

Rural Life in Late Socialism

Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future

Edited by

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Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
List of Figures and Tables	VIII
Notes on Contributors	IX

1	Rural Life in Late Socialism: Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future	1
	<i>Phill Wilcox, Jonathan Rigg and Minh T.N. Nguyen</i>	
2	Risk Perception and Lowland Rice Farming Change in Savannakhet Province, Southern Laos	21
	<i>Ian G. Baird, Santi Piyadeth and Chanthavisouk Ninchaluene</i>	
3	Hmong Christianisation, the Will to Improve and the Question of Neoliberalism in Vietnam's Highlands	51
	<i>Seb Rumsby</i>	
4	Staying or Moving: Government Compliance in Post-Zomian Laos	77
	<i>Guido Sprenger</i>	
5	Good Baby, Good Life: Exploring a New Akha Way of Life Free from Abnormal Birth	101
	<i>Ruijing Wang</i>	
6	Single Mothers' Livelihoods in Rural North Central Vietnam: Struggles for a Good Life	131
	<i>Tuan Anh Nguyen, Cam Ly Thi Vo and Binh Minh Thi Vu</i>	
7	Rural Schooling and a Good Life in Late Socialist Laos: Articulations, Sketches and Moments of Good Time	156
	<i>Roy Huijsmans and Mr Piti</i>	
8	Translocal Households and Family Visions in Contemporary Vietnam: A Neoliberal Shift?	185
	<i>Hy V. Luong</i>	
9	Making a Good Life by Building a Good House: A Case Study of Baikou New Village in Southeastern China	211
	<i>Lan Wei</i>	

10	A Good Life Postponed: Working in the Countryside, Retiring in the City in Contemporary China 240	<i>Catrina Schwendener</i>
11	Tradition, Habitat, and Well-Being: Polygamous Marriage in a Tibetan Village 263	<i>Li Zhi-nong and He Shu-qing</i>
	Index 283	

Single Mothers' Livelihoods in Rural North Central Vietnam: Struggles for a Good Life

Tuan Anh Nguyen, Cam Ly Thi Vo and Binh Minh Thi Vu

Abstract

Single mothers in rural North Central Vietnam face many difficulties in carrying out their livelihoods. Since they deviate from the norms of the patriarchal family, many do not receive support easily from their own relatives or access livelihood assets from their parents. As units of production, their households lack the support from the relatives of spouses normally available to married women and face discrimination in accessing livelihood capitals. Finally, the stigma induced by the state-sponsored notion of 'Happy Family' acts as a social deterrent to their pursuit of the good life. Thus, regardless of their efforts in crafting their livelihoods, many single mothers find themselves unable to improve their income and reduce poverty. Despite greater social acceptance of single motherhood, their experiences suggest that the good life in Vietnam today remains invested in the ideal of heterosexual marriage reproduced by state discourses and enduring patriarchal ideas and practices.

Keywords

single mothers – livelihoods – good life – households – social discrimination – kinship

1 Introduction¹

The trend of late marriage, divorce, separation and single motherhood has come along with the process of economic growth and social modernization (Dales 2014; Zarina and Kamil 2012). While marriage remains central to what the family means in Vietnam, the country has also been experiencing greater

¹ Tuan Anh Nguyen and Cam Ly Thi Vo were the main authors of the paper with the contribution of Binh Minh Vu Thi and invaluable fieldwork support from students Hoa Thi Nguyen, Hai Thanh Phan, Nguyen Cong Hoang, Ly Thi Nguyen at Vinh University.

prevalence of and a shift in social acceptance of single parent families (Lê Thi 1996; Phinney 2005). This study is concerned with single mothers, women who have children and raise their children without getting married in rural North Central Vietnam. It examines how these women deal with prejudice and social discrimination and how these practices are part of their struggles for livelihoods and wellbeing. This question arises from our observation that single-mothers are structurally disadvantaged compared to married couples not just on account of the absence of an adult male, a potential source of income and support, but also the support structure that comes from the familial network of the husband. We suggest that despite certain changes in social attitudes towards single motherhood, the opportunity and economic structure remains prejudicial towards heterosexual marriage as the ideal of the family. Single mothers demonstrate much resilience and agency operating within their structures of constraint to ensure wellbeing for their children and themselves, yet face barriers in the rural economy arising from their marital status. The study suggests that the idealization of the patriarchal family is reproduced in the very combination of social and economic arrangements that punish those who deviate from its norms and standards.

Despite much recent research and development projects on rural livelihoods, including those of poor women (Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2014) and the struggles of single women as migrant workers (Nguyen 2015; Nguyen 2019), little attention has been paid to the livelihoods of single mothers in the countryside, whose opportunities and constraints differ from the same group of women in the city. Compared to single mothers in urban areas, they face the aged-old stigmatization of women who “become pregnant without a husband” to a higher extent, a quasi-crime in past village life that called for such severe punishments as public shaving of one’s hair. Economically, rural single mothers do not have the support network of the husband’s family that is available to married women. Such double constraint on their social and economic life is likely to have significant implications for their livelihoods and wellbeing. In-depth knowledge of how they sustain family and economic life under such social and economic conditions shall be significant for the understanding of the change and continuity in Vietnamese family and kinship in the new economy.

2 Patriarchal Family and Kinship, the Role of the State and the Livelihoods of Single Mothers

Vietnamese kinship is characterized by a bilateral model, with emphasis on both the paternal and the maternal sides (Luong 1989). However, only relatives

on the father's side make up the patrilineage as an entity (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010). Prior to 1945, a woman had a subordinate position in kinship relations. She had a 'half-membership' in her father's patrilineage before her marriage and a 'half-membership' in her husband's patrilineage after her marriage (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010: 75). Daughters had no rights over property of their parents (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938]: 135). In principle the married woman became a component of her husband's family (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938]: 133) yet she did not become a full member of her husband's patrilineage. The position of the wife in her husband's kinship network was enhanced, especially after she gave birth to a son, thus strengthening the patrilineage of her husband (Phạm Quốc Sử 2000: 15–16). Therefore, in the context of the patriarchal family and kinship relations, marriage has an important meaning in term of improving the position of women. For the traditional family,² single motherhood was unacceptable. At the village level, custom often decreed that an unmarried mother had to pay a heavy fine to her village (Pham Van Bich 1999: 87). At national level, if an unmarried women got pregnant, she suffered heavy punishment. For example, an unmarried women caught in sexual relationship was punished with 100 lashes according to the Gia Long Code³ (Pham Van Bich 1999: 87). Thus, the logics of the patriarchal family deem single mothers as deviating from its norms, harming kinship relations and traditional customs.

After the August Revolution in 1945, the Vietnamese traditional family and women position were changed significantly. The Women's Union was founded along the line of the Communist Party to improve the situation of women (Rydström and Drummond 2004: 3). The Law on Marriage and the Family passed by the National Assembly in 1959 also confirmed many rights of women (Quốc hội [National Assembly] 1959). Moreover, women's liberation movement in Vietnam also transformed the position of women in terms of education, employment, political participant, upward social mobility (Pham Van Bich 1997: 131–140). In addition, the Vietnamese family and women's position changed significantly as an effect of the wars against the French and the

2 In "The Vietnamese family in change: The case of the Red River Delta", Pham Van Bich characterises the traditional family with the following features: collective community, hierarchy of sexes and ages, patrilineal family, patrilocal post-marriage residence pattern and gender separation through division of labour and spatial segregation. While he notes the French influence on the family, many of these traits remained throughout the colonial French regime from the late nineteenth century to 1945, when the socialist revolution introduced major changes to family relations and kinship practices. (1999: 7–43). In this paper, therefore, our notion of the traditional Vietnamese refers to family forms and relations that existed before 1945.

3 Gia Long Code was issued in 1815.

American as well as the wars in Cambodia and in the border between Vietnam and China. One of the biggest consequences of these wars was the greater loss of male lives leading to a large demographic imbalance between men and women. In addition, during the wars, many young women went to the front. When the war was over, many could not marry because of the absence of men due to war deaths and the perception that a thirty-year-old unmarried woman is no longer marriageable (Pham Van Bich 1997: 157–163). Thus, mature single women had great difficulty in finding a husband (Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng 2002). They also faced the stigma of being “unmarriageable”, loneliness (Phinney 2005: 219–221), and the worry about being cared for in their old age (Pham Van Bich 1997: 159).

This led to the practice of “asking for a child”, in which women conceived a child through intercourse with men who were either friends or strangers in hospitals (an arrangement facilitated by doctors) or through private arrangements. Gradually, this came to be accepted by the general public given the post-war context (Phinney 2005: 219–221). The new 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family gave all women the right to have a child (Quốc hội [National Assembly] 1986). Regardless of this recognition, until 1980s, unmarried women getting pregnant were sharply criticized (Pham Van Bich 1997: 159). Single mothers also have to face up to the benchmarks of the state-promoted notion of a “happy family”, a family with “an adequate income, two children, and stable conjugal relations”. Unmarried single mothers are clearly excluded from this vision a ‘Happy Family’ (Phinney 2005: 219–221). Similarly, Earl (2015) identifies that the twenty-first century situation of family and marriage in Vietnam centers on heterosexuality in a normative marriage. The expected responsibility of women is to get married, give birth to sons, to serve as a loving mother and a helpful wife. These discourses of women persist as Neo-Confucian patriarchy continues to play a significant part in Vietnamese culture (Earl 2015). Despite legal approval and greater social acceptance, the predominant conception of heterosexual marriage as the basis of the family along the line of the ‘Happy Family’ continues to produce stigma towards single mothers.

The socio-economic changes following Vietnam’s 1986 reforms towards a “socialist-oriented market economy” had particular implications for single mothers. With a less centralized economy, a diminishing socialist welfare system and the re-emergence of the family as the main unit of production and reproduction; families are allowed to pursue their own livelihoods and made responsible for their own livelihoods and wellbeing. The family, at this point, became the strongest institution in Vietnam with the position, the means, and the motivation to take advantage of the new economic opportunities created by the reforms (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Werner 2009). The

increased autonomy of the family has an effect in enlarging social space for single mothers for meaning making and livelihoods pursuits. However, as a unit of production,⁴ a single mother's household faces particular challenges in carrying out livelihood strategies. Among others, the household cannot rely on the contribution from a husband/father or the support of his extended family. As regards kinship networks' effects on single mothers, the male-oriented model "persisted to a much greater extent than many studies suggest" (Luong 1989). As such, under the new social contract between the family and the state, single mothers are structurally disadvantaged both as a unit of production and a unit of reproduction.

To further understand their struggles in the new economy we shall use the categories developed under the livelihoods analysis framework. Ellis (2000) points out that the concept of livelihood paints a complete picture of the complex components and pathways in making a living. According to Chambers and Conway, "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living" (Chambers and Conway 1991: 6). Three important components of livelihoods include: livelihood assets, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. Livelihood assets are five types of capitals: Human capital (skills, knowledge, and ability to work and physical health); social capital (social networks, group membership, trust, reciprocal relationships); natural capital (land, trees, etc.); physical capital (infrastructure, production tools, etc.); financial capital (cash savings, money earned from joining credit groups, etc.) (DFID 1999: 2.3 - 2.3.5). Bebbington (1999), in another study, proposes a detailed framework for analyzing rural livelihoods including four main aspects: (a) access to five types of capital assets; (b) means of transforming and combining those assets in forming livelihoods that meet their needs; (c) means of expanding assets through interaction with other actors; and (d) means of deploying and enhancing their capabilities (Bebbington 1999).

The livelihood framework is a useful analytical tool to understand the social and political economic constraints that single mothers face and the strategies that they deploy to deal with these constraints. We show that these constraints are related to the normative gender structures that punish single mothers as deviants from the norms of a heterosexual nuclear family, especially according to the standards of a state-sponsored 'Happy Family' a campaign that is promoted throughout the country with omnipresent slogans and posters in the

4 The households have land use right (not private ownership). The households' production depends on their land, their production tools and their members. Thus, households are basic production units in rural areas.

media and in public spaces (Minh Thu 2016; Quỳnh Chi 2011). The livelihood strategies that the single mothers in our study adopt indicate their resilience at the same time with continued reference to normative family frameworks in evaluating their lives and future prospects.

The livelihood framework offers the scope for comprehensive consideration of single mothers' struggles for a good life. From the perspective of this framework (Bebbington 1999; Chambers and Conway 1991; DFID 1999), a good life is one that is free from poverty, resistant to vulnerability, and one in which people are able to maintain viable income and well-being. In what follows, we will analyze the ways in which single mothers carry out their livelihood strategies and their outcomes in the social and political context that defines the Vietnamese family today.

3 Research Site, Research Methods and Features of the Sample

This chapter is based on a field study in a half-hilly, half-plain rice-growing district in Nghe An province, from April 2015 to December 2016 and some follow-up interviews in 2020. The district has a natural area of 54,829 hectares, of which agricultural land is 22,817 hectares, forestry land is 20,788 hectares, non-agricultural land is 9,928 hectares, and unused land is 920 hectares.⁵ The population by 2014 was 284,204 people, and there are 30 communes with Catholic residents including communes with religious worship facilities (Catholic) with 37,804 people, accounting for 13.3% of the district's population. There are 10 churches and 9 parish priests.⁶

This district is also a district with a large number of single mothers currently living and working (994 single mothers in 2014).⁷ The district had a village in the name of Son (anonymous name) in which only single mothers lived in the past. This village was set up about 40 years ago after the end of the American War in 1975. Many women joining the army or working as youth volunteers on the front then returned home and was not able to marry suitable people. Many of the women's boyfriends had died in the war and they were "too late/old" to find other suitable men. The perception that these women were too late/old to marry was only the traditional perception because many were still young

5 Data from the Report on Socio-Economic Development in 2013 and in first quarter of 2014 of this district.

6 Data from the Report on Socio-Economic Development in 2013 and in first quarter of 2014 of this district.

7 The data come from the Vietnam Women's Unions of one commune in this district in 2014.

then. Wishing to have children, the women engaged in the practice of “asking for a child”, meaning getting pregnant with men who were their acquaintances. The strong stigma they experienced led 30 of these single mothers to leave their home village and settle down together in an area not far from their home village, and in doing so setting up their own village (Hồng Thắng 2011). At present, Son village is part of the district administrative system. Over time, married couples in the commune also came to build houses and settled down in the village. Since it was merged with another hamlet, the village now has nearly 300 households. Of the 30 single mothers who first settled in the village, eleven still live here; the others have followed their children to other regions, and several have died.⁸

This study employs a mix-methods design, combining long-term fieldwork with a questionnaire survey. During fieldwork, observation was conducted in conjunction with in-depth interviews with single mothers, focusing on their current lives and livelihood activities. In total, 31 in-depth interviews were conducted, 25 with single mothers, three with local officials, and three with family members of the women. The women selected for in-depth interviews are single mothers living and working in the district, differentiated by occupation, age, reasons for single motherhood, family structure, health status and social status. The in-depth interviews provided information on the social characteristics of single mothers and their livelihoods activities. The interviews also sought to understand how the women build their assets to develop their livelihoods. In 2020, 5 further interviews were conducted to collect additional data for this chapter.

In addition, we also conducted a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consists of 45 questions focusing on different aspects of the social life and livelihoods of the single mothers. In terms of sampling, 16 communes in 38 communes and one town of this district were selected for the survey. The selected communes reflect a broad range of the natural, economic, social and cultural characteristics of the district. Specifically, these communes represent a group of communes with high, medium and low income per capita. These communes also represent the groups of plain and semi-mountainous rural communes. Altogether, 285 single mothers in 16 communes were interviewed (out of the total of 994 in the district).⁹ The survey team included students with

8 Mr. Chung in Son village, interview on 5 November 2020.

9 Catholicism is likely to shape people's perceptions of single-motherhood and how families treat their daughters who are single mothers. However, among 285 single mothers of the quantitative survey, there are only eight single mothers who are Catholics. The percentage (2.8 percent) is too small to compare Catholic single mothers with non-Catholic single mothers. In addition, none of the single mothers selected for in-depth interviews are Catholic. Thus, we just focus our discussion on non-Catholic single mothers.

sociological expertise, and the second author of the paper directly collected data and supervised the process in the field.

About the group of 285 single mothers that were surveyed, there are significant feature as follows. The average of age is 43.52 years old; the youngest is 20 years old; the oldest is 60 years old. About the number of children, 76.8 percent of the single mothers have one child per person; 22.5 percent of the single mothers have two children per person, and 0.7 percent of the single mothers have three children per person. Among 285 single mothers, 50.5 percent graduated secondary school; 25.3 percent graduated primary school; 16.1 percent graduated high school; 1.1 percent graduated university/college; 1.7 percent graduated vocational school. Thus, education levels of many single mothers of the sample are not high. About their occupations, 90.2 percent of this group follow agricultural production; and 82.1 percent consider agricultural production as their main job. The main jobs of 17.9 percent single mothers of the sample are small traders (4.9 percent), government employees (0.7 percent); workers (4.6 percent), teachers (1.4 percent), self/flexible/free-laborers (6.0 percent), housewives/laborers (0.35 percent). Thus, agricultural production is the main job of most single mother in this district. The survey result indicates six main reasons why this group of women became single mothers (Table 6.1). In the following sections, we will discuss how these gendered perceptions of singlehood are entangled with the women's gendered access to livelihood assets to shape their livelihoods outcomes.

Our quantitative survey shows that the average age of the single mothers is 43.52 years old, with the youngest being at 20 and the oldest at 60. The survey

TABLE 6.1 Main reasons for being single mothers

Reasons	Number of people	Percentage
Got pregnant but could not marry	80	28.1
Too poor to marry	77	27.0
Too old to marry	64	22.5
Could not find a suitable person	51	17.9
Wanted to live independently	40	14.0
Had disabilities, thus could not (have opportunities to) marry	33	11.6
Not good looking, thus could not (have opportunities to) marry	6	2.1

also shows that the shortest period of single motherhood is one year and the longest is 41 years and the average number of years as a single mother is 13.5 years. Therefore, the average age when a single mother becomes pregnant for the first time is 30.02 years old, which is relatively late for being pregnant for the first time according to local practices. Single mothers who are heads of households account for a very large proportion (84.2 percent) compared to those (15.8 percent) who are members of the household, namely those who, after giving birth, continue to live with their parents, or siblings. The majority of single mothers thus set up their own households rather than living with their parents, or brothers, sisters, with implications for familial support in terms of money and labour, a point we will take up later on in the paper.

4 Dealing with the Lack of Agricultural Land

According to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999), access to natural capital in terms of agricultural land in order to carry out livelihood in agricultural production is essential to achieve livelihood outcomes. Agricultural land is the most important livelihood asset of single mothers in this district because 90.2 percent of this group follow agricultural production; and 82.1 percent consider agricultural production as their main job. In addition, agricultural land is more important for single mothers than for other households because they are less able to mobilize support for childcare than married couples, who have parents and siblings from both sides to rely on; thus they could not migrate for wage work.

Overall, single mothers have two types of agricultural land, including garden and farmland. Garden land is the type of land surrounding houses or households. The key question here is the distribution of garden land in single mother households. Concerning this issue, the quantitative survey gives the following specific results. Firstly, 90.8 percent (259 households) are engaged in agricultural production. Among agricultural production households, only 79.1 percent (205 households) have garden land for cultivation. Secondly, the household has the smallest garden land area of 10m², the largest household garden land area is 3000 m², and the average garden land area of each household is 367 m². Thus, the area of garden land of each single mother household is not much; especially many single mothers as indicated above have no garden land.

Single mother households' limited land use right in terms of garden land use right can be explained by the fact that families tend to pass property down the

male line. Although the Civil Code in Vietnam confirm the equal right inheritance of daughters and sons (Quốc Hội 2015), the favoring of sons continues in practice. The case of Ms. Quy, a single mother, illustrates this impartiality. Ms. Quy has four older brothers. She gave birth to a child when she was 30 years old, an age that was considered neither too young nor old. After giving birth to a son in 2000, she lives with her son in a small house built in the garden of her parents' house. However, her oldest brother argued that the garden belongs to him as the oldest son of the family, not allowing her to cultivate anything in the garden. He prevented her from digging a well in the garden for daily use, and even showed a contemptuous disregard for her suggestion that she might dig the well (Ms Quy, interview on 23 October 2015). From the perspective of traditional customs and patrilineage kinship system (Đào Duy Anh 2000 [1938], Pham Van Bich 1997, Phạm Quốc Sử 2000), and the image of Happy Family (Phinney 2005),¹⁰ this story reflects two obstacles preventing single mothers to access and control the garden land. First, the traditional customs and patrilineage kinship system in which land/property was transferred along the male line prevented single mother's access to the garden land of their parents. Second, being a single mother, the woman faced stigma from her own siblings. The fact that Ms. Quy's brother prevented her from digging a well in the garden for daily use reflects the discrimination toward her. In everyday, siblings are expected to support each other when in need. However, in this case he did not support her and showed a contemptuous disregard to her because she is a single mother. In a conversation between the second author and Ms. Quy, the latter said: "No, I could not borrow even one thousand Vietnamese Dong from my brother... When I asked my brother to borrow some money, he refused, he sworn... chased me away". (Interview on 23 October 2015).

Households of single mothers have much less farmland than the average. There are two types of farmland that households including households of single mothers, cultivate. The first type of farmland is the farmland that households were allocated by the People's Committee of the communes under Decree 64 of 1993. According to this decree members of all households were allocated farmland areas equally. For this type of land, the local field survey

¹⁰ The interviewees do not mention directly the Happy Family Campaign. However, they seemed to internalize the spirit of the campaign. For example, the chairwoman of Women's Union in a commune said that: "Not only single mothers but also their children feel that it is an incomplete family. [If they] have both parents, they can enjoy a full happiness of a true family". (Ms. Ly, interview on 23 May 2016). Another interviewee, Ms. Van, a single mother born in 1972 said: "Being a single mother is not happy as a normal family. It is better to get married, but because my circumstance cannot take it". (Interview on 24 May 2016).

showed that 259 single mother households (90.9 percent) are cultivating on an allocated field.¹¹ The remaining women were not provided fields because they were born after 1993.

The survey results show that the allocated farmland area of single-mother households is as follows. Households currently cultivating the smallest land area own 180 m²; households currently cultivating the land with the largest area own 4500 m²; the average area that a single mother household is cultivating is 939 m². However, the households with large farmland areas are those in which single mothers live with their parents because the agricultural land of these households consists of land shares of the single mothers and other family members. As the interview with the chairwoman of Women's Union of a commune confirms, single mothers who do not live with their parents, have around 1 sào (500m²) to cultivate (interview on 10 May 2020).

We do not have the data on the average of land area a household with both husband and wife have for the sake of comparison. However, all individuals born before 1993 were allocated with an equal area of land. Thus, the single mother who does not live with her parents has only her own land share and the share of her child/children. Meanwhile, the single mother who lives with her parents (consisting of her parents, she, and her children/child, and maybe other relatives) might be able to cultivate the land shares of all household members.

To increase the area of agricultural land that they can cultivate, single mother households might rent or borrow land. In the three years up to the time of our survey, about 30 percent of those households did so. The rental area ranges between 150m² and 2170m², averaging 1017m². The land is usually rented from the public land of the commune, or relatives and neighbors.¹² However, a large proportion of the single mother households are not able to rent land to expand their production. The chairwoman of a commune's Women Union explained that most single mothers are not confident enough to rent agricultural public land from the commune, because they are afraid that they cannot cultivate the land effectively and become indebted to the commune (interview on 10 May 2020). Meanwhile, the commune authorities are often hesitant to rent agricultural land to the single mothers out of a belief that they are not likely to pay back the rental fees. The local authorities' mistrust in the productive

11 Fields were allocated according to Decree 64 in 1993 on the allocation of agricultural land to households and individuals for stable and long-term use for agricultural production. Individuals who were born after 1993 did not receive any allocation.

12 Compare the single mother's households with those of a husband and wife, the data from in-depth interviews in the field do not show any differences of price for renting land.

ability of the women clearly is rooted in misgivings about the incomplete family without the strength of the husband and father as a reliable collateral for the rental. The self-perception of the women and the evaluation of the local government might be mutually reinforcing in producing an unfavorable distribution of rental farmland.

Such constructions of single women as incompetent economic and contractual actor stem from the patriarchal notions of the family that emphasizes the economic and moral role of the husband in the family (Đào Duy Anh 2000[1938], Pham Van Bich 1997, Phạm Quốc Sử 2000). Moreover, the limited abilities in accessing additional land by single mothers's households also comes from the post-reform socio-economic changes that put the burdens of making a living on family members (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Werner 2009). The single mothers' limited natural capital makes it difficult for them to achieve better income as part of their agriculture-based livelihoods. (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999)

5 Diversifying Finance and Income Sources under Constraint

Financial capital is one important asset to carry out livelihoods in order to achieve a good life (Bebbington 1999, DFID 1999). With growing costs of agricultural inputs and living costs, financial capital assumes much greater significance for household livelihoods in the new economy in which self-subsistence plays a bigger role than before. Our findings suggest that single mothers generally have to stretch the limited funds they can access to invest in their livelihoods activities. The average income of single mothers in our study is 1,842,000 VND/month (42 USD) compared to 2,166,666 VND/month (49 USD) in average local income (Mai Hoa 2015). This means that many have to borrow money in order to pay for daily expenses and invest in household economy production. Among 285 single mothers, 179 single mothers (62.0 percent) reported borrowing money and there are 258 loans recorded. The purposes of loans of single-parent women households are presented in Figure 6.1.

The chart suggests that most of the loans are used to cover everyday consumption and expenses. Borrowing for house construction is quite common in rural areas today. However, our observation show the poorer housing conditions among single mothers compared with married-couple households. The quantitative data from our survey show that 90.5 percent of the single mothers lived in grade 4 houses (a one-storey house with a roof; under 100 m²)¹³

13 Features of a grade 4 house: expected to last no more than thirty years; walls made of brick; low quality finishing materials; low living comfort.

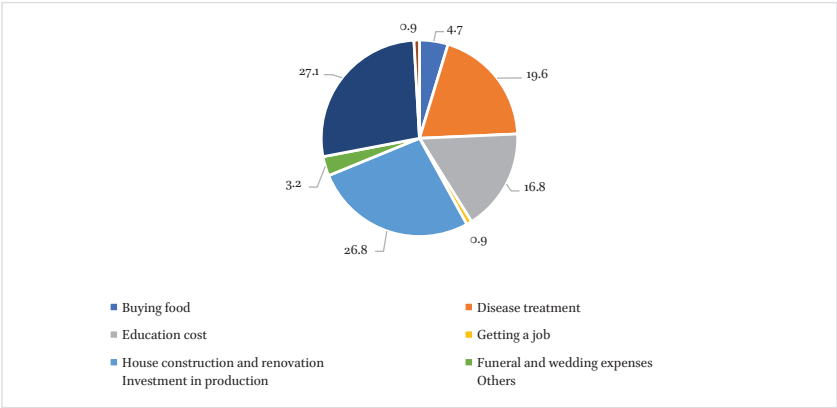


FIGURE 6.1 Purposes of loans of single-mother households

with near-poor or poor conditions. As such, the single mother’s houses were in greater need of rebuilding or upgrading.

The higher proportion of the consumption loans indicates high pressure on the single-mother household to prioritise immediate needs over longer-term investments in productive purposes. In comparison with married-couple households, the heavier burden of everyday consumption and expenses fall on the single mother’s household because of their lower income. The need to prioritise immediate consumption prevents livelihood activities that generate better income in the long term.

The sources of single mothers’ loans are highly diverse, encompassing formal and informal financial institutions and lenders, as indicated in Table 6.2.¹⁴ The table suggests that not many single mothers borrow from commercial banks because they do not have valuable properties as collateral. Moreover, not many single mothers borrow from Farmer Association Fund and Women’s Union Fund because these funds at communes are limited. Many instead borrow from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies and the poverty reduction program/fund. Poor households can borrow money from these institutions with no collateral and with low interest rate. However, in order to borrow the money from Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, the borrowers have to be selected by the mass organization at communal level. If the borrowers are women, they will be selected by the local Women’s Union depending on several criteria (Vietnam Bank for Social Policies No Date).¹⁵ Many single mothers, especially very poor

14 In the area where we did fieldwork, there were no NGO programs providing micro-credit schemes for single mothers.

15 The regulations surrounding borrowing money from the poverty reduction programme/fund are very much the same.

TABLE 6.2 Sources of loans for single mothers

Source of loan	Number of people	Percentage
Vietnam Bank for Social Policies	88	30,9
Commercial banks	12	4,2
Poverty reduction program/fund	24	8,4
Farmer Association Fund	6	2,1
Women's Union Fund	7	2,5
Relatives and friends	92	32,3
Private loan lender	28	9,8
Other sources	1	0,4

ones, were not selected to borrow money from this bank because the leaders of the local Women's Union and authorities were afraid that they can not make repayment. This practice reflects a mistrust in the single mothers as economic actors, a mistrust informed by the notion of a "happy family" as a stable unit of production. If the women cannot borrow money from this bank, they normally do so from their relatives and friends or even private lenders. As the table suggests, 32.3 percent of single mothers borrowed money from their relatives and friends. Meanwhile, 9.8 percent of single mothers borrowed money from private loan lenders. If they borrow money from private loan lenders, they will be charged high interest rate, which can be a burden on single mothers.

Single mothers experience further difficulties in obtaining loans. Apart from the difficulties in accessing certain lenders, some are hesitant to approach the lenders. According to the chairwoman of Women's Union in a commune, this is again due to their lack of confidence and a certain level of self-discrimination:

Single mothers have a sense of inferiority. They consider themselves as people with low social status. That has negative impact on their livelihoods. For example, they are not confident to borrow money because they are afraid of having to deal with the risks alone without husbands and not being able to repay their debt. For 'normal' households with husbands and wives they can borrow money to invest in trading or set up stores to have high income. For the group of single mothers, because they lack money, they mainly depend on growing rice, catching crabs in the rice field, and cutting *thysanolaena latifolia* (cây dốt) to produce traditional booms. With these livelihoods activities, their incomes are very low.

INTERVIEW ON 23 MAY 2016

What the Women Union cadre sees as self-discrimination is clearly in line with the prevalence of the prejudicial notion that a single mother cannot be trusted to be a reliable economic actor. In this logic, a husband seems the de-facto guarantee of the financial integrity of a household and without him the household is not likely to make sound investments and able to repay the loan. The mistrust seems not only based on the attribution to the presence of a husband as an indispensable economic actor in the household, but also as a moral guarantee for the repayment of the loan, as indicated by the following quote from Ms. Luan, a 41-year-old single mother:

I intended to follow the livelihood of small trading. However, I did not have money. I wanted to borrow money but the lenders refused. The lenders only let 'normal' households having husbands and wives to borrow money. Because I am alone, without a husband, I could not borrow money from private lenders. They were afraid that I could not pay the debt to them.

INTERVIEW ON 24 OCTOBER 2015

Thus, the obstacle for single mothers in obtaining the necessary loans seems to be rooted in the same mistrust towards their households as incomplete families that makes it difficult for them to rent agricultural land from the local government. The discrimination sometimes comes from their own families and neighbors, as illustrated by the case of Ms. Quy 44 years old in another commune. She told us that people around her, including her relatives and her neighbors despised her for being a single mother and being a poor person, which makes it hard for her to borrow money from them. One time, when her mother asked her older brother to let her borrow money, the brother not only refused but also cursed her loudly. She also intended to get a bank loan mortgage using the residential land on which her mother's house stands as mortgage (she and her son live with her mother in the latter's house). However, her older brother claimed that the land of their mother belongs to him as the son of the family (interview on 23 October 2015). As a result, she could borrow money neither from her relatives nor from the bank, as she describes:

No loans. Neither my mother nor my brother lent me money. [He said that]: 'If you die, our family is very happy'. If I die, he rejoices. When my mother asked my brother to lend money to me; my brother cursed and throw chairs.

INTERVIEW ON 23 OCTOBER 2015

This case indicates several layers of the structural disadvantage experienced by single mothers, including how the male dominated property regime works to prevent their access to the financial resources that are critical to their livelihoods activities. Despite the availability of social policy measures aimed at assisting disadvantaged groups such as the Bank for Social Policy, the single mothers are experiencing mechanisms of exclusion induced by the norms of the patriarchal family that continue to permeate social relations and public life.

Given their limited access to credits, the single mother households conduct a diverse array of productive activities apart from rice growing. A majority of these households engage in husbandry activities, including keeping buffaloes, pigs and chicken, although most have make-shift facilities. The poor breeding facilities impact negatively on the income they make from the animals. For example, Ms. Loan, 60 year-old single mother trades vegetables in the market, grows wet rice and breeds pigs and chicken. The three livelihoods activities combine to produce an average income per month of about one million VND (around 42 USD) (interview on 27 April 2016). The poor animal breeding facilities of single mothers result from them not having enough funds for investment and in comparison to other families with male adults, they have to build and maintain the facilities themselves. It is common for rural households in Vietnam that men build the sheds, sties and coops for keeping the animals. According to the chairwoman of Women's Union of a commune, the absence of an adult male in the family constitutes a major disadvantage in the work of diversifying household income:

Compared with households having both husbands and wives, the households of single mothers are disadvantaged in both social and economic domains. In the social domain, they are not confident, they feel self-pity (*tủi thân*). Regarding the household economy, they do not have husbands to build or repair breeding facilities. Without husbands, they have to hire someone to build or repair breeding facilities, which costs money and then they no longer have the money to buy young pigs or poultry to raise.

INTERVIEW ON 10 MAY 2020

In such statements, the multi-dimensional disadvantage that the single mothers experience boils down to the absence of a husband, a self-explanatory cause of their poverty and difficulties in developing their livelihoods. The explanation ignores the deeper structure of opportunities that punishes those who deviate from the norms of the patriarchal family and by extension, those of the "happy family" being promoted by the state. A woman not having a husband

thus might be grudgingly accepted by those around her, but the social and economic consequences of not having a husband on the life of a woman, it seems, are made to all too visible, and emphasized repeatedly, through the working of social, political and economic institutions that uphold such norms. In the same vein, the “self-pity” and “lack of confidence” attributed to the women are seen as the causes of their problem rather than the effects of prejudicial social discourses and practices. The fact that the women themselves also use these terms when talking about themselves indicate that they, as do the others, continue to refer to the normative gender norms that frame such discourses and practices.

6 Mobilizing Kinship Networks in the Face of Limited Human and Social Capital

According to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999), social capital and human capital are important for single mothers to carry out their livelihood. However, single mothers have limited access to these capitals. A quarter of the survey sample report poor health as the biggest difficulty for them in carrying out their livelihoods activities. The high incidence of poor health is strongly related to the lack of money to pay for health care and treatment, for many also the difficulty in obtaining loans to pay for health expenses. As Ms. Quy, a 44-year-old single mother revealed: “I have a lung disease and stomach disease. I would need to borrow money to pay for the treatment costs. However, I could not borrow any money, even from my relatives. Thus, I have to accept living with these diseases” (Interview on 23 October 2015). This practice also demonstrates a significant point related to health insurance policy. The Government provides free health insurance cards for poor households and near poor households. However, when people are hospitalized they have to pay for several kinds of services and medicines that are not covered by health insurance cards (Nguyen 2020). Thus, many single mothers are in poor health status. According to the survey, only 3.6 percent of the single mothers said that they are in good health; 50.2 percent of the single mothers self-evaluated that they are not in poor or good health; and 46.2 percent of single mothers are in poor health. Thus, human capital in terms of health of many single mothers is limited.

Health issues and the limited means to deal with them are related to the meagre social capital that these women have. Our survey results show that single mothers are less likely to participate in mass organizations, socio-political organizations, and social and professional organizations. The reason for this is

again to do with their experiences of being singled out for their marital status. An example is Ms. Loan, 60 years old in 2016, who only interacted with people in the cluster of households around her house. She does not participate in mass organizations, socio-political organizations, and social and professional organizations in her communes. She explained that she is very busy while at the same time feeling self-pity and lonely. She said that many people are not kind. In case of a contradiction between her and them, they will say something hurtful about her being a single mother. Many times she feels obliged to explain to people that she wishes to live in a 'normal' family with husband and wife, but because of her fate, she has to accept being a single mother (interview on 27 April 2016). She said:

They are people without a conscience. I told them: 'Because of my fate [I have to live miserably]. I also want to have a normal family like your family. I [don't] want to live miserably'.

INTERVIEW ON 27 APRIL 2016

As such, the punishment of their deviation from the norms of the patriarchal family works subtly. Despite the women's insistence that their adopted family form is not a willing choice, they are still seen as culpable for their failing to conform to the norms (Ms Loan, interview on 27 April 2016). The women's resulting lack of participation in local organizations and groupings, however, have real consequences for their livelihoods. In particular, it leads to their limited access to the wider network of support during periods of ill health or when there is a greater need for labor, for example during transplanting or harvesting time.

Being quasi-excluded from the wider community network of support, most single mothers rely on kinship networks and neighbors for support in carrying out their livelihoods activities, be it in terms of money or labor. In terms of financial support, their siblings help them the most (28.8 percent), followed by other relatives (19.2 percent), and parents (18.5 percent). Within terms of labor support, siblings also help them the most (41.9 percent), followed by their parents (19.6 percent), and other relatives (17.8 percent) and neighbors (12.3 percent). In short, the social capital of the single mothers is largely confined to the relationships they have within their parental families and immediate neighborhood.

Clearly, certain single mothers receive support from their relatives and other do not, even suffering from discrimination by their own relatives. This seems to depend on how they became single mothers. This is demonstrated through the case of Ms. Quý (interview on 18 June 2015). Quý's father died at

a very young age. Her mother alone had to raise five children on her own. In order to share burden with her mother, she delayed marrying in order to toil to earn her family's living and look after her siblings. Thus, at more than 30 years old she was still single, which was considered too late to marry around 20 years ago. At the age of 32, she "asked for a child" from a man so that the child will look after her when she is old. She said she does not suffer the social stigma of being a single mother because her single motherhood was due to her sacrifices for her family. Her relatives and neighbors support her when she faces difficulties in everyday life. While her livelihoods are difficult, she is in a slighter better situations than the others.

The case of Ms Liên, twenty-five years old in 2016, stands in contrast to Ms Quý's (interview on 13 July 2016). When she got pregnant, her boyfriend refused to marry her, and she decided to keep the child. She said that when she became pregnant, neighbors gossiped about her and showed contempt for her pregnancy. She just ignored and let them say whatever they wanted until they felt bored, she said. Ms. Liên thus suffers a greater degree of discrimination and social stigma than Ms. Quý and does not receive as much support from her relatives for carrying out her livelihood. In short, the social valuation of single motherhood, while generally demeaning, also depends on the contribution of the woman to her family's wellbeing, much in the same way that women's contributions to the war and socialist building had led to the legal recognition of their desire to have children.

7 Livelihoods Outcomes and Obstacles to a Good Life

Having discussed how single mothers make use of their limited livelihood assets to carry out their livelihood, we now return to the notion of a good life according to the livelihood framework (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999). We will assess the livelihoods outcomes of single mothers along the lines of income and living standard, vulnerability and wellbeing.

The first dimension is income. The average monthly income of single mother in the study area is 1,842,000 VND/month (around 78 USD), compared to the local average income of 2,166,666 VND/month in the district (Mai Hoa 2015).¹⁶ Almost half of these households are formally classified as poor (35.8 percent)

¹⁶ According to Decision No. 59/2015/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister on 19 November 2015, poor households in rural areas are those with per capita income per month is 700,000 VND or less; near-poor households in rural areas are those with per capita income per month ranges from 700,000 VND to 1,000,000 VND.

or near-poor (12.3 percent). Compared to the district's poverty rate of 6.29 percent in 2015,¹⁷ the incidence of poverty among single-mother households is disproportionately high. The self-assessment of living standards by the single mothers indicates a strong perception of their families as living in poverty. Specifically, 64.2 percent of single mothers rate their households as poor, 22.8 percent say that their households are near-poor. Just over one tenth think that their household is in the middle rank, and very few (0.7 percent) think that their living standards are high. Thus, many single mothers could not achieve a good life in terms of a good income and lifting themselves out of poverty. Our quantitative survey shows that 90.5 percent of single mothers have a grade 4 house. The proportion of single mothers with permanent or good houses stands at 4.6 percent; 9.9 percent of single mothers live in temporary houses and 0.7 percent live in rented houses. The survey results also show that most single mothers' households do not have common living facilities. Only 25.6 percent of them own motorbikes, the most common means of transport while 35.4 percent of the households do not have televisions and 12.9 percent of households do not have rice cookers, household goods that have almost become basic necessities in Vietnam today.

The second dimension is their relationship to vulnerability and general well-being. Following the livelihoods framework, the level of wealth accumulation, especially that of financial capital and the degree of job stability are crucial for sustainable livelihoods that reflects well-being and reduced vulnerability. Our informants score relatively low on both counts. Only 12.9 percent of them have some savings, while a large proportion of single mothers (62.8 percent) are indebted. The high percentage of single mothers indebted reflects high degree of vulnerability to single mothers when they face uncertainties in their everyday life such as sickness or unemployment or natural hazard. In addition, a large proportion of single mothers occasionally or rarely have paid jobs. Among 285 single mother there are 132 people having paid jobs. Among the group of 132 single mothers having paid jobs the percentage of single mothers who have paid jobs frequently is low. For example, only 10.0 percent of brick-layer's assistants and 14.3 percent employees of cottage industry households have paid jobs frequently. This low degree of job stability of many single mothers reflects that not many single mothers could achieve a good life in terms of well-being and reduced vulnerability.

The final point concerns the future of the children in these households. The low level of education, the low income, the low degree of job stability, and

17 Data from the Summary Report on the Implementation of Socio-Economic Development Objectives in 2015; Objectives and Solutions for the district in 2016.

the poor health of single mothers as presented above could be obstacles to the education of their children. Our observations show that children of single mothers generally are not able to achieve have high levels of education, which is essential to securing good employment. In some rare cases, single mothers' children can pursue higher education. However, in order to support their children's pursuit of higher education, the single mothers can become indebted heavily, and those who do worry about the burden of the debt. Even when higher education is possible, often with great sacrifices on the part of the mothers, it remains uncertain whether good employment will eventually result. Ms. Loan, 60 years old in 2016, has a daughter who is a second year student of University. Her income is only around 50,000 VND per day from selling vegetable at small scale and she has 500 kg of rice per crop from growing rice. Each university semester, she has to borrow 5,000,000 VND to pay tuition fee for her daughter. In addition, every month, she gives her daughter 1,200,000 VND to cover living expenses. Besides, every month her daughters takes rice from home to cook. She said that when her daughter had just entered the university she was very worried because the education cost a lot of money. However, when her daughter was in the second year of the university she was calm again. She is proud of her daughter because many children of her neighbors could not attend university. She believes that the life of her daughter will be better. However, this is an uncertain prospect because a university education no longer necessarily leads to stable and good incomes nowadays – many university graduates have to hide their degree certificates to apply for jobs as factory workers. At the same time, the household has significant debts to pay back in the years to come.

In most cases, the women's decision become single mothers despite all the stigma is driven by the desire to have a family and the concern with having children to care for them in old age. This desire is that which drives them in their struggles for a viable life within the limits of their circumstances. Their hopes for the future are invested in the children, and yet there is much uncertainty in how well the children are able to meet these expectations because they seem to inherit much of the social constraints that their mothers face.

8 Conclusion

With their limited capitals, livelihood assets, single mothers implement a variety of livelihood strategies to increase income and improve their lives. Within the social and economic constraints of their marital status, they have sought to increase the area of agricultural land, diversify the sources of their

loans, and rely on family and kinship networks in the organization of household production. Despite all their efforts, they are able only to access low-paid non-farm jobs and generally have low incomes. A disproportionate number of them remain poor, both according to formal criteria and self-evaluation. Thus, for many single mothers, there is a gap between the current life and the good life in terms of good income and lifting out of poverty, increased well-being and reduced vulnerability. This indicates that social welfare policies for single mothers must address the structural causes of their vulnerability and poverty.

Our analysis suggests that the undesirable livelihood outcomes of single-mother households are the effect of a discriminatory structure of opportunities that punishes them for deviating from the norms of the patriarchal family and by extension of the 'Happy Family' promoted by the state. Even as they are now recognized by law, their households continue to be faulted through the workings of local social and economic institutions, such as family property or credit provision, for the absence of a male adult. This takes place even through institutions that are supposed to improve the lives of disadvantaged people such as they are, not least the Women Union. The account of their livelihoods struggles indicate the enduring power of the patriarchal norms that permeate family, community and state institutions to shape people's gendered behavior as far as family making is concerned. As we have seen, the single mothers are made to be consistently aware of their marital status as a social deficiency and an economic obstacle, and they keep referring to married life as the ideal of family life. As such, the space that women are allowed to make their own family without men is heavily circumscribed, even as it goes some way in addressing their needs. The Vietnam state has had to allow them such space because of their historical and social claims and because of its delegation of reproductive and care responsibilities to the family in the new economy. Without their children, the women are likely to put their claims on state care in their old age. Their supposed "deviation", however, must be kept well in check through a combination of punitive social and economic measures; the "deviation" should remain a deviation for the sake of the "normal" family and the nation.

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