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Single Mothers' Livelihoods in Rural North Central Vietnam

Struggles for a Good Life

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Abstract

Single mothers in rural North Central Vietnam face many difficulties in earning their livelihoods. Since they deviate from the norms of the patriarchal family, many do not find it easy to obtain support 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 that are normally available to married women and face discrimination in accessing livelihood capital. Finally, the stigma induced by the state-sponsored notion of the 'Happy Family' acts as a social deterrent to their pursuit of the good life. Thus, regardless of their efforts to make a living, 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

1 Introduction¹

The trend of late marriage, divorce, separation and single motherhood has accompanied the process of economic growth and social modernisation (Dales 2014; Zarina and Kamil 2012). While marriage remains central to what the family means in Vietnam, the country has also been experiencing a greater 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 struggle for a livelihood and well-being. This question arises from our observation that single mothers are structurally disadvantaged compared to married couples, lacking not just the presence of an adult male, a potential source of income and support, but also the support structure that comes from the husband's family network. 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 the well-being of their children and themselves, yet face barriers in the rural economy arising from their marital status. The study suggests that the idealisation 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 Sứu 2014) and the struggles of single women as migrant workers (Nguyen 2015, 2019), little attention has been paid to the livelihoods of single mothers in the countryside, a group whose opportunities and constraints differ from those of similar women in the city. Compared to single mothers in urban areas, they face to a greater extent the age-old stigma of women who 'become pregnant without a husband', a quasi-crime in past village life that called for such severe punishments as the 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 a double constraint on their social and economic life is likely to have significant implications for their livelihoods and well-being. In-depth knowledge of how

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

they sustain family and economic life under such social and economic conditions is significant for the understanding of changes and continuity within the Vietnamese family and kinship networks in the new economy.

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

Vietnamese kinship is characterised 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 the property of their parents (Đào Duy Anh 2000 [1938], 135). In principle, a 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 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 terms 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 woman became pregnant, she would suffer a heavy punishment. For example, an unmarried woman caught in a sexual relationship was punished with 100 lashes according to the Gia Long Code³ (Pham Van Bich 1999, 87). Thus, the values of the patriarchal family deem single mothers to be deviating from its norms, harming kinship relations and traditional customs.

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 family refers to family forms and relations that existed before 1945.

3 The Long Code was issued in 1815.

After the August Revolution in 1945, the Vietnamese traditional family and the position of women were changed significantly. The Women's Union was founded along the lines 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, the women's liberation movement in Vietnam also transformed the position of women in terms of education, employment, political participation and upward social mobility (Pham Van Bich 1997, 131–140). In addition, women's position regarding the Vietnamese family changed significantly as an effect of the wars against the French and the Americans, as well as the wars in Cambodia and on 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 was 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 loneliness (Phinney 2005, 219–221), the stigma of being 'unmarriageable' and the worry about how they would be 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 either with a friend or with a stranger in hospital (an arrangement facilitated by doctors) or through private arrangements. Gradually, this came to be accepted by the general public, given the postwar 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 the 1980s unmarried women becoming pregnant were sharply criticised (Pham Van Bich 1997, 159). Single mothers also have to face up to the benchmarks of the state-promoted notion of the 'Happy Family', a family with 'an adequate income, two children, and stable conjugal relations'. Unmarried single mothers are clearly excluded from this vision of the 'Happy Family' (Phinney 2005, 219–221). Similarly, Earl (2015) identifies the twenty-first-century situation of the family and marriage in Vietnam as centring on heterosexuality in a normative marriage. The responsibility expected of women is to get married, give birth to sons and 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 of single mothers and their greater social acceptance, the predomi-

nant conception of heterosexual marriage as the basis for the family along the lines of the 'Happy Family' continues the stigma against 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 centralised economy, a diminishing socialist welfare system and the re-emergence of the family as the main unit of production and reproduction, families were allowed to pursue their own livelihoods and were seen as responsible for their own support and well-being. 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 had an effect in enlarging social space for single mothers for meaning-making and livelihood 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 the effects of kinship networks 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 as 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 involved 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 are livelihood assets, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. Livelihood assets are five types of capital: 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 analysing rural livelihoods including four main aspects: (1) access to five types of capital

4 A household has land use rights (not private ownership). Its production depends on a household's land, its production tools and its members. Thus, households are basic production units in rural areas.

assets; (2) the means of transforming and combining those assets in forming livelihoods that meet their needs; (3) the means of expanding assets through interaction with other actors; and (4) the means of deploying and enhancing their capabilities.

The livelihood framework is a useful analytical tool in understanding 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 media and in public spaces (Minh Thu 2016; Quỳnh Chi 2011). The livelihood strategies adopted by the single mothers in our study indicate their resilience, at the same time as continued reference to normative family frameworks in evaluating their lives and future prospects.

The livelihood framework offers 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 in which people are able to maintain a viable income and well-being. In what follows, we will analyse 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 article is based on a field study conducted in a rice-growing district, half hilly, half plain, in Nghe An province from April 2015 to December 2016, with 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 920 hectares.⁵ The population by 2014 was 284,204 people, and there are thirty communes with Catholic residents, including communes with religious worship facilities (Catholic) with 37,804 people, accounting for 13.3 per cent of the district's population. There are ten churches and nine parish priests.⁶

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.

This district also has a large number of single mothers currently living and working there (994 single mothers in 2014).⁷ The district has a village by the name of Son (anonymous name) in which, in the past, only single mothers lived. This village was set up about forty 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 could not find suitable people to marry. 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 simply the traditional view, because many were in fact still young. Wishing to have children, the women engaged in the practice of 'asking for a child', meaning getting pregnant by men who were their acquaintances. The strong stigma they experienced led thirty of these single mothers to leave their home village and settle down together in an area not far away, thus 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 settle down in the village. After merging with another hamlet, the village now has nearly 300 households. Of the thirty single mothers who founded the village, eleven still live here; others have followed their children to other regions, and several have died.⁸

This study employs a mixed-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, thirty-one in-depth interviews were conducted, twenty-five with single mothers, three with local officials and three with family members of the women. The women selected for in-depth interviews were 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 livelihood activities. The interviews also sought to understand how the women build their assets to develop their livelihoods. In 2020, five further interviews were conducted to collect additional data for this article.

In addition, we also conducted a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consisted of forty-five questions focusing on different aspects of the social life and livelihoods of the single mothers. In terms of sampling, sixteen communes in thirty-eight communes and one town of this district were selected

7 Data from the Vietnam Women's Union of one commune in this district in 2014.

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

for the survey. The selected communes reflected a broad range of the natural, economic, social and cultural characteristics of the district. Specifically, these communes represented a group of communes with high, medium and low income per capita. These communes also represented the groups of plain and semi-mountainous rural communes. Altogether, 285 single mothers in sixteen communes were interviewed (out of the total of 994 in the district).⁹ The survey team included students with sociological expertise, and the second author of the paper directly collected data and supervised the process in the field.

In the group of 285 single mothers who were surveyed, the average of age was 43.52 years; the youngest was twenty, the oldest sixty. As for the number of children, 76.8 per cent had one child, 22.5 per cent had two children and 0.7 per cent had three children. Among the 285 single mothers, 50.5 per cent had graduated from secondary school, 25.3 per cent had graduated from primary school, 16.1 per cent had graduated from high school, 1.1 per cent had graduated from university/college and 1.7 per cent had graduated from vocational school. Thus, the educational levels of many single mothers in the sample were not high. Concerning their occupations, 90.2 per cent of this group followed agricultural production and 82.1 per cent considered agricultural production to be their main job. The main occupation of the other 17.9 per cent of the single mothers in the sample was small trader (4.9 per cent), government employee (0.7 per cent), worker (4.6 per cent), teacher (1.4 per cent), self/flexible/free-labourer (6.0 per cent) and housewife/labourer (0.35 per cent). Thus, agricultural production was the main job of most single mothers in this district. The survey result indicates six main reasons why this group of women became single mothers (Table 1). The following sections will discuss how these gendered perceptions of singlehood are entangled with the women's gendered access to livelihood assets in shaping their livelihood outcomes.

The survey shows that the shortest period of single motherhood was one year and the longest forty-one years, with the average number of years as a single mother being 13.5 years. Therefore, the average age when a single mother became pregnant for the first time was 30.02 years old, which, according to local practices, is relatively late. Single mothers who were heads of households accounted for a very large proportion (84.2 per cent) compared to those (15.8

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 in the quantitative survey, there were only eight single mothers who were Catholics. The percentage (2.8 per cent) was too small to compare Catholic single mothers with non-Catholic single mothers. In addition, none of the single mothers selected for in-depth interviews were Catholic. Thus, our discussion is focused on non-Catholic single mothers.

TABLE 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 opportunity to) marry	33	11.6
Not good-looking, thus could not (have opportunity to) marry	6	2.1

per cent) who were members of a household, namely those who, after giving birth, continued to live with their parents or siblings. The majority of single mothers thus set up their own households rather than living with their parents, brothers or sisters, with implications for familial support in terms of money and labour, a point that will be taken up later 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 earn a livelihood in agricultural production is essential to achieve livelihood outcomes. Agricultural land was the most important livelihood asset of single mothers in this district because 90.2 per cent of this group followed agricultural production and 82.1 per cent considered agricultural production to be their main job. In addition, agricultural land is more important for single mothers than for other households because they are less able to mobilise support for child care than married couples, who have parents and siblings from both sides to rely on; thus they cannot migrate for waged work.

Overall, the single mothers had two types of agricultural land: 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. First, 90.8 per cent (259 households) were engaged in agricultural production. Among agricultural production households, only 79.1 per cent (205 households) had garden land for cultivation. Second, the household with

the smallest garden land area had 10 m², the largest household with the largest garden land area had 3000 m², and the average garden land area was 367 m². Thus, the area of garden land of each single-mother household was not large, and many single mothers, as indicated above, had no garden land at all.

In terms of garden land use rights, the limited rights of single-mother households can be explained by the fact that families tend to pass property down the male line. Although the Civil Code in Vietnam confirms the equal inheritance rights of daughters and sons (Quốc Hội 2015), the favouring of sons continues in practice. The case of Ms Quy, a single mother, illustrates this partiality. Ms Quy had four older brothers. She gave birth to a child in 2000, when she was thirty years old, an age that was considered neither too young nor old. Since giving birth to her son, she lived with him in a small house built in the garden of her parents' house. However, her oldest brother argued that the garden belonged to him, as the oldest son of the family, and refused to allow her to cultivate anything in the garden. He also 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 a 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 the 'Happy Family' (Phinney 2005),¹⁰ this story reflects two obstacles preventing single mothers from accessing and controlling garden land. First, the traditional customs and patrilineage kinship system in which land/property was transferred along the male line prevented the single mother's access to the garden land of their parents. Second, as 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 towards her. Normally, siblings are expected to support each other when in need. However, in this case he did not support her and showed a contemptuous disregard for her because she was 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 swore ... chased me away' (interview on 23 October 2015).

10 The interviewees did not directly mention the 'Happy Family' campaign. However, they seemed to internalise the spirit of the campaign. For example, the chairwoman of the Women's Union in one commune said that: 'Not only single mothers but also their children feel that it is an incomplete family. [If they] had both parents, they could enjoy the 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 as happy as having a normal family. It is better to get married, but because of my circumstances I could not' (interview on 24 May 2016).

Households of single mothers have much less farmland than the average household. There are two types of farmland cultivated by all households, including those of single mothers. The first is that 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 showed that 259 single-mother households (90.9 per cent) were cultivating an allocated field.¹¹ The remaining women had not been provided with fields because they were born after 1993.

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

We do not have the data on the average land area of a household with both husband and wife for the sake of comparison. However, all individuals born before 1993 were allocated 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, her children/child and her parents, and maybe other relatives) might be able to cultivate the land shares of all household members.

To increase the area of agricultural land they can cultivate, single-mother households might rent or borrow land. In the three years up to the time of our survey, about 30 per cent of those households had done so. The rental area ranged between 150 m² and 2170 m², averaging 1017 m². The land was usually rented from the public land of the commune, or from relatives and neighbours.¹² However, a large proportion of the single-mother households were not able to rent land to expand their production. The chairwoman of one commune's Women's Union explained that most single mothers were not confident

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

enough to rent agricultural public land from the commune, because they were afraid that they would not be able to cultivate the land effectively and would become indebted to the commune (interview on 10 May 2020). Meanwhile, the commune authorities were often hesitant to rent agricultural land to single mothers out of a belief that they were unlikely to pay the rental fees. The local authorities' mistrust in the productive ability of the women is clearly 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 unfavourable distribution of rental farmland.

Such constructions of single women as incompetent economic and contractual actors stem from the patriarchal notions of the family that emphasise 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 ability of single-mother households to access additional land 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 a 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 necessary to achieve a good life (Bebbington 1999; DFID 1999). With the growing costs of agricultural inputs and everyday living, financial capital assumes a 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 livelihood activities. The average income of single mothers in our study was 1,842,000 VND/month (US\$42), compared to 2,166,666 VND/month (US\$49) average local income (Mai Hoa 2015). This means that many had to borrow money in order to cover daily expenses and invest in household economy production. Among the 285 single mothers surveyed, 179 (62.0 per cent) reported borrowing money and 258 loans were recorded. The purposes of loans of single-parent women households are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 suggests that most loans were used to cover everyday consumption and expenses. Borrowing for house construction is quite common in rural areas today. However, our observations show poorer housing conditions among sin-

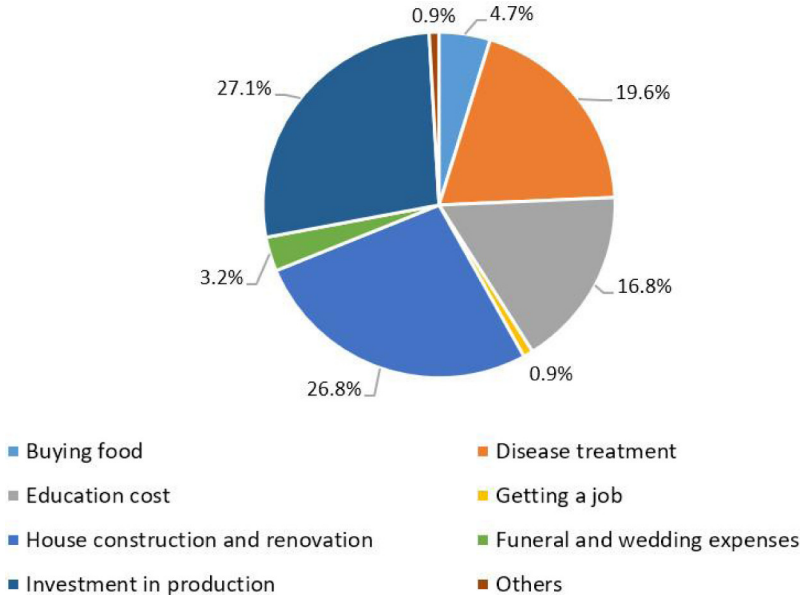


FIGURE 1 Purposes of loans of single-mother households

gle mothers compared with married-couple households. The quantitative data from our survey show that 90.5 per cent of the single mothers lived in grade 4 houses (a one-storey house with a roof, under 100m²)¹³ with near-poor or poor conditions. As such, the single-mothers' houses were in greater need of rebuilding or upgrading.

The larger proportion of loans for everyday expenses indicates high pressure on the single-mother household to prioritise immediate needs over longer-term investments. In comparison with married-couple households, a heavier burden of everyday consumption and expenses falls on the single mothers' households because of their lower income. The need to prioritise immediate consumption prevents livelihood activities that would 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 2.¹⁴ The table suggests that not many single mothers borrow from commercial banks because they do not have valuable properties to use as collateral. More-

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.

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

TABLE 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 programme/fund	24	8.4
Farmers' Association fund	6	2.1
Women's Union fund	7	2.5
Relatives and friends	92	32.3
Private lender	28	9.8
Other sources	1	0.4

over, not many single mothers borrow from the Farmers' Association fund and the Women's Union fund because, at the commune level, these are limited. Many instead borrow from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies and the poverty reduction programme/fund. Poor households can borrow money from these institutions with no collateral and at a low interest rate. However, in order to borrow money from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, borrowers have to be selected by the organisation at communal level. If the borrowers are women, they will be selected by the local Women's Union according to several criteria (Vietnam Bank for Social Policies nd).¹⁵ Many single mothers, especially very poor ones, were not selected to borrow money from this bank because the leaders of the local Women's Union and other authorities were afraid that they would not be able to keep up with repayments. This practice reflects a mistrust in the single mothers as economic actors, a mistrust informed by the notion of the 'Happy Family' as a stable unit of production. If the women cannot borrow money from this bank, they normally resort to relatives and friends or even private lenders. As Table 2 indicates, 32.3 per cent of the single mothers borrowed money from their relatives and friends. Meanwhile, 9.8 per cent of the single mothers borrowed money from private lenders. This incurs high interest rates, 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 mothers are hesitant to approach lenders at all. According to the chairwoman of the Women's Union in one commune, this is again due to their lack of confidence and a certain level of self-discrimination:

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

Single mothers have a sense of inferiority. They consider themselves as people with low social status. That has a 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. 'Normal' households with husbands and wives can borrow money to invest in trading or set up stores to increase their 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 livelihood activities, their incomes are very low.

Interview on 23 May 2016

What the Women's 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 seen as not likely to make sound investments and be able to repay the loan. This mistrust seems to be based on the view that a husband is not only an indispensable economic actor in the household but also a moral guarantee for the repayment of the loan, as indicated by the following quote from Ms Luan, a forty-one-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, with husbands and wives, borrow money. Because I am alone, without a husband, I could not borrow money from private lenders. They were afraid that I would not be able to repay the debt.

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 neighbours, as illustrated by the case of Ms Quy, a forty-four-year-old from another commune. She told us that people around her, including her relatives and her neighbours, despised her for being both a single mother and a poor person, which made it hard for her to borrow money from them. Once, 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 using

the residential land on which her mother's house stands as collateral (she and her son live with her mother in the latter's house). However, her older brother claimed that their mother's land actually belonged 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 will be very happy.' If I die, he rejoices. When my mother asked my brother to lend me money, my brother cursed and threw 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 livelihood activities. Despite the availability of social policy measures aimed at assisting disadvantaged groups, such as the Bank for Social Policy, single mothers experience 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 credit, the single-mother households conducted a diverse array of productive activities apart from rice-growing. A majority of these households engaged in husbandry activities, including keeping buffaloes, pigs and chickens, although most had only makeshift facilities. The poor breeding facilities impacted negatively on the income they made from the animals. For example, Ms Loan, a sixty-year-old single mother, traded vegetables in the market, grew wet rice and bred pigs and chickens. The three livelihood activities combined to produce an average income per month of about one million VND (around US\$42) (interview on 27 April 2016). The poor animal breeding facilities of single mothers resulted from them not having enough funds for investment and, in comparison to other families with male adults, they had to build and maintain the facilities themselves. It is common in rural households in Vietnam that men build the sheds, styies and coops for keeping the animals. According to the chairwoman of the Women's Union of one 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 [*túi 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

According to 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 without a husband thus might be grudgingly accepted by those around her, but the social and economic consequences of not having a husband are, it seems, made all too visible, and emphasised 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 problems rather than the effects of prejudicial social discourses and practices. The fact that the women themselves also used these terms when talking about themselves indicates that, like other people, they continued to refer to the normative gender norms that frame such discourses and practices.

6 Mobilising 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 in carrying out their livelihood. However, single mothers have limited access to these sources of capital. A quarter of the survey sample reported poor health as the biggest difficulty they faced in carrying out their livelihood activities. The high incidence of poor health was strongly related to the lack of money to pay for health care and treatment, together with the difficulty many had in obtaining loans to pay for health expenses. As Ms Quy, a forty-four-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 and near-poor households. However, when people are

hospitalised they have to pay for several kinds of services and medicines that are not covered by the health insurance cards (Nguyen 2020). Thus, many single mothers are in poor health. According to the survey, only 3.6 per cent of the single mothers said that they were in good health, while 50.2 per cent viewed themselves as in neither poor nor good health and 46.2 per cent described themselves as in poor health. Thus, human capital in terms of the 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 organisations, socio-political organisations and social and professional organisations. The reason for this is again to do with their experiences of being singled out for their marital status. An example is Ms Loan, sixty years old in 2016, who only interacted with people in the cluster of households around her house. She did not participate in mass organisations, socio-political organisations or social and professional organisations in her commune. She explained that she was very busy, while at the same time feeling self-pity and loneliness. She said that many people were not kind. In case of a disagreement between her and them, they would say something hurtful about her being a single mother. She often felt obliged to explain to people that she wished she lived in a 'normal' husband and wife family, but because of the way things had turned out she had 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

This punishment for deviating from the norms of the patriarchal family works subtly. Despite the women's insistence that their adopted family form was not a willing choice, they were still seen as culpable for failing to conform to the norm (Ms Loan, interview on 27 April 2016). The women's resulting lack of participation in local organisations and groupings, however, had real consequences for their livelihoods. In particular, it led to their limited access to the wider network of support during periods of ill health or when there was a greater need for labour, for example during transplanting or harvest time.

Being quasi-excluded from the wider community support network, most single mothers relied on kinship networks and neighbours for support in carrying out their livelihood activities, be this in terms of money or labour. In terms of financial support, their siblings helped them the most (28.8 per cent), followed

by other relatives (19.2 per cent) and parents (18.5 per cent). Within terms of labour support, siblings also helped them the most (41.9 per cent), followed by their parents (19.6 per cent), other relatives (17.8 per cent) and neighbours (12.3 per cent). In short, the social capital of the single mothers was largely confined to the relationships they had within their parental families and immediate neighbourhood.

Clearly, certain single mothers received support from their relatives and others did not, even suffering from discrimination by their own relatives. This seemed to depend on how they became single mothers and is demonstrated through the case of Ms Quý (interview on 18 June 2015). Quý's father died at a very young age. Her mother had to raise five children on her own. In order to share her mother's burden, Quý delayed marrying in order to work to earn her family's living and look after her siblings. Thus, she was still single past thirty, which around twenty years ago was considered too late to marry. At the age of thirty-two, she 'asked for a child' from a man so that the child would look after her when she was old. She said she did 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 neighbours supported her when she faced difficulties in everyday life. While earning a living was difficult, she was in a slighter better situation than the others.

The case of Ms Liên, twenty-five years old in 2016, stands in contrast to Ms Quý's (interview 13 July 2016). When she became pregnant and her boyfriend refused to marry her, she decided to keep the child. She said that neighbours gossiped about her and showed contempt for her pregnancy. She just ignored them and let them say whatever they wanted until they grew bored. Ms Liên thus suffered a greater degree of discrimination and social stigma than Ms Quý and did not receive as much support from her relatives with making 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 well-being, in much the same way that women's contributions to the war and socialist building led to the legal recognition of their desire to have children.

7 Livelihood Outcomes and Obstacles to a Good Life

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

The first dimension is income. The average monthly income of single mothers in the study area is 1,842,000 VND/month (around US\$78), compared to the district's average income of 2,166,666 VND/month (Mai Hoa 2015).¹⁶ Almost half of these households are formally classified as poor (35.8 per cent) or near-poor (12.3 per cent). Compared to the district's poverty rate of 6.29 per cent in 2015,¹⁷ the incidence of poverty among single-mother households was disproportionately high. The single mothers' self-assessment of their living standards indicates a strong perception of their families as living in poverty. Specifically, 64.2 per cent of single mothers rated their households as poor and 22.8 per cent as near-poor. Just over 10 per cent thought that their household was in the middle rank, and very few (0.7 per cent) thought that their living standards were 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 per cent of single mothers had a grade 4 house. The proportion of single mothers with permanent or good houses stood at 4.6 per cent; 9.9 per cent of single mothers lived in temporary houses and 0.7 per cent lived in rented houses. The survey results also show that most single mothers' households did not have facilities enjoyed by most people. Only 25.6 per cent of them owned motorbikes, the most common means of transport, while 35.4 per cent did not have a television and 12.9 per cent did not have a rice cooker, almost basic necessities in Vietnam today.

The second dimension is their relationship to vulnerability and general well-being. Following the livelihood framework, the level of wealth accumulation, especially that of financial capital and the degree of job stability, is crucial for a sustainable livelihood that reflects well-being and reduced vulnerability. Our informants scored relatively low on both counts. Only 12.9 per cent had some savings, while a large proportion (62.8 per cent) were in debt. This high percentage of single mothers in debt reflects their high degree of vulnerability to everyday uncertainties such as sickness, unemployment or natural hazards. In addition, a large proportion of single mothers said they had a paid job only occasionally or rarely. Among the 285 single mothers, only 132 had paid jobs, and among this group the percentage who frequently had paid jobs was low. For example, only 10.0 per cent of bricklayers' assistants and 14.3 per cent of

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

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 employees in cottage industry households had paid jobs frequently. This low degree of job stability experienced by many single mothers reflects the fact that not many 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 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 were not able to achieve high levels of education, something essential to securing good employment. In some rare cases, single mothers' children went on to higher education. However, in order to support this the single mothers could become heavily indebted, and those who did so worried about the burden of the debt. Even when higher education was possible, often with great sacrifices on the part of the mothers, it remained uncertain whether good employment would eventually result. The daughter of Ms Loan, sixty years old in 2016, was a second-year student at university. Ms Loan's income was only around 50,000 VND per day from selling vegetables on a small scale, and she had 500 kg of rice per crop from growing rice. Each university semester, she had to borrow 5,000,000 VND to pay her daughter's tuition fees. In addition, every month she gave her daughter 1,200,000 VND to cover her living expenses, and her daughter took rice from home to cook. She said that when her daughter first went to university she was very worried because the education cost a lot of money. However, by the time her daughter was in her second year she had calmed down. She was proud of her daughter because many of her neighbours' children could not attend university. She believed that her daughter would have a better life. However, this was an uncertain prospect because nowadays a university education no longer necessarily leads to stable and good incomes—many university graduates have to hide their degree certificates to apply for jobs as factory workers. At the same time, the household will have significant debts to pay back in the years to come.

In most cases, the women's decision become single mothers despite all the stigma was driven by the desire to have a family and the concern with having children to care for them in old age. This desire was what drove them in their struggles for a viable life within the limits of their circumstances. Their hopes for the future were invested in their children, and yet there was much uncertainty over how well the children would be able to meet these expectations because they seemed to inherit many of the social constraints that their mothers faced.

8 Conclusion

With their limited capital and assets, single mothers implemented a variety of livelihood strategies to increase income and improve their lives. Within the social and economic constraints of their marital status, they sought to increase the area of agricultural land, diversify the sources of their loans and rely on family and kinship networks in the organisation of household production. Despite all their efforts, they were able to access only low-paid non-farm jobs and generally had low incomes. A disproportionate number of them remained poor, according to both formal criteria and self-evaluation. Thus, for many single mothers, there was a gap between their current life and the good life in terms of good income and being lifted 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 though they are now recognised by law, their households continue to face discrimination 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 like them, not least the Women's Union. The account of their struggles to make a living indicates the enduring power of the patriarchal norms that permeate family, community and state institutions to shape people's gendered behaviour as far as family-making is concerned. As we have seen, the single mothers are constantly made 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 where women are allowed to make their own family without men is heavily circumscribed, even as it goes some way towards addressing their needs. The Vietnamese 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 rely 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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