

The consequences of labour out-migration on income, rice productivity and gender roles: Synthesis of findings in the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam

Thelma R. Paris, Joyce Luis and Donald Villanueva, International Rice Research Institute, Philippines

Maria Fay Rola-Rubzen, Curtin University of Technology, Australia

Truong Thi Ngoc Chi, Cuu Long Delta Rice Research Institute, Vietnam

Chaicharn Wongsanum, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

1. Introduction

Around 70 percent of the population in Southeast Asia lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture. However, the share of agriculture in gross domestic product has declined, agricultural labour productivity growth is decreasing and productivity gaps remain wide. Low product prices and high input prices have also made agriculture less attractive. The result: low growth in agriculture and lower incomes for the people dependent on it. Although agriculture, especially rice farming, is still the largest employer, its capacity to generate new employment is falling. In East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, it now has less employment potential than industry or services (UNESCAP, 2008). Out-migration from rural areas is now increasingly becoming an important livelihood strategy and escape out of poverty. Migration is a safety net against income shortfalls because of crop failure or low productivity created by drought or floods. In addition to deteriorating employment opportunities at home and better prospects in urban areas, the increased mobility of the population from the rural areas is also a result of improved communication and road networks (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).

Policy-makers are often concerned that out-migration of labour from agriculture might reduce crop production and endanger food security. On the other hand, remittances may facilitate on-farm investment or relieve credit constraints that impeded farmers from buying fertilizer or other key inputs. The unresolved question concerning migration and agricultural production is whether remittance incomes enhance production enough to compensate for the reduced availability of male or female labour in any specific setting and improve intra-household welfare (better education of children, reduction in women's workload, empowerment of women, etc.). Although there have been numerous studies on migration, what has not received much attention is how this process affects the family members left behind, especially women. According to Hugo (1993), migration has potentially far-reaching effects on household structure by increasing the incidence of female-headed households through sex-selectivity of migration. However, although there has been much talk about the "feminization" of agriculture and increasing female-managed farms because of increasing male migration and participation in non-farm work, data that support this contention are patchy and anecdotal. The reduction in the

supply of male family labour because of participation in non-farm work and migration will have repercussions on the management of the farming systems, rice production and intra-household welfare, particularly on women's roles and responsibilities. There are knowledge gaps in relation to the effects of migration on gender roles. There is a need to anticipate the likely implications of this trend and to prioritize research and policy interventions that can improve the well-being of members of farming households, especially of women farmers who are left to manage the farms.

In this paper, we are especially concerned with improving the understanding of migration's contribution to the livelihoods of rice-farming households and its effects on women left behind to manage farms.

The specific objectives of this research are to:

- determine the incidence and patterns of work-related migration in major rice-based farming systems in the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam;
- assess the contribution of remittances to household income and of migration to rice productivity and the labour participation of men and women in rice production;
- examine the key constraints faced by women in managing farms;
- identify training needs and technology solutions to overcome these constraints;
- recommend gender-responsive policies and women-friendly rice-related technologies which can provide rural livelihood opportunities and empower poor rural women.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section two discusses the methodology for achieving the objectives. Section three presents the research findings and section four provides examples of training activities that can enhance women's technical knowledge and skills. Section five presents a summary and conclusions. Finally, section six provides recommendations to help women from farming households which have male migrants.

2. Methodology

To address the five objectives, this study used a number of methodologies. It is important to note that in this study, migration is defined as the move or change in residence of an individual (rather than an entire family) for a continuous period of three months or longer. Labour movement within a village and other villages for employment on a daily, weekly or monthly basis was classified as non-farm activity.

Literature review. A review of literature on migration, agricultural productivity and gender roles was conducted separately in the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Secondary data and information on the study areas (districts and villages) were gathered.

Selection of study sites. The study sites were selected in consultation with local government agencies. The selected study sites in the Philippines were Pangasinan, Bulacan and Bicol, which are located in Luzon Island. In northeast Thailand, villages in Khon Kaen and Udonthani, which represent rainfed and irrigated rice production systems, were selected. In Vietnam, the study was conducted in villages located in Vinh Phuc province in North Vietnam, and in Tien Giang, Long An and Ben Tre provinces of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam. Except for North Vietnam, which represents irrigated areas only, selected

villages in South Vietnam have both rainfed and irrigated rice production systems. All of the study villages grow rice during the wet season. Farmers who have access to irrigation facilities grow two to three crops of rice per year. Vietnam has the highest rice-cropping intensity index but has the lowest rice area (less than one hectare). The average rice area in the Philippines and Thailand is less than two hectares. A household has about five to six family members. Other non-rice crops are grown during the dry season, depending upon the availability of residual moisture or limited irrigation.

Data collection. A rapid rural appraisal and census of farming households in 48 villages in Thailand, 46 in the Philippines and 42 in Vietnam were conducted to determine the incidence of individual migration in rainfed and irrigated villages. Village-level information included the characteristics of the village, typologies of households (social differentiation), agriculture-related information, proximity to a labour market, occurrence and nature of participation of family members in farm, off-farm and nonfarm work and other migration-related information.

Focus group discussions with key informants were conducted to elicit perceptions on migration and its consequences on agriculture and family welfare.

Extensive household surveys were also conducted. Villages were selected based on the rapid rural appraisal. Households were selected through proportionate sampling according to the number of households in a village. The number of households with and without migrants that participated in the survey was 831 in Vietnam, 830 in Thailand and 813 in the Philippines. A structured pre-tested questionnaire was used, made up of two parts: Part one includes farm-household information, migration-related information, perceptions on the impact of out-migration on crop production and livestock, amount of remittances received from male and female migrants, disbursement of remittances, sources of household income, amount and value of assets and land ownership. Part two includes agricultural information and labour use by gender in major rice operations. Descriptive analysis was conducted by comparing and analysing differences between households with migrants and without migrants.

Identification of constraints of women left behind. Principal women whose husbands migrate were interviewed to identify constraints they faced in managing their farms. To overcome these constraints, technology and training needs were listed and prioritized by the research team for implementation.

3. Findings

3.1. Incidence of migration

We hypothesize that more people from rainfed villages migrate to other areas due to several 'push' factors such as higher risks in crop production, unemployment resulting from low cropping intensity and low productivity, and poor infrastructure facilities. Results show that migration occurs not only in the rainfed but also in the irrigated production ecosystems. But migration is more prevalent in the rainfed villages. The incidence of migration is higher in northeast Thailand than in the Philippines and Vietnam. In Thailand, 63 percent and 54 percent of the households from the rainfed and irrigated villages, respectively, have at least one migrant. In the Philippines and Vietnam, about a quarter of the households have one or more migrants. The factors that have impacts on

TABLE III-8
Incidence of migration

Rates of out-migration	Thailand		Philippines		Vietnam	
	Rainfed	Irrigated	Rainfed	Irrigated	Rainfed	Irrigated
HMR	63	54	26	22	24	20
MMR	34	26	20	22	25	34
FMR	23	20	34	21	13	5
Total households	1 197	789	3 062	2 861	462	2 668
Total adult males	2 433	1 546	728	1 361	1 039	5 394
Total adult females	2 467	1 637	754	1 433	1 047	5 486

Source of data: rapid rural appraisal and census of farming households, 2004.

Household migration rate (HMR) = number of farming households with at least one adult migrant divided by the total number of farming households in the area (sample size).

Male migration prevalence rate (MMR) = number of adult male migrants in the area (sample) divided by the total number of adult males in the area (sample).

Female migration prevalence rate (FMR) = number of female migrants in the area (sample) divided by the total number of adult females in the area (sample).

migration in Vietnam are population and employment pressure, industrialization and urbanization. However, industrialization and urbanization have not only taken place in the big cities; this process has also occurred in many other different localities. In northeast Thailand, riskiness in farming due to unreliable rainfall distribution, drought, unemployment and poverty are factors which push the members of the farming population to the cities and other rural areas. In the Philippines, education and social networks are two of the pull factors, while unemployment, low wages, low profitability in farming and lack of infrastructure facilities are some of the reasons why people leave their villages for 'greener pastures'. The interest to leave the country is not only limited to the elderly but is also found among children, who wish to work abroad someday (Asis, 2006).

Our findings also reveal that the rate of male migration is higher in the rainfed than in the irrigated villages in Thailand and the Philippines. Female migration rates are higher in the rainfed than in the irrigated villages. Across countries, the prevalence of female migration is highest in the Philippines, followed by Thailand and then Vietnam.

3.2. Patterns of migration

Based on the extensive farm household surveys in the Philippines and Thailand, a higher proportion of adult sons and daughters migrate than their fathers. A similar trend is found in South Vietnam. We expect that rice productivity remains the same and labour out-migration will not affect the family labour supply. In contrast, in North Vietnam a higher proportion of principal males migrate than sons, while the principal females are left behind to manage their farms in addition to their household and child care responsibilities.

The migration pattern based on the place of destination depends on the availability of jobs in the place of destination. A higher proportion of the migrants in Thailand and Vietnam are engaged in rural-to-urban migration than rural-to-rural migration. In contrast, international migration is most prevalent in the Philippines, particularly migrants from

the rainfed villages. In Vietnam, rural-to-urban migration is more prevalent among farming households from the rainfed villages. In contrast, in the irrigated villages, an almost equal proportion of the migrants work in the rural and urban areas. International migration in Vietnam is nil.

Migrants leave their villages for better employment and income opportunities. In the Philippines, a higher proportion of the international male migrants than female migrants are employed in the service sector (e.g. airplane, ship, cargo) and factories. Male migrants are employed in the Middle East, Korea, Taiwan and other countries. On the other hand, female overseas workers are employed as domestic helpers, caregivers and factory workers in Italy, the Middle East and Singapore. Migrants prefer to work overseas because they receive higher remuneration and benefits than in their own countries.

In Thailand, almost half of the male and female migrants are engaged in farming in their villages, but only about 10 percent of them are hired in agricultural jobs and about half of them are employed in unskilled jobs at their new work place. Slightly more than one-fourth of them work as salespeople in stores.

In South Vietnam, male migrants work as hired agricultural labourers, factory workers, construction workers and masons in cities, as hired fishermen in sea fishing, and in shrimp or squid catching in other provinces. Women work mainly in factories, in waste trading and small trading, as hired labourers in rice farming, as sand-boating workers, domestic helpers, and factory workers, or in other industrial areas near rural areas.

3.3. Contributions of remittances to household income

Every year, rice farmers who grow rice under rainfed conditions are faced with uncertainty and risk. Rainfall distribution is highly variable and unpredictable. Drought occurs during the vegetative phase of rice growth, which causes losses or low yields. This situation is exacerbated by the predominance of marginal and small landholdings. Consequently, farming households derive their livelihood from diverse sources of farm income (rice, non-rice, livestock, rental fees from land, animals and machines), off-farm activities (income from wage labour on other farms) and non-farm activities (employment activities within and outside their villages without changing residence). In income analysis, remittances are most often classified as non-farm income. However, since this research focuses on income from out-migration, remittances were disaggregated from non-farm income.

Table III-9 shows the share of the different sources of livelihood and average household income. Average household annual incomes of households with migrants are almost twice those of households without migrants in the Philippines and Thailand. In Vietnam the incomes are almost the same. Remittances from migrants comprise a significant share of the total household income in the three countries. The share of remittance income is highest in the Philippines (59 percent) mainly due to international migration. In Thailand and Vietnam, remittances are 38 percent and 36 percent, respectively, where rural-to-urban migration is more prevalent (brought about by rapid industrialization and transportation facilities). Remittance earnings compensate for lower income from rice in the Philippines and Thailand. On the other hand, in Vietnam, remittances compensate for lower income from other crops and lack of other non-farm income opportunities within the villages. It is interesting that households without migrants have much larger sources of non-farm income than migrant households in all three countries. However, the data do not indicate whether non-migrant households develop non-farm livelihood activities

TABLE III-9

Share of different sources of income
(percent) and household income per year

Source of income	Thailand		Vietnam		Philippines	
	WM	NM	WM	NM	WM	NM
	(n=268)	(n=295)	(n=304)	(n=346)	(n=321)	(n=349)
Remittances from migration	38		36		59	
Cash income from rice	12	19	37	49	17	36
Cash income from other crops	16	21	2	1	a	
Off-farm	4	8	2	4	2	2
Non-farm	21	45	10	25	20	57
Capital gains from land and non-land assets	1	1	a	a		a
Income from livestock	8	6	13	21	2	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Annual household income (USD)	2 541	1 842	1 411	1 306	2 857	1 512

WM - with migrant; NM - no migrant; a - less than 1%

because they can not engage in migration, or they do not wish to migrate because they have a satisfactory range of farm and non-farm income sources. Nonetheless, these findings reveal that migration is a routine livelihood strategy of poor farming households, helping them to smooth seasonal income fluctuations and earn extra cash to meet contingencies or increase disposable income, particularly in the rainfed villages.

Off-farm income refers to the income obtained by male or female household members from wages paid in cash or wages in kind by working as hired labourers in different farm operations in other farms. Non-farm income refers to income received by family members by working within and outside the villages without a change in residence. Earnings classified under non-farm income include those from retirement pensions, buy-and-sell small businesses and services and other earnings from household members who commute daily for non-farm jobs.

3.4. Contributions of remittances to household welfare

The contributions of remittances to household welfare depend on the amount of remittances sent by migrants to their families. Migrants allocate their earnings for their personal expenditures in their place of destination and send the rest to their families. Migrants from the Philippines send the highest amount (about US\$200 per month) while Thai migrants send less than US\$100 per month. Vietnamese migrants send the lowest remittances, at less than US\$50 per month. As mentioned earlier, international migration is prevalent in the Philippines, rural-urban in Thailand and Vietnam. Thus, we expect remittances to have greater positive outcomes on family welfare in the Philippines than in Thailand and Vietnam.

How are remittances used by farming households left behind? It has been widely observed that the investment of remittances into productive uses is limited, and consumption spending is greater. But this is not necessarily a problem as consumption can include a variety of uses which may have a positive impact on well-being and multiplier effects in the economy. Based on this study, remittances are mainly used for food and other daily expenditures, particularly in the Philippines and Thailand.

In the Philippines, next to food expenditures, families spend the remittances on children's education and farm inputs. For migrant parents, providing an education for their own children is a priority. Because of strong family ties, unmarried female migrants are expected to pay for the education of other close relatives, including nephews and nieces. Migrants also take care of the health care needs of ageing parents, since public health in the Philippines, particularly in the rural areas, is considered to be quite poor and the costs of medicines too high. A study on Filipino migrants in Italy (INSTRAW, 2008) revealed that it is the investment of remittances in agricultural production that has offered greater food security to remittance-receiving households. This is due in part to the fact that remittances allow farmers to purchase the necessary inputs (e.g. fertilizers, pesticides), pay for irrigation expenses, pay for hired/contractual labourers or purchase livestock. This permits farmers to stock the rice requirements for a year, particularly farmers with rainfed plots who harvest only once in a year.

In Thailand, remittances are also used for repaying debts, purchasing farm inputs and paying for children's education. A study in Khon Kaen province (Aimimthan *et al.*, 2002) reveals that migrants had to pay high interest rates in paying off debts to recruitment companies. More children or dependents in migrant families were enrolled in school than before due to remittance earnings.

In Vietnam, families in the South spend their remittances on food and farm inputs while those from the North keep much of the remittances as savings for future investments, and less so for food expenses. In general, once the basic needs of the households with migrants are met, construction or renovation of a house is generally a common investment, as is the purchase of consumer durable goods.

3.5. Out-migration and rice productivity

The effects of labour out-migration on rice productivity can be mixed. On the one hand, migration might reduce labour supply and farm output. Farm output can later increase if the absence of some family members is compensated by the reinvestment of remittances on farm inputs or by helping ease cash and credit constraints. The performance of a crop can be attributed to many factors, such as the environment, quality of land, labour, capital and managerial ability of the farmer. Effective farm management depends on the education of the farmer, experience, technical knowledge, access to inputs, incentives and family support. Rice productivity itself is influenced by many factors, such as varieties used and crop and resource management practices. If remittances come on time, the farmers can use the available cash to purchase inputs and hire additional farm labour to complete the labour requirements on time and also relieve female family members from drudgery.

To assess the effects of out-migration on rice productivity, we compared the average rice yields of households with and without migrants by production systems (rainfed and irrigated) during the wet season. Results revealed that households with migrants have higher average yields than those without migrants during the wet season for the

irrigated villages included in the study, except in Thailand. These yield differences are statistically significant. In the rainfed villages, average rice yields are almost the same between the two groups. However, these differences are not statistically significant. Thus, based on these comparisons of average yields between the two groups, out-migration did not lead to a reduction in rice productivity. In the rainfed villages in Thailand and Vietnam, households with migrants use more family than hired labour. Family members left behind take over the field operations and farm management responsibilities.

3.6. Out-migration and workload of men and women left behind

What happens to women's workload when men migrate? Palmer (1985) cited many issues for women left behind, one of which is the increase in the work burden of women, depending on who is left behind. In Thailand, principal females had been engaged in their traditional tasks as unpaid workers and as managers with a limited budget, arranging for hired labourers and borrowing money from private lenders. Thus, migration did not change their participation in field activities. However, the principal females revealed that their work burden and farm responsibilities increased. They had to manage the day-to-day farm activities and make crop management decisions aside from household management when their husbands worked outside the villages for extended periods.

In Vietnam, the labour contributions of principal females increased. In addition to managing all operations, they also look for labourers to hire during peak cropping operations. During peak cropping season, wage costs increase and hired labourers are difficult to find. To cope with this problem, women exchange labour with women from other households. The important activities that increase wives' workload when husbands leave are irrigating the fields, dredging field canals, applying fertilizer and spraying pesticides and transporting paddy sacks from the fields to their house and to the market. Thus, the farm managerial responsibilities of the principal women increased due to the migration.

3.7. Constraints faced by women left behind in managing farms

When principal female members left behind were asked whether they had encountered problems in managing their farms, at first they said they had no problems since they had long-term experience in farming. However, after building a rapport with them during the interviews, they said that they faced several constraints in managing their farms and great pressure to maintain rice yields due to the absence of their husbands. They feel the stress in allocating the limited budget for the household, farm inputs and other major expenditures such as children's education.

In the Philippines, they complained of high costs of inputs (seeds, chemicals, hired labour, irrigation) and a low paddy price, especially during the harvest season. They are especially concerned about improving post-harvest practices, which is their domain. Similarly, in Thailand, they complained about the high costs of fertilizer and herbicides to control weeds, especially in direct-seeded plots. They also had problems with snails, which damage young rice seedlings; low yields due to drought; and a reduction in paddy area because of increasing area cultivated for other crops (sugar cane, eucalyptus, cassava). The costs of chemical fertilizer ranged from 45-55 percent of the total costs of farm inputs in this study (with and without migrants) in both irrigated and rainfed villages.

In Vietnam, they complained of a lack of capital to pay for hired labourers and cash to buy material inputs since remittances were small. They also complained of high costs of inputs such as seeds, chemical fertilizer and pesticides. The high costs of inputs can be addressed by improved crop management techniques through rice technologies. However, based on the in-depth interviews in the study villages, the women do not have access to information on improved crop management techniques, particularly in relation to reduced use of inputs without reducing rice yields. They rely on their neighbours (and input dealers) for information on the use of inputs and pest management.

4. Enhancing women's technical knowledge and skills

Based on the above-mentioned constraints, the research teams organized several training programmes that focused on efficient use of inputs in rice production. In these training activities, the invited participants are mainly the women *de facto* heads of households among the households with migrants. However, in the Philippines, several husbands who were present in the village during the time of the surveys participated in the training. A series of village classes were conducted on improved rice production management, with a focus on improving farmers' rice seed health practices. Extension guides on "Improved Seed Health Improvement Practices" were distributed to the agricultural extension officers and participants. After the training, the participants compared the selected (healthy) seeds with the unselected seeds in their own plots. This gain in knowledge led to yield gains of 5-10 percent.

In Thailand, the team organized field trips and training courses for women on technologies which can reduce the cost of chemical fertilizers and herbicides. Staff from the Land Development Department and experts from the Faculty of Agriculture, Khon Kaen University trained the women, their husbands who migrate on a seasonal basis and village committee members on the production and application of liquid biofertilizer and bioinsect repellent using local herbal plants to control weeds in the fields. For the first time, the women were direct recipients of training courses designed to address the constraints they face in managing the farms, especially when their husbands are away for long periods. After the training, they gained more knowledge and information on how to better manage rice production from seed to seed, use inputs more efficiently and reduce costs, which are necessary in making sound decisions.

In Vietnam, the research team organized a series of training programmes at the three study sites on the onset of the wet season. Women received technical knowledge on integrated pest management and the three "Rs" (reduce seeds, reduce fertilizer and reduce pesticides), and were provided with seeds of new varieties. At the rainfed sites, the women used to grow long-duration rice varieties. However, after the training they shifted to short-duration (i.e. three-month) varieties. They also reduced the amount of insecticide sprays, fertilizer and seeds. They were able to save 350 000 to 400 000 dong/ha (US\$22-25) because of the reduction in the cost of inputs. Average yields increased from four to five tonnes/hectare. In the irrigated villages, the women are already growing short-duration varieties. However, after the training they reduced the amount of urea, increased the dosage of potassium, and reduced the number of insecticide sprays and seed rates. Yields increased during the wet season.

5. Summary and conclusions

This migration study was based on surveys of farming households with and without migrants in the Philippines (813), Thailand (830) and Vietnam (831). Our findings reveal that the incidence of migration is highest in northeast Thailand (63 percent). In the Philippines and Vietnam, about a quarter of the farming households interviewed have at least one migrant. In the Philippines and Thailand, a higher proportion of adult sons and daughters migrate than their fathers. In contrast, in North Vietnam a higher proportion of fathers migrate than sons, while the mothers stayed behind to take over their field work responsibilities and management of the household and farm. Average household annual incomes of households with migrants are almost twice those of households without migrants in the Philippines and Thailand. In Vietnam, average household incomes between the two groups are almost the same.

Remittances from migrants comprise a significant share of the total household income in the Philippines (59 percent) mainly due to international migration. In Thailand and Vietnam, remittances are 38 percent and 36 percent, respectively, where rural-to-urban migration is more prevalent (brought about by rapid industrialization and transportation facilities). Remittance earnings compensate for lower income from rice in the Philippines and Thailand. On the other hand, in Vietnam remittances compensate for lower income from other crops and lack of other non-farm income opportunities within the villages. Remittances are mainly spent on food and daily expenditures, children's education, farm inputs (hired labour, material inputs) and debt repayments.

In Thailand, principal females continued to contribute significantly in field activities. In Vietnam, labour out-migration resulted in fluidity in gender roles as the principal females who were left behind took over the tasks traditionally done by the principal males, such as irrigating the fields, preparing the dikes, applying pesticides and hauling farm products. In contrast, in the Philippines, the principal females withdrew from field activities and are more engaged in managing their farms and non-farm income-generating activities. Rice yields among migrants did not decline; thus migration led to positive consequences on production.

In all three countries, women's farm managerial responsibilities increased with migration. They will play greater roles as farm managers in the future, unless rural development takes place and reduces the outflow of rural labour. Agricultural research and extension institutions can play an important role by enhancing the technical knowledge and skills of women, especially of female *de facto* heads of households. These can be effective strategies in increasing rice productivity, ensuring family food security, and alleviating poverty in a context of out-migration.

6. Recommendations

To help women from households with male migrants increase farm production and improve livelihoods, the following needs to be addressed:

- Principal females left behind to manage the farms should be included in participatory research dealing with rice-variety improvement and associated crop management technologies which can reduce costs of production. They should also be direct beneficiaries of agricultural extension services.
- Government assistance to agriculture and agricultural microcredit should be channeled through women to effectively reach the entire household.
- Programmes that combine technical with organizational and leadership skills are effective in building social capital. Thus, research and development workers should facilitate the formation of women's groups to sustain adoption of different income-generating activities. One strategy would be to train rural women as local agricultural extension workers who can transfer their knowledge to other women.
- Women should be given opportunities for technical education that can build their entrepreneurial skills for self-employment and wage employment.
- The value chain of farm products should be studied to identify opportunities for enhancing women's roles in marketing and dissemination of information.

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