

# Moving out of Home: Negotiating Gender for Personal Transformation of Hmong Women Working in Tourism-related Activities in Sa Pa, Vietnam

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## Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the various strategies that Hmong women who work in tourism-related activities use to deal with their husbands at home. Based on ethnographic research in Sa Pa, Vietnam, the author argues that Hmong women have successfully manipulated the discourse of traditions concerning gender and work to gain power in their relationships with their husbands, and overcome the socio-cultural, economic constraints imposed on them by their culture. Hmong women continue to play a subordinate role in their patriarchal society, while at the same time undermining the system through their subtle power struggles. In order to ensure that their husbands continue to support the family, they understand how important it is for them to continue to feel powerful and dominant. Hmong women use their newly learned negotiation skills to deal with their husbands and gain a better position in the family.

**Keywords:** Hmong, gender relations, tourism, Vietnam

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์กลยุทธ์ต่างๆ ที่สตรีม้งผู้ทำงานในกิจกรรมด้านการท่องเที่ยวใช้ในการต่อรองกับสามีของพวกเธอที่บ้าน จากการวิจัยทางมานุษยวิทยาที่ซาปา ประเทศเวียดนาม ผู้เขียนเสนอว่า สตรีม้งสามารถปรับวาทกรรมแบบประเพณีนิยมด้านเพศภาวะที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการทำงานเพื่อให้พวกเธอสามารถมีอำนาจในความสัมพันธ์กับสามีของพวกเธอและสามารถเอาชนะข้อจำกัดด้านสังคม-วัฒนธรรมและเศรษฐกิจที่เป็นตัวกำหนดบังคับพวกเธอตามแบบแผนวัฒนธรรมเดิม สตรีม้งยังคงมีบทบาทอยู่ในสังคมชายเป็นใหญ่ แต่ใน

เวลาเดียวกันพวกเขาก็สามารถบ่อนทำลายระบบสังคมแบบนี้ด้วยการต่อสู้ต่อรองเชิงอำนาจอย่างแนบเนียน เพื่อให้สามีของพวกเขายังคงรับผิดชอบและสนับสนุนครอบครัวต่อไป พวกเขาเข้าใจถึงประเด็นสำคัญที่ว่าสามีของพวกเขาจะต้องยังคงรู้สึกว่ามีอำนาจและมีบทบาทเด่นกว่า สตรีมั้งใช้ทักษะการต่อรองใหม่ๆ ในการจัดการความสัมพันธ์กับสามี เพื่อให้พวกเขามีสถานะสูงขึ้นในครอบครัว

**คำสำคัญ:** มัง ความสัมพันธ์ทางเพศภาวะ การท่องเที่ยว เวียดนาม

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, tourism in Sa Pa, Vietnam has developed rapidly and become a key industry in its socio-economy strategy. The rapid development of tourism has opened new opportunities for local people, including opportunities to engage in tourism-related economic activities. The Hmong women in Sa Pa, like many other ethnic minorities, have taken advantage of these opportunities by engaging in various tourism-related activities to increase their income. Engaging in these activities means Hmong women move from their homes, which are spaces with limited social relations and interactions, to wider, more public spaces that contain both risks and new experiences that provide them personal transformations. These transformations challenge a number of existing social, political and cultural relationships. Within households, these transformations are creating family struggles and tensions.

The literature on gender relations in families points out that it is not easy for men to accept gendered transformation in the family (Harrison, 1992; Timothy, 2001). At the heart of this is the argument that changes in gender roles reduce the power of the husband in the family (Timothy, 2001; Rothschild cited in Bui Phuong Dinh, 2006). Within the Hmong context, the most striking aspect of gender roles in Hmong society is the hierarchical relationship between men and women. The man is the leader and decision maker in the family and has authority over both his children and his wife. Women usually do household chores such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, helping with farm work, and

providing advice to their daughters to ensure their proper behavior. For Hmong women, working outside the home is viewed as a threat to family honor and status, so “a good wife stays home” (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). In this article, I examine how these dominant gender ideologies function and are reproduced in the daily realities of Hmong women that inform their perceptions of work and their roles in the family. I also analyze how Hmong women use gendered strategies to organize against gender constraints and negotiate for changes in their daily lives. I argue that Hmong women are successful in manipulating discourses on traditions concerning gender and work to gain power in their relationships and overcome socio-cultural and economic barriers, enabling them to enjoy their lives in ways they had never been able to experience before.

This research is underpinned by longitudinal ethnographic research in Sa Pa, which has been a tourist site since 2012. The author undertook fieldwork for six months from September 2012 to April 2013 with follow-up visits in early 2014, completing a total of 24 conversational interviews with Hmong married women and their spouses. Hmong women for the purpose of this study are those aged 14-40, who are involved in various tourism-related activities such as tour guides, street vendors and handicraft makers. Their spouses work mainly in farming. Fieldwork was undertaken with Hmong interpreters.

## Conceptual Approaches to Gendered Transformation

Many studies recognize that tourism can offer opportunities motivating local communities to initiate changes and question existing gender constructions (Swain, 1993; Nash, 1993; Little, 2004; Brandth and Haugen, 2010). To examine gender roles within communities, families and the employment context of tourism, scholarly works generally focus on the influence of economic and social power. A study in Peru finds that Peruvian women experience a sense of empowerment because their participation in tourism work gives them more freedom and financial independence. Tucker (2003). The interaction between local women with both national and international tourists can also challenge local

gender norms, leading to changes in lifestyle and behavior regarding consumption as well as shifting gender perceptions. Through encounters with tourists, local women's perspectives are opened to a broader spectrum of gender roles and non-traditional worldviews (Chant, 1997; Elma, 2007).

However, increased social and economic power does not always create new roles and elevated status for women in the family. Even though women may gain economic autonomy, their roles and status remain unchanged in many societies. A number of studies in Greece address this issue and note that despite increased economic power, women are still "left aside" (Tsartas, 2003:118), and in fact, jobs in tourism are often extensions of their domestic roles (Lerch and Levy, 1991; Garcia-Ramon, Canoves and Valdovinos, 1995). In some cases, economic power proves to be a risk for women, because it threatens the status of men as breadwinners by delegitimizing their ability to make financial decisions and posing a challenge to their status (Rottschild cited in Bui Phuong Dinh, 2006; Scheyvens, 2002).

A secondary power struggle may occur as husbands and their working wives negotiate domestic tasks, which are often traditionally "women's work." Men's participation in household chores and childcare is a "threatening prospect" as it is seen to diminish their power (Timothy, 2001: 244). Walsh (2001) shows how men in Loushui village in China justify their refusal to do household work on the basis that it breaks with traditional culture. Chant (1997) shows that although having an independent income can help Mexican women to have more egalitarian relationships with their spouses, not all Mexican men are pleased with their wives' economic independence. These men "retaliate by either dropping out of work or scaling down their contributions to household income" or "use their wives' earnings to play cards or to go out drinking with male friends" (Chant, 1997: 142). In these instances, women suffer more from their economic autonomy than they benefit from it. Clearly, if cultural struggles between men and women to renegotiate gender roles do not value the woman's need for independence and the man's need to maintain some vestiges of power, women's work outside the home is jeopardized.

The above discussion clearly shows that economic and social factors are not enough to explain the changed or unchanged nature of gender relations in communities and families. Cultural norms and traditions about gender influence the perceptions, roles and relations between women and men. Thus, power should be defined according to relationships, connections and the manner in which it manifests itself rather than according to the attributes of the actors involved (Foucault, 1975: 31-32; Foucault, 1976: 112-113; Finas, 1977: 4-5). Power as a mode of action includes one's use of economic, social and cultural strategies to mobilize the available resources in society in order to gain an advantage over another. For example, Ilcan, in her study of the work and struggles of women in rural Turkey, argues that tradition and moral discourses are both instruments and effects of power. She argues that moral judgments that "one ought to do this or that" are beliefs interpreted as choice or duty, and direct the actions of people by restricting them to spheres of conformity and responsibility (Ilcan, 1996). Considering that moral discourses are not strictly rule-bound, Ilcan emphasizes that people can resist and adjust to them through the play of power relations. In the power game, individuals can be both "subject" and "agent" by determining which moral discourses can be enhanced or invented.

Reviewing these studies provides a conceptual tool for investigating changing gender roles in the context of tourism. Existing gender constructions may be either reconfirmed or challenged to initiate change. Changes (if they are possible) are influenced by economic, social and cultural factors, and if successful, change is a process of contestation and negotiation of power between individuals. One may "do gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in ways that support or challenge existing norms and practices in a particular situation. In this sense, gender can be performed, renegotiated and undone as the situation permits. In the case of Hmong women, Duong Bich Hanh's notable study of Hmong girls in Sa Pa, Vietnam (2006) finds that gender roles and relations are changing in the Hmong community. Hmong girls can now choose, and are encouraged by their families, to go to town to

engage in tourism-related activities. Gender patterns that traditionally existed in Hmong villages are changing, and many men do household work while their wives work in town and bring money back for their families. However, the subjects of Duong Bich Hanh's study are unmarried girls, so their independence is more unfettered because they are not constrained by the responsibilities of wives and mothers.

### **“Bargaining with Patriarchy” in the Home**

Kandiyoti (1988, 1990) suggests that women and men in any society should negotiate and adapt to a set of rules that guide and constrain gender relations. Both women and men possess resources they use to negotiate and maximize power and opportunities within patriarchal structures. Kandiyoti (1990: 9) coined the term “bargaining with patriarchy” to refer to this phenomenon.

Hmong women undertake tourism-related activities in the hope of earning additional income to meet their family's financial needs. In doing so, they experience the joy of a freedom that they have never felt before. This autonomy is offset by a minimal income that fluctuates and comes at the risk of resistance from their husbands. It is because Hmong men consider women who are gone from early morning till late afternoon to be lazy because they are “escaping from household work.” Other men are suspicious about their wives who leave home all day, especially when there are rumors about romantic relationships between Hmong women and male tourists (Le Thi Dan Dung, 2015). Male resistance can take various forms, such as the refusal to do their male work, thereby neglecting their duties to provide the family income. In response, Hmong women are developing strategies to gain certain advantages over their husbands in order to change the power structure in the family, enabling them to continue their work and enjoy a better life.

The strategy that Hmong women use rests on the man's authority in the family and on the gendered division of labor. This strategy is rooted in the social and cultural obligations that Hmong society assigns to the man as the head of the family. Women take advantage of this

situation by using the notion of family obligations to emphasize the roles of men as the main economic contributors, supporting women morally, and maintaining order and parental authority over the children in the family. Similarly, to ensure that their husbands continue doing male work and contribute to the family income, Hmong women employ a strategy that rests on the gendered division of labor. For example, rice farming and collecting cardamom are important sources of income and livelihood in Hmong life, and specific aspects of these activities are culturally male activities. Hmong women therefore manipulate this gendered division of labor by asking their husbands to uphold their duty to perform these tasks by pointing out the men's obligations as providers for their family. The women demand that their husbands meet their family's basic expenditure needs. They also demand that the money derived from collecting cardamom be used for the good of the whole household. However, when they do not succeed in getting access to this money, they try to hand over household expenditures to their husbands. In this way, Hmong women emphasize not only their husbands' responsibilities, but also their importance in the family as the main breadwinners, and thus foster their husbands' pride. This is a pragmatic strategy because, as many Hmong women emphasize, Hmong men are well aware of their position and status, as well as their responsibilities in the family. However, their pride plays an important role in deciding what they do for the family. They are more willing to uphold their familial duties if they feel valued and appreciated by their families. If they lose their pride and are made to feel powerless, they will respond by not contributing to the household. Using this as a technique of obtaining power, Hmong women reinforce traditional female and male roles, making them more strongly tied to household duties. From another perspective, when successfully applied, this technique affords the women benefits such as assistance with child rearing and avoiding resistance from their husbands in their bids to work in tourism. Such practices and strategies are indicative of the women's determination to overcome their traditional and moral constraints, and surmount their subordinate positions and the power hierarchies within their families that are dictated by gender.

In recent years, many Hmong have converted to Christianity. The fact is that Hmong women and girls now have to act within new constraints on desires and behaviors imposed by Christian gender and sexual norms (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011). Therefore, the freedom of Hmong girls in Duong Bich Hanh's study in fact is "a kind of asceticism that young Hmong people are imposing on themselves" (Ngo Thi Thanh Tam, 2011: 318). However, conversion to Christianity does not appear to have had much impact on gender relations among those in Sa Pa. When talking with the Hmong women about Christianity, they say that the Bible does not mention the compliance of women with men's requests; however, it emphasizes the role and responsibility of each member in the family's happiness. They strongly believe in both Christian and Hmong morality and work to ensure that their actions reflect their beliefs. Many women I spoke with shared these perceptions. Despite having unequal positions in the family, many women said that they felt safe and secure and that they respected their husbands. These women reasoned that by respecting and following their husbands' requests, they will be rewarded with a harmonious, happy or even violence-free family. And if they respected their husbands and complied with their wishes, their husbands would be more likely to grant their consent for them to work.

### **Influencing the Decision-making Process**

Although Hmong women work to support the power of men in their family and adhere to traditional rules and roles favoring men, they manage to use aspects of these rules for their own benefit. The confidence they get through their work with tourists, their experiences in dealing with the police and difficult vendors, and their business negotiation skills have in turn helped them to deal with their husbands.

However, it is important to mention that women's involvement in decision-making processes only occurs when issues, such as reproduction, children's education, and family budgets, arise within their households. This situation is in line with what is found in Hmong

families in Laos, where men are the heads of the family and act as the public face, making the major decisions regarding economic activities and community involvement (Yuang, 1992). The power and importance of Hmong men in Sa Pa in decision-making processes are illustrated in the following example.

I observed a meeting of Ta Chai hamlet, Ta Phin commune, in which 18 people participated, consisting of 17 men and only one woman. The meeting was to discuss state guidelines and policies on poverty reduction. I was sitting next to Sa, a 35-year-old Hmong woman, the only female in the meeting. She was in attendance because her husband had left town for a cousin's funeral, so she had to participate instead. She was sitting separately from the men, next to the cooking fire. However, she listened intently to the explanation of the policies. One of the important policies that the head of the hamlet mentioned was the State Bank of Social Policy's low interest lending scheme. All of the men actively participated in discussing it and asking about the conditions and interest rates for this policy. Sa did not ask questions publicly, but moved next to a man and privately asked him some questions. The head of the hamlet required participants to register immediately as to whether they would like to borrow money or not. Sa registered her name. After the meeting, I asked her, "So did you decide to borrow some money?" She said, "No, I just registered and I will discuss the matter with my husband for the final decision. We can ask the head of the hamlet to remove my name from the list if we do not need the loan." She commented that her husband had a 'big head', and added, "so it is better that I should consult him before deciding important things. I am a woman; I do not know much about big issues in the community."

This story illustrates several aspects of the power dynamics and decision making in Hmong families in Sa Pa. First, representation in the public sphere is not solely the realm of men. Women are granted access in certain circumstances. However, it is still a male dominated activity. Second, although women can decide on certain things within their families and at a commune level, they nonetheless want to confirm and discuss their decisions with their husbands. In addition, once again

we can see an instance of Hmong women working to keep men in positions of decision making although the women are capable of making these decisions.

Hmong women are not only becoming more active in participating in family decision making, they are also earning money through their involvement in tourism as well as autonomy and the freedom from being completely dependent on their husbands. Although the money they earn from tourism is minimal, they can generally keep it for themselves. They can use it to buy clothes for themselves and for the family. They can also use that money to purchase daily family necessities without having to ask their husbands. Before women started working, they had no money of their own, so every time they wanted to buy something, they had to ask their husbands. Now that they are earning extra money, they can spend it without having to ask their husbands. For women, managing their own extra money is important in changing their role in the family to some extent.

This point demonstrates a re-negotiation and re-calibration of gender relations within households based on the women's new income position. Consequently, women have more pride as well as more power in their relationships, as many Hmong women have stated. For Hmong women in Sa Pa, working outside home has great value not only for their status within the family, but also for their emotional satisfaction, which I will describe below.

### **Fun and Relaxation: Escaping from Boredom**

Despite the cultural traditions and gender constraints that inhibit Hmong women from experiencing empowerment, their participation in tourism-related jobs helps them move outside their community, amuse themselves, and enjoy their lives in a way that they could not before. Many Hmong girls and women expressed a distinct feeling of joy from the mobility that tourism work offers them. Working in tourism is an opportunity for Hmong women to interact with other women and tourists. Establishing friendships with other Hmong is not only of importance for

their business but also for their state of mind. Many women said they got bored when they were at home, and they would cheer up when they were out in the street where they could have fun and be with friends. Some others emphasized the importance of the moral support they received from being with friends in Sa Pa. Lung, a 35-year-old explained to me, "during lunch we can talk with each other about everything, about family and personal problems. Others can give you advice to solve your problems. But even without advice, talking with others is always a good way to release pain and stress." With friends, they share their life and family problems. Sharing problems helps them to alleviate their individual stress and worry.

By participating in tourism work, women are able to enjoy their lives in ways that they could not before. While working in Sa Pa, they can take time off to go to the weekend market there without having to ask their husbands. Saturday and Sunday mornings from 7 am to noon, ethnic minorities from neighboring districts gather in the Sa Pa market to trade goods. For many Hmong, the weekend market is a good opportunity to have fun and enjoy themselves. For young people, the market is a time for them to date, to make new friends and to find and meet their boyfriends and lovers. Unmarried girls go to the markets to look for a lover-for someone with whom to establish a stable and committed relationship which can lead to marriage, while married women are looking for a boyfriend. A "boyfriend" for a married Hmong woman is simply a married or unmarried man that a woman can talk to, and have a drink or meal with.

Before working in tourism, Hmong women seldom had the opportunity to go to the weekend market, but now they tell their husbands they are going to town to work, and they can use their own money to meet up with their friends and boyfriends. By doing this, women feel that they have more self-worth, and are more equal to their husbands. A Hmong woman named So, who works as a street vendor, shared her feelings on how working outside home made her life more interesting. So said that before she started working, she was often anxious about her husband's relationships with other women. Sometimes

he would stay away overnight without a good reason, and she knew that he was spending the night with someone, but she could never do anything about it. This made her feel jealous, weary and stressed.

Married women like So never allude to their relationship with their “boyfriend” as being sexual, because they are aware of the importance of fidelity for women. As mentioned above, for married women, a “boyfriend” is a man that they can meet during the weekend market to talk to, to have a drink and a meal with. If Hmong women hear that their husbands or other women’s husbands have girlfriends, they assume that these girlfriends are Hmong and that the relations are sexual. Apparently, Hmong men have sex with their Hmong girlfriends, but married Hmong women who have boyfriends deny that their relationship is sexual. When I asked So about her relationship with her “boyfriend,” she said that she does not see this as love but only as a form of social relationship, though she referred to him as her “boyfriend.” For So, love is about looking after each other, and it is understood as complementary and self-sacrificing. The relationship between So and her “boyfriend,” as So said, does have these kinds of attributes. However, their relationship has other elements that Hmong women and men see as features of dating. They exchange messages and calls on weekdays to inquire after each other’s health, work and life. Small gifts for a “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” on their birthdays gives them happiness and emotional satisfaction. Emotional satisfaction clearly plays a large role in these relationships. The sexual element is not obvious, and I did not find evidence of any exchanges of money or other material goods. Buying lunch and drinks is shared between couples and birthday gifts are paid for by each in turn. The “boyfriend-girlfriend” relationship is based on emotional need and on satisfaction from a sense of dating, taking care of and being cared for, especially in a culture in which, for most men and women, marriages are arranged at an early age.

The refusal to talk about the sexual and romantic elements of these relationships can be explained by the fact that Hmong women are afraid of being seen as unfaithful. The gossip about Hmong women working in Sa Pa is a fact that Hmong women cannot ignore if they are

to ensure that they can continue to work there and more importantly, ensure that their marriages and families do well. Obviously, fear and desire are integral parts of these “boyfriend-girlfriend” relationships.

The relationships between married Hmong women and their boyfriends have some commonalities with relationships formed by Dai women in Southwest China who migrate to work in Thailand, in the way that the “caring” aspects are emphasized over the sexual aspects. In addition, although Hmong women in Sa Pa may or may not be involved in sexual relationships with their boyfriends and do not receive money from them as Dai women do, having a boyfriend is “part of the ‘freedom’ away from home” (Deng and Lyttleton, 2013: 8). These relationships are emotional attachments, and they signify liberation from the social and cultural constraints of their home lives (Deng and Lyttleton, 2013).

Married Hmong women who are involved in extra-marital relationships see these relationships as a form of therapy which helps them cope with the hardships associated with their marriages. These hardships include difficulties in getting married, hard work in the rice fields, house work, and the stress of dealing with their husbands’ extramarital relationships. Hmong women more or less expressed feelings of being free and happy thanks to their work in tourism and the money they earned. Working outside the home creates a social space that helps them to enjoy a new life with romantic relationships, freedom, fun and relaxation. Even though they suffer from more work and additional difficulties, Hmong women still express their desire to work in tourism, and they have developed various strategies to deal with the resistance from their husbands.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that participation in tourism-related activities has given Hmong women the pride and power associated with earning their own money. Even though the amounts they earn are small, they provide opportunities for freedom, fun, relaxation and romance.

Nevertheless, these women have not totally overturned the traditional gender norms of their culture. The socially embedded constructs of gender are still reproduced in the daily reality of Hmong men and women.

However, some Hmong women use and manipulate views of gender relations to gain power in their relationships with their husbands. They are overcoming the socio-cultural, economic barriers to increase their power in their families while continuing to work and enjoy a better life. In doing so, they appeal to their husband's sense of obligation, which is linked to the gendered division of labor and male authority in the family. While the Hmong women continue to play a subordinate role in their patriarchal society, they are undermining the system through their subtle power struggles. By using this discourse of power, Hmong women are successful in mobilizing the available means to mediate and regulate resistance from their husbands, and continue their efforts to leave their homes for work. Hmong women referred to understanding how important it was for their husbands to continue to feel powerful and dominant in order to maintain harmony, and to ensure their husbands continued to support the family. To do so, Hmong women use their newly-learned negotiation skills to deal with their husbands and gain a better position in the family.

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