is no conflict. I often confide with them about family when I have free time. For example, I sometimes talk to them about my children's studies. When I'm sad over something, such as having a conflict with my husband, console me and give me some helpful advice.

Đào noted that even though many women knew each other before working in the factory, their relationships had deepened through extensive time together in the factory:

> They are my neighbours, relatives or simply people living in the nearby villages. We know each other, we meet each other daily here, even outside the factory, when we go to the wedding parties or other events in the community, we also see each other. We are not only colleagues but also neighbours. So, we have a good relationship.

As can be seen from the women's descriptions of their relationships with one another, they consider each other like family; they protect each other, confide in, and support each other. The factory in these descriptions fits with Belenky, Bond and Weinstock's (1997) conceptualisation of the public homeplace as a safe space where people are able to speak freely and resist dominant ideologies. Further, the close bonds and dialogue they share and provide a context for the women to challenge and resist patriarchal familial structure and practices. As Watkins and Shulman (2008) identified, public homeplaces become sites of consciousness raising and solidarity through storytelling and sharing experience: "individuals begin to see that what is being suffered is not only one's own…. members begin to understand in what ways their personal problems reflect larger sociocultural arrangements, such as the devaluing and exclusion of women and the poor" (p. 216).

Gendered matters were discussed commonly including conflict with in-laws and challenges the women faced as their role, status and decision-making changed in the family. For example, Táo who appeared quite timid told me that:

> There are mostly women in my factory. When I am sad, I often confide with them, about problems such as family matters, conflict with my husband and my parents-in-law. For example, I confronted my parents-in-law about caring for my children. When I gave a child of mine who was sick some medicine that didn't help, my parents-in-law said that I did not know how to take care of my child. Or while having an argument with my husband, when he wanted to buy a TV, but I thought it was not necessary. At those times, my colleagues were good friends. They advised me to be patient and talking to them made me feel better.

Similarly, Cam, said that she felt calmer and more comfortable when she confided in her friends at the factory:

> Most of them are women. I told them about family problems, such as having conflicts with my husband or mother-in-law. After telling them I felt more comfortable, they also gave me valuable advice, some said, 'the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is always uneven, if you want to

> keep your family happy you should try to keep quiet and put up with her'. I feel that now I can keep calm better. I also ask their experience of raising/feeding children.

Bưởi also provided insight into these experiences:

> That was the time when we built our house, we nearly divorced because of my father-in-law, he is very strict and has a lot of control over our lives. In particular, I wanted to install a heater in the bathroom, but he said, 'What age are you to join in?' He looked down on me because he thought my position was low and I was not allowed to join in on an issue that important. I replied, 'Whatever class I am in, I have a right to ask for it.' Because of this there was a major conflict between me and my husband, and my father-in-law. They thought that I was very sassy, my husband stood on my father-in-law's side, and he wanted a divorce. I was forced to sign the divorce form. When we went to the local law court, the staff advised us to wait for three months. At that time, I asked my co-workers and my husband's friends for advice. They explained to my husband that my demand was needed, and I am not sassy, and by then both me and my father-in-law had calmed down. Finally, my husband understood, and we still live together. Importantly, the heater was installed.

Stories like this were told often in the interview, and so often the other women at the factory became site of strength in these conflicts. As Bưởi described in her story, her co-workers assisted with negotiation and conflict resolution, helping to mobilise small resistances to significant and long-standing traditional structures. Of particular importance here is the ways in which public homeplaces become spaces to question the current power structure, but also places to recover. As Watkin & Shulman (2008) stated:

> Processes in the dominant culture that have attributed negative meanings to one's very existence are questioned and rejected. In their stead, positive meanings are encouraged that allow members of the community to recover from toxic

> internalizations and feelings of inferiority, emptiness, and meaninglessness (p. 217).

According to Watkin ad Shulman (2008), it is because women in these spaces are able to better articulate their concerns and experiences and build solidarities that they can resist and challenge oppressive gender dynamics beyond the walls of the factory. Thus, in this chapter I have shown that the confluence of these women's situations, specifically the location of the factory in their ancestral village, the relaxed working environment, and the type of work (piecework) is part of what allows the factory to emerge as a new type of quê. The Vietnamese idea of homeplace is a feminist space of relationality and belonging, based on traditional values and ideas but crafted in a space of modernisation which holds a tension between empowerment and exploitation.

Chapter 6: Visible work in the family and at home: shifts in the division of labour

Introduction

This chapter examines how women's roles in their households have changed as a result of their participation in factory work. In the past women have been responsible for domestic duties such as cleaning and caring for family and have also spent many hours undertaking agricultural work. New roles in factories have left less time for domestic work. This has caused a shift not only in the distribution of domestic work, but also shifted longstanding gender and age hierarchies in the family. In this chapter I examine family dynamics, specifically how household work, which traditionally has predominantly been women's responsibility is now being split more evenly with others in the family. This is a result, of not just the availability of time but also of the meaning that is given to that work. In taking on factory work women are moving from 'invisible' to 'visible' work. Visible work is recognised as work by the community and is usually in the formal sector rather than in the informal sector, or domestic context. I first explore the traditional division of household work then look at the shift to visible factory work for the rural women who were my research participants. Finally, I examine how employment in this setting affects the redistribution of domestic work.

6.1 Traditional division of household work

The division of labour in households in Vietnam is shaped largely by longstanding perceptions about gender, specifically that women are "weak", and suited to light, easy, delicate work that requires not physical strength but "the assumed feminine capabilities of endurance and patience" (Bergstedt, 2015, p. 137; see also Rydstrøm, 2003). In rural Vietnam women are ascribed roles in the domestic sphere, including family agriculture. In earlier research about the gender division of household labour in Vietnam, Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, and Huy (2010) found that wives did over 80 percent of domestic work. Tasks such as preparing the dinner, tidying the house, sewing, embroidery, and bathing children are expected to be completed by women (Rydstrøm, 2003; 2004). Alongside work in the domestic sphere, women play an important role in the informal sector of the economy in Vietnam, as part of their family's broader livelihood strategies. Studies have indicated that women engage in a variety of informal work in rural areas including street and mobile vending, home

handicraft production, self-employment or casual labour (Bình, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2014; Oudin, 2009; Pettus, 2004; Turner, 2018). Like the domestic sphere, these activities in the informal sector are largely invisible work. This work is characterized by long hours, inconsistent and low wages, and poor working conditions, which women balance with their undervalued role in the domestic sphere. This domestic role, which they are defined by, has included emotionally supporting their husband's working status and career development (Dong, 2016; Pettus, 2004). For Vietnamese men, in contrast, the domestic sphere has been far more a sphere of leisure than work. Since the highest status in Vietnamese families is given to the father, he has had absolute authority in the household. Traditionally, his position as the provider for the family was unchallenged (Bergstedt, 2015). Because the man provided the main source of income for the household, he was never expected to work in the kitchen or to cook. After work, he returned home and relaxed (Dong, 2016).

Such a gendered division of labour between 'domestic' and 'productive' work is not unique to the situation of women in Vietnam. During the 1970s western feminists questioned the universal condition of women's subordination. One of the main reasons for this asymmetrical condition, feminist writers argued, was the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, to the role of mother and wife, while men were associated with social roles of dominance and authority, ensuring them economical resources, social recognition and political power (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974). Therefore, women's position within the family has traditionally been one of subordination (Binh, 2004). Kabeer (2015) argued that:

> The first form that this asymmetry takes relates to the fact that while everywhere in the world, households must allocate the labour at their disposal between earning a living and caring for the family, in much of the world, women bear a disproportionate share of the unpaid work of caring for the family (p. 195).

Further Kabeer (2015) pointed out that "women either work as unpaid family labour or in home-based forms of economic activity where they relinquish control over the production process and to the proceeds of their labour to male household members" (p. 195). In Vietnam, as elsewhere, the public versus private divide overlaps with the ideological divide of masculinity and femininity. The public domain of the political arena is seen as a masculine sphere, while domestic work is seen as a woman's domain.

Furthermore, men's interests and responsibilities are often conceived as "big issues" (*việc lớn*), while women's duties and interests are often perceived as "small issues" (*việc nhỏ*) (Bergstedt, 2015). This divide has limited women to the domestic realm and systematically underestimated women's contributions (Kato & Luong, 2016). The form this takes in Northern Vietnam is influenced by its exposure to Chinese culture for many years and influenced by Confucian family ideology. This includes social separation by gender, and filial piety (Kato & Luong, 2016).

Vietnamese women's engagement in work in rural garment factories challenges cultural norms that define women's typical gendered roles within the domestic sphere and men's role outside the home as the economic provider. Women are now performing work, which is visible, that is it is seen as 'real' work in a way that domestic work and family agriculture, and even informal work outside the family, are not. This has brought a new work environment for women, new conceptions of time discipline and the separation of work from family life. Feminist writers have argued that access to paid work has been a way for women to increase their bargaining power within the household (Kabeer, 1994). It is argued here—and further in the following chapter—that this is the case for women factory workers in rural Vietnam. Drawing on the experience of the women in this study, it is argued below that factory work has opened up opportunities for women to gain a new status in their family and meant that the work they do is visible and recognized. Earning an income at the factory has changed their role in a variety of important ways. These changes and their impacts will be discussed in this chapter and the following chapters.

6.2 The factory and family dynamics

6.2.1 Shifting from invisible to visible work

In the past the majority of women have carried out family agricultural as an informal livelihood strategy largely unrecognised by their family and the broader community as work. This work has been 'invisible'. With the introduction of factories into the rural areas in Vietnam, formal employment opportunities have been pursued by women. I argue that women in factory roles have been transformed from invisible workers to visible 'real' workers who are valued as an economic contributors to the household. Informal work outside home is an important source of income for many poverty-stricken families, and this is most frequently performed by women. Family

agriculture work is not considered formal work as agriculture is traditionally dominated by farmers who cultivate their own land on a small scale (Liu, Barrett, Pham, & Violette, 2020).

Most of women in this study had previously worked in family agriculture—paddy farming—the main form of agriculture in Vietnam. Peasants live on them long-term but it is not considered real work, as the average farm size is about two acres and lacks professional management (Liu et al., 2020). Despite efforts to mechanize, much of the farm labour is done manually, for example, in many paddies rice seedlings are planted by hand. “Your face to the earth, your back to the sun” is a proverb that indicates how hard the lives of peasants are in rural Vietnam. Studies have shown that in Vietnam women contribute up 60 percent of the agricultural labour force (Kabeer & Tran, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2014; Raney et al., 2011). While both men and women co-operate in rice production, women shoulder the heaviest workload in most phases of agricultural production (Bergstedt, 2015). Women’s extensive contribution in the rice paddies, especially in transplanting, planting, and weeding is also the most arduous as it is performed in knee-deep water. After harvesting, much of the work in processing and drying rice is almost exclusively women's responsibility. Although the work is very hard and time consuming, the income from agriculture is low (Bergstedt, 2015; Liu et al., 2020), and women’s contribution to their family’s livelihood has not been properly recognised. For example, Mai, who was working in agriculture before beginning work at the factory, said that she spent most of her day farming and came back when the sun set: “In the past, I did agricultural activities and raised livestock at home. Besides doing work outside in the farm, when I came home, I had to do a lot of work that is called “domestic work”. Mai continued by explaining how difficult it was to rely on family agriculture for survival:

> I worked hard but sometimes we lost the harvest because of bad weather or from insect diseases, at that time rice was not enough to support for my family. We didn’t have enough food is not, and I was worried, but I didn’t know what other things I could do to get money.

Huệ similarly explained how when the harvest is lost due to bad weather or destruction of insects, much of their effort is also obliterated. Recalling her past Huệ said:

> I had to do the farming alone because my husband went to work far away from home. I had to shoulder all of the farming tasks, from planting to spraying pesticides, and transporting. We only had enough rice to sustain the family, sometimes we have a bit left over to sell, but if it is properly counted working out all the expenses and income, doing family agriculture makes a loss. But we had to do it in order to survive—we didn't have any other things to do. When I came home from field, I had so many home chores to do because no one helped me. Farming is considered the responsibility of women.

Alongside this work, some women in this study also engaged in other informal work, as described in the introductory section above, and had previously worked in factories in cities. In particular, it is common in rural areas to see women selling food and agricultural products which they grow at home and on their family farm at the local open market (chợ). At the market they might sell products such as a bunch of vegetables and some ripe fruit. This work is the responsibility of women, and as Leshkowich (2014) argued, underpinning this are social constructions of gender: "the chợ is said to have always been a woman's domain because of Vietnamese women's natural aptitude for trade" (Leshkowich, 2014, p. 5). This activity brought women some money directly, but that money was used to buy other necessary products for family. At the end of the day, these women working in the market would not have any money left in their pocket. Cam recalled her previous experience of working in the market: "Sometimes I had to sell something at the market. This was just for extra money, for buying food and some other things. That money is not for savings, it was just enough for daily expenses".

Many rural women raised livestock, such as chicken, ducks and pigs in their home garden with the goal of providing additional meat for their family at special events like New year's celebrations, Independence Day, feasts etc. If there were any products left over, they could sell them to their neighbours or on the local open market. Cam said:

> In rural areas, most houses raise some chicken and ducks, and when needed we kill them for food. Going outside to buy things is expensive. As we do agriculture, we have rice to feed them and do not have to buy food for these

> animals. Raising them is quite easy but it also takes time to sweep and clean the barn and so on.

Sometimes women could become small-scale middle merchants. Huệ previously ran a small shop at her home and sold different types of fertilizer which she bought from suppliers and then sold to villagers. That business activity was compatible with her domestic and caring work. She said: "I always work, I work all day, but at the end of the day, I do not have any money left. The profits only enough to cover living expenses".

However, some of the women in this study felt they were held in contempt by the people around them because of the work they did. Although all these forms of work were hard and occupied almost all their time, in the view of community they were small and incidental. These women felt that if someone asked a mother-in-law what her daughter did and the answer was family agricultural work and other forms of informal work, her mother-in-law would answer 'she stays at home', implying that she did nothing. These women themselves were not confident when asked about their employment status because of the community attitudes. Mai said, "I felt ashamed when being asked what job I do, so sometimes, I did not dare talk with strangers or rich people". Mai said that now she is working at the factory she feels less anxious about being asked what she does, but she does not like to be asked what her previous job was. Likewise, Mận felt the community looked down at her:

> When I stayed home to take care of my children, my neighbours thought I was lazy, for example they said to me, 'you are the happiest in this village, you have fallen into a tub of butter'. Now when I come here [to the factory] to work, they say nothing, they turn to other people—the women who are in the same situation as me before.

6.2.2 Women factory workers: visible in the community

Most of the participants felt that their work was more valued when they started working in factories, and they were viewed as more worthy. A factory job is different to informal work as women have a regular monthly income, a stable working location and regular and consistent hours set by factory. In comparison to their previous work,

factory work is ‘visible’, it both has a monetary value, and it occurs in the public sphere. Because domestic work, including family agriculture occurs behind the four walls of the home, it does not have visibility in the village, and it is certainly not a space in which women gather as ‘workers’ in the way they do in the factory. The invisibility of women’s contribution has led to their devaluation and not getting the honour and respect they deserve at home and in society. Factory work has brought these women a new status because it is formal work, with a stable wage and location. Shifting to this work, they feel they are appreciated more by members of their community as well as members of their family. Their monthly wage means they have a respected role and identity which is not tied to their status and identity in the family.

For some participants in this study, as well as many other young women from their province, the experience of factory work began when they migrated to the city and was quite different to work in their home village. Women in the cities received a monthly wage, but also faced a high cost of living, and substantial cost to travel to their hometown. This meant that their contribution to their family’s livelihood was not significant. For mothering women there were additional costs, because if they brought their children with them the cost for childcare in the city was much higher than in the countryside. Alternatively, they could leave their children in their village with the children’s grandparents. Some women felt that their parents-in-law saw this as a burden, without realizing how much work the women were doing. Đào, for example, previously worked in a factory in the city and had to leave her children in the care of her parents-in-law in her hometown as her husband had also migrated to a city to get work. She said was only able to send a little money back:

> In 2012, I worked as a garment worker in Hanoi. At that time, my salary was around 4 million VND per month. I spent very carefully, but each month I could only afford to send at the most 2 million VND to my parents-in-law to raise my children. If there were big events of my family or relatives, I had to come back more often, and then the money left was smaller.

The parents-in-law, therefore, experienced the burden of the responsibility for the children for much of the year, while not seeing much of the financial benefits of this work.

The work women did in city factories was viewed differently to work in rural factories because it was often seen as temporary and less stable. There were two aspects to this. First, most women undertaking factory work in the city were unmarried and any money they were able to save went to their birth family. After marriage, women belong to their husband's family, so any money they make goes to this family. Scholars said that young migrant workers used part of their income "small contribution" to send back to parents as a "giving back" for nurturing and caring them in childhood (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010, p. 9; see also Nghiem, 2004). This was the case for one participant, Cúc, who migrated to Ho Chi Minh city in early 2000s, when she was twenty-two, to work as a garment worker in a joint-venture company. She said, "At the beginning my salary was around 6 million VND. After deducting my living costs, I saved the rest and also supported my parents, but only a little". The second reason for the work being temporary is that many of the women that migrated chose garment work as a steppingstone in order to find better opportunities (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010; Bowen, 2008).

Rural factory work is different to city factory work, as women stay in their own home and community, and all members of the family such as parents-in-law, children and husband can support the work as well as benefit directly from it. Local factory work undertaken by women means that elderly family members do not face the burden of being the sole caregivers of their grandchildren, unlike when their son and daughters-in-laws migrate to cities for work.

The rural factory work undertaken by the women in this study was highly visible to others in the village. Unlike in a city context where workers generally only interact with each other, there were a great deal of interactions between the women and other people in their surroundings. These interactions help shape the community and family members' perceptions of women factory workers and are important in terms of being understood as a legitimate and thus more visible type of employment. Villagers often spoke to each about the women's positions within the factory. For example, Mơ who had been attached to her family's farm for years was only acknowledged by her neighbours as 'worker', with status in the community once she took a job at the factory. Mơ commented, "I believe that they think we work harder than before". Similarly, Mận observed:

> Now when they meet me, they are happy and ask me, 'How hard is the work, how much do you earn?' they think I work harder than when I was doing family agricultural work. They thought I was being lazy then and so now, they respect me more.

Đào noticed a change in her social status:

> I think they [the community] value us more, for example, in the past when I did agricultural work, they never spoke when they saw me, now when they see me, they ask 'How are you? How is your work? Are you paid a high salary?' I feel I am more respected, and that my life is more valuable. I am not afraid of being asked about my work like I was in the past.

Having money to spend, and the respect they felt they received because of this was important to some women:

> I notice sellers [who run family shops such as clothes and grocery shops] respect me more. When I come in to have a look, they offer me new kinds of products, and the way they give advice is more enthusiastic, as now I come and buy more often, and they also know I have money to buy (Cam).

Another woman, Hồng was pleased when she and other women who worked in the factory were able to make a visible financial contribution to the community:

> Last year, my village rebuilt the village gate, it is so majestic, they called for donations from villagers and organisations in the village. Some of us from the factory contributed a bit and the factory manager also donated on behalf of the factory. This donation was written on a board with our factory's name. I was proud of it, and I think the villagers will recognize our merits.

While some women, such as Đào and Hồng were pleased to have more respect, other women said they did not care about the attitude of the community, that they would likely ignore what people said about their work. Some said they had felt people were treated equally both in the factory and the community, that people were not treated

worse than others because of their occupation. Huệ said: “I think there is no discrimination between outside work and factory work—it is all legal work”. Similarly, Hồng explained, “Every job is a job. It's hard to earn money. Now they [villagers and neighbours] are better in their thinking than before, but everyone can only know about their own situation.

It is evident that gendered roles are shifting in this context. In the past, the domestic sphere was the main responsibility of rural women, now these women spend most of their time in the factory. This factory work is different to factory work in big cities where women migrate alone, or without other members of their family and work without domestic help or daily interactions with their family. In the rural context women are supported to do factory work so are happy at work and obey the discipline of the factory. For example, they go to work on time and focus totally on the work process. Moving from the “inside” to the “outside” sphere marks a huge shift in women’s lives and gender roles in the family. While women work in the factory, the “inside” work they have left still needs to be done by others. It means that this work will necessarily lead to restructuring or renegotiating of the division of housework in the household. In the next section I will focus on how household chores are carried out.

6.2.3 Shifting the division of domestic work

As outlined above, domestic work is traditionally ascribed as being part of women’s household responsibilities. The types of work that is understood as within the domestic sphere (in contrast to ‘productive’ work) changes over time and place, but it tends to include the repetitive tasks that maintain the functioning of the household, such as cleaning, cooking, and washing. In rural Vietnam—as in many parts of the world—family agriculture is also an aspect of domestic work. Rural women’s engagement in factory work appears to be disrupting the existing gendered division of labour within the domestic sphere. Around the world, the literature suggests, when women enter the paid workforce, they tend to still do the bulk of domestic work (Kabeer, 2015; Le, 1996). In past this was the experience of the participants in this research, but notably the women reported a very significant re-distribution of household work when they began factory work. Most of the participants lived in a household that included their husband’s parents, a smaller number lived in a household that consisted of their nuclear family, and one participant was a single parent. Participants reported that they were being

relieved of some of the tasks that were traditionally understood to be the responsibility of the daughter-in-law. This included a re-distribution to their husbands, to parents-in-laws (but most especially mothers-in-law) and to their children. How these tasks were re-allocated depended in part on the structure of the household.

The work of the women in this study was very significant to the household livelihood. For most in the sewing group at the factory it was comparable, and sometimes greater, than their husband's financial contribution. With this they also often worked more hours of the day, meaning the 'effort' they put in for this contribution was also very visible. Huệ said:

> He [her husband] is a builder, the job is quite flexible as it depends on the house owners and the demand of building houses in community. He earns on average 250000 VND per day. So, his average income each month is around 6 million VND, but he does not receive it monthly. Usually, the landlords give him a little in advance, after completing the project, the rest is paid. Sometimes it is paid depending on the progress or at each completed stage.

Huệ's wage was lower than her husband's, but Huệ told me that her wage was also one of the lowest in the factory, due to a disability in her hand. She only did simple tasks such as labelling products, cutting thread, or beating the cotton. However, some other women earned double Huệ's wage. For example, Hồng—a skilful worker—sometimes took products home. She told me that her wage varied from 7 million to 8 million VND per month.

All participants who lived with their husbands reported that their husbands had taken on a significantly larger amount of the domestic work than previously. Huệ said: "Our life is simple as my children have grown up. My husband normally finishes work earlier than me, so he cooks dinner. When I come home, dinner is ready".

Similarly, Hoa said "When my husband came home (in the past), he sat in front of the television, and whenever dinner was ready, I offered it to him. But now, when he comes home, he has to prepare dinner for us".

Most of the participants (nine) lived in a household that included their parents-in-law and these women reported that much of the work they previously did was now done by their mothers-in-law, or husband. This was across household tasks, agricultural work

and child raising. Hồng said: “Other jobs like cleaning houses, washing clothes, cooking rice, my mother-in-law has does it all. My mother-in-law, my husband and my son do all the tasks at home to support me”. Mai said that before she worked at the factory, she was solely responsible for domestic work and so unlike others in her household, had no spare time: “I did a lot of domestic work—shopping, cooking, washing, cleaning and so on. I almost had no time for relaxation”. Mai then described the change in the division of domestic work:

> Now, when I work here, my husband and my parents-in-law all support me, my children help me to cook dinner, my parents-in-law do all the housework for me, they also take and pick up my children from their school. So, I can concentrate on my work.

Traditionally women were responsible for supervising and feeding children. However, most of the women who participated in my research said that when they started working in the factory, they received more support from their husband and parents-in-law with taking care of their children. As said above, factory work is recognized as valuable work and parents-in-law voluntarily take care their grandchildren as they realise their daughter in laws stable income guarantees financial support for the whole family. They see taking care of children as mutually beneficial. For example, Mai said happily, “My parents-in-law take my children to their school every day and pick them up. In the evening, they wash and feed them”. Similarly, Đào said, “When I come home in the evening, my mother-in-law has feed my children in advance”.

Reduced household chores contributed to another significant change for many women in this study. They reported that they were able to spend more time on their children’s education particularly via teaching and supervising study after work. For example, Đào said:

> I rarely have to do housework; my husband and my mother-in-law does all the housework for me. My main duty at home is teaching my children to do homework in the evening. Sometimes on the weekend I take them out.

Cam also reported spending more time helping her children with their homework, but also said that they were taking on more responsibilities: “My children help me to cook dinner, after having dinner I help them with their homework”.

The one participant who was divorced and did not receive assistance from in-laws had been able to draw on support from her parents, as well as an uncle. Cúc had two young children and after she divorced, she went back to live with her parents. She reported that her parents provided significant assistance with household work as well as childcare and that she also asked for help from her unmarried uncle. Cúc explained how much she relied on support from her parents and uncle:

> My parents do all the housework, jobs like cooking, shopping, washing and so on. When they are busy or when they are away, luckily for me, my uncle who lives nearby comes to my house to help me. So, I am not worried about household chores. When I come home at late evening, everything is ready.

As will be discussed further in the next chapter, this cannot simply be understood as men and other family members 'making up' for the hours women now spend in the paid workforce. Rather these are significant changes to the social and cultural conceptions of how gender roles are performed in this society. In the past, if a man was seen cooking in the kitchen, or going to an open market he would commonly be considered a "woman" given he was performing the roles ascribed to women. Hoa, who lived in a nuclear family with her husband and two middle-school aged sons suggested that women's factory work was also transforming the types of domestic labour boys undertook as. She said:

> I spend most of my time working here, so I do not have much time to do housework. My husband and my two sons often help me with this work, because I have taught my two sons to cook and prepare meals since they were small, and now after school they can help me washing dishes, cooking, cleaning the house and my husband also guides my children with their homework at the evening.

The re-distribution of household work is, however, not necessarily as much a re-distribution of labour between men and women in the household as it is a re-distribution between different generations of women in the household. For instance, Táo said, "In the evening, I help my children do their homework. In the meantime, my husband usually does nothing".

Changing gender roles is complex, and domestic work is intimately tied up with gender identity. While some women were pleased, they were having their load of the domestic labour reduced, they still wanted to keep roles such as cooking and feeding children. Mai said: "I like feeding my little daughter, for me a mother is likely to have a special bond with her daughter, I am happy with that work, as it is '*thiên chức'* [heaven-ordained duties of motherhood]".

This complexity exists not just for these women working in factories in rural Vietnam but is a more general phenomenon. It is true when feminist writers indicate paid work as a way for women to liberate themselves and have bargaining power within the household (Kabeer, 1994). Moving from working inside the family home and property to working outside in the community is an initial step, which takes their work from invisible to visible. Women's role working in the factory, has changed the division of labour of their households which has changed existing gender roles markedly. For the participants in my research, factory work marked a significant turning point in their lives. It was clear that they felt their life was more meaningful and comfortable as a result.

For some of the women who participated my research this was not their first experience of working in a factory, they had previously worked in city factories away from their family and the impact on the family dynamics were different. In contrast, in a rural setting, where they were surrounded by their families, factory work offered women the opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles in the household. Even for women in households in which gender roles did not change significantly the burden of domestic work was reduced.

The contradiction between the cultural definition of women as mothers and wives, responsible for the domestic arena and the realities of their lives as wage workers has both forced and encouraged a number of wage-earning women to question the rationale of the traditional ideologies. The subordinate status of most women in the family is a result of the gender division of labour. When they work for wages in factory, the majority believe they are working to ease the financial burden which has traditionally belonged to their husbands. However, women's work is no longer considered "small work". It is "bigger", valuable and visible, and even equal to men work. The boundary between "small work" and "big work" has decreased and their

entry into waged work has raised their expectation of changes in men's behaviour towards their domestic roles.

It is evident from this study that although the wage-earning women did not ask for complete gender equality or altogether contest the division of labour in their families, there was still change in their status in the family with husbands doing more housework and sharing other domestic activities with their wives. Factory work gave the women research participants a strong sense of justice; they realised that previously they not been treated fairly in their families or in the broader culture. When men shared domestic work with these women, it helped them to acknowledge the value of the work, and how hardworking women are. In a broader context, this attitudinal change may contribute to the whole society having an increasingly positive, enthusiastic view on the position of women whether they work outside or inside family.

Changing the division of labour in family means that there is a rearrangement of the traditional hierarchical structure in family. Men have traditionally been considered economic providers and the head of the family who made all the decisions (Bergstedt, 2015). In contrast, rural women, in particular, daughters-in-law, have had the lowest position. It has been their responsibility to obey their husband as well as the elderly in their extended family. However, the recognition of factory work as real work with a visible income has enhanced women's status in the family. No longer at the bottom of the hierarchy, they no longer obey and accept everything without question. This will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7: Shifting gendered power relationships in the family

Introduction

This chapter explores the impacts of factory work on women's empowerment and decision making, within what is a hierarchical family structure, one in which a women's is subservient not only to her husband, but also to her mother-in-law. Research participants felt that not only had their tasks in the family changed—as was discussed in the previous chapter—but that they also had more authority in their family and were valued more. This included being involved in decision making around the management of household resources both in terms of short-term spending and the use of savings. Many women felt that this led to many changes in family dynamics and relationships. In this chapter I will explore the relationship between women and their mothers-in-law in some depth. This relationship is often considered the most difficult to reconcile in the family due to the difference in status and power. For some participants, this relationship moved from being authoritarian to a more supportive due to the women being in visible employment—at the factory. In this chapter, I also focus on how the role of mother is changing for some of these women. Many women felt that they are gaining a more significant voice in their children's education and career, and some suggest that this has helped to narrow the gap in education between girls and boys. These women also significantly contribute to change the norm of preferring sons to daughters by demonstrating that women are as economically valuable as men.

7.1 Empowering women in household resource management and decision making

Studies across different cultural contexts have highlighted that intra-household distribution and consumption patterns are largely determined by cultural norms and cannot be understood without analysing the specific context and the processes that underpin gendered power dynamics in the family (Bermant, 2008; Kabeer 1991). These studies show that in different cultures and across different classes that individual household members have different access to the resources of the family (Kabeer, 1991). Kabeer argues that women's relationship to the resources of the household depends on factors such as cultural norms, relative power and status in the family, social class, income level, life-cycle stage, marital status, household type and earning capacities. In another study Kabeer (1994) showed how access to wage work can be a way for women

to increase their bargaining power within the household, especially when they have autonomous control over their income. This access can allow women to make choices about spending for things like groceries or necessities for their children without input from men in the family. They are better able to actively participate in the decision-making processes about how to allocate the family resources. In rural Vietnam there are many factors that contribute to women having less power in making decisions around the expenditure of household resources than men. This next section examines whether factory work changes cultural norms around the distribution and consumption of resources in their household for these women, and whether they are empowered by this.

Many women in Vietnam are responsible for managing the household budget, for day-to-day expenditure such as food and small house-hold items (Kato & Luong, 2016; Knodel, Loi, Jayakody, & Huy, 2005; Le, 1996; Rydstrøm, 2003). They are also generally responsible for the long-term savings of the family, however, they are not involved in larger financial decisions—this is the husband's domain (Hien, 2008; Rydstrøm, 2003; Van, 2012). Large financial decisions may include, for example, the building or repairs of a house, the purchase of expensive furniture and appliances, and the education or marriage of their children. Research shows that the proportion of Vietnamese families in which the husband and wife consult with each other on common affairs is on the rise but this is mostly in middle class families and families in the city (Tran, 2017; Van, 2012).

Almost all the participants in the current study managed their family's budget. For example, Mận said: "Before I worked in this factory. He [her husband] did not keep money for himself, he gave me all money he earned". But keeping money and making decisions about how that money is spent is different, as Mai explained: "That money is his earning, I have no right to make decisions about it, I only use a little to buy basic things for family, for big issues in family, the decision belongs to him". Mận recalled that being responsible for the family budget, yet not being able to make decisions about how the money should be spent, caused her anxiety:

> After I got married and gave birth, I had no job, only stayed at home and looked after my child, all family's living expense (included expenses for my parents who live with us) depended on my husband's income. He sometimes complained why so much money was spent. I felt stressed at that time. Although he gave me

> all the money he earned, I did not dare to spend anything on things for myself, not even clothes. When I visited my mum, she bought clothes for me.

The family structure and dynamics shape the wife's access to money and resources, including the gendered dynamics of power within the household. Because the mother-in-law has a higher status than her daughter-in-law, she is also likely to have more authority over the expenditure of household resources. Cam explained how she was excluded from the major decision about the building of their house, and it was decided between her husband and mother-in-law:

> All money my husband earns he does not give to me, he gives to my mother-in-law, she may be afraid I will use a part of that to support for my own parents. Moreover, when my house was built, my husband and my mother-in-law discussed it with me; I was not happy, but the final decision belonged to him and my mother-in-law. She borrowed money for him to build a new house, now she has used that money to return the loan.

The introduction of factory work in their community has opened the way for women to approach resource distribution and decision making differently, consistent with Kabeer's (1999) view that one way of thinking about women's empowerment is via their ability to independently manage resources. Kabeer (1999) argued that changes in women's resources translates into changes in the choices they are able to make, which in turn changes their conditions. In other research, concerning women in India, Khan and Ram (2009) also found that "work participation" was an important factor in contributing "to women gaining status and autonomy" (p. 2).

Paid work shifted the traditional position of the women I interviewed from the lowest in their family, to a higher status. This has given many women agency in deciding how and what to spend money on in the household and beyond. The majority of the participants said their budgeting is now shared more equally between husband and wife. For example, Bưởi said happily, "We have a cashbox and we put it all together, if the spending is small, I make decisions by myself, if it is over 1 million VND, we ask each other's opinion". Mận described how her mother-in-law said she could choose how she spent her income from the factory:

> My mother-in-law told me: ‘You earn money by yourself so it is your money, you can buy whatever you want’. To be honest, that never occur before. However, I only buy things for my children and my family such as milk, food, living expenditure.

Many expressed a feeling of satisfaction and happiness at their new financial agency. Cam told me “Now I can buy myself new clothes when I visit my mum, with my own money”. They are also responsible for managing the wages they receive each month, even though this money is predominantly spent on their families, community events or saved for the future. For example, Hoa said, “I spend that money [her wage] on buying school supplies for my children and for other family expenses. I also use it for some festivals, or for wedding presents in the village”.

Some of the women’s decisions, however, involved a large amount of their household’s money and had the potential to have a major impact on the family. This change in the degree of the importance of financial decisions made by the women is a significant theme in participants’ accounts in this research. For example, Hồng said:

> I wanted to buy a sewing machine for me to work at home that is over 10 million VND. My husband agreed with me. In the past when buying something that cost this much, my husband would make the decision.

Moreover, many women found that the respect they gained from having an income was useful in being able to negotiate with family members when making decisions concerning to reach the whole well-being of the family. For example, Mận said:

> My husband is very bossy; he wanted to buy a new television, although I did not agree I let him to have a look at the one he liked. Then I analysed the situation and explained that because we are still in debt because of borrowing money to build the house, we should use the old one, then in the next few years we can buy a new one. As a result, he agreed with me.

The women have reached a level of greater equality in decision processes and other family members have a significantly increased awareness of their rights. Bưởi stated:

> My father-in-law is very strict and has a lot of control over our lives. In particular, I wanted to install a small air condition in my room, as my children share the same room with me and it is very hot in summer, but he didn't agree, he said, 'That device consumes too much energy, thus the energy bill will be very high', and he compared 'In the past I also raised children like you do, there was no air conditioner and the kids were still healthy'. He seemed irritated with that issue and thought I dared to look down on him when I intend to make this decision, the right to make big decision like that belong to him or my husband. I had no status in the family to do it. In that time, I asked my co-workers for advice. I also looked for help from my husband, then I explained to my father-in-law about the importance of that device, he then had calmed down. Finally, he agreed with my decision.

It was evident through my interviews that the women not only had the right to spend money for themselves and family members, but also to support others outside their immediate family. This increased autonomy shifted cultural norms. In Vietnam there is a traditional saying: "*Chúng mày là lũ vịt trời, bé thì ăn hại, lớn thì bay đi*", which means "You are the flying ducks: it takes great effort to nurture you when small, but when mature, you fly away". This saying describes woman's responsibilities after marriage which involves serving her husband's family for the rest of her life. Now, some women who work have started to financially support their own parents or give gifts to other family members, demonstrating that they are an economic asset to family. For rural women, who before working in the factory were engaged in farming, it is considered to be the first time they can "pay back" their birth parents. As Mai stated: "I can give small presents to my parents when they get sick".

In conclusion, while women in Vietnam have long been responsible for family budgeting, many participants in my research felt that they had a greater say in how family resources were spent, and in family decision-making, with many explaining how they were increasingly involved in decisions about how this money was spent. This is important because traditionally men's control of the household income has made it

difficult for women to buy things for themselves or for their own parents. More importantly, women traditionally had little involvement in important decision-making that affected them and their children. The changes that factory work has brought about in this regard are making a substantial difference to women's empowerment and their visibility in their family. I suggest that accompanying this is a series of changes in their relationships with family members, specifically with their mothers-in-law and with their children. These changes are discussed in the following sections.

7.2 Re-negotiating the hierarchical relationship with their mother-in-law

A woman's relationship with her in-laws is one of the most challenging for rural women in Vietnam. The relationship between women in a rural Vietnamese family is age hierarchical (Werner, 2004). Older women are more respected than young. The cultural norm in rural Vietnam is that a bride will come and live with her husband's family where she spends more hours with her mother-in-law than with any other member of the household and that she will be under the supervision of her mother-in-law (Schlecker, 2006; Werner, 2004). She is expected to do domestic and agricultural activities that were previously undertaken by her mother-in-law. She is supposed to modify her private habits, with her mother-in-law ensuring that she follows their family's way of living and working. For that reason, conflict is sometimes unavoidable. One side has authority, higher status, and seniority, while the other deals with decreased self-esteem, at being conferred a junior status on the new family (Dang, 2007; Do & Brennan, 2015; Werner, 2004).

As Werner (2004) argued the interests of the mother-in-law often work against gender equality among the younger generation, therefore, she the study of gender in northern Vietnam is not simply a function of female-male relations but involves age hierarchies. Young married women do not really become a "wife" till their son(s) marry and bring home a daughter-in-law. Through the identity of a "mother-in-law", a woman truly become a "wife", having reached a kind of social parity with their husbands (Werner, 2004). The Vietnamese Communist Party's promotion of "harmonious" intergenerational relations, demonstrated in campaigns like "Building the Cultured Family" first launched in 1962 states that "Grandparents, fathers, mothers and family members in family must be cared and nurtured well" (Vietnam Communist Party, 2018b). Thus, the role of women in the family as traditional nurturers and regulators of

harmony is strongly reinforced (Drummond, 2004). One participant, Lê, said her mother-in-law always compares how Lê undertakes domestic tasks with the way she had previously done this:

> My mother-in-law usually said that in the past she had to do things like this, in the past she had to make things like that, although when I joined this house, she didn't help me with any household chores or with raising the livestock. When my father-in-law told her she should help me, she replied, 'It is her business, no one has to do for her'.

In the family, traditionally, big decisions belong to men and the less significant decisions are made by women. However, in some cases, if men cannot manage the role, for example, if they are working far from home, or it relates to subjects that are considered to belong to women, the mother-in-law acts as the head of family and has the power to make decisions. Mơ recalled her past when working in her family farm:

> Normally, people planted rice two times per year as main harvests, we also did that, but she (her mother-in-law) wanted me to grow corn in the winter in order to get some corn to raise chicken at home. I was quite tired because at that time my children were small but I had to follow her.

Bưởi experienced this situation also. She stated, "I have to ask for permission from my parents in law when doing some things, for example, when I want to take my children out somewhere".

In this section I examine the changing relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law due to their entry into factory work in the village. Some women found working at the factory allowed them to re-negotiate a more equal relationship with their mother-in-law. While women were previously working in informal contexts such as family agriculture and tended to be seen as "unemployment", these women are now making a visible contribution to the family livelihood, and they are given the formal title of "worker". Their financial contribution is often similar to men and can bring about changes in the behaviour of a woman's in-laws, as well as her husband. It is consistent with Werner's (2004) view that if a daughter-in-law bring in more money to the household and increases the family's social prestige through her work, she will

receive help with the household chores from her mother-in-law. Some of the participants suggested the relationship had moved from one where the mother-in-law had a "supervisory" role towards a more "supportive" relationship. In particular, some tasks that are normally the responsibility of the daughter-in-law were transferred to her mother-in-law. Mai was one of the participants that experienced this: "My parents-in-law do all housework for me, they also take and pick up my children from their school so I can concentrate on my work". Some women also reported that their mothers-in-law do the grocery shopping. That is a change, as research by Knodel et al. (2005) indicated, shopping at the local open market is usually the responsibility of the daughter-in-law. Shopping is time consuming as it is performed almost every day, and women have to calculate and consider carefully what to buy that will be the lowest price but satisfactory to the needs of the whole family. One woman, Hồng, suggested happily that her mother-in-law not only relieved her of the job of grocery shopping but also showed care for her in the way she shopped: "My mother-in-law goes to market every two days, she sometime asks me what food I would like to eat; she will buy it and cook".

The bonds between the women and their mothers-in-law had become stronger and less hierarchical, according to many research participants, who said that they and their mother-in-law now do not want to live separately as both need support from each other. Daughters-in-laws need their mother-in-law's support with domestic work and childcare, and in exchange, mothers-in-law need physical and mental support from their children. For example, two of the women spoke about how they were reliant on their mother-in-law's assistance to be able to go to work. Bưởi stated: "They can live nearby so they can help me to take care my children and even do household chores for me". And Hồng explained:

> I want to live with her because she helps me a lot. My husband's family members and I don't have any conflict. If I didn't have my mother-in-law's help, I would not have enough time to go to work and take care my children.

As I demonstrated in chapter five having a daughter in law nearby can make a mother-in-law feel safer, reduce the burden of caring for grandchildren and reduce the amount of domestic chores. In an informal conversation, one mother-in-law said that if she is sick, or something happened to her at night her daughter-in-law could help her.

Not all women, however, experienced such a positive transformation in their relationship with their mother-in-law. It was not the case for Lê whose husband had died before she started working at the factory and whose two grown up children were studying in Hanoi. Lê's mother-in-law stayed with Lê's brother-in-law during the day but at night moved to Lê's house. Lê explained:

> In the past when I did agricultural work, I also had to carry out all domestic work, she did not help me with anything. For example, in the evening I had to do all the household chores like cooking, washing, cleaning. My father-in-law sympathised with me, and he suggested that my mother-in-law help me, but she said, 'it is her business, no one should do for her'. Now, she helps me to cook dinner (only plugging in the rice cooker, not preparing other food). But honestly, I do not need her help, I can do by it myself as I prefer living alone, it offers more freedom.

For Lê this was something of a psychological struggle, she was trying to decide whether to continue to let her mother-in-law come in the evening to keep the family close or to have the freedom of living without her. In her struggle over this decision, she thought about the social and cultural expectations of a daughter-in-law to look after her mother-in-law. Lê added:

> She (her mother-in-law) told me she wants to move in with me every night so that the family will be close. But I know her main intension is to supervise me as she is afraid, I will get a boyfriend. To be honest, at this age I do not have the need. If I have free time, I only want to invite some friends over. But if I live alone, she will doubt me. So, I have to accept her here that is one way to prove I'm innocent. Moreover, I will still be viewed as a good widow and have a good relationship with my mother-in-law.

This redistribution of work from the women to their mothers-in-law indicates significant social and cultural changes to the role and seniority of the mother-in-law in the household. To sum up, two tendencies can be noticed in the relationships between

mother and daughter in law in each family. On the one hand, mothers-in-law have found it beneficial to behave more generously towards their daughters-in-law than they themselves were treated in the past. On the other hand, some still have an active role in managing the tension in their relationship, otherwise, their daughters-in-law might get offended. Approximately two decades ago research by Werner (2004) and Rydstrøm (2003) found that most rural Vietnamese women endured the traditional hierarchical relationship with their mother-in-law; accepting the lack of equality and not overtly rebelling against it. Research by Bélanger (2004) found that some women were hesitant to marry due to this intergenerational inequality. However, my research demonstrates that factory work has created more equality in the family and decreased the hierarchical gap between mother-in-law and that of daughter-in-law as the women workers have a more important position in their husband's family. Women have more power to negotiate relationship with their in-laws, as friendships developed via factory work have wakened up their consciousness of women's subjectivities and family-defined womanhood. As their status is enhanced, women have more say in other domains, for example, navigating their children's education and future career—a domain which has traditionally belonged to men. In the next section I will focus on how women have an increasing impact on raising and educating their children.

7.3 From traditional mother to modern mother

In this section I will give an overview of the traditional role of Vietnamese rural women and evidence how factory work affects the role of these women in raising their children, as well as making the argument that they are gaining more power to intervene in their daughters' education. In the traditional Vietnamese family, when children are born, the main responsibility of the mother is feeding and caring for the child. Studies show that preschool age children are generally taken care of by their mother (Jayakody & Phuong, 2013; Knodel et al., 2005), with fathers responsible for rules and discipline. Fathers as symbols of authority, remain quite distant from children especially daughters (Jayakody & Phuong, 2013). Once the child enters school, the mothers are responsible for helping with homework (Knodel et al., 2005).

Feelings of pressure to conform to highly demanding and contradictory standards of womanhood have been identified among Vietnamese women (Knodel et al., 2005). There is an expectation that an ideal woman can work, parent and learn. The literature

on what constitutes being a good mother and worker in Vietnam is abundant. A 2002 campaign launched by Vietnam Women's Union had two slogans that defined "triple excellent women" and "new mothers" as those who are "studying actively and working creatively, raising children well, and building happy families". This widely promoted images of independent women who can juggle work and motherhood effortlessly (Huyen, 2020; Sidney Ruth et al., 2006, p. 386). While affirming the role of women in the public sphere, these campaigns also highlight the Confucian idea that caring for the family and parenting are a women's domain.

Traditionally, gender disparities in education reflect gender discrimination in schooling investment (Liu, 2001), As children become more mature, sons are educated with fathers, whereas daughters remain with their mothers (Jayakody & Phuong, 2013). As Giang (2004) has noted the concept of "*trọng nam khinh nữ*" meaning "respecting men and despising women" is still deep-rooted in rural areas. It is considered that "only men need to learn, while higher education for women brings no benefit because female labour is mostly concentrated in agricultural production" (Giang, 2004, p. 143). If parents have to choose between investing in higher education for sons or daughters, sons are preferred because "the expected return on a son's education is higher than the return of investment on a daughter's human capital" (Liu, 2001, p. 300). According to Confucianism, sons provide security to the parents in old age, while after marriage daughters belong to their husband's family, so investment in daughters is seen as a loss. Mothering is thought to be women's natural ability and vocation. In rural areas, after giving birth a mother will traditionally stay in one room of their house with their newborn babies for at least three months. (Knodel et al., 2005). Lê recalled her reproductive period: "After giving birth to my first daughter, I mainly stayed at home. My mother-in-law told me not to shower or wash my hair for one month as these activities would give me health problems in the future".

The children's health is the mother's responsibility and if a child gets ill, the mother will be in charge of. For example, Mận shared her story:

> When my children get ill, my responsibility is to buy medicine as I can describe the symptoms to the sellers. My husband can't describe the details of the symptom as well as me. If they have more serious ill and remain in hospital, staying and taking care them is also my responsibility, not others.

Caring for children, however, is not considered a barrier to women doing paid work, as if they find suitable work, they can ask for childrearing help from parents or others. That can explains why the female labour force participation in Vietnam was 73 percent in 2019, far greater than most country in the world (e.g., USA 57 percent and UK 58 percent) (World Bank, 2021). However, as it is considered one of the virtues of a mother, the more time women serve their children the more respected they are. When engaged in factory work a woman's daily life is usually extremely busy. Đào said:

> I wake up at 6am, go to market to buy food and cook for my husband and children, after that I come to the factory, I start to work at 7:30am, I have one hour for lunch time and I eat here. The factory offers a meal at lunch time. I only have to pay 3000 VND for each meal, the rest is supported by factory. Eating takes about 15 to 20 minutes and then I continue working, I almost have no short sleep. I work until 8 pm.

As looking after children is one of their most important priorities, all the women who moved for work said the needs of their "left-behind" children was the main reason they came back their hometown. Hoa said, "My two children are growing, they need my care. I also want to stay with them and supervise them. Men can't take as good care as women". However, as far as spending time with children, entering the workforce makes fulfilling the "good mothering" role more difficult as workers have to balance time for work and for children. Cam said:

> In the evening, sometimes I want to put him (her son) to bed early so I can continue sewing. I don't want to ask my parents-in-law's help as they take care him all daytime. It's an internal conflict, I always want to put him first, but I just can't play with him as much as I should.

While working mothers have less time for their children, education of these children is a particular focus. This finding builds on Jackson's 1996 research that found women are more likely to use their income for children's well-being than men. Some women use their money to hire tutor to teach their children at home or send their children to a private education centre after school hours for extra study of subjects like English or Maths. They equip the child with the knowledge so that he or she can do well

in school and succeed in his or her career later. Hoa said, “I paid 1 million VND a month for my children’s extra learning, it is deducted from my wage”. Bưởi said she bought her daughter a computer for her study.

The women I interviewed have more of a voice in their daughters’ education and career, aspiring for their daughters to have a different experience than them. It was not unusual for these women to have experienced discrimination in education. This is consistent with data in Liu's (2001) study, which demonstrated that the ratio of girls not in school is higher than that of boys once they are over 9 years old. The gap widens as children grow older, and the proportion of women learning also reduces gradually when moving into higher education (Dung, 2015). The women were regretful about having limited education and felt that they may have been impacted by the traditional thinking expressed in the idioms “Daughters are not my children” or “You are the flying ducks” or “*Thị mẹt*” meaning “Girl’s middle name; a cheap basket’ means that girls are not valuable”. Some women said that they were changing this norm through investing equal amounts of money in their daughters’ and sons’ education. For example, Lê said:

> When she (her daughter) was in grade 9, my husband, who has passed away, said that after graduating high school she only needs to enter a vocational training school in provincial centre, as school fees and cost of living is cheaper than in Hanoi, and the time for studying is shorter in comparison with university. I hesitated but nodded yes, because at that time I was doing agricultural farm work and other jobs that didn’t pay much money. Since I came here, my income is stable, from 7 to 8 million VND per month, and because of this now my daughter is studying at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, and my older son also is studying university. Every month I send them money.

Children are a source of motivation to women in working life, in return, these parents can expect to lean on their children when they get older. Being a mother is the most vital function of Vietnamese women after getting married and not having children is viewed as the biggest misfortune in their lives (Bergstedt, 2015; Kato & Luong, 2016). Children are considered invaluable assets in the family. So, giving birth and taking care of children are not only responsibility but also a future investment. Lê said:

> If I take care of them well now, hopefully I can rely on them when I get old. Also, if they have a good job, I won't worry about them. Especially, my daughter's life will be better later on. If she has a good job, she can take care of her life. My life is too miserable, I don't want her to experience what I have.

These women felt responsible for their children's development, particularly their daughters' education and future career that may shape their whole lives. In their view, workers are better than farmers but are in a lower position than office staff. The women realised that without adequate education, their daughters might fall into the same path as they had. Most of the women only had a high school certificate, and from their perspective this limited qualification was an obstacle to them to getting an office job. Thus, all interviewees stated that they will use their income to invest in their daughters' education until these children can't continue studying. For example, Mai said:

> I want my daughter to study well, so she can find a good job, I do not want her to become a garment worker like me because with the development of society, they will need people who have good/higher skills.

Huệ, mother of one boy and two girls said, " I will invest money for them (her two daughters) to study until they can't. I invest equally between my son and my daughters". Táo commented, "I always respect and support my daughter's decision. If she wants to do further study, I will let her do it. I don't think there is a difference between boys and girls".

Factory work has helped the women recognise that they can be a bridging generation. They are aware that they have experienced gender inequality, now they can liberate themselves from some aspects of traditional gender roles. They believe that if their daughters can obtain stable paid work, their daughters' lives will be different from their own; they will not be in a disadvantaged position in family and community. For example, Bưởi said, "I need to take more care of my daughter, I do not think "giving birth to daughter is a loss". If she has a good job, she can live a good life, as well as support us". Lê was clear about using both her knowledge and financial power to help her daughter:

> I have experienced very difficult times in the past, both mental and financial. 'Thoát ly' —which in English means 'escaping from rural farm'—is the first way to liberate women. Now I know that myself and other women workers are in a better position, and I also have money, to hope that my daughter, and firstly my daughter needs to finish her education.

In brief, the traditional role of mother is changed by factory work. Dewi (2011) argued that the old style of good mother stresses the importance of love and security which were described as passive qualities—patience, reliability and willingness to spend time. In contrast, the new style of good mother is more interested in providing a stimulating environment for her child's development (Dewi, 2011). The rural working mothers who participated in my research are aiming to work creatively and raise children well—In line with the Vietnam Women's Union 2002 campaign. In this context, the role of these mothers in taking care of their children is nuanced, not only measured by how much time they spend with their children but by the way they nurture them. The traditional role of fathers in influencing children's education and career is shared by these mothers. If in the past some rural girls chose to migrated to work as precarious workers in big cities in order to look for further study (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2009; Bowen, 2008), for them working is a step to save money for future plans. These girls (children of participants in my research) have received direct support from their parents, especially their mothers, who unlike mothers of previous generations have invested in higher education for their daughters and have the income to guarantee this education. In turn the daughter can become an asset to the family through contributing economic sustainability. The women recognise that education and formal employment is the best way to escape restrictive gender norms. Their awareness challenges men's authority in navigating children's education and opens the way for more equality for women in the future.

The finding of this chapter demonstrates that factory work—paid and formal employment—has given rural women workers new roles and status in their family. They have gained significant authority in the family with their perspective on important issues heard and respected, and they have increased involvement in decisions about expenditure. The impact of these changes is a difference in family structure with the

women no longer at bottom of their husbands' family hierarchy. This is evidenced in a less hierarchical more reciprocal relationship-between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and women having more power in navigating education and employment for their children, particularly their daughters. Mothering women's paid work helps to narrow the gap in education between genders, gradually eliminating discrimination against women.

Chapter 8: The body as a site of change for women in rural Vietnam

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the ways in which paid factory work leads to changes in rural mothering women's gendered identities in relation to their place and roles in community life. This chapter flows on from previous findings that articulate the ways in which women's lives have changed as a result of their paid factory work. Specifically, I have addressed the new and safe spaces (public homeplaces) that factories have created, bringing these rural women together and strengthening the relationships between them. I have also examined the significant changes to their status and roles as they move from 'invisible' work in the paddy farms at their homes into recognised 'visible' work that contributes tangibly and symbolically. As Rydstrom (2006) contended, daughters and women must acquire their sense of worth and value to their parents and in-laws, whereas for boys and men this worth is innate and inborn; working in factories and having an income enables women to earn this respect. This process of change has been explored through Chapters 6 and 7, showing that factory work has led to disruptions in longstanding gendered roles and hierarchies in the home and family. Mothering working women have become active powerholders and decision makers and this has resulted in increased agency (choice and control) over who they are, what they look like and how they resist, maintain, and negotiate their place and role in the community. This chapter shows some of the incremental yet significant changes that result from having disposable income, such as refashioning and styling of oneself, engaging in leisure activities in public spaces previously deemed off limits and altered roles in community life. Ultimately a sense of empowerment to be different, look and do differently has been a driving force.

Given the focus on identities, gender and place (the village), I draw on Judith Butler's work on gender, embodiment and performativity (Butler, 1988; 1990; 1993; 2004) to understand how rural women's bodies become a site for change and a symbol of agency and empowerment. Butler's conceptualisation of how gender identities are formed, maintained, and challenged is essential for understanding how cultural change at the community-level is taking place. To reiterate some key thinking relevant for this chapter, Butler characterises gender as arising from sociohistorical and political contexts and being defined and regulated through dominant social discourses, cultural

norms, laws and language that we take up through socialisation and repeat across our lifetime and generations. Our families, communities, mass media and social relations also shape what is considered feminine, our place and our roles as women. In Vietnamese society and particularly in Northern rural Vietnam, as I have previously discussed gender identities and the roles of rural Vietnamese women have been dictated through Confucianism, feudalism, the French colonial regime, liberalism and socialism influencing, at times, a contradictory script about gender. Whilst communist leadership proclaimed gender differences no longer exist, traditional Confucian ideology persists; dictating that women should be submissive daughters, wives and mothers and should "restrain(s) her speech, dresses in a pleasing manner, and manage her household" (Dass, 2009, p. 2260). Given her natural capacities as a mother/carer, a woman's role is to serve others (O'Harrow, 2021).

"Performing gender" means that women act under pressure of a patriarchal, heteronormative power structure and, in fear of becoming a social pariah, being shamed and physically or punished (Butler, 1988). It is under the threat of what Butler calls "normative violence"—slurs, insults, ostracization—that women perform gender in accordance with cultural norms and scripts, avoiding pain and discomfort (Butler 1990; 1993). Thus, gender performativity is and becomes a "dynamic and corporeal process… [achieved through] appropriation, interpretation, and reinterpretation of cultural terms of embodiment that define gender" (Lloyd, 2007, p.38 discussing Butler).

These pressures, to maintain morality and modesty, which have played out on women's bodies in rural Vietnam, have kept them on paddy fields and in homes, constantly tending to and caring for others and keeping the peace by staying 'backstage'. In this chapter I explore key themes that were identified in the stories of the women and documented in my observation notes, that show small but significant shifts to the ways that women step out of traditional gender scripts; creating new subjectivities through refashioning the body, daring to occupy public spaces previously deemed off limits, for leisure and socialising, and finally showing their value and narrowing the hierarchical structure in public space.

8.1 Refashioning bodies, transforming gender identities

In this section I will examine how women's identities and subjectivities have shifted as a result of their work, income and changing status in the family and

community. Specifically, I explore how bodies become a site for gender expression, challenging traditional cultural norms as women refashion themselves. Bodies, Butler (1988) contended, have an incredibly important role in maintaining gender identity, "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519). Clothes and other accessories are far more than just material items, they have cultural meaning and as Turbin (2003) argued are contested sites that 'reveal ideological assumptions underlying social patterns" (p .48). Leshkowich's (2009) research exploring fashion in Ho Chi Minh–the biggest urban city in Vietnam—indicated that "clothing tends to be viewed as an obvious signifier of one's moral and material status" (p. 95), and the use of fashion and consumption is used as a way to express one's identity (King, Nguyen, & Minh, 2008). In Vietnam and particularly in rural Northern Vietnam, how women present themselves, dress and style themselves has always been a reflection of gender, class, age, and geography. For example, long dark clothing is worn by peasants on their family farms. This type of clothing implicitly signals the lowest class who are voiceless in society and whose lives are quiet, modest and invisible, remaining out of the 'public sphere'. As Rydstrøm (2006) noted:

> Rural young girls encounter more kinds of social control in daily life than do young women in urban Vietnam and therefore have to carefully balance their verbal and bodily behaviour in order not to provoke well-established assumptions about appropriate female 'morality' (p.284).

A common sight you will come across while traveling in Vietnam is that of local women wearing the *nón lá* (a conical shaped palm-leaf hat), this also represented in media and posters. The Vietnamese Communist Party chose the image of a woman wearing a nón lá as an ideal model of femininity and beauty. It is used as Vietnam's national logo to promote Vietnam to the world, accompanied by the slogan "Vietnam—A destination for the new millennium" (Chiu, 2005). The image of the nón lá is has become strongly associated with peasant lives from the paddy field to boat men and women. But this is a co-opted and romantized symbol and marker of femininity, which obscures the harsh realities that many peasant women continue to face in rural Vietnam. In practice, the nón lá is mainly used in working environments such as the farm, for

selling food at markets and for doing all kinds of informal work outside. The nón lá can serve numerous purposes such as personal sun protection, as a basket for women going to market, a fan for a ploughman on hot summer days, or even a keepsake to memorize (Rajapaksha, 2018). Traditionally women who worked in the fields have worn dark clothing and their hair in a bun. Their skin has been dark from working long days under a hot sun. As a result of their factory work which provided both a new income and a space to be with other women, the participants in my research, had begun to change this image. They had increased freedom to express themselves and were shedding the traditional clothes of the farm. Their refashioning of their bodies, which inevitably occurred in public spaces became a site of identity expression, change and even resistance.

In my observations, the image inside the factory was not one of sameness, or a universal dark colour that has characterized women's uniforms in the past. Instead, it was an image of vivid colour that came not only from the clothes the workers wore but also the cloth products they made. Each woman wore something different from one other and it was always a topic of conversation:

> *Around 7am, Hồng walked along the corridor to her seat. Today, she came a bit later than the usual working hour (7 am). Two workers who sit near her looked up and asked her 'Do you have a new jacket?' Hồng nodded, said, 'Yes', and smiled. Another worker asked, 'How much?' Hồng replied, '250000 vnd'. One of the workers left her seat and went over to Hồng. She touched Hồng's jacket to examine the quality of the material and said, 'That is quite ok, it looks warm and light.' Then she asked Hồng to turn around. She nodded and said, 'Pretty.' Their conversation continued with questions like, 'Where did you buy it?' and, 'Did you get a bargain?' Some other workers also stopped their work to hear the story. They seemed to agree that the jacket was pretty and a good price. (Fieldnote, December 20, 2018).*

Almost all the participants in my research admitted they had changed their clothing style in order to suit their work, but also because they could, and because they enjoyed it. They dressed neatly in bright coloured *sơ mi, quần phăng* (shirts and pants designed in European style) that were different from the black wide legged silk pants that are easy to lift-up in the paddy farm. A number of the women I interviewed told me that they now had the opportunity to buy new fashion which allowed them to express

femininity in ways that they were not possible in the past or not suitable with their previous informal work. Huệ said:

> I dress in cleaner clothes. Previously staying at home and working on the farm meant I could not dress well because it is muddy all day. In addition, no one noticed or cared what you wore. Even in the past, if I had been able to afford to buy these clothes, I wouldn't have worn them because people might have said I was ridiculous.

Đào added:

> I dress more fashionably, because in the past I did not have enough money to buy nice clothes. Moreover, working in a clean environment is suitable for wearing clean and fashionable clothes. In addition, everyone here dresses neatly and we follow each other.

Interestingly both Huệ and Đào's comments say a lot about a context in which you might be deemed "ridiculous" for daring to dress differently than what has been accepted as both modest and honourable. Đào's comment about "we follow each other," aligns with my observations that working together in the factory was important for this type of change to occur. Traditionally, it would have been seen as a transgression of femininity—a violation of social norms. In short, it is harder to be viewed as 'slutty' or 'comical' when there are many women changing their clothes. Additionally, because they are performing visible work with a financial contribution, there is a small but important amount of power underpinning this shift.

The women who had never left their village, were acutely aware of this non-traditional look which involved spending money and time on themselves and appearing 'different,' For example, Táo said:

> I think I dress more neatly than before. I even wear professional suits for big events. At the beginning, I felt a bit embarrassed, but now I am happy. I also go to a beauty salon to have my hair done on the Lunar New Year.

However, the new style can't replace the old style in a few weeks and the pressures of the dominant heteropatriarchal ideological constructs, images and norms

that govern women's bodies and lives persist. Many women in this study chose to perform gender in ways that ensured they were not subjected to 'normative violence'—meaning ridicule, judgement, and psychological stress. For them, a good woman is a person who maintains the traditional style and way of living because it is essential to their dignity in the family and community. For example, Huệ stated: "I still wear neat, simple clothes and in dark colour, young girls can follow fashionable trend but we, mothering women, we need to modest, too much colourful will be the central object of gaze of villagers".

It was also clear that women's bodies and how they were stylised and fashioned was inherently linked to what was deemed acceptable in the spaces they were in. They were careful to steer clear of criticism or the judgemental gaze of other villagers. This was particularly clear for those women who had previously worked in the big city. For example, Cúc said:

> When I worked in Ho Chi Minh city (the biggest city in Vietnam), I dressed and had my hair styled cooler as I followed other city residents. As in the city, people's lives are more independent, no one know who you are so no one judges you and you can freely wear what you want. But working in a rural area I dress less colourfully and less sexy, as I was born and grew up in a rural area. I dress neatly, in a way that is suitable to my work.

Cúc's observations made it clear that she was careful not to experience what Butler (1993, p. 3) has called "abjection" —being seen as "improper or morally unclean" by the community. This is supported by research by Bélanger and Pendakis (2009) which showed that young rural women who worked in factories in the big city always conformed to traditional notions of dress when returning home, faithfully performing gender so that they weren't seen as "spoiled" and unsuitable for marriage (p. 7).

During my field research, I observed that many women still wear the nón lá, but it no longer has the same significance it once had. For example, Táo said,

> Living in a rural village, the nón lá is used for cover whenever it rains or there is sunshine. It is easy to use. I sometimes use it, but when going to work I wear a helmet as I go to work by motorbike.

Another element of the women refashioning themselves was use of makeup and other cosmetic products, something that had never been part of their routine previously. Their skin was brighter, paler and less rough, due partly from working inside house, out of the direct sun, partly from cosmetics, Hồng said:

> I start to think of myself, now I have more money. As women, we must put on some make up (laughs). I use whitening powder and pink lipstick when I attend festivals, and on working days I only use face lotion.

Along with changing hair, clothes and makeup, the women used gold more frequently to decorate themselves daily; gold has both economic and symbolic value in for women in rural areas (Nghiem, 2004). I observed that many women workers wore gold rings on their fingers (each person wearing at least one or two rings) and even some wore bracelets. For them, gold had more value than it did before. Táo told me with a laugh, "I follow others, I wear a ring to show that (Táo).

Historically, gold jewellery has economic and symbolic significance in rural Vietnam for women. Gold jewellery has been used intergenerationally as a form of economic security and women normally keep it in a hidden box without their husbands' knowing to safeguard their futures (O'Harrow, 2021). Women "raise their daughters to understand, if not explicitly, then by example, that they should always have their own money, and cannot depend on men" (O'Harrow, 2021, p.165).

Gold is also used as a dowry[4] and is not only considered a valuable gift that might help a woman avoid future misery, but it also implicitly indicates the status of the bride's family in the eyes of outsiders, which would improve the girl's position in the husband's family. Lê shared her story:

> When I got married, my parents were poor farmers, they had nothing to give me, only the rich gave their daughters rings or bracelet on the wedding. Now I have bought some gold as a savings. I have a daughter and I will use it as a dowry

[4] "To give a women a piece of fine jewellery in Vietnamese tradition is to help confirm her independence as a human being, and for a mother to hand over a piece of her jewellery to her daughter is a universally understood gesture, for which the sub-text is 'may this protect you from misery'" (O'Harrow, 2021, p.178).

> when she gets married. By doing that, I will be less embarrassed, and my children will be less disadvantaged.

Gold decoration is used by women as an expression of individual and family status—wearing gold demonstrates that they do not belong to the lowest position in the social hierarchy. This differs from women who are in a higher class or well educated—who neither use gold as a saving, nor decoration—preferring a more subtle aesthetic. (Nghiem, 2006).

In the past young women from rural villages who sought work in urban areas changed their style of clothing to avoid looking like "rural girls" and resemble "urban girls," in order to attract men and negotiate early marriage in their home village (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2009; Nghiem, 2004). These women used good quality shampoos and lotions effectively denaturalizing the connection between wealth and privilege and pampering one's body (Nguyen-Vo, 2004). In an urban setting, the middle class, emerged as a result of globalization and the development of the commodification of social relations in big cities (Leshkowich, 2008; Nghiem, 2004; Nguyen-Vo, 2004). In urban contexts there is less focus on morality and more focus on individualism. Urban middle class women use cosmetics and skin care products with the aim of enhancing their appearance and sexual attractiveness in order to lure their husbands home (Phinney, 2008).

The mothering women workers who participated in my research changed their bodies and looks with a different motivation and purpose; it signalled their desire and ability to afford to dress in whatever way they liked in a demonstration of their increased social status and agency. Thus, there was a narrowing of the gap between these women and the urban middle class. Having neat and clean clothes that are suitable for the factory working environment is the way these workers explained their dress change. Possibly, besides the utilitarian purpose of the western style clothing, which is considered to be suitable with the worker class, a new way of dressing has gradually influenced female workers' perception of beauty and femininity. As Brady and Schirato (2010) commented:

> Across a variety of cultural fields, the subject both 'chooses' and achieves further identities. This involves developing literacy with regard to the requirements (discourses, performances, forms of value, bodily hexis) associated

> with each category and site of identity and ensuring that the choices made are in keeping with normative values (p. 27).

This phenomenon is first time these changes have taken place in rural areas. These middle class working women who remain in their home place, and participate in "the warmth of the moral economy which still exists in the countryside" (Carruthers, 2017, p. 269), are slowly shifting the image of femininity in their village. The way these rural women are fashioning themselves is different to educated urban middle-class women because it plays out on the public stage of the village and poses a threat to psychological safety because it marks them as different to other women, and from the traditional image of women in these places. Rural women are seeking to 'try on' new ways of being and thus see themselves differently through an individual style that has never been available both due to financial constraints but also because they were a reflection of their husband and new subjectivities were a privilege afforded to men. Yuval (2010) has noted that identity is at least partly constructed and reconstructed through the "narratives, stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be" (p. 266). Women navigate this identity shift and stories about who they are by keeping a balance between traditional and modern, so that they can remain in line with moral standards of modesty, and abide by one of the four virtues, dung (appearance). Such changes can be seen as performing subversion, but also partly abiding by concepts of dignity, traditional femininity, and rural womanhood. In other words, an identity of rural middle class working women begins to form, shaped by smaller changes to expression of class, gender, ritual, age, and geography, which bring them social status in community.

8.2 Leisure as subversion

In this section I explore the ways in which women are shifting gendered norms and practices about public space through their increasing use of it for socializing and enjoying leisure activities. Rural women's role in public space has traditionally been extremely limited and governed and even policed by heteropatriarchal ideology and everyday relations.

Western feminists have long argued that the division between the public and private are inherently gendered and even one of the most important organising structures

in ensuring women remained oppressed. The public therefore has been associated with men/masculinity and private, the domestic sphere, with women/femininity (Duncan, 1996). Whilst this discussion of the public and private is one that dominated feminist analysis in the 1970s, many have now abandoned it with the dramatic increase of women's participation in the workforce in Western countries. But Drummond (2000) argued that this binary is still incredibly important and relevant as a tool for analysing the current state of gender relations and power in rural Vietnam. In relation to such an analysis, the body must remain an important focus because any experience of space is an embodied experience. As Ranade (2007) noted, public space is linked to power and gender:

> Structures of power are reinscribed through space by everyday practices of moving through and occupying space, it is the body that becomes the locus of action for it is through the body that they every day is lived, executed and experienced (p. 1524).

Drummond (2000) argued Vietnamese women's engagement with public spaces is more complicated and historically constructed and far more limited than men's. For example, during the feudal dynasty public spaces would have included the village communal house (*đình*) and the temple (*chùa*)—both of which were restricted in access according to gender and status. While women had limited use of the temple they were barred from the communal house. Ranade (2007) outlined just how important it is for women to be in spaces in ways that align with gendered norms:

> Control of women's movement has been central to the maintenance of a gender regime informed by patriarchy. So long as women reproduce the discourse of the hegemonic gender regime appropriately through their socio-spatial performance of femininity in public space, they can largely access it (p. 1525).

This has been the case in Vietnam, with women being both central to the running of many different parts of society in public space (i.e., markets), but realising that is the 'proper place' and that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing, namely being productive. For that reason, women's leisure activities in the past have been entirely different from those of men, particularly in rural areas. Safe places for leisure for rural

women have been, and largely continue to be, located in the 'inside world' (home), consisting of watching TV with children or supervising children's study. In peak farming seasons, they often chat in a group in the shade of big trees after finishing their farm work. What women are doing in public and how is just as important as where they are. For example, Minh-Ha (1992) has argued the first deadly sign of a woman not conforming to a normative understanding of gender roles is ngồi lê (sitting everywhere outside home), meaning she is being idle or moving freely in public spaces. Wandering was not a matter of course for the married women in rural areas, they might get in trouble with their husband if they can't prove the reasonable purpose to go out. As Bergstedt's (2012) observation's show, they might end up facing "questions and accusations from suspicious husbands that awaited wives who were not home, or returned back later than expected, without an acceptable explanation for their whereabouts (p. 7).

Thus, being in public space, socialising, chatting, and hanging around has been a privilege Vietnamese men enjoyed and as men this is their right because they belong in the "outside" world. Bergstedt (2012) described this in her research:

> A man's way of moving and occupying places, to be able—at least ostensibly—to wander around purposelessly without any apparent reason and destination, to idly fall into conversation with anyone and accept an invitation without careful estimations about appropriateness and respectability. To be seen 'hanging around' outdoors without really working or being on the way to or from some engagement was predominantly a male privilege (p. 7).

Women on the other hand are relegated to the "inside," where they should be doing domestic duties. Many of the women recounted experiences of being judged in public, with their actions scrutinized. As Mận explained her experience:

> I moved here to live with my husband's family after getting married as my hometown is far from here. At that time, whenever I went out, I had a feeling people were watching me, and behind my back, I imagined I would be the centre of gossip, like, 'Did you see her, did you see her walking over there?' Or 'What is she doing?' I had a feeling of losing freedom.

The gaze of the community acts as an "organising principle" (Butler, 1990)—they are the threat that ensures women continue to perform gender in ways that align with traditional expressions and practices. As has been identified in other chapters, particularly Chapters 6 and 7, mothers-in-law are one of the most powerful enforcers of heteropatriarchal structures, and participants in this study identified them as such. Lê recalled a conversation with her mother-in-law: "When I go out with my friends, she asked why I go out so much and why I come home late. And she was annoyed with me". Small actions such as questioning where they have been or what they have been doing were common. As O'Harrow (2021) has commented, a woman's reality is one of constant surveillance:

> The average Vietnamese woman gets very little of the physical privacy she very much desires …Always surrounded by people, her real problem, one of the most irksome of her life, is not physical but psychological privacy—freedom from prying eyes (p. 170).

Non-traditional leisure activities for women which operate outside the home and are associated with a Western style concept of leisure would be considered deviant or unsuitable for women (Rydstrøm, 2004). Outside entertainment activities have traditionally belonged to men.

The accounts of the mothering women workers who participated in my research demonstrated that the way women move through public space is very different from the past and a new enjoyment of leisure has emerged alongside their engagement with factory work. Almost all spoke about the changes to their life in terms of the leisure activities they were enjoying as a result of their increased free time, income and status within the family and community. These leisure activities moved from 'inside' or private spaces, to outside, public spaces. Many women dared to go beyond the boundary of traditional leisure activities and beyond those that had delineated public space for women. Interestingly in this research, the women I interviewed did not seem to fear being labelled "westernized" if they indulged in non-traditional leisure activities in their community. The burden of domestic workload was reduced, as it was shared by family members and due to being economically independent, they were able to do what they desired. For example, Lê said:

> Sometimes, some of my friends and I go to restaurant to have a cup of coffee. Chatting and drinking coffee help me to relax, my mother-in-law step by step must be familiar with this. She now says nothing when I come back, she may be not very happy, but I don't care too much.

Eating out was not something a rural woman did in the past. There was potential for a great deal of discomfort—being the object of the gaze and interest of male diners for example. However, I observed that there were two family run restaurants in front of the factory, which offered noodles, cakes and various other snacks, and the customers were mostly women workers. Mận said:

> Sometime I wake up late, I have breakfast outside, it cost me 10000vnd. Cooking takes a lot of time; I can use that time to work and get money. Moreover, eating out for us is now considered normal in view of villagers, it is different from the past, before if I ate out, I was considered a lazy woman

Outdoor sport activities have been traditionally dominated by men; now they are shared more with women. It may not be the first time for rural women to engage, but it was clearly a breakthrough for these women workers, Hoa recalled, "Some women played previously, but they were office staff or teachers." She added:

> On Sunday, sometimes I play volleyball in the yard of *nhà văn hóa* (culture house). My husband says nothing, I think he has no reason to complain, as it is good for health. Why not, I did not do anything wrong. Men play, so why shouldn't we? We also contribute money to the family. Cooking is now simple, I prepare everything before and when I finish some games, dinner is ready.

Risky places (places for men) have become normal places for women, and this is something that seemed to be because women were not going to these locations and activities alone, rather they were going with other women from the factory. Lê said:

> In the past, firstly I didn't have money to go to coffee stall. Even if I had money I did not think to go and drink coffee alone. It would have seemed ridiculous. For example, some people might have said, behind my back, *con đàn ông*—she

> is showing male characteristics. But now I go with a group of some workers from my factory and it is normal.

Historically, even spaces that were considered women's places such as the hair washing stall were often not safe for these rural women to visit, as they might have become an object for villagers' gossip, Hồng said:

> In the past, going to the hair washing hair stall to lie down was a luxury. The villagers could see me and even though I paid the owner, she could still talk with others. Rural life is complex. Because I didn't want to be the target of gossip, I washed my hair myself. That service only served office staff and urban women who came back and visited their home place (quê). We (rural women) did not dare use it in the past, but now many of us confidently go. We're tired from working and sometimes we have to relax (laughs).

The location of entertainment is no longer limited to women's own village and community but also extends to other communities. The women in my research had started to organize long trips far from home for holiday and relaxation, something that had not been done in the past. Mơ said:

> When we work together, we have a union, and a benefit for wellbeing and entertainment. We organized a visit to the beach every year. To be honest if my colleagues didn't support me, it would be very difficult for me to have trips like these.

Moreover, villagers seemed more sympathetic to women workers, as the women's contribution was visible and made a significant financial difference to the family. Their hard work and long hours were evident. They deserved to have relaxation time for themselves, and therefore the outside activities they joined were not viewed as 'wrong'. Additionally, factory work helped the women to have a concept of leisure on weekends, and holidays. Previously their informal work meant that every day was a working day. Mai said:

> On Sunday, I sometime take my children to playgrounds where they enjoy many activities. I buy ticket for them, and they always hope to come Sunday as soon as possible. Sometimes I go to the farm or visit my relatives. I think my life is more meaningful at present.

Entertainment activities have moved from inside to the outside, from the confines of the village to districts or provinces. The women in my research challenged traditional norms of women's good behaviour by their new way of life. Relaxation was no longer viewed as damaging the virtue of women, threatening to male supremacy, or tarnishing the image of a good mother. In contrast, it was a way to exercise their soul, refresh their mind, creating a work-life balance and motivating them to be more productive. Their participation in outside leisure activities contributed to the boundary between male and female characteristics and domains decreasing, and the formations of new subjectivities working to recreate gender. As Butler (1988) argued:

> The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguist (p. 523).

8.3 Becoming visible in public space

Rural village life differs from urban life as it is not only the bonds and ties with relatives and neighbours that are a cornerstone of daily existence but also deep spiritual ties with ancestors and deities. The involvement of rural women in community life including, ceremonies, rituals, offerings, and other village events is one of the key measures of their worth and their gendered role. At the centre of this traditional gender role is the belief that because they are mothers, they are innately caring and submissive (e.g., selfless). In this section I will focus on how women workers began to perform their community role in festivals and events differently. Moving from invisible to visible work marked a change in the division of domestic work and disrupted traditional

hierarchical relationships inside the family, but it also created changes in community life that reflected the women's increased income, time, desires, and agency.

For rural people, the communal house (đình) and pagoda (chùa) are key public spaces and images of communal houses, banyan trees and water wharfs have always been common village symbols. In particular, the communal house is not only valuable in terms of history and architecture but is also a place to gather and connect the community. In feudal regime the đình was the centre of male-dominated power and the place where the hierarchy of village society was ritually reproduced. During the socialist regime, "the đình became a major target of socialist ritual reform aimed at building a new egalitarian and just society" (Endres, 2001, p. 70). The đình serves two main purposes. Firstly, it plays a role as the religious centre for worshipping the village tutelary god who invented and developed the village. Secondly, it is a cultural centre, that is used to organize the village cultural festivals and activities such as wrestling, chess, traditional singing, and dancing on holidays such as New Year celebrations or when the field work is over (Bui, 2021). Traditional activities associated with spiritual life, religious beliefs, rituals, customs, communication, and social cohesion of rural people are performed in the annual village festivals (*hội làng*). These festivals are a systematic cultural activity, covering almost all different aspects of human social life. If activities inside family are understood as private and small, festivals at the communal house can be seen as a full picture of the village organization. Life seems quiet in villages; festivals also offer opportunities for all villagers and people from other communities to come together. This culture has greatly affected the life of rural people, especially women whose role is both symbolic and practical. For many women, religion provides both a sense of community, and an explanation for the problems faced in daily life (Kato & Luong, 2016). As said in Chapter 2, women's participation in these festivals plays a very important role in connecting the temporary earthly world and the spiritual world to bring well-being to all other members in their family.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, traditionally, women are in a subordinate position, tending to and servicing other members of their family. When they participate in community events, this subordinate position continues. "*Nam trọng nữ khinh, nam ngoại nữ nội*" translates as "value men above women, men belong outside, women belong to inside". Men's contribution to community events involves visible 'front of stage' work such as decorating and organizing the party. Women's role

involves chores such as cooking, preparing trays of food, cleaning and washing—all considered relatively insignificant work, which occurs out of sight and is expected. As O'Harrow (2021) has observed, women are considered "furniture on the stage rather than actors. Their function is to obey and to show proper (i.e., obedient) behaviour in word and deed, through chastity and submissiveness" (p.162, 163). In Northern Vietnam village festivals, it has also generally been women who prepared "elaborate offerings" for the guardian deity (Endres 2001, p. 76). Huệ recalled her experience of working behind the scenes:

> Each year we have many festivals and events in community. My husband and I both help and participate in preparations. He is a member of the organizing committee who arranges tasks for others, and I am responsible for cleaning, washing dishes and so on. I usually serve for at least two days in each event.

Mothering women are particularly invisible in terms of their contribution—which is huge. In addition to being saddled with domestic work at community events for days, they must also ensure the home and family are also taken care of before and after events. Lê said:

> Community festivals normally take place after harvesting season, I mean after we complete planting or harvesting rice or corn. I have more free time, so I can run back and forth between my house and the communal house. For example, in the daytime, I help to prepare for parties, such as chopping vegetables, washing dishes, and preparing the tables. I am familiar with that type of work. And in the evening, I watch traditional folk singing and dancing.

With the introduction of factory work, the domestic role these women used to play in festivals is being left for older people in the village, or a small business from another village must be hired. Hồng observed:

> When preparing ritual offerings such as a tray with food and cakes, we work together and have fun. It shows our sincere heart (*thành tâm*) and the contribution of each individual to our gods as well as community. However, our work is far less productive than people hired to do it.

The factory has created the opportunity for women to play a new role whilst participating in community festivals. The women who participated in my research were no longer in a default position in the kitchen or 'back-stage'. They could be found confidently sitting at the same party table with other guests and men. Their scale of socialization had expanded; they were no longer isolated with other women in the village with the same background but had begun to confidently associate with people from all walks of life. Bưởi said:

> I wear formal dress to attend the festivals in the early morning. If there were parties, I will sit at the food table with other guests which I did not dare before as I was afraid I had nothing to say. Moreover, I have a reason for not serving in the events because I have to go to work in factory on time.

The women noted that their contributions to events were valued differently. Whereas in the past, women's support had been measured by how much manual work they did, it was now measured through their donation of money, giving presents or other property. Women found that they were recorded as benefactors as they now belonged to a specific institution—-the garment factory—and were garnering more respect. For example, Lê said:

> In the past, only the rich donated money or assets on the anniversary of the death of the tutelary god of my village. Now I have capacity to donate some money. My name is recorded in the list under the form 'chị Nguyễn Thị Lê, Công ty may ATEX' meaning: 'Mrs Nguyen Thi Le, ATEX garment factory'. I think I am more valuable.

This is supported by Endres's (2001) research in rural Northern Vietnam:

> A person who donates a large sum is regarded as a person with a lot of tam – a 'virtue of the heart', which, if expressed through generosity, entails esteem and prestige. The tam of the individual donor can be gathered from stone tablets containing his or her name and the amount of money donated (p. 92).

However, some women in my study still kept to the traditional norms when engaging in local events, as they were familiar and did not totally want to change the

way they participated. In Vietnam "a good woman" is believed to be a hard working one who is always busy and industrious. Over the years, the expectations of women and their characteristics have been affected by globalisation. But gender roles are also deeply rooted in spiritual and religious tradition. Butler's (1990; 1993) notion of "constrained agency" is particularly pertinent here as many women will feel uncomfortable completely abandoning these duties because of their sacred nature. For many, these gendered activities are intertwined with pleasure and habit, and associated with their daily life. Mai said, 'When participating in community festivals, I prefer serving others. I am familiar with that type of work. I cannot attend and just do nothing'. Similarly, Mơ commented, 'Serving in the kitchen belongs to women, doing nothing is boring and I feel shame. Festivals are mostly organized on Sunday, and I am free on those days'

Others still struggled with how they could balance their role—and different aspects of their identity and sense of belonging in a public place. On one hand the women belonged to worker class who is thought to have higher status, on the other hand, they wanted to keep their emotional connection to the event as peasants. Ritual festivals are considered spiritual food, so in order to keep the balance, the women wanted to serve at local events like their mother and grandmother had done. Cúc said:

> Although I do not have much time, when participating I must do something like preparing things for those events. It is a way to maintain cultural values and also bring luck, well-being for me and my family members, I think.

Some participants found it hard to perform gendered roles differently—afraid of judgement from other villagers, especially older generations, who still maintained Confucian standards when evaluating women's dignity. Cam commented:

> When going out or participating outside events in community. If I do not follow traditional ways I may be judged as not hardworking, not enthusiastic, not sociable. Almost everyone in the village knows each other's, so village life is quite complex.

However, some women seemed to be able to find a balance between the new and the old. They considered their involvement in the local festivals a way to relax, enrich their

soul and strengthen emotional connections with relatives, neighbours, and community. Mai said:

> Helping too much in those events is tiring but working here occupies much of my time. I prefer having two days off work per week so I can participate more in community events. Emotion cannot be bought by money, but without money we meet difficulty in life.

The feeling of being more respected in public space was a strong theme in the women's accounts. In particular they felt respected in conversations with neighbours, or shopping locally. Mận commented: and Bưởi confidently shared their cases:

> In the past, when my neighbours visited my house or I saw them outside, they said nothing. But now, when we meet, they actively ask, 'How are you? How is your work?' So, we have many things to talk about. We share stories are more openly.
>
> The shop owners introduce me to more items and guide me more enthusiastically when I come to their shops to have a look, as they know I may have money.

Festivals are places where people in the communities gather and those who live far away return to their hometowns for—they are central to the life of a community. Factory work has changed the way the women in my research appear and participate in local festivals and ceremonies. Their role has shifted from servers to guests, from informal to formal types of participation, from a low to a higher position. These women are negotiating a more equal role in society; local events now not only help them strengthen their emotional health and relationship with others but also bring them status. The women in my research were able to donate money to religious events at the communal house and, which also earned them more respect and a higher social status. The woman took a great deal of pride in this, the result of their hard work.

In brief, the process of change happened 'naturally' and gradually for these women as they moved from "inside" to "outside". Their bodies had been out of sight doing 'invisible work,' looking like each other in their paddy field uniforms of dark garments and hats as they sustained their family and community. However, factory work provides new understandings of self through others, and renders respect and

authority via doing 'important' and visible work outside the home. Over time the working environment motivated these rural women to change, and they became conscious of their improved status. The factory work provided them with opportunities to understand and perform themselves in ways that they desired; ways that had been unavailable to previous generations. As Butler (1993) argued: "historical, cultural, national, religious, economic, political and generic – determine or inflect the way the body is understood, the meanings that are associated with it, and the narratives and values that come to inhabit it" (cited in Brady & Schirato, 2010, p. 4). For the women in my research, this initial step of change; represented via the women's bodies—their modes of expression, actions and visibility —began to create new ways of doing gender in their village.

However, this change differs from changes to emerging middle classes in urban areas. The change experienced by the women who participated in my research was strongly impacted by local, traditional norms and values as the saying goes, "*Nhập gia tùy tục*"— "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". There was also the overarching influence of the state's principal of "*Hòa nhập nhưng không hòa tan*"— "Preserve identity and core values in the integration process". I have demonstrated in this chapter how the women have moved from invisible to more visible performances of gender – from the inside (domestic) world to that of the outside or public. Status and identity are written onto their bodies through the way they, dress, make up, perform, and even engage in 'risky' places that traditionally belonged to men. Further, the hierarchy in social, public space has been significantly narrowed, and is one in which both women and men are actors. New ways of doing gender can be seen. Although these new ways are under constraint, this is how social change takes place, through repetition of actions and expression which are considered subversive, but which over time become integrated into culture. As Butler (1988) has argued:

> Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure (p. 531).

These rural women workers can be viewed as having successfully combined new freedoms, tangible pleasure and status with aspects of their traditional gender roles in

order to retain dignity. These changes may potentially bring even more significant changes for the women's daughters' generation.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The garment industry has always been considered a key aspect of the economic development of countries in the global South, especially for women. Job creation in this sector has been particularly strong for women in who previously had no income opportunities other than the household or the informal sector (Keane & te Velde, 2008; Nordås, 2004; Tran, 2012). Whereas in the past, factories were all located in big cities or in industrial zones and the workforce were mostly young migrant workers, more recently a number of factories have relocated from the cities to the countryside. Rural areas in Vietnam are changing rapidly as manufacturing enterprises expand and spring up. This is considered an inevitable consequence of globalization as well as Vietnam's development goals following the Đổi Mới economic renovation.

This has led to the emergence of a new class of worker—rural women who are older than 25 and have children. These women can be seen in their hundreds on the way to or from the many factories that have come to form part of this new landscape. They include women who have come back from large cities and also "left-behind" mothers who have never migrated from their villages. This changing environment is a visible manifestation of the social and cultural changes taking place in Vietnam, as even rural area starts to integrate with the global economy and move towards modernisation. This movement has been framed as a win-win-win strategy for rural women, industry, and the state, bringing employment for women in their home place and an available workforce for factories. This current study sought to explore the dramatic implications for these women, as well as their communities more broadly, as women take up factory work. I set out to explore the following central research question:

- How does the establishment of factory work in rural Vietnam change women's working lives and what are the social implications of these changes?

  And the following sub-questions:

  •How does the growth of garment factories in rural Vietnam change the gendered division of labour?

  •What are women's experiences of undertaking this work?

  •How have women's changing roles and identities created social and cultural change in the community?

Overview

The movement of women into new factories challenges gender norms and women in their new roles as paid visible workers are then challenging gender identities in all areas of their lives—in both the private and public spheres. This study focused on exploring the social changes on the lives of mothering rural women, and potential changes on women in these areas more broadly through the division of labour in family, gender roles, empowerment, relationships, and identity. The thesis also aimed to investigate how these women negotiate their new factory worker role with their traditional role of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. This transition is examined throughout the thesis. Chapter 2 sets the context for this examination, through a discussion of how rural mothering women have previously had little opportunity to participate in paid work due to the constraints of traditional gender roles, and lack of work opportunities in countryside. The work these women have historically undertaken in family agriculture is informal and invisible, despite its importance. As in the case of other developing countries in the region, in Vietnam, the first stage of globalization has created a big wave of migration, especially in the garment and textile industry which is considered a feminized industry (ILO, 2018). From the early 1990s young rural women migrated to big cities, where they participated in factory work. This was precarious work with poor working conditions, long working hours and exploitation (Campaign, 2005; Ngai, 2005). Then in the next stage of globalization in the mid-2010s, the subcontracting system relocated to rural areas for the first time. This satisfied the need of both state and local government for economic development, and it meant rural women could engage in paid without leaving their communities.

In order to develop a nuanced understanding of rural Vietnamese women's experiences of being rural factory workers and how their social lives changed in comparison with previous rural women generations I employed an ethnographic approach. As discussed in Chapter 4, I spent nearly three months in both community and factory settings observing the life and work of these women workers. Fieldwork and participant observation and semi-structured interviews provided a well-rounded picture of the research setting. I drew on feminist approaches to gender, Butler's (1988; 1990; 1993; 2004) concepts of performativity and identity, Kabeer's (1999) Empowerment Framework to examine how women's employment in the formal sector

creates social change. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve women who worked in a rural garment factory, and I conducted an ethnographically based study in the village where these women lived. In this research I occupied both "insider" and "outsider," positions. As someone who was born and grew up in this community, I have a deep understanding of the cultural milieu, having been socialised in a town similar to the one in my study. In taking up the role of the researcher, I was also positioned as an outsider, mobilising theoretical and methodological tools to understand. I used thematic analysis to identify emerging issues that rural women workers have experienced and challenged as well as negotiated in their family and community life.

The findings of this study, which are presented in Chapters 5 to Chapter 8, show that the entry of rural women into factory work brings fundamental changes in gender relations. In Chapter 5 it was demonstrated how the factory adapted to suit the needs of women with children, and thus a new workforce was formed. Having a wage-earning job in their own village allowed women to continue with gendered roles in a way which was not available to women who migrated for work. At the same time these jobs also allowed women to challenge the culturally ascribed gender roles. Earning a wage gave the women a status which meant that they were in a better position to negotiate their role in their families and communities.

In Chapter 6 it was demonstrated that women's gendered roles in their households changed as a result of their participation in factory work. There was a rearrangement in the division of domestic work, including in the family paddy farm. When the women moved into formal work, they had less time for domestic work, and this caused a shift in the distribution of domestic work. This challenged traditional relationships and dynamics, including raising family expectations of men's contribution to domestic work.

Chapter 7 showed that the changing the division of labour in family also meant the rearrangement of the traditional hierarchical structure in family, creating spaces for women's empowerment. Many women gained a stronger sense of authority, and as they gained their own financial resources this led to more say in how family finances were allocated. For some women, changes in the household included changes in their relationship with their mothers-in-laws. In this relationship the mothers-in-laws holds significant power and many women spoke of ways this was reduced, such as their mother-in-law performing more domestic duties, or offering support.

Chapter 8 highlighted changes that occurred outside the home. Wage-earning work altered the women's identities, roles, and status in community. Women refashioned themselves and changed how they acted in the public space; for example, some engaged in leisure activities that traditionally are dominated by men. During ritual events in public spaces, women engaged differently than they had previously—taking on a more dynamic role with new confidence. In community life generally the women became far more active, visible performers. This can seen as an important step towards narrowing the gender role gap between women and men in public spaces.

The following sections will explore and discuss the impacts of factory work on women; specifically, what it means in regard to loss and gain for gender roles, status and identities, as well as the possible impact on the next generation. This discussion will also explore the sociocultural tensions that imbue this period of rapid community change in the context of rural garment factories. The discussion of change is based on the empowerment process, which is used to explain that as women have traditionally occupied a subordinate position, they lacked opportunities to negotiate their role, however with a formal job and income, they were able to gain greater authority. This evidenced through the ability to make decisions, perform different identities and negotiate roles and choices in their family and community. For Kabeer (1999), as stated in Chapter 3, the process of gaining life choices has three inter-related dimensions: "resources", "agency", or the ability to define one's goals and act upon them, and "achievements".

Section 1: Approaching resources and not helpless victims of capitalism

Some feminist scholars, including third world feminist scholars, argue that women in the Global South are victims of capitalism. Approached from a feminist perspective, the increase in the number of women employed in factories is a strategy to obtain cheap labour and keep workers unorganized (Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Mezzadri, 2016; Ngai, 2005; Schoen, 2019). This has been described as capitalism combining with patriarchy to control women (Bruneau, 2018). Feminist scholars also argued that globalization leads to a deterioration in women's rights. Women still hold the lowest position in the production line, often working in exploitative and unsafe conditions (Campaign, 2005; Prasad, 2018; Ngai, 2005). According to Tran (2019), economic structures, policies and processes shape gender relations. My study showed that these

economic changes brought about by globalization in turn brought about social and cultural change in the realm of gender. While exploitative, these changes also created spaces that the women in my study occupied to bring about positive social changes. Not all women are shaped by gender inequalities in the same way, rather gender intersects with other statuses such as ethnicity and religion (Mohanty et al., 1991). Women working in these factories face difficult working conditions and are exploited through low wages and minimal safety conditions. This type of work relies on the women creating as many products as they can in order to receive a minimal wage. At 8 pm there is still a bright electric light at the factory and the noise of the sewing machines for some hard-working women, while others take products home to complete. But this intersects with social relationships outside of the factory, making this work attractive to many women. In comparison to working in factories in cities, these women are compensated by living in their own home and community and maintaining the culture that traditionally ascribed them the role of mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. This makes their experiences different to that of rural Vietnamese women who migrate to cities to engage in factory work. The impacts of this work on gender relations in their communities is quite different for the two groups.

Despite exploitative conditions, women working in these factories are not helpless victims of global capitalism. Instead, these workers actively negotiate the factory floor, as well as use this work to re-negotiate their lives beyond the factory contexts. They compromise with capitalism in ways that satisfy and reduce the level of stress and tension in the workplace, creating a more relaxed working environment. As discussed in Chapter 5, according to the manager the workplace looks like “a market, a playground”. These rural women have negotiated many of the institutional structures and regulations, which has resulted in both increased flexibility and freedoms. For example, the workplace is more than just a shopfloor with machines, their noise, fabric—it is a social field, where women can chat and connect as they work, sometimes with their children perched on table or chair nearby. Urban factory environments in comparison are usually highly regulated and oppressive, with limited opportunities for socialising. Moving to work in the formal sphere is an initial step which helps women to affirm their value. With an elevated social status linked to financial gains their gender roles and traditional cultural norms are challenged, providing an opportunity to remake the role of women in rural contexts.

Factory work is not rural women workers' sole option, they have alternative choices of work, such as paddy farming, various forms of informal work, as well as working in other factories which are springing up in local communities. However, by working in these factories these women are actively pursuing an opportunities to enhance their level of prosperity and give their families a good life. The women's wage is lower than their counterparts in big cities and provincial industrial parks. But there is a compromise between owners and their workers that has allowed for some freedoms of working and greater comfort in their working conditions. The factory I did my research in was certainly exploitative, but factory jobs still led to increased opportunities for women due to the ways doing these jobs changed gender relations in rural villages. Workers can negotiate and compromise in order to have more freedom. While they have little say in how the factories are run the factory offers ongoing stable jobs, and currently there is no better alternative. Viewed through the lens of perspective of Kabeer's empowerment concept, this work is the most suitable "resource", the first important tool which set the foundation for women to approach not only choice in livelihood but further life choices that will be discussed in the following sections.

Section 2: Hybrid spaces and identities: what is lost and gained as women become empowered?

Factory work in rural contexts is changing gender roles. For women workers this brings about significant changes in their relations in their immediate family contexts, especially in their relationships with their husbands and their mothers-in-law. It also brings about changes in their social location and roles in the community more broadly. The result of this is significant blurring of conceptions of gender roles in the private and public spheres. Women do not necessarily advocate for full equality with men in their households or in public spaces, but there is evidence to show the changes in their traditional status and to their gendered role in the family and community has shifted as a result of their engagement in 'visible' and valuable. For many women this is their first experience of formal work, having previously worked in family agriculture. Other women have worked in the formal sphere but because this has usually been outside of their community, in factories in cities, this had a limited impact on households and communities. Factory work is visible work and visible income that is recognized as real work by society and this affects the behaviours of women factory workers, and others.

Butler's (1990) theory of gender and performativity noted that it is the sociohistorical and political contexts and cultural mechanisms through which gender moves across different locations, and it is transmitted across generations through socialisation. Butler contends that it is through small shifts in the performance of gender that result in new identities being formed. When overlayed with Kabeer's (1999) work on empowerment, this research highlights that it is the acquisition of new resources (income being the main one), but also a sense of solidarity with other women in the factory (a public homeplace of sorts) that women can begin to experience forms of individual and collective agency that generate new rural-middle-class gendered identities. Below I discuss how these played out in the research context I explored, while considering other contexts and literature.

In contrast with women in many countries in South Asia, Vietnamese women have tended to have greater mobility for work, but as is the case in other countries in South Asia domestic work is their main responsibility. Rural women have previously engaged in many forms of paid work, but almost always in the informal sector. The patriarchal village culture considers women and this work to be of low value and not real employment. Women have had no opportunities to ask for change and very little consciousness of the need for change as their role is transmitted from generation to generation. Gendered socialisation in traditional Vietnamese society has always led men and women to believe that they have very different roles to play in the family and society. Housework and childcare is considered women's responsibility while men provide for the family—it would be demeaning for them to do housework (Rydstrom, 2006). These attitudes are deeply anchored in sociocultural scripts that have been around for hundreds of years (Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, 2013; Hansen, Jensen, & Skovsgaard, 2015). Most studies, in different global contexts, suggests that women's entry into the paid workforce does not reduce women's domestic work significantly (see Bari, 1991; Kan & Laurie, 2018; Tilly & Scott, 2016; Westwood, 1985). However, there have been some studies that suggest women employed in the formal workforce spend a reduced amount of time on domestic work with their husbands performing a greater proportion of routine housework (see Berk, 2012; Sayer, 2005; Shelton, 1990).

Almost all of the participants in this study said that their domestic work reduced significantly as they received help from other members, especially husbands and mothers-in-laws. For example, some said their husband ceased their habit of watching

TV while their wives cooking dinner, and some went market shopping and made dinner for their family when their wives were working. What had been seen as women's chores were now seen as being acceptable and reasonable for men to do while their wives were at the factory. For women, who lived in extended families (with parents-in-law), household chore help mostly came from their mother-in-law, who acknowledged their daughters-in-law's factory work as a real job with a real income.

These changes were not just about labour but signalled an ideological shift which brought changes in the distribution of decision making with regards to money, and emotional labour in the household and community. Some of the women workers in this study gained significant authority in family through their visible finance contribution and they were able to have a far greater say in decision making around the spending of family income. As Kabeer (1994) demonstrated, access to waged work for women can be a way to increase their bargaining power within the household, especially when they have autonomous control over their income. Women's work is no longer considered "small work" or "inside work" associated with low income-levels, and lack of recognized professionalism. Many women factory workers in this study gained power in the negotiation of household chores, especially, with mothers-in-law. The relationship between women and their mothers-in-law is considered the most fraught relationship in the family, as the mother-in-law is viewed as having the higher authority. Waged work offers women the opportunity to gain a greater awareness of their position in family and mothers-in-laws benefit from their daughter in law's income. Factory work provides these rural women the conditions to question the traditional norms that are ascribed to them as part of the roles of daughter-in-law, wife, and mother, as well as their position in their husband's family. With factory work, they have a higher status, and their voices are heard.

Outside the family, women have increasingly been able to refashion themselves and their roles in community life as their work becomes more visible and their status shifts. That has resulted in changes in the way some women participate in local events and engage in all outside activities. They are no longer being afraid of others asking them who they are and what do they do for a job. In the past, women in rural Vietnam have generally been socially invisible to relatives and other villagers during community activities because men have occupied the role as head of households and kinship structures. Women were at home and out of sight, their place was not in the public

realm, and they didn't have peer networks. Silence was always part of this invisibility across both realms— it was an expected part of the four virtues and women's voices were not noticed or valued by villagers. Women served in community events as part of a group without individual agency. However, as factory workers with an independent income, the women have gained confidence. Some women move out in the front and play a role of hostess who guides and introduces guests in these events, they confidently communicate with these guests instead of isolating with other women behind the stage. The way they participate alongside relatives at local events may not change, for example, some women still prefer doing stuff in that events in the rear, but they also feel self-confident to communicate with others and speak out what they desire. They have feeling of more valuable and meaningful to life and community, even breaking the norm by occupying leisure activities – risky places that traditionally dominated by men, all that helps to narrow the hierarchy community structure where women -the inferior position is ascribed from inside family and brought to outside world. And even in the women world, the gap between women is narrowed, these rural women might not feeling shamed when seeing strangers women who they think have higher status, turning back to my own story, I witnessed my village friends at my age isolated when I visited my village, they might saw me far from and turn their head assuming not seeing me, they were afraid I will ask what they did, how about their life and so on, but these women in my research are more confident to share their stories with me-the stranger, outsider, and also observed the way they deal with visitors in local events. I have explored that, thank to this job, rural women become more confident, living in more freedom and confidently answer whilst being asked "who you are".

Drawing on Kabeer, it is clear to see that once these new resources are acquired, including self-confidence, peer networks and new freedoms within the home and beyond that empowerment creates new performances and new subjectivities that threaten to unravel centuries-strong gender structures and roles. However, there are many other things to consider as empowerment comes at a cost for women who are caught up in social transformation.

However, gender roles and identities cannot transform overnight—the patriarchy only makes room for certain kinds of new performances or is so deeply ingrained that performances are near impossible to let go of. Butler's (1990; 1993) concept of constrained agency, is relevant to the experience of the participants in my research—

while old gendered scripts are replaced with new gendered scripts, in actuality the new scripts often reflect much of the same power dynamics of patriarchal relations and discourses. Whilst it is clear that the everyday lives of women in my research are significantly different due to factory work, they are not limited by gender roles and there is an ongoing social and psychological tension connected with their experiences of empowerment. Women are trapped in a change process under patriarchal constraints—they feeling afraid of the judging gaze of fellow villagers, if their expressions of agency appear too subversive. They are also reluctant to completely to give up many traditional duties and ways of being because those performances of gender have been what makes them respectable women. Being 'respectable' can also seen as a source of power, remaining 'true' to tradition when others are 'acting out'. Whilst most of the factory women are satisfied with their new status, others were ambivalent about aspects of it. Some said that they did not want to share particular domestic tasks. Some tasks appeared to be central to their gender identity and a source of power and dignity in the family. Some women felt regretful that they had lost relationships with relatives due to factory work. Relationships with relatives and neighbours are crucial elements of rural life, however when women participate in factory work, the time they can spend supporting relatives and neighbours is reduced significantly. Some women also had a feeling of being isolated from other aspects of their community. The benchmark that they had once used to measure their contribution to relationships, was the amount of manual activities they performed to help relatives and neighbours, but this contribution is now financial. From the perspective of some, this change has directly and indirectly affected the love and neighbourliness of the village.

These challenges and negotiations of old and new see a new femininity emerge, a hybrid between modern and traditional, between western styles anchored in individualism and Asian styles closely tied to collectivism, but still one that abides by capitalistic and paternalistic notions of femininity. Women may be adopting new performances of gender, but these performances are *still* rigid and oppressive to some degree, as they are based on a femininity which Nguyen-Vo (2006) has pointed out as being characterised by a fashioning of the self that is normalised and encouraged by media saturated and consumer cultures. Similarly, we must also consider what is lost through this empowerment and new individualist modes of femininity tied to economic power. In this research it becomes clear that as change takes place we cannot ignore

how “capitalism shapes our relationships with others, our sense of ourselves and our capacities, practices, and actions in the material world” (Cole & Ferrarese, 2018, p. 105). A sense of community, collective care and even spiritual depth can be lost, at least in the short term, as domestic and community roles previously held by women are no longer being fulfilled. At this point of change and for men and women at their life point of middle age, it is unlikely, due to the ways in which masculinity is defined and socialised, that men will be equipped or willing to take on some of these roles.

Section 3: Gender in transition

These women's involvement in waged work has made them increasingly aware of the gender roles which ascribe to them a subordinate role in the family, and their work to one of invisibility within the private sphere of domestic work and family agriculture. The experience of change in their role has given these women a vantage to question their relations with men. While this change may be incremental, awareness of inequalities is the first condition for any meaningful process of change. The identity of most of the women I interviewed was still tied to the traditional gendered scripts of mothers and wives, but they tried to negotiate and modify the gendered scripts in ways that benefitted them. These women reflected relatively critically on the patriarchal attitudes, authority and division of labour within their households; they actively questioned the longstanding hierarchies. These women entered the formal workforce to improve the economic status of their households and to reduce their reliance on the life of small-scale farming and low-value agriculture (Chau, 2018). But the impact of this work has been more than economic. As well as an independent source of income the social aspect has given women a chance to interact and share experiences with other women outside of their household. It is not surprising that most of the women felt that working in the factory led to them having a greater say in household decision making and more independence.

There are multiple ways in which women become aware of gender inequalities and it is suggested here that factory work is perhaps more successful than other ways that have been tried. For example, the Vietnamese communist party legislated for gender equity through the 1986 Law and Marriage Act (Vietnam Communist Party, 1986). This states that within a family a couple has a joint responsibility for household chores and childcare. Yet gendered scripts persist, and invisible domestic labour falls

squarely on the shoulders of women. Studies in Vietnam have shown that women tend to be mainly responsible for domestic work regardless of age, suggesting few changes in the gender division of household labour (Binh, Khieu, & Van, 2002; Phinney, 2008; Werner, 2009). In rural areas, Knodel, Loi, Jayakody, and Huy (2005) asserted that gendered ideologies and scripts even more persistent and rigid being more conservative and tradition in attitudes towards doing or dividing domestic labour. As Scott and Chuyen (2007) stated, there appears to be a sense of ambiguity among development agencies around what gender equality means in practice within the Vietnamese context. The interventions of state government are based around women's basic needs in areas of their traditional roles, and do not address equality per se nor do they address longer term strategic needs leading to change in gender relations (Scott & Chuyen, 2007). For example, previous projects only focused on loaning women money to set up or start businesses, such as planting vegetables, breeding livestock, setting up home-based grocery stall and so on. These are temporary and not stable solutions as the loans were not accessible to all rural women for a variety of reasons and there was no guarantee that any business funded by the loan would become a sustainable livelihood. Also as these small businesses were run by individuals or small groups they did not have a significant impact on gender norms that constrain gender equality. Factory work is stable work that brings women together. Their work is visible and their income also visible, which brings them status and empowerment in family and community. Kabeer et al. (2013) argued, however, that paid work alone does not promote gender equality, unless patterns of growth generate reasonable quality jobs for women. Therefore, we must consider the form of paid work, the conditions and how it is organised when aiming to empower women and narrowing the gender gap.

The process of change is taking place, and “achievement” (Kabeer, 1999) is the last step after women obtain resources and agency—meaning that women have the freedom to do what they want and desire. The women in my research have not reached the last step as factory work is still exploitative, and some are also still finding a balance between being a modern woman and embodying the traditional dignity of a ‘good woman’. However, the women can be seen as being ‘on track’ to achievement. This research has demonstrated that women have gained more space in society and inequality between men and women has decreased as women gain more agency and visibility. Although Kabeer’s approach is particularly useful for conceptualising women’s

empowerment, she was not clear on the place of collective action. The factory work in this research presents nascent opportunities for collective action as it is situated in the women's home place. This means not only does the women's new status impact on their families and alter traditional gender roles in their homes, it also impacts on their community and an emergent working class is formed.

Looking to the future, perhaps what is most significant about factory work is the foundation for these women to ask for more equality for their daughters' generation. Having an awareness of gender inequality, the process of change is not limited to changing their working lives but also improves the situation—both financially and socially—for their daughter's generation. Many of these women were specifically saving money for the education of their daughters and had aspirations for their daughter's future employment. Many of these women had not engaged in high school education, because of the traditional norms of daughters belonging to their future husbands' families, and therefore being of no economic value. This type of thinking meant that disadvantage and gender inequality has been a repeated cycle for, the rural women. Thanks to factory work, these women are likely to be a transitional generation who have a voice in deciding how to invest in their daughters' education and future employment prospects. Waged rural women's consciousness of gender inequalities at both ideological and practical levels in the family does not eliminate their subordination in the family, but importantly these women do challenge existing gender relations in rural households and communities in Vietnam.

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