

Gender and Remittances Across the Mekong Subregion

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Abstract

This paper draws upon qualitative data collected in 2016 to evaluate the influence of gender upon decision-making processes regarding migration and the utilization of remittances within the context of the Mekong subregion. The study analyzes the perspectives of migrant family members from their country of origin (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar) and their destination country (Thailand). By illustrating the underlying reasons and motivations on migration, and sending/receiving/utilizing remittances, the findings provide insights on the role of gender in the decision making process for migrants and their families.

Keywords: gender, migration, remittance utilization, Mekong Subregion

Introduction

In the migration process, families' decisions on whether a son, husband, daughter, or wife should migrate, and when this should occur are shaped by gender systems within a society, and gender organization within families and other social institutions (Cooke, 2008). Gender roles, or men's and women's socially-assigned expectations for their position

within social institutions, such as the family or workplace, further structure a family's decision about a member's migration behavior (Lindsey, 1997). Yet, decision-making within a family about migration behavior is complex, reflecting the preferences, interests, and power of each member, i.e. parents, children, and extended relatives. The would-be migrant is of course also involved in the decision. The gender and gender status of the family members and would-be migrants inform decisions about who migrates, and when, where, and how the migration takes place. At the destination, gender systems shape the labor market opportunities for migrants, the amount of remittance one is expected to send to the family back home, and the duration of time between arrival at the destination and the first remuneration (Freire, 2011). Social constructions governed by gender influence not only include the earning power of male and female migrants (and consequently their personal spending behaviors), but also the remittance spending patterns of recipients in the origin household (Lopez-Ekra et al., 2011).

Remittances are integral to migration. Although a precise amount of remittance earnings is difficult to determine, it is estimated that in 2019, remittances transferred by labor migrants within developed and developing countries to developing countries accounted for about \$554 billion (World Bank, 2020). A vast body of research has been conducted on the intersection of migration, remittances, and gender (i.e. Crush, 2008; Freire, 2011; Le Goff, 2016). These studies suggest that remittances earned by males and females depend on many factors, including cultural background as well as the locations from and to the remittances are earned and sent.

While women have constituted a sizable share of international migrants since the 1960s, they have increasingly become independent in their migrations, seeking employment opportunities abroad often ahead of or separate from male family members (Castles et al., 2014). Female migrants from the Mekong subregion, including Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are no exception to this global trend. It is estimated that about 45% of migrants in this region are females (Curry, 2014). Across the region, a sizable number of young women

from these three countries migrate abroad, both within and outside the region, to join international labor markets (Piper and Yamanaka, 2005). Unfortunately, studies that focus on the benefit of remittances to the family and community in the Mekong subregion are relatively rare (Phalleap, 2018). However, existing studies suggest that remittances sent by females to their homes in the subregion can help to ensure left-behind family members are cared for and supported financially, specifically in the area of farm production (Kelly, 2011).

Thailand has become a key destination for migrant workers within the region, as favorable wages, which began to emerge in the late 1980s, came to distinguish the Thai economy from its neighbors, attracting nearly four million migrants to Thailand from neighboring Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar (Harkins, 2019). Several previous studies (e.g. Deelen and Vasuprasat, 2010; Jampaklay and Kitisuksathit, 2009; Maltoni, 2010) relate remittances to gender in the migration flows from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar to Thailand. However, existing studies have rarely investigated the influence of gender roles within their families of origin on migration decisions, financial behavior, and remittance utilization. This limits our understanding of the complex relationship between migration, gender, and labor earnings in the context of the Mekong subregion. By exploring gender in relation to these segments of the migrant remittance process, this qualitative study enhances our understanding of the meaning and significance of women's migration as it relates to family relations and economy. As a result, by revealing women as pivotal actors in the migration and remittance theater, we arrive at a more gender-equitable portrayal of female migrants, now perceived as critical "breadwinners" for both their families and the local economy.

Gender Roles in the Migration and Remittances Process

Past research reveals that decision-making related to migration and remittances often follows closely established gender roles within families. Hoang (2009), for example, noted that within the Vietnamese context, married males can easily decide to migrate because wives are

pressured to remain in the traditional position of home-bound mother and wife. In addition, families are often concerned for a woman's safety if she works abroad. When comparing married and single females, single women are more likely to migrate than their married counterparts. This is because single women are less obliged to take on the traditional woman's role compared to married women. In the Asian context, a woman's migration generally tends to be accepted if it is viewed as directed toward enhancing the family's well-being (Yeoh et al, 2002).

Gender differences in remittance behavior are shaped by the migrant's capacity to remit, which in turn is influenced by the gender structure of labor markets at the destination (Freire, 2011). In the case of Thailand, while male migrants from neighboring Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar predominate in the relatively well-compensated construction, farming, animal husbandry, and service sectors, female migrants predominate in the domestic helper sector, which offers less remuneration (Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2020). This gender pattern of wages affects the amount a migrant can remit and, at least with respect to wage income, enables migrants to potentially remit more funds to their family household compared to their female counterparts (Carling, 2005).

Many scholars have queried the means whereby gender influences remittance behavior. Even though male migrants usually earn higher wages than females, past studies consistently find that women tend to remit a higher proportion of their earnings relative to men (i.e. De la Brière et al., 2002; Le Goff, 2016; Ribas, 2008). This has been interpreted as a function of women's deeper sense of obligation and willingness to sacrifice to improve her family's quality of life. Yet the findings are not conclusive, and they vary across contexts. In South Africa, daughters have been observed to remit less than other groups of migrants, a pattern which researchers suggest may result from women's lower wages relative to their male counterparts (Crush, 2008). Therefore, the complex web of relationships that links gender differences to earning, gender-socialized obligations to the family, and remittance behavior remains uncertain.

The receipt and consumption of remittance monies are also informed by the gender of both the sender and recipient. Women are usually major remittance receivers who manage the family's funds (Petrozziello and Robert, 2010). According to previous studies (i.e. Erdal, 2012; Gulati, 1993), remittances sent from a migrant husband to his wife back home tend to be used to help improve the family's economic situation. When male migrants send their earnings to other family members, such as their mothers, the money will often be distributed to other relatives outside of the household. These patterns suggest that women who are left behind will have the full power to manage remittances from husbands and sons, except when subordinate to other family members, such as in-laws.

Methodology

The mobility of migrant workers relates two geographical areas: place of origin and place of destination. To understand the context of migration, it is necessary to study phenomena from both. This research is designed to investigate the influence of gender throughout the migration process. Therefore, a multi-site methodology (King, 2018) is appropriate for this study. Multi-sited migration analysis is part of multi-sited ethnography (MSE), and the methodology was proposed by Marcus in 1995. The approach requires ethnographic fieldwork at more than one site in order to understand contextual binding between multiple sites together (Boccagni, 2019).

This research was conducted in 2016 across Thailand (i.e. the migrant's destination country), and in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (i.e. the migrant's country of origin). In order to understand the whole picture of gender and remittances across the Mekong subregion through a qualitative approach, we obtained data from two types of participants. The first type of participant comprises migrants from the three aforementioned countries who worked in Thailand at the time of the survey. They were interviewed to understand their gender roles in the family and their behavior with financial remuneration. Secondly, migrant households in each country of origin were surveyed to

understand their perspectives of the influence on the family via monetary remittances from migrants.

First, we conducted in-depth interviews with 17 migrants from the three countries of origin who at the time of the interview resided in Thailand, in particular Bangkok and the vicinity. Respondents recruited for the study were aged 15 years or older, had been residing in Thailand for at least two years prior to the interview, and had family members in their home village to whom they had sent remittances over the two years prior to the interview. The recruitment of these migrant respondents, as the starting point, was conducted using already-established personal contacts of the researchers together with the employers, migrant workers, and their networks. A 'snowball' technique was then used to recruit additional respondents. General characteristics of the migrant respondents who lived in Bangkok and vicinity are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 General characteristics of informants in Thailand

Informant*	Country	Age	Marital status	Job in Thailand	Average income per month (baht)	Remittance behavior		
						Frequency (Time)	Amount	
Min (baht)	Max (baht)							
Female								
1. Chann	Cambodia	24	Single	Seller	12,000	Monthly	2,000	2,000
2. Kornsawahn	Lao PDR	34	Single	Seller	9,000	Monthly	1,000	2,000
3. Nang	Lao PDR	20	Single	Domestic helper	9,000	Monthly	8,000	8,000
4. Mala	Myanmar	23	Single	Domestic helper	10,000	On convenience	-	40,000
5. Sinuon	Cambodia	36	Married	Laborer	15,000	Monthly	10,000	10,000
6. Vongmany	Lao PDR	28	Married	Seller	9,000	Monthly	4,000	4,000
7. Aye Aye	Myanmar	28	Married	Gardener	7,800	Monthly	3,000	3,000
Male								
8. Hongkam	Lao PDR	30	Single	Mechanic	10,000	On request	3,000	10,000
9. Thongchan	Lao PDR	19	Single	Restaurant	9,000	Bi-monthly	5,000	6,000
10. Zeyar	Myanmar	22	Single	Cook	10,000	Monthly	-	-
11. Kyaw Win	Myanmar	19	Single	Factory	9,000	On request	6,000	6,000
12. Arun	Cambodia	38	Married	Laborer in a warehouse	8,000	Monthly	6,000	7,000
13. Samay	Cambodia	29	Married	Cleaner	9,000	Monthly	4,000	4,000
14. Chea	Cambodia	35	Married	Seller	10,500	Bi-weekly	2,000	4,000
15. Thiha	Myanmar	40	Married	Factory worker	14,000	Once/2-3 months	Based on income	Based on income
16. Kiri	Cambodia	32	Divorced	Seller	12,000	Bi-weekly	2,000	4,000
17. Kambai	Lao PDR	29	Divorced	Factory worker	13,000	When convenient	4,000	8,000

* The names of the research participants are pseudonyms.

The second set of respondents included 16 informants from 16 migrant households in the aforementioned three countries of origin. For each of these, we purposely selected one village with a high rate of migration to Thailand. Our selections were based on the recommendations of our co-investigators in each country. Respondents were selected from households in three selected villages. Households were selected according to whether they had at least one family member who was currently working in Thailand at the time of the interview and remitted cash to the family sometime during the two years prior to the interview. The households selected for interview in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar were not the same households of the migrants interviewed in Thailand. General characteristics of respondents interviewed in the countries of origin are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 General characteristics of respondents in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar

Informant*	Country	Age	Marital status	Remittances receiver	Financial dependency
Female					
1. Leakena	Cambodia	72	Widowed	Mother	Waiting for money from Thailand to help cover daily living expenses and for hired labor in the rice field
2. Bopha	Cambodia	48	Widowed	Mother	The mother could earn money to cover daily expenses of the household; the remittances were mostly used to invest in the family occupation
3. Thonglavahn	Lao PDR	80	Married	Mother	The mother did not depend on remittances from her daughter because she could earn some money by herself, and the rest of her children took care of her
4. Jansorn	Lao PDR	50	Married	Mother	The family was still able to earn money to cover daily living expenses
5. Khin Khin	Myanmar	65	Married	Mother	The family depended heavily on remittances because they were no longer earning their own income
6. Hla Hla	Myanmar	52	Married	Mother	The parents were unemployed but had outstanding debt
7. Moe Moe	Myanmar	45	Married	Wife	Did not depend on remittances because the wife ran a grocery business in the village
8. Sela	Cambodia	50	Married	Mother	The family borrowed money from a microfinance company to build a new house, and they needed to repay the loan in monthly installments
9. Kanha	Cambodia	59	Married	Mother	The family depended on remittances to cover daily living expenses and support the grandchildren (i.e. the children of the adult migrants who were working in Thailand)
Male					
10. Tola	Cambodia	56	Married	Mother	The family borrowed money from a microfinance company to build a new house, and they needed to repay the loan in monthly installments
11. Mony	Cambodia	53	Married	Mother	The family borrowed money from a microfinance company to build a new house, and they needed to repay the loan in monthly installments
12. Kamphat	Lao PDR	50	Married	Father	The parents could not earn money due to health problems; remittances are the only source of income for the family
13. Thongbai	Lao PDR	58	Married	Daughter	Everyone in the family could earn money on their own; the family did not depend on remittances
14. Ponsinh	Lao PDR	67	Married	Sister	The father re-married, and his new family had their own business; he did not depend on remittances
15. Zaw Zaw	Myanmar	70	Married	Mother	The parents depended on remittances because they had stopped working
16. Aung Aung	Myanmar	54	Married	Mother	The parents depended heavily on remittances because they had no job and no rice fields

* The names of the research participants are pseudonyms.

Results and Discussion

In the Mekong subregion, patriarchal values shape relationships within the family and determine the roles of each family member. In Myanmar, patriarchal values limit female decision making in the family or society. In terms of labor relations, more males than females join in the job market. In addition, females are invariably paid less than males, despite equivalent labor skills (Gender Concerns International, 2020). In Cambodia, females are taught to defer to the authority of their husband and tend to the well-being of dependent family members. Although Cambodian females comprise about 70 per cent of the labor force, their income is lower than males, despite equivalent labor skills (Doney et al., 2019). In Lao PDR, the patriarchal culture plays a significant role, especially among ethnic minority groups. Females tend to be passive and participate less in decision-making and community activities (Asian Development Bank and The World Bank, 2012). It is believed that migration is a factor which can transform societal norms (Koshel and Yakovenko, 2020). In this section, we will discuss how the migration of females from a patriarchal society can help to improve their social status via remittances.

Gender within the Family and the Decision to Migrate

Previous research has acknowledged the role of gender in family decisions regarding migration (i.e. Wahba and Wang, 2019). Parental support for the migration of adult children is also influenced by whether the prospective migrant is a son or daughter. Data from our fieldwork support those findings, and further research indicates that the decision to migrate is made for the sake of both the family and the migrant child. Information from the interviewees in migrant households superficially indicates that the parents' process of selecting a family member to migrate is based on gender preference. Looking deeper at underlying reasons suggests that gender preference can be made in both directions, favouring either sons or daughters. On the one hand, families often prioritize sons to migrate, and the reasons are twofold. First, young men

are perceived as having higher earning potential compared to their sisters. Second, parents make considerations about safety, and perceive that sons are better able than daughters to protect themselves from exploitation and abuse while living independently. As quoted below, a mother in Cambodia expressed why her daughters were not the first choice for migration. She believed that a son would better protect himself than a daughter. The family would support migration of the daughter only when her brother(s) could not perform the tasks as expected by the family. In this situation, safety and security may be less prioritized:

I wanted my son to migrate, but he was disabled. So, I decided to let my daughters go to Thailand instead. However, I wanted my son to migrate because he could better protect himself (from exploitation and abuse) (Leakena [Pseudonym], 2016).

By contrast, other families prefer daughters to migrate in the belief that daughters are more likely than sons to save their earnings and remit more to the family back home—even if the daughter stands to earn less than her male counterpart. As stated below, the mother in this family did not mention safety and security as the priority when making the decision regarding who should migrate. Rather, she considered expected returns to the family, thus preferring her daughter to migrate due to the perception that the daughter would save more money than her son(s).

I prefer that my daughter go rather than my son. A daughter will save more money (i.e. to remit) (Kanha [Pseudonym], 2016).

Family preference to send daughters or sons is based on their expectations, not necessarily reality. When investigating deeper into the expectations of parents whose child(ren) migrate for work, families that have at least one migrant daughter expect the daughter to remit an amount far more than the cost of her daily living expenses. A father in Myanmar, as expressed below, strongly believed his migrant daughter would keep her promise to buy him a new vehicle when she had enough savings.

I want to buy a pick-up truck. My daughter has not yet sent enough back for that purchase. She said I could buy it once she saved enough (Aung Aung [Pseudonym], 2016).

The role of gender in the family regarding migration not only plays out among parents, daughters, and sons, but also couples. A husband migrating without his wife is one of the more dominant migration patterns found in this study. By contrast, our study did not find any married women migrating without their husband. That a married female is not encouraged to migrate alone may be due to concern about the woman's safety (Boyle, 2002). If a wife wants to migrate with her husband, she is expected to travel with him at the same time or follow him later -- but not before. For example, a man from Myanmar felt that he should be the one to take the risk of traveling to Thailand. His wife could then follow him if he found that the situation at the destination was safe for her.

So, when one of my friends asked me to go with him to Thailand, I got interested. I decided to follow him. My wife agreed to let me try first. If the situation in Thailand was bad, I could just go back home. If the situation was favourable, she would follow me later. Two years after I came, she followed me here (Thiha [Pseudonym], 2016).

It is evident that gender is integral to the family decision as to whom should work away from home. Reasons behind the inter-play of gender are embedded in the family's expectation of returning benefit to the family and the well-being of their children (i.e. in the case of an adult daughter migrant). In the case of the migration of couples, there seems to be an imbalance of power between husband and wife. While a husband usually initiates the plan to migrate and enjoys migrating alone, a wife is encouraged to follow only when her husband has already settled in at the destination or is accompanied by her husband at the outset (Hoang, 2009).

Gender and Remittance Behavior

As presented in Table 1, migrants from the three aforementioned countries in the Mekong subregion are employed in various types of jobs which in turn lead to different amounts of income. Data show that female and male migrants remit about the same proportion of their income. The portion from monthly income remitted by female migrants varies from 17 percent (*Chann*, Cambodia) to 89 percent (*Nang*, Lao PDR) with an average of 45%. For males, the portion ranges from 33% (*Kiri*, Cambodia) to 81% (*Arun*, Cambodia) at an average of 44%. Thus, our data do not support most previous research which suggests that female migrants remit proportionately more than their male counterparts (De la Brière et al., 2002; Le Goff, 2016; Ribas, 2008). Beyond the amount of money, however, our data reflect some insights and differences in gender behavior, e.g. female migrants are more determined to remit their earnings compared to males.

Information from our interviews supports the contention that migrants try their best to minimize their personal expenditures while living in Thailand in order to maximize remittance amounts. Characteristics or conditions of family members left behind (as summarized in Table 2) influence remittance behavior of the migrant worker as well. Many families are heavily dependent on remittances, such as those whose adult migrant children have left their own young children behind in the care of other family members, or those families with a disabled member(s), or families with a severely ill family member(s).

In addition to remittance dependency of the family left behind, and the migrant's ability to remit, we further investigated other motivations underlying their behavior, and whether those motivations reflect any differences between women and men. Information from migrants working in Thailand reveal that feeling grateful to their parents highly motivated them to give back to their parent(s) by sending their remittance, regardless of their parents' economic dependency. This is exemplified by the case of an adult daughter migrant from Cambodia:

They did not ask me for it (my remittance); I sent it myself. They will call me when they really need extra money for something. I have never been late sending money to them. I do it because I am their daughter. If I did not, who would do it? I am very happy that I can send money to my parents because they have taken care of me since I was young. I must... (weeping)...I decided on the amount by myself. I did not ask about their spending. I give it to them unconditionally. The only thing that worries me is whether the amount I send is enough to cover their expenses (Chann [Pseudonym], 2016).

In addition to showing their feeling of gratefulness to parents as a motivation to remit, having the opportunity to take care of the family brings migrants a higher sense of self-esteem. Moreover, migrants also send remittances in the hope that their parents can enjoy the same quality of life as the migrant's life in Thailand, as mentioned by the following migrant daughter:

My family is still in debt and we are paying for it. I told them that if they have any urgent need for funds to let me know. I am willing to do that for my parents. If I cannot send money to my parents, I will feel unworthy. I do not want to have a better life if it's only me who enjoys it. I want my parents to have a better life too (Mala [Pseudonym], 2016).

The determination of the daughter to unconditionally remit is especially reflected during difficult economic circumstances. This was demonstrated in the case of a migrant daughter from Lao PDR who still made the effort to remit to her mother even though she could be short of funds. She gave higher priority to the (presumed) need of her mother, even if her mother did not tell her exactly how much remittance she needed, if any.

I just sent money to my mother yesterday because she needs to see the doctor. That would cost her 200 baht per bottle of normal saline solution. There is a clinic in my village, but the doctor's

fee is very expensive. Normally, I send 1,000 to 2,000 baht to her every month. I used to delay in remitting that amount because I had no money left over. If my mother wants me to send her money, she would not ask directly. She would tell me indirectly by saying something like 'we are almost out of rice' (Kornsawahn [Pseudonym], 2016).

Even though our sample includes adult son migrants who remit to their families back home, sons in our study tended to remit more intermittently or only upon the request of their parents, unlike their female counterparts who considered it a regular obligation. For example, a migrant son from Lao PDR, quoted below, sent his parents money only when requested. Sometimes he skipped sending money because he thought that his parents were already making ends meet without his assistance.

I send money to my family based on their needs. They ask for more money when the rice farming season begins because they must hire other villagers to work for them...There were times when I was unable to send money back home because I had spent it all. Sometimes I send less than they requested. My parents do not complain because it does not affect them (financially) that much (Hongkam [Pseudonym], 2016).

Individual remittance behavior of migrants tends to change over time. For example, getting married while still a migrant is one of the factors that can lead to changes in remittance behavior. Many workers migrated to work in Thailand when they were young and single. After a period of time, some of these migrants marry. After marriage, the amount and frequency of sending remittances declines because of their new family's needs in the destination country. As reported by a mother of a migrant in Lao PDR below, the remittance behavior of her son was no longer regular after he married. He would remit to his parents' family only when they requested it.

Two years ago, I heard that my son had taken a wife. After that, he no longer remitted to us as usual. But he regularly asked me whether I was all right. He said if we didn't need the remittances, he would not send them automatically; only when we needed it (Jansorn [Pseudonym], 2016).

Although changes in a migrant child's marital status might lead to changes in remittance behavior (which can be seen in the case of both migrant daughters and sons), the data from the interviews are inconclusive. A daughter of a migrant family in Cambodia in this study reduced remittances to her mother after getting married to a compatriot in Thailand. Despite this, she never stopped remitting at least some money to her mother on a regular basis. That was not the case for a father in Myanmar whose daughter (as well as his son) stopped remitting to him after getting married.

Our oldest son and daughter stopped remitting after forming their own family. Now the money we receive every month is remittances only from my (single) youngest son and our (single) daughter (Zaw Zaw [Pseudonym], 2016).

As presented above, daughters seem to remit out of their sense of obligation to their family more so than sons, who tend to remit irregularly or upon the family's request. In addition, a daughter's remittance behavior after marriage changes less dramatically than a son's. This difference may be attributed to gender norms in the family which can play a significant role in shaping remittance behavior. Daughters show higher motivation to boost their parents' quality of life as well as that of other family members (Ribas, 2008). As pointed out in a previous study, in the Buddhist context, options for daughters to express their gratefulness to parents may be more limited than sons, but sending remittances is one of those options. Sons in a Buddhist family in the Mekong subregion may show their filial obligation to parents by entering the monkhood, while daughters may provide social and economic support (Korinek and Entwisle, 2005).

Gender Roles within the Family, Remittance Recipients, and Remittance Utilization

Gender roles in the family influence who the recipients of remittances are and their utilization of the money (Petrozziello and Robert, 2010). As presented in Table 2, our interviews show that almost all recipients are female, e.g. mother, wife, female sibling, or other adult female relatives. This might imply that women are more trusted with household money matters. Empirical evidence from previous research indicates that females are perceived to be more careful in spending the family's resources than males. When remittances are sent to an adult female in the household of origin, the sender can be more confident that money will benefit the whole family (IOM, 2004). Data from our interviews also confirm this perception, i.e. trusting female family members to manage remittances is widely practiced. According to some migrant family member(s) at the place of origin, when the money is in a woman's hands, saving and spending for the benefits of the family are more assured.

I gave the money I earned to my wife (to supplement what she receives in remittances). In this village, we respect women. Men have trouble saving money because they like to party with friends. They would drink and buy unnecessary things. Women could save more money and used it to take care of the family (Thongbai [Pseudonym], 2016).

The trust in women to control the money from remittances may reflect the woman's role in looking after the well-being of family members. Based on our interviews at the migrant's household of origin, remittances are usually spent to cover daily living expenses, paying off debt, investing in agricultural production, or purchasing other non-luxury items. These spending patterns are consistent with findings of previous studies (e.g. Ratha, 2013, Taufatofua, 2011; Vladicescu et al., 2008). This is illustrated by the case of a Myanmar mother who received remittances from her children:

When I receive money, I first pay for essential living expenses. I buy rice, cooking oil, meat, vegetables, and other meal ingredients. Some are for monthly costs, such as tutoring and pre-school fees for my granddaughters. Sometimes I use the money from my (migrant) children for medical checkups and medicines for my husband and me (Khin Khin [Pseudonym], 2016).

In our study, females may not be the primary recipients if they are unable to manage the money for reasons, such as a serious health problem, being too old/infirm, etc. An example from our interviews shows that in some cases, remittances from migrants were sent to the father, who managed the money himself because his wife was suffering cognitive decline.

She (my wife) would spend the money and would not remember what she paid for. Sometimes, she would stash the money somewhere else and could not find it (Khampat [Pseudonym], 2016).

Although migrants are generally hopeful that the money they remit will help to ease their family's economic situation, improving their lives, migrants may not know exactly how their family utilizes the remittances. Some migrants just remit and do not ask how the recipients spend the money, because they are reluctant to pry or seem controlling. In particular, this seems to be an unwritten norm when migrants remit to their elderly dependent parents.

I just send money to my parents. I never ask about their spending. It depends on them. My husband never tracks his parents' spending either. If they want to pay for food or something else, they don't need to let us know. We just remit. They are getting old. If we see that they are happy, then we are happy too (Aye Aye [Pseudonym], 2016).

This is consistent with reports from recipients within the migrant's family of origin. According to the parents we interviewed, they could spend money sent by their migrant children freely. They were not asked to report on what they used the remittances for, although they might offer that information voluntarily.

My son never asked me about my spending, but I always told him about it. He always told me that I don't need to explain what I do with the remittances because the money was mine (Hla Hla [Pseudonym], 2016).

The situation might be different when the remittance recipient is a migrant's wife. The left-behind wives in our study may report how they use the remittances to their husbands in Thailand, as in the case below. However, it is not clear whether, by sending remittances, male migrants retained their pre-migration economic power in the household, or whether they ceded that power (fully or partially) to their wife.

I do not ask my wife about the spending. She would call to ask my permission if she wanted to buy something special, such as school uniforms for our children. I think she feels the need to tell me because she does not earn money by herself. I told her I am the father of the house and I have a duty to take care of everyone. But if she really needs to buy something, she should just do it. She does not need to be afraid that I will complain. Even so, she said she still feels the need to ask me out of consideration for my sacrifice (Arun [Pseudonym], 2016).

Our study results are consistent with the findings of the study by Aneja et al. (2017). They found that about 60 percent of remittance recipients in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are women. This phenomenon can be explained by the gender-based division of labor within the family. In a patriarchal society, females are almost always assigned to manage household tasks, while males are assigned to undertake the more specialized jobs outside the household (Doneys et al., 2019). As presented above, the women in these three countries

are perceived as more trustworthy and more skillful in money management than their male counterparts. Thus, females in the origin household remain the primary recipients of remittances. This also reflects the role of women in taking care of dependent family members, regardless of the migration of other household members.

Improvement of the Status in the Family after Migration

When living at home, a young-adult daughter is usually seen as someone who can perform only light work when helping her parents around the house. That perception overlooks other potential contributions of women to the family. Yet, when women migrate and remit, it is still uncertain whether their status in the family as a money-earner improves (Omelaniuk, 2005). On the one hand, it can be argued that earning money for the family can empower females in the household. This happens because women perform additional tasks beyond their traditional household duties. Even more significantly, remittances from a female migrant can change their status from family caretaker to major money-earner, which in the past, was the exclusive role of adult males (UNFPA, 2006). On the other hand, some argue that migration does not necessarily improve a woman's situation in the family, and migrant daughters are usually pressured by their parents to remit to their family. Some migrant women cannot even control the use of their remittances sent back home (Ghosh, 2009).

In this study, we have found that the status of daughters is improved as they gain higher acceptance from parents, due to their economic contribution to the family. As stated below a mother in Lao PDR acknowledges that her migrant daughter has helped to improve her living conditions:

This house was built from money that my daughter earned from her job in Thailand. The television, electric fan, and refrigerator were bought using her money. Sometimes she brought (material) goods back from Thailand, such as an electric cooker and kitchen utensils. These amenities have made our life more comfortable (Thonglavanh [Pseudonym], 2016).

When an unmarried daughter takes on the role of household leader, her economic role in the family does not differ from that of the other men in the household. In those cases, her migration to earn money in Thailand is very important to the family members left behind, and any degree of financial success can enhance her reputation significantly. A case in point is the story of a single daughter from Lao PDR who migrated for work in Thailand. She was responsible for raising her younger siblings since their mother passed away and her father remarried and moved to live with his new wife in another household. Because of her income from work in Thailand, her younger brother was able to obtain a law degree from a reputable university. In addition, she was able to use her savings to build a larger house for the family. Her father boasted about her diligent efforts to earn money in contrast to other migrant females from the same village:

She migrated because she wanted to earn money to build a new house and pay for her younger brother to go to university. I did not expect her to give any money to me. She was very patient. Other women in the village migrated at the same time as her, but they returned after a short time. My daughter did not quit (Ponsinh [Pseudonym], 2016)

Typically, a female in this region works side-by-side with her husband in the rice field or earns money from economic activities at home. At the same time, the wife must perform routine chores and childcare around the house. For a woman, her migration can also improve her economic status in the family, and this is not any less important than her husband's contribution. That said, however, her heightened economic status does not absolve her from traditionally "female" tasks in the household. While living in the country of destination, the migrant woman is still expected to perform the customary family chores and manage the household finances. This shows that women are expected to play both an income-generating role and the role of care provider for dependent family members concurrently.

Every day I must wake up at 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast for my husband before he goes to work. I start my job at about 6 a.m. At 11 a.m., I take a break to cook lunch for my husband. I then prepare dinner for him at 6 or 7 p.m. (Sinuon [Pseudonym], 2016).

The data reflect that, though being far away from home, cross-border migrant women in the region still shoulder dual tasks, economically and domestically. While migration clearly helps improve a woman's status in the family by heightening the family elders' acceptance of their contribution, the ratio of a woman's power in the family to men remains questionable. As commented in another study, migration may only increase a woman's opportunity to assert herself in the labor market, but she is still harnessed to traditional female roles (Chen et al., 2006).

Conclusions

This study utilizes qualitative data that captures perspectives of both migrant workers in Thailand who have traveled from countries in the Mekong subregion, as well as the migrant households at the country of origin. Our objective sought to understand and explain the role of gender in the decision making of the family and the migrant worker on migration and remittance behavior. In cases where the parents initiated the migration of their adult child, the decision to support sons or daughters in their migration depended in large part on their expected potential to earn money and remit to the family, but also on the advancement of the individual migrant. Within married couples, husbands often have greater power than wives regarding their decision to migrate. While a husband can initiate and migrate alone, a wife would usually only be allowed to migrate when being accompanied by her husband or following her husband after he has settled at the destination.

Our study looks at gender difference beyond the cash amount of remittances sent by female and male migrant workers. We have also

taken into account their marital status. In addition to a family's dependency on remittances in the country of origin, altruism, obligation, and sacrifice are factors influencing behavior. Regardless of a migrant's marital status, the data suggest that motivations are influenced by the gender role, in that female migrants have a stronger commitment and determination to improve their origin-country family's well-being more than their male counterparts.

The role of gender is also evident when looking at recipients and remittance utilization. In general, recipients of funds earned by the migrant worker are working-age adult women, although there were some cases in this study in which men were recipients. Females are perceived as more trustworthy with the household's finances, and would spend the remittances more responsibly than their male counterparts. The focus on women as recipients also reflects a woman's duty in taking care of household activities and dependent family members.

Sending remittances (as opposed to locally-generated income) confers a higher status in the family for the female migrant, as the money is probably perceived as a bonus for the family and a boost to the household's quality of life, compared to that of neighboring households. Yet this higher status in the family achieved through remittances from abroad does not lessen women's traditional roles as care providers or homemakers. Thus, it remains unclear whether more female labor migration would genuinely help to improve a woman's status in the family and society, or merely provide women more opportunities to travel, expand their horizons, and gain occupational skills, essentially the same benefits male migrants can acquire. Answers to this question should be further investigated.

This study aimed to clarify the influence of gender roles and remittance behavior and utilization within a specific migration flow under challenging circumstances. The findings help to illuminate the power of women in their role as breadwinners for their families, on par with men in the same situations. These findings resonate and reflect the importance of females working on-the-go, as found in other parts of the world that have similar migration dynamics to Thailand, Cambodia, Lao

PDR, and Myanmar. It should be noted that the paper focuses on cross-border (i.e. sub-regional international) migration, which might be distinct from internal migration as regards to gender roles.

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