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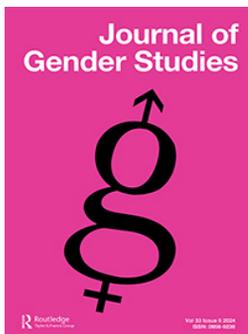
*Women workers and the contestation of gender roles
in Vietnam's new rural factories*

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Women workers and the contestation of gender roles in Vietnam's new rural factories

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnam garment factories are increasingly moving to rural areas, encouraged by government incentives and labour shortages. Many factories predominantly employ women, and in this article we examine the experiences of 12 women working at a factory in their home village in northern Vietnam. Factory work, because it is in the formal sector, has made visible to the women's families and their communities that they are 'workers', in contrast to the invisibility of domestic and family agriculture work. Taking an empowerment approach to frame this study, we argue that their new financial resources and visibility as workers led them to challenge gendered roles in their households in important ways, including around financial decision-making and the distribution of domestic work. They also felt their status within the community was elevated. However, our findings show that empowerment is conditional, incremental and constrained by patriarchal familial dynamics and gendered societal scripts. As with elsewhere, the tensions between factory work as a form of empowerment and as a form of exploitation are inherently linked, and women's gendered identities shape the ways factory owners are able to create a cheaper factory workforce in rural Vietnam.

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Introduction

Since 2010 many garment factories in Vietnam have relocated from cities to rural areas and have been hiring women to work on the factory floors. Creating jobs and diversifying livelihoods in rural Vietnam, especially for women, has been a priority of the Vietnamese Government (Chau, 2018). The government offers economic incentives for enterprises to set up businesses in rural areas, such as lower land rental costs, tax incentives, loans with low interest rates, human resource training, and simplified administrative procedures (Holroyd & Coates, 2021; Vietnam Communist Party, 2018). Thus, these enterprises can save significantly on production costs by moving to rural areas. Factories also benefit by avoiding the labour shortages that exist in the large cities (Buckley, 2023; Duong, 2012). According to UNICEF (2017), there are approximately 6000 garment factories in rural areas. Employment in these factories has dramatically changed the lives of the women workers, who have often moved into this work from family agriculture and other informal work.

Given that factories have only been set up in rural areas recently, there has been little research on the experience of workers in these factories, and even less about women workers (see however Buckley, 2023; Chau, 2018). Instead, the focus of the academic research into factory workers in Vietnam has been on the experience of young women working in cities, about 80% of who have

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migrated from rural areas (UNICEF, 2017). For some women, it can provide an opportunity to escape family and community pressures (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010) and gives women a source of stable financial employment (UNICEF, 2017). However, the literature suggests that higher living costs in urban areas can mean little money is left over after expenses (Kien, 2021) and living conditions can be poor, including because of limited housing (M. T. Nguyen et al., 2022). Whilst Tran (2008), argues that women's engagement in global subcontracting factories has disciplined them into commodified, compliant and flexible workers, studies also show they do resist these conditions (Chi & van den Broek, 2020; Tran, 2008).

Women's experiences of working in urban factories can be very different to that of women in rural factories. In urban factories, women tend to be recruited when they are young, few recruit women over 35 years old (Duong, 2012). There are specific difficulties faced by women with children who chose to migrate to work in urban factories, among these being access to childcare and schooling (Siu & Unger, 2020; UNICEF, 2017). The children of most factory workers stay with their parents, but a significant number live with relatives in their hometown until starting primary school (Siu & Unger, 2020; UNICEF, 2017). For women from rural areas, any deviation from the performance of gender roles is evident, unlike migrant workers they can not re-fashion themselves out of the eye of the community (Bélanger & Pendakis, 2010).

In this study, we examine the experiences of rural women working in an export-orientated factory that opened in their village in Hà Nam province in northern Vietnam in 2014. The village had traditionally been the home of farmers who grew rice and maize on family-owned farms and women's work there was located primarily in the 'private' spaces of family agriculture, domestic work and caring for family. The factory, which employs about 400 people from the village, is emblematic of the larger trend of industrialization and off-farm work in rural Vietnam caused in large part by government appropriation of agricultural land for industrial projects (Chau, 2018; Cu et al., 2020). This has brought about changes which have included a growing number of people excess to the requirements of agriculture (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Holroyd & Coates, 2021) and the outward migration of men and women (Bacud et al., 2021; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Kawarazuka et al., 2020). Like other apparel factories in Vietnam (UNICEF, 2017), almost all the workers on the factory floor were women and we were interested in whether this factory work changed the women's status in their families and communities. We sought to examine how this factory work shifted women's identities and gender roles, and played a role in household and community dynamics. Couched within an ethnographic approach, this research included the first author's immersion into factory and village life, in addition to 12 semi-structured interviews with women (all mothers) between 25 and 45 years who worked at the factory.

Factory work in the global south: at once empowering and exploitative

Gender is a central dynamic of the global garment industry. Women in the global South have worked in export orientated garment factories since the 1960s (Elson & Pearson, 1981) and there is a voluminous literature about female garment workers in South Asia (for example Kabeer et al., 2018; Mezzadri, 2016; Pun & Chan, 2012). Many feminist writers have argued, as it is here, that employment in formal work can be empowering for women (Chopra, 2015). For example, in their study of women and work in Bangladesh, Kabeer et al. (2018) argue this can go beyond economic empowerment and include family and community dynamics. Kabeer (2008) argues paid work can alter the balance of power, decision-making, patterns of domestic abuse, and increase resources and assets for the women involved. But Kabeer (2020) warns that individual forms of empowerment are only starting points and that changing patriarchal, institutional and structural mechanisms of domination requires transformative agency to change the material conditions women face in factory work and society more broadly.

Undoubtedly, the societal norms that guide the performance of gender can be used as a means of exploitation in the world's factories. A body of global literature has repeatedly identified the

underpayment of wages women have experienced in many factories and the hazardous work environments, long working hours, harsh discipline, lack of job security, suppression of trade union rights, confinement to factory grounds and slum-like living conditions in many factories (Kien, 2021; Pun, 2005; Tran, 2008; Trask, 2013). Feminist work has pointed to the cultural and economic ways in which gender identity is drawn on – and reconstructed – to maintain a cheaper workforce. Tsing (2009, p. 171), like others, has argued that capitalism ‘makes use of diverse socio-economic niches through which goods and services can be produced more cheaply’ and gender is one of these. Elson and Pearson (1981) pointed out several decades ago that this included claims to women’s innate natural capacity for this type of work, with ‘naturally nimble fingers’, while Soni-Sinha (2011) has shown that gender identities and roles can mean that women undertake work in the paid economy within their homes, and this work to be devalued. It is not only factory owners that draw on these discourses, Chi and van den Broek (2020), for example, argue that women have been marginalized in manufacturing unions and this has affected the extent to which they represent the issues especially relevant to women. The gendered division has a central role in shaping the global economy, but this is of course dependent on the cultural context, norms and practices that maintain and reproduce this division. In the context of this research, a village in northern Vietnam, Confucianism, socialism and the urbanization of rural areas have served to shape gender roles, identities and expectations, as well as the potential for exploitation and possibilities for agency and empowerment.

We situate our research between this dialectic of empowerment and exploitation in order to examine what this looks like in the lives of women in rural Vietnam. Kabeer (2008, 2018) argue that women’s empowerment can be understood as ‘changes that went “against the grain” of the structures of patriarchal constraint ...’ (Kabeer et al., 2018, p. 236) and they argue that paid work can lead in this direction. Women have agency in this process, yet as Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) argue, labour agency is always constrained and relational. Different subject positions offer varying constraints and opportunities and labour agency needs to be connected ‘... into the webs of wider relations with other social actors and institutions in which they are inevitably embedded’ (2010, p.221). They argue that workers are especially constrained by global production networks, the state, community politics and labour market intermediaries (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). To think about the question of work and empowerment requires thinking about the connections between work in the factory and work outside of this. Work in a factory can, for example, just be an additional burden in women’s lives (see Dutta, 2019). For women moving into paid work, their labour agency crosses, to follow Carswell and de Neve (2013), activity in both the productive and reproductive spheres, and the constraints upon this located across both. Whether paid work leads to empowerment is not predetermined, and here we examine ways in which women variously employ the different resources paid work makes possible. Given the conditions and pay in factories, and gendered processes that allow for this, we are necessarily aware that viewing this through the lens of empowerment can limit an understanding of the social and political contexts in which these issues are a part.

Tracing changing gender roles in rural Vietnam

The impact rural factory work has on women needs to be understood in terms of gender roles in Vietnam. Confucianism, feudalism, socialism and more recently neoliberalism and global discourses of femininity have blended to shape the values and social norms of Vietnamese society (Do & Brennan, 2015; Werner, 2009). Rural northern Vietnam has been influenced by Confucianism more than the rest of the country, and this includes prescribed gendered performance and presentation as part of a social and moral code in which they are wholly dedicated to family and community life (Nghia, 2005). The three submissions/obediences of Confucianism outline a patriarchal family structure in which women must submissively obey their father, their husband and then their son throughout their lives – though it is the mothers-in-law who often enforce these rules (O’Harrow,

2021). The virtue of *công* (industriousness) means women must be diligent and efficient in their domestic labour. The feminine ideal extends beyond the home, including ancestor worship, community activities and caring for extended family members (Werner, 2009). Through industriousness and other virtues that emphasize chastity and femininity in behaviour, women are placed as the collective moral backbone of the family and society (O'Harrow, 2021).

In rural Vietnam, women are primarily ascribed roles in the domestic sphere, including family agriculture, caring work, and work in the informal economy. Teerawichitchainan et al. (2010) found that women did over 80% of non-agricultural domestic work and other research has shown that women also shoulder the heaviest workload in agricultural production (Bergstedt, 2015). Many women also engage in informal work such as selling agricultural products, street vending, or casual labour, work that is characterized by low wages and poor working conditions (D. L. Nguyen et al., 2014; Turner, 2018). In addition, women are expected to ensure their children, relatives and communal duties are attended to (Bergstedt, 2015; Scott & Chuyen, 2007). However, gender relations have been changing in rural Vietnam following the Doi Moi reforms. Bacud et al. (2021), for instance, found that some women have a greater decision-making role on farms, and Hoang and Yeoh (2011) found women and men doing more work which is not typically ascribed to their gender. Importantly, Kawarazuka et al. (2020) found that women's increased economic independence through labour migration challenged the stereotypical images of women's work, however this did not necessarily translate to shifts into higher status roles or more responsibility in work contexts. Understanding these changes to gender relations and roles in rural Vietnam provides us with important context for our study, particularly in relation to what enables and constrains empowerment for women taking up paid work.

Methodology

This study draws on three months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 12 women workers in a factory in rural northern Vietnam undertaken by Thuy, the first author, as part of her doctoral research. Having grown up in a rural town nearby, Thuy was both insider and outsider, experiencing similar gender norms and expectations, but also coming back as an educated professional to undertake research that would unpack and examine these complex relations. Methodologically, this study was informed by feminist epistemologies positioning women as having 'situated knowledge' that can shed light on the confluence of power relations that impact their lives (Haraway, 1988, p. 83). For the fieldwork, Thuy immersed herself in community life, working in the factory for a short period of time to develop a deeper understanding of the women and the nature of the work, as well as the work culture in the factory more broadly. She also spent time in different community settings such as the market, attending pagoda events and weddings, visiting neighbours' homes, and the local women's association meetings. Ethnography aims to investigate aspects of the lived experience of people within a particular cultural context and thus was chosen for its focus on '... discovering and investigating social and cultural patterns and meaning in communities, institutions, and other social settings' (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 1). Ethnographic interviews are distinct in that they often have a foundation of familiarity, reciprocity and trust between the researcher and the participants as a consequence of spending time in situ (Spradley, 2016). Thus, researchers have a nuanced understanding that results in contextualized conversations with participants (Stage & Mattson, 2003). Interviews focused upon participants' narrating their experiences of gender relations, roles and identity prior to undertaking paid work and how these had shifted as a result of their paid work in a factory. These shifts in how women are perceived and treated, in addition to the sense of control they have over their lives, are reflective of Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem (2018) 'spheres of empowerment which take place in relation to self, family/household and community.

The 12 women were interviewed in 2019 and were recruited either through a local women's organization or while Thuy worked in the factory. The women had all worked in the factory for some years, with half of them having been there since it opened. They all lived in the village and were all

mothers over 25. However, their household and mothering experiences differed: eight participants lived with their husband, parents-in-law and children; one with her husband and children; one with her children and parents; one with her mother-in-law; and one with her husband. None of the women had undertaken formal work in their village before this. But four women had worked in city factories and of these, three intending to work there temporarily, and one had wanted to move permanently. Thus, some participants had experiences that offered a comparative perspective about factory work in cities versus rural areas. In addition, most participants had worked in informal but paid work in their village, and all had worked in family agriculture. To keep the principles of confidentiality, participants' names have been changed. The research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE18–194). For analysing the interviews, we used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) in the interpretation of the women's stories and experiences, identifying, analysing and reflexively interpreting patterns in the data, with due attention to our different roles of insider/outsider.

Working in the formal sector: from invisible to visible work

The descriptions women gave of working in family agriculture, domestic work and sometimes informal work prior to working in the factory suggested it was undervalued. Mai and Huê, participants in this study, explained that family agriculture was both difficult and time consuming. Mai said she spent most of her day farming and came back when the sun set: '... I did agricultural activities and raised livestock at home ... when I came home, I had to do a lot of work that is called "domestic work"'. Huê, who did this work while her husband spent his days working away from home, said:

I had to shoulder all the farming tasks ... When I came home from the field, I had so many home chores to do because no one helped me. Farming is considered the responsibility of women.

Both women explained that as well as being physically difficult, agricultural work paid poorly and was unreliable. Mai said:

I worked hard but sometimes we lost the harvest because of bad weather or from insect diseases. ... the rice was not enough to support my family. We didn't have enough food, and I was worried ...

Similarly, Huê recalled that:

... We only had enough rice to sustain the family, sometimes 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 anything else to do.

Alongside this work, some participants engaged in informal work selling produce, most commonly selling a small quantity of agricultural products grown at home at the local open market (*chợ*) or to neighbours. Cam recalled: 'Sometimes I had to sell something at the market. This was just for extra money, for buying food and some other things'. Huê ran a small shop at her home selling fertilizer to villagers. This type of work is the responsibility of women, and as Leshkovich argues, underpinning this are beliefs about gender roles: 'the *chợ* is said to have always been a woman's domain because of Vietnamese women's natural aptitude for trade' (Leshkovich, 2014, p. 5). This work is outside the home, but it simply becomes an extension of the domestic sphere based on constructions of gender roles. Kabeer (2008, p. 7) notes that it is the 'intertwining of ideological and material factors' that constitute the 'structures of constraints' – the rules, norms and practices, in family and beyond, that ensure the reproduction of gendered inequality. In contrast, in the factory their jobs were ongoing and usually fulltime, and were visible to the household and community as "work". As discussed in the following sections, most of the women not only felt that their families' financial situation had improved but that the work they did in the household had reduced, and their status at home and in the community was greater.

But their factory work wasn't a complete break from informal work. For example, women regularly took home garments to finish sewing, and overtime was often a significant part of their pay. Buckley (2023) has argued that while there is an increase in formal work in Vietnam, there is at the same time an informalisation of the formal economy through the use of mechanisms such as short-term contracts, payment by pieces completed and excessive overtime. He locates these within the market liberalizations of Doi Moi and argues that the increased number of private enterprises offer poorer protections for workers, while the conditions in State Owned Factories have also worsened (Buckley, 2023). It was evident at the factory that this work was not the only livelihood strategy that women were pursuing, the workers often sold goods at the factory, and indeed the factory owner commented on this by saying the factory at times 'resembled a market'. Similarly, their caring responsibilities and work for their children also took place in the factory setting when alternative arrangements fell through. Whilst the flexibility is of benefit to the women, it ultimately benefits the factory in creating the conditions for a 'flexible' workforce and one which means that women are willing to work for less pay than they would in cities because they can both work in the factories and undertake caring responsibilities.

Shifting the division of domestic work

All the participants said they did less domestic work after starting at the factory, and that this work was redistributed to other members of their household – their husbands, parents-in-laws (but most especially mothers-in-law) and children. Their income was a very important contribution to the household's finances, indeed in most households their income was comparable to their husband's wage, if not greater, and their husband's work was often short-term and less reliable. Because of this, their work was 'visible' in a way it had not been previously. Most of the participants who lived with a husband reported that their husbands had taken on a significantly larger share of domestic work, especially cooking and shopping. Huệ, whose children were already grown up, said her husband finished work earlier than her and 'when I come home, dinner is ready'. Similarly, Hoa's husband now prepares dinner where previously '... he sat in front of the television, and whenever dinner was ready, I offered it to him'. Not all of their husbands were more involved, though, and Táo said she still did the domestic work and helped her children with their homework while '... my husband usually does nothing'. In many households, the women's work in the factory also led to some domestic work being transferred to other members of the household.

The performance of particular gendered roles remained significant in the way women contested their roles in their households. For one, much of this work was still undertaken by women, but it was an intergenerational transfer of work. While traditionally daughters-in-law are responsible for most of the household's domestic work, mothers-in-laws were taking on more of this. Hồng, for example, said: 'Other jobs like cleaning houses, washing clothes, cooking rice, my mother-in-law does it all. My mother-in-law, my husband and my son do all the tasks at home to support me'. Some of the women were pleased to have their domestic work reduced, but still wanted to hold on to some roles, and explained these in terms of existing gender roles. Mai explained this in terms of motherhood:

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]

For Mận, household work was tied to gender identity, expectations and capabilities:

I think old people say, 'women must be good at housework'. It is true. No matter how hard he tries a man will never be as good as a woman at housework.

Gender ideologies about the natural capacities and roles of women and men are deeply ingrained, culturally and structurally, and change is not straightforward. This is not simply other family members 'making up' for the hours women are in the paid workforce, though, rather it challenges existing gender relations. Women's entry into factory work is one of a number of challenges to

existing gender roles in rural Vietnam today. Hoang and Yeoh (2011) found that when women migrated from rural Vietnam some fathers performed masculine roles differently because of the pressure on their time. In our study, too, there was some evidence that concepts of masculinity were changing or at the least exceptions were being made to gender role transgression. A husband of one of the factory workers, for example, described how he can now do the shopping with his masculinity intact because everyone knows his wife is working.

Shifting gendered access to household resources

Women in rural Vietnam are usually responsible for managing the day-to-day household budget, but not the decisions behind how money is allocated, especially decisions about significant expenditure such as children's education or household furniture (Kato & Luong, 2016; Rydstrom, 2003). Yet as is the case elsewhere, it is involvement in the decision-making – rather than the management of the budget – that is associated with power in the household (Çinel, 2022). Financial decision-making in a household in rural Vietnam is usually the husband's domain and perhaps that of his parents, who have higher status than their daughter-in-law (Rydstrom, 2003). Mận recalled how being responsible for managing the household budget was a source of anxiety for her:

After I got married and gave birth, I had no job, only stayed at home and looked after my child... [My husband] sometimes complained why so much money was spent. I felt stressed at that time. ... I did not dare to spend anything on things for myself, not even clothes. When I visited my mum, she bought clothes for me.

Cam also illustrated the significance of the arrangement around money to power in the household:

All money my husband earns he does not give any to me, he gives to my mother-in-law. She may be afraid I will use a part of that to support my own parents.

Women said their income allowed them to claim a greater role in the decision making regarding household financial resources. Most women said financial decisions were shared more equally after they started at the factory. Bưởi said happily, '... if the spending is small, I make decisions by myself, if it is over 1 million VND (\$43 USD), we ask each other's opinion'. Mận described how her mother-in-law's attitude changed after she started work in 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 occurred before. However, I only buy things for my children and my family such as milk, food, living expenditure.

Some women said the respect they gained from having an income was useful in being able to negotiate financial decisions in their household. Bưởi, said her father-in-law, who was 'very strict and has a lot of control over our lives', disagreed when she wanted to buy a small air conditioner for the bedroom she and her children slept in, but after starting at the factory:

I dared to confront him when I intended to make this decision. The right to make big decision like that had belonged to him or my husband. I had no status in the family to do it.

and she said she drew on advice, including from her co-workers:

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 ... Finally, he agreed with my decision.

These findings highlight the shift in perceptions among the family members of the status and role of the women as a result of them bringing in much needed income. This has led to important changes in power within the household, specifically that the women were now playing a more significant role in making decisions about resources. These changes also enable psychological empowerment, providing women with a greater sense of self-worth and confidence, allowing them to challenge patriarchal traditions in a way that they would previously not have dared. This contestation plays out within gendered constraints, as Bưởi's example above shows. She challenges her father-in-law, but

ultimately this is his decision. Likewise, Mận's story reminds us of the entrenched nature of gendered dynamics in the household; despite her mother-in-law's permission, she still decides to only spend money on her family, reflecting how women still performed their gendered roles in accordance with familial and societal expectations.

Shifting visibility in the community

As was the case within their households, some women felt they were valued more in the wider community because of their status as a factory worker, partly due to the monetary value of their work. Mơ, who had worked on her family's farm for years, said when she started working at the factory '... they [community] think we work harder than before' and Đào noticed she became more visible in her village:

... in the past ... 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.

While some women such as Đào were pleased to be more respected, other women said they did not care. Hồng explained: 'Every job is a job. It's hard to earn money'. Women also talked about increased respect due to their status as consumers, and this was important for some women. Cam said that when she went to shops such as grocery or clothes shops:

I notice the sellers 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.

Another change in perception stems from shifts in their role as the backbone of collective life, through organizing, cooking and serving others at weddings, ceremonies, and celebrations. Rather sometimes, usually during the week, instead of performing unpaid labour for these events the women's contribution became a financial one. Bưởi said she and other women working in the factory now often hire a small business to do this work, showing '... our sincere heart (*thành tâm*)' via their contribution. Hồng was pleased when she and other women from the factory were able to make a visible financial contribution to the community because it would demonstrate their worth:

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

Similar to the changes in perceptions in their family, the women's experiences in the community reflected shifts in status that were tied to their work outside the home, and the value attributed to that. These findings show how the women's sense of worth increased as their role in the community shifted from being sellers or serving others, to that of consumers and even the ones being served. This was not a clear-cut shift as many of the women spoke about ensuring that they fulfilled their gendered spiritual roles within the communal house (*đình*) and pagoda (*chùa*) and these remain key public spaces in which women must be visible symbolically and practically. Likewise, this did not necessarily change gender roles, but rather who did this work. It was usually still women who did the preparation and men who did work out the front of these events but it was now often the older generation or alternatively people hired to do this work.

Conclusion

For the women in this study, working in a factory in their community allowed them to elevate their social and economic status in their households and the community. This is in line with a body of literature (e.g. Kabeer et al., 2018) that has found that women's engagement in the formal workforce can provide opportunities to create changes in their

lives which are empowering. Our research reflects important shifts in the agency of these women, including increased control to choose how to participate in household and community life. Most of the women said that they were able to bring about changes that were meaningful, and often very significant, after working in the factory. In part these changes were directly related to the importance of their work to the financial situation of their household. Women were able to leverage this to get a greater say in financial decisions. Their new financial resources also meant they were able to present themselves in the community in newly visible ways, both at community events and as consumers. Some changes were possible because of practicalities, because of the need for households and the community to function when women were not available, and some domestic and community work was transferred to others, mainly husbands and mother-in-laws. Additionally, the cultural value ascribed to work in the formal sector played a significant role in elevating the status of women in the eyes of the community.

None of the changes in women's lives were pre-given by their entry into the paid workforce, and women described incidents in which they had to push hard for change and challenge their husbands and in-laws. Women drew differently on the financial, practical, and cultural changes associated with their work to challenge aspects of household and community life within the constraints of patriarchal norms and gendered expectations. What aspects of family and community life women wanted to challenge, or felt they could, differed. Most wanted to follow some expected gender roles, such as around childcare, more faithfully than others roles. These roles are deeply anchored in sociohistorical influences of Confucianism and socialism, in which Vietnamese women must be nurturing, selfless and in constant service to others (O'Harrow, 2021). Performing gender in ways that still at least partly satisfies cultural norms and avoids shame was important. This reflects the pressure of patriarchal heteronormative power, laying bare the constraints placed on empowerment and agency for women (Butler, 1988). In line with Kabeer et al. (2018), shifts associated with paid work can be empowering for individuals, because family and community dynamics change, but only starting points. In part this is because it is questionable as to whether some of these shifts were significant in recasting gendered roles and divisions of labour. For example, whilst in some households the domestic work was transferred to husbands, it was often taken up by mother-in-laws instead and in community celebrations and ceremonies the roles and labour these women performed was often still done by women – whether hired or older women.

To think about paid work such as this using the framework of empowerment has sometimes left unattended the ways in which much of women's work outside of the formal sector is undervalued, while the formal sector exploitative. The participants in this research had all worked hard to support their households in family agriculture, domestic work and sometimes informal work, and they still do. But this work was not valued as highly as working in the formal sector. Given that social reproduction is still work that needs to be done, empowerment via paid work is not sufficient. Further, work in the formal sector, in factories such as this, is often characterized by exploitative labour relations, low-pay, long hours and a lack of regulation (Kien, 2021; Pun, 2005; Tran, 2008; Trask, 2013). The undervaluing of work outside and within the formal sector are related. Both the factory and the sphere of social reproduction draw on gender scripts that ascribe meaning and value to work. In this factory, the women all worked doing 'women's work', sewing garments. That women are willing to work in these factories is shaped in part by gender norms and roles. This work satisfies their need to remain in their 'home place' (quê) and in their gendered roles as mother, wife and daughter-in-law where they maintain community responsibilities. In both the factories and the work outside the formal sector, gender identities inherently link these dynamics of exploitation and empowerment, constraining the empowerment of women.

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