

# Precarity, Gender and Work: Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Asia

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## Abstract

Precarity among low-skilled temporary migrant workers in Asia is well documented, particularly concerning migrant women in domestic work in countries of the Gulf region and in East Asia. In this paper, we first examine the intersection of gender and type of work by comparing men and women, but also by comparing women engaged in domestic work and those working in manufacturing. Second, we analyse indicators of precarity through the entire migration process: pre-departure, time abroad, and return. Based on descriptive analyses from survey data collected in 2009 from 499 former Vietnamese migrant workers who worked in Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan between 2000 and 2009, our results indicate differences in (1) moments of precarity, (2) types of precarity, and (3) levels of precarity. This paper unpacks how gender is central to an understanding of precariousness in migration but also how it may intersect with other important variables.

Research on legal temporary low-skilled migration flows has repeatedly shown that migrants are subject to structural precarity, given their limited rights in the destination countries (Piper 2004; Piché 2008; Goldring 2010). Reports of abuse, failure to be paid expected salaries, arbitrary dismissal, and deportation are common in destination countries of East, Southeast and West Asia that import labour (Martin 2010). Structural precarity appears to be particularly acute for migrant women who migrate within patriarchal regimes and gendered labour markets (Danneker 2009). Studies on women migrant workers in domestic work, in particular, contain a wealth of vivid illustrations of the intrinsically gendered aspects of the migration process, migration experience, and migration policies (Constable 1997; Hondagneu Sotelo 2000; Lan 2008; Constable 2010).<sup>1</sup> While gender clearly shapes precarity in

specific ways, we know little about when, how, and who is more or less precarious among these groups of migrants in the Asian context.

This paper aims to address these questions in two ways. First, most accounts rely on the experiences of female domestic workers, and results are then often extrapolated to women migrants in general. Yet, women migrants in low-skilled occupations work in other sectors, such as manufacturing and services. In this analysis, our objective is to unpack how gender matters by comparing not only men and women, but also women working in different jobs. Second, most research documents women migrants' experiences while abroad, while less is known about what unfolds in the two other phases of the labour migration process: pre-departure and return. We therefore analyse experiences during the entire migration process. We pursue these two lines of inquiry as a way to further our understanding of precarity among low-skilled labour migrants within Asia using a gender approach.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we do not discuss the important question of agency (see, for instance, Sim 2009; Hsia 2010).

This analysis is based on survey data collected in three provinces of Vietnam from 499 migrant returnees (former migrant workers) in 2009. The sample of former migrant workers used in this analysis had worked as domestic workers or factory workers in Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea between 2000 and 2009. Our findings show differences in (1) moments of precarity, (2) types of precarity, and (3) levels of precarity. During the pre-departure period, women surveyed were more at risk during training than men, while men endured the burden of larger pre-departure fees than women. While abroad, women former domestic workers reported the most positive experiences, compared to their female and male counterparts who worked in manufacturing. Routes to return showed that domestic workers were the most likely to complete their contracts and return as planned, while factory workers, both men and women, were more likely to either be sent back early or to overstay their visas. Among women, levels of precarity show that, overall, female factory workers were at higher risk than women who laboured in domestic work. These findings must be situated within the policy and social environments of these migrants' destination countries: Taiwan in the case of domestic workers, and Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia in the case of factory workers. Likewise, precarity prior to migration and upon return is shaped by Vietnam's political economy and social context.

### **Precarity, gender, and work in the migration process**

To examine migrants' experiences through the lens of rights (the objective of this special issue), we find the notion of precariousness or precarity (used interchangeably thereafter) particularly useful. Goldring et al. (2009) suggest that precariousness can be defined as a continuum upon which migrants' vulnerabilities can be examined. Using this conceptualisation, Goldring et al., along with a growing number of researchers, question the dichotomous categories – legal and illegal, documented and undocumented – that are used to classify migrants and claim, rather, that it proves more fruitful to use a spectrum

of precariousness. Goldring and her colleagues argue that:

[...] precarious migratory status, like citizenship, is multi-dimensional and constructed by specific state policies, regulations, practices of policy implementation, activism, discourses and so forth, and that there may be multiple pathways to precarious status, depending on the context at various levels. To explore the implications of precarious status for differential inclusion, we link forms of precarious status to the presence/absence of rights and entitlements (Goldring et al. 2009: 240).

Goldring et al. show how precarity is legally produced by temporary migrant workers' programs, whereby employers and receiving states can easily dispose of migrants. In other words, temporary foreign workers are, in essence, in a precarious state due to their limited entitlement to social protection and their mandatory return, which prevents them from accessing legal and social citizenship. This approach, thus, shows the usefulness of studying migrants along a continuum of 'precariousness', rather than within binary conceptualisations of legality. Moreover, as Raghuram (2010) shows, this precarity is not limited to the lesser skilled. Using the example of migrants skilled in medicine in the UK, she shows how temporariness and precarity are different and how 'precarity and vulnerability, the hallmarks of temporariness, are not limited to the lesser skilled' (Raghuram, forthcoming: 26).

The concept of precariousness, developed from examples taken from the Canadian case (Goldring et al. 2009), and the unpacking of the relationship between temporariness and precarity, in the case of the UK (Raghuram, 2010), are both particularly useful for the Asian context. Indeed, international temporary labour migration in Asia, for the most part, consists of legal migration flows. Migrants are documented and legally enter the borders of receiving countries. Despite their legal status, they face high degrees of precarity that may lead to voluntary or involuntary slippage into the illegal sector (Bélanger et al. 2011). In other words, being legal and documented does not mean that migrants work and live in safe and fair conditions. Compulsory return, combined with limited social protection

and the near impossibility of appealing an early contract termination, create a high degree of precarity in itself. This situation is, in turn, conducive to the development of an illegal sector in which migrants may, in fact, feel freer and more empowered, as illustrated by the research of Lan (2007) on undocumented domestic workers in Taiwan, and by Bélanger et al. (2001) on undocumented factory workers in Japan. In some extreme cases, migrants suffer from forced labour and human trafficking (Bélanger, forthcoming).

Research paying attention to migrants' rights has especially focused on migrants' lives in the destination country where they have limited rights and entitlements (Constable 1997; Piper 2004; Oishi 2005; Le 2010). Temporary labour migrant workers have limited 'bundles of rights' and are often constructed by employers and governments of receiving countries as cheap, flexible, and disposable labour. Lack of respect for labour contracts, arbitrary dismissal, passport confiscation, lack of health benefits, abusive working conditions, physical abuse, and confinement are among the numerous problems repeatedly identified by researchers and migrants' advocates (Piper 2004; Bélanger et al. 2010; Martin 2010).

Studies on women migrants highlight the additional vulnerabilities that women (relative to men) face due to the global gendered job market that confines them to sectors such as domestic work. Women migrants are also situated in a global patriarchal order that often puts them in a subordinate position as aspiring migrants, migrants abroad, and returnees. Studies into the lives of domestic workers, in particular, have underscored the vulnerabilities of those working in private homes, where they can be particularly at risk for various types of abuse. Studies on Singapore (Ueno 2009), Taiwan (Lan 2006), Hong Kong (Constable 1997) and the Gulf countries (Bélanger and Rahman 2013) show similarities, despite differences in the intensity of these problems and the scope for resistance and contestation. In this literature on women migrants, however, quantitative analyses are lacking and a gender approach – rather than a focus on women – is rarely adopted.

In this paper, we push this line of inquiry by exploring the experiences of migrants, both men and women, to unpack how gender is intertwined with other aspects of migrants' experiences. We examine how gender is related to precariousness among low-skilled labour migrants by situating migrants in their family context and life course stage (gender, marital status, and age) prior to and after departure, as well as their workplace context abroad (domestic workers in private homes or factory workers in manufacturing). By comparing women working in factories or as domestic workers and men working in factories, we explore the intersection of these variables.

Studying how gender and type of work shape migrants' precarity requires the study of migrants' experiences in destination countries, but we make a case for also examining the pre-migration and return stages of the process. Migrants' rights can be threatened even before they cross borders. Candidates for migration can be targeted by abusive recruiters seeking victims for exorbitant pre-departure fees and unlawful work contracts that will not be honoured abroad. When aspiring migrants begin to seek migration opportunities, they have to confront a dense and complex migration industry in which they have little or no protection (Bélanger and Wang, 2013). While the degree of vulnerability varies by country of origin, similar problems exist across the region. Precarity during recruitment, for instance, has been studied by Linqvist (2010), who shows how recruitment is gendered in Indonesia.

In this paper, 'pre-departure' refers to all the steps migrants have to go through in their country of origin before going abroad as migrant workers. Candidates for migration must navigate complex networks of intermediaries and recruitment agencies, disburse various fees and costs for which they have to secure loans and mortgage assets, undergo pre-departure training, and negotiate their migration at home with family members (Wang and Bélanger 2011). This often treacherous process may last from one to 12 months and, in some cases, even longer. During this period, most migrants are uncertain about the outcome of their efforts and investment in going abroad to work.

Debt bondage is the main mechanism whereby migrants become vulnerable. In order to pay the high pre-departure costs, they have to borrow money at high interest rates and mortgage their assets. Given the frequency of abuse and deception, migrants are at high risk and net economic returns from this type of migration are uncertain. Costs and fee deduction schemes vary between origin and receiving countries, but, overall, the vast majority of migrant workers in Asia have to pay a very high price – often the equivalent of six to 18 months of full time work – for the ‘privilege’ of working abroad (Bélanger et al. 2010; Martin 2010). The way in which gender shapes the pre-departure experience deserves attention. Indeed, fees paid, paths to recruitment, training, and contracts are far from being gender neutral (Linguist 2010). Precarity faced by aspiring migrants differs for women and men, and among women working in different sectors, as our analysis will show.

Return is the least studied ‘moment’ of the temporary labour migration process. Biao (2009) writes about compulsory return as a means of controlling migration in East Asian receiving countries. Return becomes an instrument of power for employers and brokers who can return workers home not only when their contracts end, but also whenever they wish to dispose of workers due to illness, disputes, mismatches or a desire to reduce the workforce. The threat of early return looms large for workers who may not be able to pay off their debt before returning home. As Biao (2009) argues, structurally, mandatory return is a way of controlling mobility by creating more mobility, thus curtailing the formation of networks and ethnic communities. According to Biao, ‘compulsory return places migrants in a perpetually liminal, disposable and transient position, and thus renders the migration flows controllable’ (Biao 2009: 1). A lucrative industry of companies specialising in the organised, escorted and ‘safe’ return of migrants eloquently speaks to the determination of Asian countries to enforce return in order to prevent settlement.

In this analysis, ‘return’ refers to a migrant’s return to the family of origin after working

abroad. The notion of ‘return’ is somewhat open, however, since migrants may return from one contract and prepare to leave for another, for the same destination or a different one. As Liebelt (2010) argues, many migrants do not go ‘back and forth’, but rather ‘on and on’. Despite the openness of the notion of ‘return’, ‘return’ involves re-insertion into one’s family and community after a long absence, so it is a critical moment to assess the impact of migration on migrants and their families. Return may also be orchestrated and shaped by countries of origin that may extend their control over migrants after contracts end. Silvey (2007) documents, for example, how the Indonesian state exerts control over female returnees at the Jakarta airport in the name of security and safety.

#### **Vietnamese migrant workers in Asia**

Vietnam began sending unskilled and low-skilled migrant workers to Asian countries in the early 1990s. The four top destination countries are Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, and Japan. Agreements between Vietnam and these countries concur on the export-import of labour and establish annual quotas of migrant workers. Figure 1 shows the total migrant workers deployed annually. Relative to other migrant workers’ sending countries of the region, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, Vietnam sends relatively small numbers of migrant workers abroad. In 2012, for example, only approximately 80,000 migrants went abroad. Figure 1 shows that the top destination countries since the 2000s have been Malaysia and Taiwan, and Figure 2 shows how the proportion of females among migrant workers has increased since 1992, with women surpassing men for the first time in 2004. The decline in the proportion of women migrants that follows this peak is likely linked to Taiwan’s ‘ban’ on women live-in caregivers from Vietnam in 2004. Officially, this ban was put in place by the Taiwanese government because too many Vietnamese domestic workers were running away and overstaying their visas. Unfortunately, however, Taiwan’s shift in its migration policy towards Vietnam is likely to have fuelled fake contracts for jobs other than domestic work (to cover up the hiring

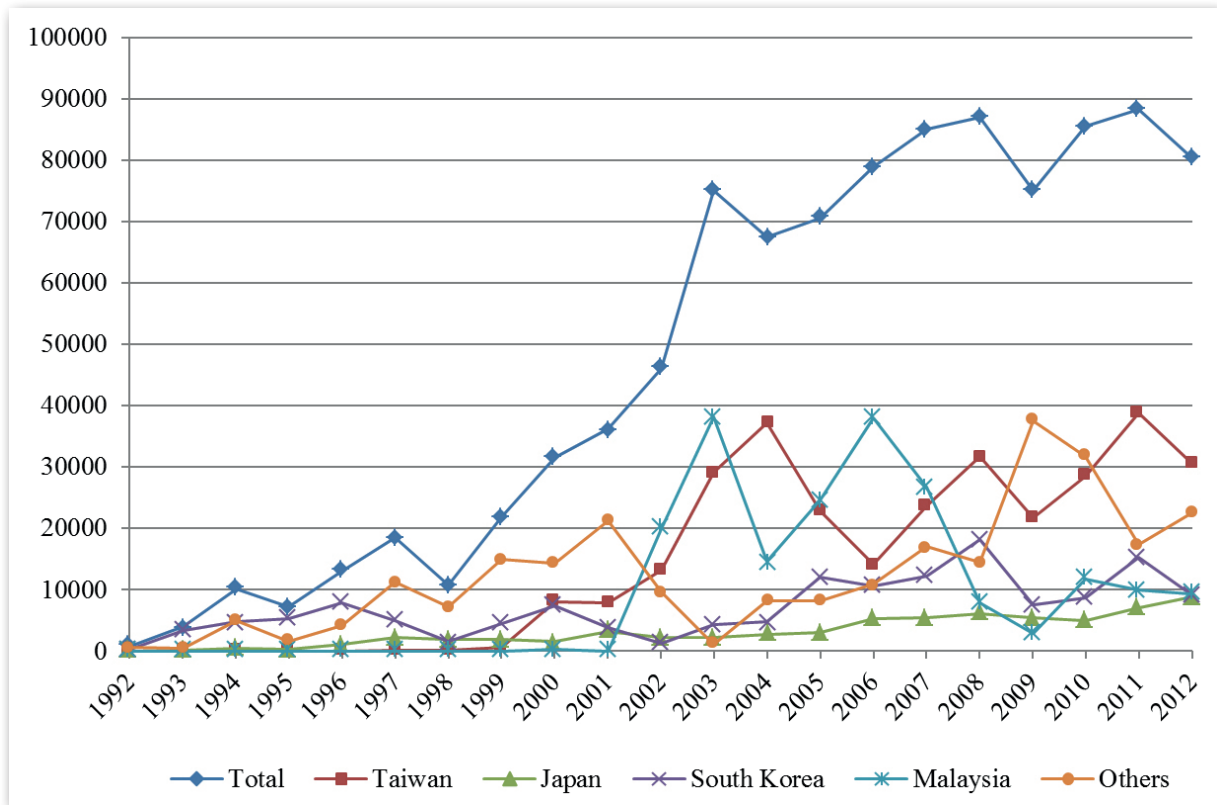


Figure 1. Total number of Vietnamese migrant workers deployed annually, 1992-2012, by country of destination.

Source: Ministry of Labour Affairs (MOLISA), unpublished data provided to the authors

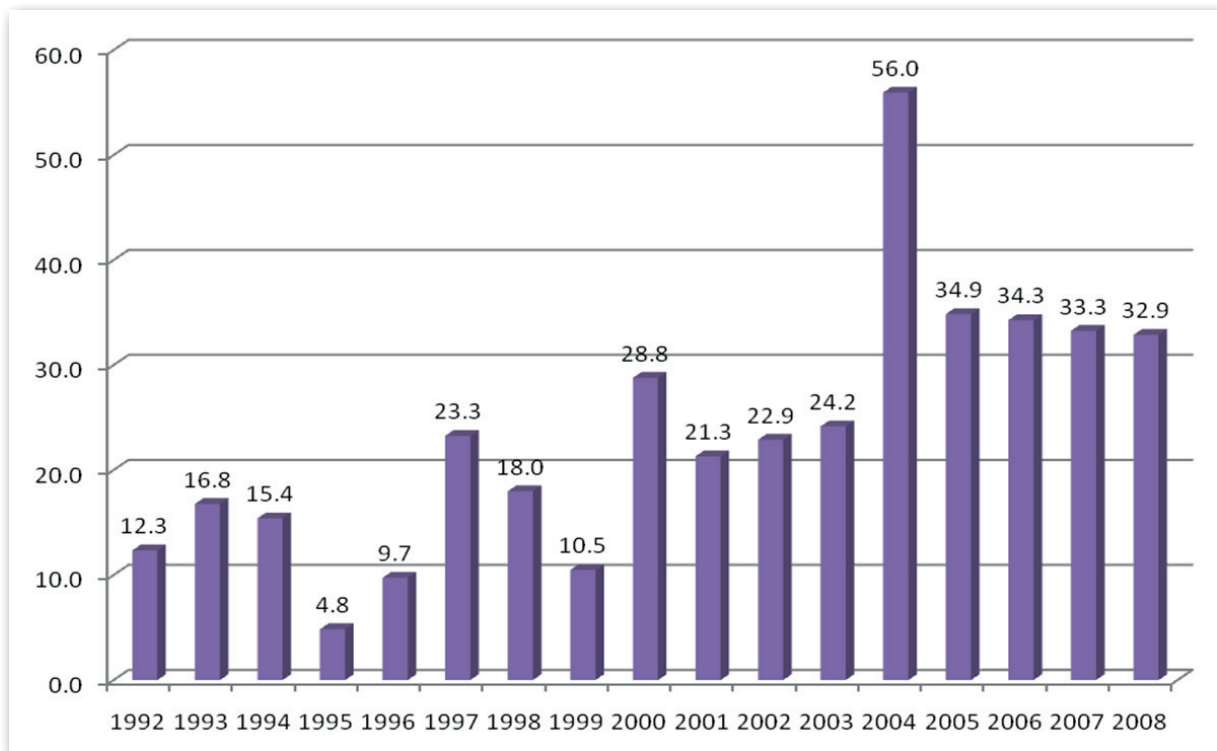


Figure 2. Proportion of women Vietnamese migrant workers deployed annually (among all migrants), 1992-2008.

Source: Ministry of Labour Affairs (MOLISA), unpublished data provided to the authors

of Vietnamese domestic workers) and to have increased trafficking. Women migrants already working in Taiwan at the time of the ban were allowed to stay and renew their contracts. This sudden change in Taiwan's migration policy was harmful for women in Vietnam who saw their migration opportunities significantly reduced.

### Data and method

The analysis presented in this article draws on a survey conducted in March and April 2009 in three provinces of Vietnam: Ha Tay and Thai Binh, which administratively belong to Northern Vietnam, and Ha Tinh, which belongs to Central Vietnam. We chose these sites because they were well-known for sending large numbers of migrant workers abroad. Data were collected from 656 migrant returnees, of whom 39.5 per cent were female and 60.5 per cent were male. Migrant returnees were defined as those who had returned to Vietnam for at least six months after having worked in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan or Malaysia. Those who were home on short visits with relatives were not selected. The questionnaire designed for migrant returnees includes nine sections: (1) demographic information on the migrant; (2) destination and duration of stay; (3) networks and recruitment; (4) pre-departure training in Vietnam; (5) travel overseas; (6) work experiences in the destination country; (7) communication with home and remittances; (8) other work and overstay; and (9) return and impact of migration.

This study also included the collection of qualitative data. Through a migrant life history approach, we asked former migrant workers who returned to Vietnam to narrate their story from the day they considered going abroad to the moment of the interview. We interviewed a total of 99 migrants in six localities who worked in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia about their experiences prior to migration, while in the destination country, and upon their return. As part of our project, we also interviewed brokers, trainers, family members of migrants, and government officials in Vietnam. We conducted fieldwork with migrant workers in their destination countries, particularly in Taiwan, in pub-

lic places, in the workplace, and in one shelter. This paper relies on the survey data, but it is also informed by the ethnographic and qualitative components of the study. We do not present interview data in this paper, but the fieldwork provides context and insight into the interpretation of the survey data.

To select our study participants for the sample survey, we cooperated with provincial-level administrators who provided us with the list of international labour migrants (currently away and returnees) by district and commune. For each province, we purposely selected two districts of Thai Binh and Ha Tinh and one district of Ha Tay that sent large numbers of residents to work overseas. In the next step, in order to ensure an adequate number of individuals to satisfy the estimated sample size, we chose communes where returnees were concentrated within each of the selected districts. The number of migrant returnees obtained from the lists provided by local authorities and collaborators was virtually equivalent to the sample size, so the research team decided to interview all those who were listed. Therefore, apart from individuals who refused to participate in our survey and those who were unavailable at the time of interviewing, the final sample included nearly all migrant returnees in the selected communes.

This analysis uses a sub-sample of our total sample that includes the following groups: female former domestic workers, female former factory workers and male former factory workers only<sup>2</sup> (meaning the type of work carried out while abroad as migrant workers, not while in Vietnam). In our study, domestic workers, all of whom were women, lived in the household where they worked. They performed a variety of tasks including care for children and elderly family members, food shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other household chores. Factory workers, both male and female, worked either in large industrial factories or small family-owned shops. Types of manufacturing jobs tended to

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<sup>2</sup> Workers are recruited and trained to work in a specific sector abroad, and, once abroad, they cannot easily change employers or work sectors.

	Female domestic workers	Female factory workers	Male factory workers	Total
<b>Country of destination</b>				
Taiwan	100.0%	13.4%	20.3%	43.1%
South Korea	0	11.8%	23.3%	13.4%
Japan	0	10.1%	6.2%	5.2%
Malaysia	0	64.7%	50.2%	38.3%
<b>Age</b>				
20-29 years	9.8%	47.1%	35.7%	30.5%
30-39 years	49.0%	48.7%	50.7%	49.7%
40+ years	41.2%	4.2%	13.7%	19.8%
<b>Marital status</b>				
Never married	1.3%	24.4%	21.1%	15.8%
Married	89.5%	69.7%	77.5%	79.4%
Other	9.2%	5.9%	1.3%	4.8%
<b>Educational level</b>				
Primary and lower	9.8%	11.8%	6.2%	8.6%
Lower secondary	69.9%	58.8%	63.0%	64.1%
Upper secondary and higher	20.3%	29.4%	30.8%	27.3%
<b>Total %</b>	<b>30.7%</b>	<b>23.8%</b>	<b>45.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Total N</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>499</b>

**Table 1. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Sample characteristics (n=499).**

Source: Authors' data.

be gender-specific. Men generally laboured in automobile, electronic, mechanics, and timber processing manufactures, while women tended to work in textile and food processing factories. In Japan, a small textile shop could be making and sewing car seats. The analysis includes a sub-sample of 499 returnees.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 provides information on the characteristics of this sub-sample. In this sample, 30.7 per cent are female former domestic workers, 23.8 per cent are female former factory workers, and 45.5 per cent are male former factory workers. Older, married and less educated women tend to do domestic work,

while younger, single and more educated women and men are more likely to work in the factories. Taiwan was the destination of all domestic workers, while factory workers most frequently worked in Malaysia and South Korea.

This survey is limited in two ways. First, our interviews and questionnaires were only conducted at one point in time, and we asked study participants to think retrospectively about their entire migration experience. This approach relies on participants' memory of their migration and is mostly interested in capturing this point of view. A second limitation concerns non-response and self-selectivity of the sample. It is possible that individuals who agreed to participate in our study are self-selected for their failure or success in labour migration. Since nearly all returnees living

<sup>3</sup> The remaining 157 respondents not included in this analysis worked in construction, fisheries, agriculture and services.

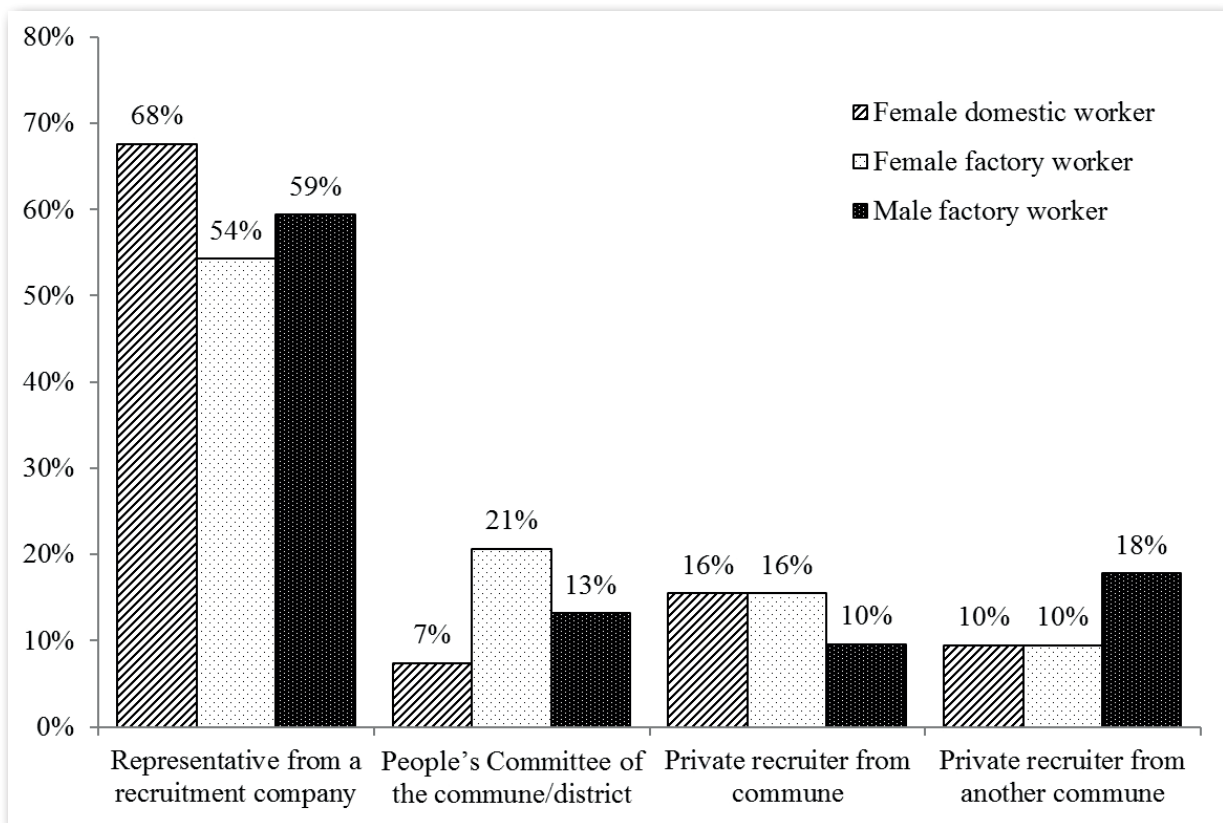
in the selected communes took part in our study, we feel this bias was significantly reduced. In addition, overstay is a difficult outcome to measure since many migrants who overstayed may still be abroad. We therefore only measure overstay among returnees who took part in our survey.

**Pre-departure**

The first step for candidates to labour migration is to be recruited. There are various routes to recruitment with some being more risky than others. Most respondents initiated labour migration by contacting a representative of a labour export company. The remaining respondents were recruited by the People’s Committee of their commune or district or by a private recruiter. Among women migrants, domestic workers tended to rely more on recruitment companies than factory workers (68 per cent compared to 59 per cent). Recruitment through a Commune or District People’s Committee was most prevalent among female factory workers. Among factory workers, men, more than

women, tended to go through private recruiters from another commune (18 per cent of men as opposed to 10 per cent of women) (see Figure 3).

Recruitment routes and network ties with recruiters play an important role in the type of job migrants obtain abroad because recruiters tend to specialise by job sector and by country of destination. Older and married women migrated more often as domestic workers because they were able to more easily find a recruiting agent for this type of job. Age and marital status were also established by recruiters and receiving countries: Married women with children were constructed as being more appropriate for care work, while single and young women as being more suitable for factory work. Married women typically talked to former domestic workers who would, in turn, connect them with the recruiting agent they had dealt with in the past. Networks of sisters, neighbours and kin members generally led to the connection between the aspiring migrant and the recruiting agent.



**Figure 3: Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. First contact during recruitment stage.**

Source: Authors’ data.



Pre-departure costs	Female domestic worker	Female factory worker	Male factory worker	Total
Mean	1,276.85	2,943.66	3,423.37	2,643.58
SD	1,047.80	3,274.68	2,922.52	2,758.44
N	152	118	221	491

**Table 2: Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Pre-departure costs (in USD) (departures between 2000 and 2009).**

Source: Authors' data.

Younger, single people, both women and men, by contrast, preferred to go abroad to work in factories, as they would do in Vietnam if the salary and working conditions were better. They were also the targets of recruiters. They formed their own networks, very much apart from those of married women. Candidates for factory work abroad also connected with young factory workers in their age cohorts, often brothers, cousins or former classmates. They exchanged information about recruitment with the purpose of working in a factory, preferably in Japan or Taiwan.

Overall, access to recruiting agents and personal networks intersect with gender and age in shaping the migrants' destination and type of work abroad. Women tended to go through more reliable contacts, including recruitment companies and official labour export programs, while men tended to connect with private recruiters in other communes and, thus, were more likely to be at risk for deception and high recruitment fees. Recruitment routes and networks are gendered, but they are also segmented by age, marital status, and educational level, variables which, in turn, affect the job sector migrants will labour in abroad and the levels of precarity they are exposed to during the recruitment stage. The worst cases of abuse were mostly experienced by men, in part because of the more risky routes they had taken during the pre-departure period (Bélanger and Wang 2013).

Our survey results indicate that average pre-departure costs were between US\$2,000 and US\$5,600. In general, as shown in Table 2, men had to pay much higher pre-departure costs

than women (average of US\$3,423 compared to US\$1,276-US\$2,943,  $p < .000$ ). Among women, differences also emerged. Those who became factory workers abroad had to pay fees double those of domestic workers (US\$2,943 compared to US\$1,276). Domestic workers, however, have more deductions from their salaries than workers in manufacturing. It should be noted that standard deviations are quite high, especially for factory workers, indicating the great variability of costs reported. For example, a factory job in Japan costs the most, while a factory job in Malaysia costs the least. Not surprisingly, the poorest workers tended to go to Malaysia, while the ones with more income, borrowing capacity, and better connections were able to secure a job in Japan.

In order to finance their migration, nearly all migrants in our survey had to borrow money from different sources. Overall, they had to borrow the equivalent of 97 per cent of these costs, with women borrowing the full amount and men 94 per cent on average. Female and male factory workers have a similar pattern of access to resources. The majority of them (62.2 per cent of female factory workers and 59.9 per cent of male factory workers) borrowed from the bank to pay high pre-departure costs, while only 47.7 per cent of domestic workers did so (results not shown). Domestic workers tended to mobilise smaller amounts from close relatives (19 per cent of domestic workers borrowed from family members and relatives, while only 6.7 per cent of female factory workers and 10.6 per cent of male factory workers did so). The analysis indicates

that the type of job has the greatest influence on migrants' access to various resources to finance migration. Creditors appear to be more inclined to finance workers with factory jobs lined up than those with contracts to work as domestic workers. Earning expectations could explain why the type of job abroad limits or opens up financing possibilities.

Pre-departure training is mandatory in Vietnam due to its export labour law. Training can be provided by the Vietnamese recruiting agency or by foreign companies who train workers on behalf of the Vietnamese recruiting agency. Most workers who took part in our survey enrolled in a pre-departure training program (86.7 per cent), and all of them had to pay for their own training prior to leaving. Over a quarter of our respondents (27.5 per cent) experienced problems during pre-departure training. Compared to women and men who were trained to be factory workers, aspiring domestic workers were much more likely to face training problems: The percentage of female domestic workers who reported problems with pre-departure training was 46 per cent, more than double the number of female factory workers (21.5 per cent) and male factory workers (18.2 per cent) who did so. Frequently, workers were 'not allowed to go out' and suffered from

'verbal abuse'. Only future female factory workers experienced physical abuse during training. Former male factory workers were more likely to have experienced bad living conditions during training than the two other groups (data not shown).

### Labouring abroad

The structural conditions of precarity abroad are well documented in earlier studies. Here, we document migrants' own assessments of their experience. When asked about their working conditions, housing conditions, and pay, domestic workers were the most positive, followed by male factory workers. Female factory workers were the least satisfied regarding these three variables (see Table 3).

The survey respondents were also asked whether they encountered negative experiences in the workplace. Results show that about half of the migrants suffered from at least one negative experience at work: Male factory workers were most likely to report at least one incident and domestic workers were the least likely. Verbal abuse was the most frequently reported negative experience for all three groups. This was followed by failure to receive the expected salary, although factory workers (both male and female)

		Female domestic worker	Female factory worker	Male factory worker
Working conditions	Poor	16.3%	24.4%	25.6%
	Acceptable	46.4%	49.6%	45.4%
	Good	37.3%	26.1%	29.1%
Housing conditions	Poor	11.1%	29.4%	26.9%
	Acceptable	49.0%	41.2%	47.6%
	Good	39.9%	29.4%	25.6%
Regular pay	Poor	22.9%	57.1%	51.1%
	Acceptable	54.2%	31.1%	33.0%
	Good	22.9%	11.8%	15.9%

**Table 3. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Returnees' assessment of their working and living conditions abroad.**

Source: Authors' data.

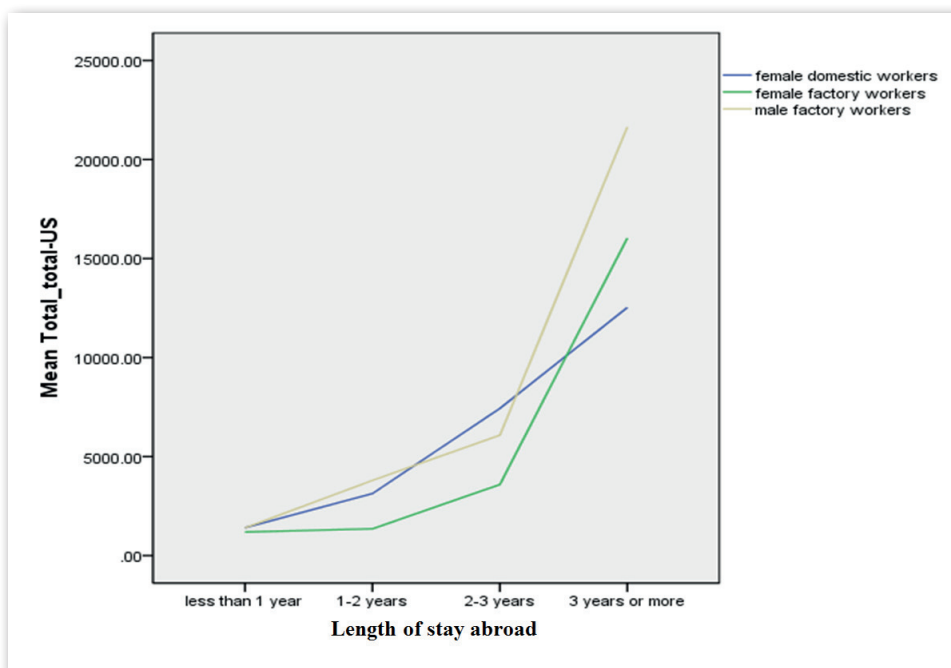
	Female domestic worker	Female factory worker	Male factory worker
Verbal abuse	31.8%	28.2%	32.2%
Physical abuse	4.0%	0%	3.5%
Not allowed to see a doctor when ill	2.0%	1.7%	3.1%
Failure to receive salary	1.3%	3.4%	0.9%
Failure to receive expected amount of salary	16.6%	25.6%	30.4%
Change of employer without prior notice	2.0%	0.9%	4.4%
Conflict with superior	3.3%	9.4%	8.8%
Conflict with other workers	0.7%	6.0%	6.2%
No negative experiences	58.9%	51.3%	48.9%

**Table 4. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Negative experiences ever experienced abroad.**

Source: Authors' data.

were much more likely to report this problem than domestic workers. Conflicts were much more often reported by workers in factories, both men and women, than by domestic workers. Overall, men reported a greater number, and more varied types, of negative experiences than women (see Table 4).

Figure 4 shows the mean total income reported for the stay abroad by duration of stay. We note that domestic workers and male factory workers who stayed abroad between one and three years earned the highest incomes. Beyond the third year, however, factory workers (men and women) earned significantly more than



female domestic workers. Staying beyond one's contract seems to pay off more for those in manufacturing (workers who stayed more than three years generally overstayed their visas). For the case of Japan, we noted elsewhere how migrant workers who overstayed their visas and became undocu-

**Figure 4. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Mean total income by length of stay abroad.**

mented workers tended to earn higher salaries than those in the legal system (Bélanger et al. 2010). This underscores female factory workers' vulnerability in terms of earning lower incomes, compared to other workers, during the first three years abroad. These results should be interpreted with caution, since wages vary by country of destination.

### Return

While return is compulsory for all temporary labour migrants, it may occur in various ways. We identify three types of return: early return, timely return, and return following overstay. Generally speaking, the most desirable scenario is a 'timely return', which refers to a return upon contract completion. Table 5 shows the percentage of the three paths of return among these three groups. In our survey, domestic workers were more likely to return 'on time': 68.5 per cent of domestic workers versus 43.6 per cent of female factory workers and 44.3 per cent of male factory workers. In general, workers who returned upon the completion of their contracts were most likely able to reimburse their pre-departure debt and, in most cases, have net income from their stay abroad.

Early return is a widespread problem faced by a large proportion of workers. Among all respondents, 38.3 per cent of workers came

home before the end of their contracts. Factory workers, compared to domestic workers, faced a greater risk of being sent back home before completing their contracts (45.3 per cent of female factory workers, 40 per cent of male factory workers, and 30 per cent of domestic workers). For this reason, the percentage of returnees who had not re-paid their pre-departure loans was much higher among factory workers than among domestic workers (34.2 per cent of female factory workers, 31.3 per cent for male factory workers, and 10.5 per cent for female domestic workers (data not shown). While a few returned voluntarily (i.e. their return was not related to working or living conditions in the host country), most of them were forcefully sent back or had no choice due to particularly abusive working conditions. Early returnees were at the bottom of the local hierarchy: the shorter their time abroad, the worse their position at home and in the community. Not surprisingly, the likelihood of having paid one's pre-departure debt was directly correlated with the length of stay. Our survey results reveal that over three quarters of migrants who returned after less than 12 months abroad had not re-paid their debt; whereas among returnees who stayed abroad three years or longer, 90 per cent had been able to do so (data not shown).

	Female domestic worker	Female factory worker	Male factory worker	Total
Timely return (completed contract and returned home)	68.5%	43.6%	44.3%	<b>51.4%</b>
Early return (returned home before end of contract)	30.1%	45.3%	39.8%	<b>38.3%</b>
Overstay (stayed after contract completion)	1.4%	11.1%	15.8%	<b>10.4%</b>
<b>Total N</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>481</b>
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 5. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Route of return.**

Source: Authors' data.

Overall assessment	Female domestic worker	Female factory worker	Male factory worker	Total
Success	62.1%	25.2%	29.5%	<b>38.5%</b>
Neutral	22.9%	30.3%	26.0%	<b>26.1%</b>
Failure	15.0%	44.5%	44.5%	<b>35.5%</b>
<b>Total N</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>499</b>
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 6. Migrant worker returnees from Vietnam. Overall assessment of experience as migrant workers.**

Source: Authors' data.

Overstay often preceded return among our study participants. Since the duration of workers' contracts is rather public and generally standard depending on the country of destination, workers who overstay are quickly identified by fellow villagers. The choice to overstay comes with a severe penalty: the non-reimbursement of the safety deposit, a measure enforced in Vietnam to reduce the risk of workers overstaying their visas. Factory workers were much more likely to overstay their visas than domestic ones (11.1 per cent of female factory workers, 15.8 per cent of male factory workers, and only 1.4 per cent of domestic workers). Our gender analysis does not identify clear differences between men and women; rather, female domestic workers were more likely to return at the end of the contract while factory workers, men and women, were at risk of early return (very precarious outcome) or could overstay their visas (could be a strategy to counteract precarity in order to earn more income). The type of work was a greater determinant in reducing precarity (timely return), increasing precarity (early return, which often translated into unpaid debts) or in providing an opportunity to stay longer and earn additional income if overstay proved to be successful (which was not always the case). As evidenced by the data, the range of precarity is greater among the female and male factory workers than among domestic workers in our study.

On a series of subjective measures of their experience, returnees differed in their sense of

whether work abroad had improved their situation or not. The main finding here is an overall positive assessment from former domestic workers and similar, yet more mitigated assessments from male and female factory workers. Nearly two thirds of former domestic workers considered their experience a success, while less than a third of factory workers did so (see Table 6). We asked returnees to assess the impact of their migration on the following aspects of their lives: loans and debts, savings, employment, income, living conditions, education, and health and social status. In response to all these questions, higher proportions of domestic workers reported positive impacts, while factory workers, men or women, reported similar or negative impacts (results not shown). For example, over 82 per cent of former domestic workers report a positive impact on their level of indebtedness, compared to only 64 and 59 per cent of female and male former factory workers, respectively. Nearly half of domestic workers felt their social status was enhanced, compared to only about a quarter of former factory workers.

### Conclusion

Empirically, this paper shows some ways in which precarity among low-skilled migrant workers relates to gender and type of work. First, we provided descriptive results of three separate groups to analyse the effect of gender versus the effect of a migrant worker's position in the labour market. It is often thought that migrant workers

in the private sphere, such as domestic workers, nannies or elder care workers, are particularly vulnerable to abuse and precariousness. In fact, in the case of the migrants studied here, we see that domestic workers are, for many of the variables analysed, in a stronger position than women or men working in factories. On subjective measures where migrants assess their own migration, domestic workers report significantly more positive experiences than factory workers.

In the pre-departure period, from recruitment, training, contract signing, and fee payment, Vietnamese potential migrant workers are at risk of abuse. Although the labour-export program in Vietnam is supposed to be led entirely by state-owned labour-export companies (Wang and Bélanger 2011), in reality, multiple actors – at the national, provincial, district and commune levels, as well as those acting privately on behalf of the multitude of recruiting agencies – are involved. Because exporting labour generates profit, an open discussion of exorbitant costs, frequent abuse and deception is avoided and media accounts often focus on problems abroad, pointing at receiving nations and employers as being the ones mostly responsible for the problems encountered by migrants. Since early 2010, however, some stories of abuse at home have been uncovered and reported by the media. For example, in July 2011, a big case of export-labour fraud went to trial. A total of 111 aspiring labourers who desired to work in South Korea were cheated out of nearly one million US dollars (on average US\$9,000.00 each by six unlicensed brokers). In the end, none of the workers who had paid the fees was sent to South Korea (VTC News 2011).

However, survey results show that the risks differ by gender and types of work abroad. Women who prepare to go abroad as domestic workers pay lower fees and, consequently, hold less debt than their counterparts. While lower fees could be related to subsequent lower income levels, we do not see such a discrepancy in our results. In the training period, however, candidates for domestic work are particularly at risk of abuse.

The strongest discrepancy between the groups observed concerns time abroad when domestic

workers report more positive experiences. The same result emerged from our qualitative data overall. Domestic workers in our sample worked in Taiwan, where there is a strong civil society advocating migrants' rights and government policy aimed at reducing abuse. Some research suggests that when domestic workers have good relationships with their employers, while their structural precarity might not be reduced, their subjective experience may be significantly more positive (Lin and Bélanger 2012). Domestic workers are less likely to return early or late, two routes to return with significantly more risk of increased precarity, although overstay might boost total income.

Our analysis thus shows how precarity differs at each stage of the migration process. Studying each moment of migration reveals how the types of precarity vary by gender, but also by the type of work migrants do. The country of destination, a variable not included in the present analysis, also matters. Working in East Asia is very different from working in the Gulf region. Political, religious, social and economic contexts differ and together shape the migration experience in specific ways. The degree of precarity varies between individuals surveyed in this study. The quantitative analysis provides means, but the narratives we collected provide examples of the range of precarity experienced, including extreme cases of forced labour and human trafficking (Bélanger, forthcoming).

The more positive experience of domestic workers contrasts with the idea that workers in private homes are particularly subject to abuse and precarity. Expectations prior to migration could vary. Domestic workers might have very low expectations prior to leaving and, therefore, express very positive sentiments if their migration went relatively well. Men might expect high earnings and good working conditions, and the realities of their time abroad could foster a negative evaluation. Beyond expectations, however, these results call for more research on male migrant workers and their experience of precarity. Research on workers in fisheries shows the harsh realities of foreign workers on fishing vessels (Derks 2010), but is insufficient. Studies

on female factory workers generally focus on internal migration flows, but the experiences of international migrants in this sector are less studied. Future analyses should also use multivariate analyses to provide a deeper understanding of how precarity unfolds and is experienced by various subgroups of migrants. A gender approach shifts the focus strictly from migrant women to the interplay of gender with other variables.

Overall, conceptually, this analysis reveals that temporariness plays a role in shaping migrants' experience at all stages of the migration process.

Prior to departure, temporariness is defined by the contract duration, which sets the expected time of return. Abroad, temporariness entails such precariousness or precarity that becoming undocumented might be preferable. Upon return, the relationship between temporariness and precarity continues when the preconceived duration of temporariness is not met, and, therefore, a form of social precarity through exclusion and stigmatisation after return is created. These relationships indicate the need to develop migration theories in line with such trajectories and features of contemporary migration flows.

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