



RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INEQUALITIES IN ASIAN CITIES

Focus on Internal Ethnic-Minority Migrants in Hanoi,
Vietnam

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COVER IMAGE : Vietnamese woman in a private sewing workshop in Hanoi, Vietnam, 2019. (Photo: Shutterstock)

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SUMMARY

The first case of Covid-19 in Vietnam was confirmed on January 23, 2020. The country swiftly responded to the pandemic threat through lockdowns and other containment measures that caused tremendous damage to Vietnam's economy. The impacts of Covid-19 and its economic fallout were especially evident in major urban areas, predominantly because of population density, including large populations of disadvantaged groups and informal workers. This report focuses on the economic impact on ethnic-minority migrant workers in Hanoi, who have been among Vietnam's most-affected populations during the pandemic because of previously existing inequalities and a lack of support systems.

Many working-age Vietnamese migrate from impoverished rural areas to urban areas, including Hanoi, for better opportunities, such as obtaining university degrees or better paid jobs in order to provide for themselves or their families. Often, these internal migrants remain in cities because they earn more than they can in their hometowns. However, new arrivals often find only short-term jobs that provide low wages, no formal contracts, and limited opportunities for career growth, within a larger environment of few or no social-protection benefits. Internal migrant workers feel obligated to accept such employment because they have little choice: they lack financial capital, need incomes, and face a dearth of good-paying jobs closer to their hometowns.

Many internal migrants belong to ethnic-minority groups who typically find it even harder to find formal or higher-paid employment because, compared with the dominant ethnic group, they lack sufficient human and social capital – the education, training, skills, and social contacts needed to get ahead. Additionally, female ethnic-minority migrant workers often face discrimination because of their gender, which compounds their difficulties. This discrimination, combined with their lack of disposable income and a tendency to socialize only within their ethnic group, contributes to minority workers' lack of integration within local urban communities and participation in public life. These minorities' relative isolation, whether self-chosen or externally imposed – or a complex combination of the two – affects their ability to negotiate urban life, hindering their ability to constitute the social and human capital needed to find better jobs or to take full advantage of a city's public services.

Like all workers, ethnic-minority migrants in Hanoi experienced significant financial shocks during the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, largely due to government disease-containment measures that caused a sudden and severe loss of income. Financial losses rippled outward to also affect their mental health, as they suffered stress and exhaustion. The Government of Vietnam attempted to mitigate the economic impacts of restrictions through multiple government-led support measures. However, only those migrant workers who previously fell into “poor” and “near-poor” categories were likely to avail themselves of support programs because they were already familiar with and recognized by Vietnam's social protection system. Households that had not received support before the pandemic and suddenly lost all income tended to miss out on this relief.

In addition, many ethnic-minority workers whose occupations fell outside of eligibility criteria – or appeared to be ineligible – were frustrated by the lack of support. Compounding this frustration, some migrant workers were led to believe that they were ineligible for relief programs despite central-government guidance to the contrary. These issues limited the breadth and effectiveness of government support systems; well-intentioned programs too-often failed to mitigate the financial harm done to some of Vietnam’s most vulnerable urban residents.

The lack of government financial support and pre-existing safety nets, as well as ethnic-minority migrant workers’ lack of financial and local social capital, resulted in many workers using short-term coping mechanisms, such as depleting savings, borrowing, and severely reducing consumption, which will likely fail to sustain migrants in the long term and further disadvantage them in the future. More equitable and comprehensive policy responses to the plight of ethnic-minority migrant workers in Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities can alleviate both long-standing and pandemic-related challenges to ethnic-minority groups’ financial recovery, social inclusion, and wellbeing.

*Vietnamese woman carrying vegetables for sale on Long Bien bridge in Hanoi, Vietnam.
Photo: Shutterstock*



INTRODUCTION

This research has a dual focus: it explores the inequality and marginalization experienced by Vietnamese ethnic-minority migrants in an urban setting, including before the Covid-19 pandemic, and seeks to understand how pandemic restrictions and supports affected them. Prior to the pandemic, The Asia Foundation (TAF) chose Hanoi as the locus for research because the city attracts high numbers of temporary and long-term ethnic-minority migrant workers, an understudied group.

Since literature on the migration and lives of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam is limited, we combined desk research with individual interviews to strengthen understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority migrants, stimulate discussion, encourage support for ethnic-minority migrants in urban settings, with the aim of informing government and nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) about the kinds of assistance such migrants need to overcome pandemic-related losses and more effectively contribute to Vietnam's urban economies and societies.

We focused on the following five research questions:

1. What motivated ethnic-minority migrants to move to - and stay in - Hanoi?
2. What factors enable or hinder ethnic-minority migrants in terms of finding employment in Hanoi?
3. What factors enable or hinder ethnic-minority migrants in terms of accessing public services and participating in public life in Hanoi?
4. To what extent have pandemic restrictions affected ethnic-minority migrants' ability to maintain an income?
5. To what extent have government policies enabled informally employed ethnic-minority migrant workers to maintain their income during restricted periods?

We began the research with a literature review in October and December 2020, complemented

by a set of 19 semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted remotely and in person from October 2020 to January 2021. The lead researcher selected research interviewees from diverse places of origin, occupations, ages, and ethnic minority identities. Participants were predominately women (13 out of 15), aged 21 to 53, educated from grade three through university, and had lived in Hanoi from three months to seven years. In addition to the 15 migrant workers interviewed, the researchers interviewed one employer in the construction industry and three NGO employees for comments on their knowledge of the experiences of ethnic-minority migrant workers. Research methodology details and guidelines can be found in Annexes A and B, and detailed interviewee characteristics in Annex C.

The 5 Cs: Context, Capital and Capabilities in Cities during Covid-19

This research utilized the '5Cs' conceptual framework for mapping and interpreting the multidimensional disadvantages brought about for individuals and communities in a crisis situation.¹ In this context, the 5Cs framework enables analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on Contexts, Capital and Capabilities in Cities and focused on three areas: First, we analyzed the **context** of Covid-19 impacts in terms of the non-health implications of the pandemic and the repercussions of government-implemented disease-containment measures. Second, we



examined how people's **capital** (their tangible and intangible resources), particularly their financial, social, and educational (human) capitals, had been impacted by the pandemic and containment measures. Third, the depletion of people's resources influenced their short- and long-term coping abilities, which may further impact people's future **capabilities**, particularly their ability to secure employment, pursue careers, and have independence outside the home.

The causal relationship between these three levels of analysis – context, capital, and capabilities – is neither simple nor linear: the context tends to impact capital and capabilities, but those, in turn, contribute to further changes in the context.

In this report we apply the framework to understand long-standing challenges facing ethnic-minority migrants in Vietnam and specifically Hanoi. It examines the context: the non-health related impacts of the pandemic, including restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of the virus, the resulting shocks to markets and employment, and the state-led support schemes that aimed to mitigate impacts on workers, businesses, and the economy. It highlights the impact pandemic containment measures had on the financial, human, and social capital of individuals and their families and it traces these immediate effects to illustrate the long-term impacts on people's capabilities that will affect their future opportunities and recovery.

1. BACKGROUND ON VIETNAMESE ETHNIC-MINORITY MIGRANTS

Throughout Vietnam, many people migrate from rural areas to urban areas such as Hanoi, seeking educational and livelihood opportunities. According to various studies, about 35 to 57 percent migrate for employment, followed by family reasons such as marriage (21-26 percent), and education (13-23 percent). In addition, 63 percent of migrants cite a lack of land, or poor land, for agricultural production, or a lack of capital for investment in production (45 percent) as reasons for moving to cities.²

Among these internal migrants many belong to ethnic minorities, who account for approximately 14 million of Vietnam's 96 million people. The dominant group, who identify as 'kinh' (Viet), account for around 85 percent of the population.³ There are 54 other recognized ethnic groups and some, such as the Tay, Thai, Muong, Kho-me, Hmong, and Nung, have populations of over 1 million.

Vietnam's ethnic minorities mainly reside in highlands and mountainous areas, which are often rural and remote, dependent on agriculture and seasonal tourism, and where internet connectivity is often weak. These communities are frequently considered as "geographical poverty traps"⁴ because, despite more than two-decades of government-led poverty reduction programs, rural ethnic-minority communities still register the country's highest poverty rates and lowest education levels, with fewer opportunities to access employment, education, and healthcare.

ESCAPING GEOGRAPHIC POVERTY TRAPS FOR URBAN OPPORTUNITIES

Most internal migrants move to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City which receive more than 20 percent of the national total.⁵ Many, particularly those from ethnic minority or other disadvantaged groups, tend to work in unstable, short-term, informal, low-paying, and often dangerous jobs, such as construction, recycling,

and factories, that don't include health protections or adhere to safety standards. Migrant workers are also more likely to turn to street-selling, where they are exposed to high levels of air pollution and other hazards, again without any protections.⁶

Despite the hazards, ten out of 15 of our ethnic-minority interviewees were motivated to stay in Hanoi to earn an income they couldn't achieve in their hometowns, one that could provide for them or even their entire family back home. Others earned extra money to fill a gap in their family's seasonal agricultural income, or to pay off debts. Fifty percent of the interviewees also cited educational opportunities as a reason for moving to Hanoi. One research participant explained that Hanoi-based institutions offered greater opportunities than cheaper schools closer to their hometown, while another emphasized better on-the-job training opportunities in Hanoi. Some migrant workers had chosen Hanoi specially because it was close to their hometown and they could easily travel back when necessary.

"I choose to work in Hanoi so that if something happens at home, I can be at home [straight away]."
- 36 years old female domestic worker,
6 years in Hanoi

Migrants in cities like Hanoi can be categorized into (i) seasonal migrants – migrating

during agriculture off-seasons, (ii) circular or temporary migrants – these range in duration from weekly commuting to migrating for a few years with the intention of returning and (iii) permanent migrants – migrating for years without intention of returning. While “permanent migrant” may seem like an oxymoron, 25 percent of our interviewees said they remained in the city long term because they enjoyed aspects of Hanoi life, such as the “bustle” of the city, opportunities to try something new, and the shops and services, but still identified themselves as an ethnic-minority migrant. With such broad categorizations, in cities like Hanoi, likely the majority of the population is comprised of internal migrants.

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION COMBINE WITH SELF-ISOLATION TO HAMPER SOCIAL INCLUSION

Within Hanoi’s urban population tensions exist that are largely based on ethnic differences. Research suggests the majority of city dwellers in Hanoi tend to regard ethnic-minority migrant workers, particularly the poorer ones, as a “social problem.”⁷⁷ Stereotypes depict them as “backward, greedy and uneducated.”⁷⁸ The state-controlled media tends to reinforce these stereotypes by commonly representing ethnic minorities as poorly educated and dependent on the state.⁷⁹ Consequently, although Vietnamese law prohibits discrimination against ethnic minorities, discrimination persists, including through informal restrictions on employment and access to education.

Our interviewees described multiple experiences of prejudice and discrimination since they moved to Hanoi. Two described how they had been warned by neighbours before they left the north that they should be prepared for prejudice and discrimination when they moved to Hanoi.

“In my hometown, they warned me that when Thai people went to work in Hanoi were bullied by Kinh people.”

– 53 years old female construction worker, 4 years in Hanoi

The expectation of prejudice and discrimination – however likely or unlikely – may well be enough to produce a reluctance to expand social networks to curb any desire to participate in mainstream urban life for some ethnic minority migrants. Many interviewees described how they had to adapt and, to some extent, endure negative attitudes from others living around them in order to engage socially with others.

“They said I was such an ethnic-minority-person- know-nothing. I cried. But it was just that one time. Now, bullying me is impossible.”

– 38 years old female domestic worker, 6 years in Hanoi

In general, our research suggests that urban ethnic-minority migrants tend to network with people of the same ethnicity in order to enlarge their social network and information-sharing opportunities.

“I came here and met people of Thai ethnicity so we found information together, created relationships, and support each other with information.”

– 27 years old female construction worker, 5 months in Hanoi

The experience of exclusion through discrimination appears to be most keenly felt by migrants with lower levels of education. In contrast, a few students we spoke to, who were pursuing higher education in Hanoi were finding broader social integration easier. Four young students described their experiences of

much more diverse social engagement. Several described their roles in organizing events to celebrate and share aspects of their cultures. However, they noted that their activities appeared to draw an inordinate amount of attention from the local authorities, causing them some anxiety.

"The government often pays greater attention to self-organized groups of ethnic minorities. For example, the same activity will encounter more challenges if it is organized by a group of ethnic minorities than if it is organized by a group of Kinh people."

- Female employee of pro-ethnic minority people NGO, 30 years in Hanoi

In stark contrast to our younger interviewees attending university, most, rarely socialized with a wider group of Hanoi residents or participated in public activities. Many linked this lack of social interaction to the fact that they needed to save money or worked such long hours, including weekends, that they had little time for anything else.

"He [my husband] has worked in Hanoi for some years, but he's worried about saving money and sending money home, so he practically doesn't go anywhere."

- 40 years old female construction-site cleaner, 3 months working in Hanoi on this occasion

"I work then stay home ... like a mouse in the corner of the house."

- 42 years old female construction worker, 5 months in Hanoi

Language and other cultural differences are other factors that increase self-isolation and

make securing and settling into new jobs difficult.

"Some people say bad things about ethnic minority people. Language is difficult. They also embarrass me, not wanting to hire me."

- 36 years old female domestic worker; 84 months in Hanoi

GENDER PREJUDICE UNDERMINES ETHNIC-MINORITY MIGRANT WOMEN IN BOTH CITY AND HOMETOWN

Many female ethnic-minority migrant workers face additional challenges because of their gender, including sexual harassment that ranges from verbal abuse to sexual assault.¹⁰ Some interviewees shared experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, including the use of sexually explicit language by male co-workers, especially on construction sites and in mixed temporary housing.

"Can your husband do it? If not, then ask me,' a man challenged me. I shouted at him, then he didn't bother me more. I'm treated like that even though I am here with my husband. Other women who come here alone and haven't married are surely sexually harassed in many ways."

- 40 years old female construction worker, 3 months in Hanoi

Prejudice against women also emerges when female migrant workers return to their rural villages. Female interviewees explained that women working away from home were sometimes assumed to work as prostitutes or viewed as "bad" wives and mothers by their home community.

"They think that women who go to work far away will learn 'bad habits', or 'will get spoiled', and leave their husband and children behind."

- 40 years old female construction worker, 3 months in Hanoi

HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION SYSTEM LIMITS MIGRANTS' ACCESS TO SUBSIDIZED PUBLIC SERVICES

Once in Hanoi, for a range of their own and externally imposed reasons, ethnic minority migrant workers often have limited access to public services. While prejudice and discrimination contribute to the social exclusion of ethnic minority migrants in Hanoi, so do migrants' ties to their hometown¹¹ when they remain temporary residents and lack or do not seek formal registration in urban residence booklets. These booklets are currently part of Vietnam's household registration system, known as "ho khau", which is due to be phased out in 2023. The central problem is that a person can only be registered in one locality at a time, either Hanoi or a hometown, and receive benefits on that basis.¹²

Thus, if a migrant worker chooses to remain registered in their hometown while living in Hanoi, they may have to pay for what would otherwise be Hanoi's free or low-fee public services, including health insurance, and public schools for young children.¹³

Sometimes migrants avoid registration in Hanoi because it can impact on their rights to own land in their hometowns. Other times, temporary migrants are unable to obtain a resident booklet because the registration process takes longer than the period the migrant stays in town. Some ethnic-minority migrants may experience unofficial discrimination: one interviewee expressed frustration at local authorities who had not issued the residence paper she needed

to give to a potential employer.

While in all cases, living in the city outside the "ho khau" system limits access to opportunities and services,¹⁴ ethnic-minority migrants whose children were living with them in Hanoi seemed to experience the greatest difficulty as temporary residents. For example, one participant explained that she had to pay extra to enroll her child in public school in a neighboring residence ward because of her temporary residence status.

"If I don't have the KT3 [residence permit], in the future it will be hard for my second child, who's going to school next year, to apply for a state school because they'd admit those who have permanent residence first, and then KT3, and then other children with other types of residence if there are slots left. I intend to do the KT3 from now until Tet to prepare for my child's education, if I have money"

- 47 years old female domestic worker, 6 years in Hanoi

DISCRIMINATION, NARROW SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND INFORMATION GAPS CONTRIBUTE TO KEEPING ETHNIC-MINORITY MIGRANT WORKERS IN URBAN SETTINGS RELATIVELY IMPOVERISHED AND INSECURE

Most of our research participants had found their current job through recommendations from friends, family members or contacts in northern rural villages, all from the same ethnic group. Fewer than 50 percent of also accessed employment-related information via the Internet, recruitment companies in their hometowns, or community-service workers.¹⁵ Notably, the word-of-mouth jobs were

often short-term and did not offer formal employment contracts. For this reason, informally employed ethnic-minority migrant workers also often lack social safety nets, such as unemployment insurance: 62 percent of workers have only a verbal employment agreement with their employers and 15 percent have no agreement at all.¹⁶ Only 0.2 percent of informal workers have compulsory social insurance (paid by employers) and under 2 percent have social insurance on a voluntary basis (where employees pay it themselves).¹⁷ Thus, many interviewees were working without job security or a mechanism with which to claim compensation if necessary.

Most interviewees explained that they were working on the basis of verbal agreements. A few seemed to know they could expect a formal contract but assumed that “written agreements” referred only to timesheets. It appears that employers discriminate and take advantage of the migrants’ ignorance about labor laws and regulations. For example, one construction contractor explained that he employed ethnic-minority migrant workers specifically because they worked for less money than other workers.

“The main reason I recruit more ethnic minority people than before is because they can be paid less. If we want to compete with others in the market, we have to lower our input cost as much as we can, so we recruit ethnic minority people from the Northwest provinces. Wages for this group of workers cost me less than for Kinh group migrating from other provinces or who already live in Hanoi.”

– 38 years old male construction contractor, 10 years in Hanoi

This was just one perspective, but, given the

large amount of ethnic minority workers on construction sites – several construction workers noted that ethnic-minority migrants outnumbered Kinh people on every construction site they knew – it suggests that employers may take advantage of their lack of education in order to pay them less while simultaneously reinforce the “ignorant ethnic” stereotype.

For their part, the research participants were primarily focused on whether they earned more than they could back home and whether their pay in Hanoi was more consistent and reliable than income that depended on seasonal harvests. Interviewees had few other expectations of their employers. For example, one interviewee explained that unexpected difficulties, such as an injury at work, would be a matter of personal misfortune that she would not complain to her employer about.

Notably, interviewees who accessed employment-related information online tended to be better educated, had lived in Hanoi for three years or more, and had access to smart phones. Two research participants described how quickly they were able to change jobs by searching online social platforms when the lockdown in Hanoi ended.

Despite having access to information through word-of-mouth and online sources, interviewees often said that a lack of information along with their limited skills, education, and training limited their ability to change jobs. Some migrants, despite having smartphones, appeared to rely solely on information from family and friends that was localized to one sector, such as construction. This made them feel like there were few opportunities to move to different types of work. None of the interviewees mentioned formal sources of information, like those provided by the government, which suggests interviewees may not be aware they exist.

2. CONTEXT: COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS ERASED JOBS AND INCOMES

Vietnam went into a national lockdown¹⁸ for 15 days, from April 1–15, 2020. This first lockdown period was extended to the end of April 2020 for areas with high infection risk, including Hanoi.¹⁹ All shops and factories, except those providing essential goods, closed. Vietnam also suspended the entry of tourists and non-residents from March 22, 2020.²⁰

Vietnam was hugely successful in containing the outbreak until mid-2021. As at June 15, 2021, there had been only 10,810 confirmed Covid-19 cases and 59 deaths. Vietnam's GDP growth rate remained one of the highest in the Asia-Pacific region, at almost 3 percent in 2020 and a projected 7 percent in 2021.²¹ Yet early pandemic-related restrictions caused tremendous damage to individual and household incomes.²² According to the General Statistics Office, by December 2020, the finances of more than 32 million people nationwide were affected, with 69 percent suffering decreased income, 40 percent reduced working hours, and approximately 14 percent job loss. The service-sector labor force suffered the heaviest losses, with 72 percent affected, followed by industry and construction (65 percent) and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (26 percent).²³ More specifically, the poverty rate of ethnic-minority households more than tripled, rising from 22 percent pre-pandemic to 76 percent by April 2020, and then dropping slightly to about 70 percent in May 2020.²⁴

For most of the research participants, the first national lockdown in March and April 2020, meant a sudden loss of at least one month's income. The impact of this period appears to have been severe and immediate for those who had little or no savings to rely on. For those who could not earn enough to save any money before the pandemic, the complete loss of income was devastating. For some participants, income loss did not only affect their lives in Hanoi but also meant they had no money to send to their families back home.

"I'm not afraid of Covid, just afraid of being unemployed."

– 38 years old, female domestic worker, 6 years in Hanoi

Covid-19 isolated area sign with barricades on Hanoi street, Vietnam
Photo: Vietnam Stock Images



3. COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS UNDERCUT EARNINGS, DEPLETED CAPITAL AND REDUCED WELLBEING

Most interviewees focused on the impact of the first wave of the pandemic because it was associated with the one-month lockdown in Hanoi, during which they could not work. The uncertainty about how long they would need to survive without income added to the despair with which they spoke about this period.

"If Covid [lockdown period] persists for another 3 or 4 months, I don't know what my life will be like."

- 40 years old female construction site cleaner, 6 years in Hanoi

REACH OF STATE SUPPORT SCHEMES WAS PATCHY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL WAS IMPORTANT IN FACILITATING ACCESS

In order to mitigate the pandemic's negative economic impacts, the Vietnamese government launched several programs, including a fiscal package to support enterprises, a loans program with a zero-interest rate for employers to pay workers' salaries, a social protection package for vulnerable groups and electricity price reductions, reduced interest rates, and a credit package for banks. The effectiveness of these relief programs for all targeted groups remains contentious.²⁵ For example, approximately 80 percent of enterprises could not access the government's fiscal or loan packages because of a shortage of information and difficulties in qualifying;²⁶ arguably these firms' inability to access government aid affected their ability to help their employees through the pandemic.

The government's first social protection

response package, known as the "62 Trillion Dong Program", sought to reduce the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable individuals. The majority of interviewees confirmed that they had heard about the Program, most commonly through word of mouth, although some had also heard about it through the radio, public loudspeakers,²⁷ or from community authorities. Fifty percent of the interviewees who knew about the program had either received support through it or had close relatives back home receive support. These tended to be interviewees whose families fell into established "poor" and "near-poor" categories used in Vietnam's social protection system before the pandemic. For the most part, these participants described the process of accessing support through the program as easy and straightforward, with little need to submit or complete extensive paperwork.

However, those households not classified as poor or near-poor before the pandemic tended to have the opposite experience. These interviewees described having no detailed information about the program and no idea how to access it. They talked about the need to prepare dozens of documents to prove they were unemployed.

Our research interviews illustrated some of the reasons ethnic migrant workers were

unable to access the package: complicated administrative procedures; a lack of clear information and guidance for applicants, including how the newly poor could certify that their income was below the poverty line; a lack of “ho khau” residence papers; and local governments’ misinterpretation of the policy.²⁸ Overall, our interviews indicated that the program was not effective in supporting those who had suddenly lost their incomes. Community authorities in various localities communicated inconsistent information, telling some interviewees that they were ineligible despite guidance to the contrary from the central government, excluding workers who did not have formal contracts and preventing them from completing the relief application process.

“They (local authorities) explained that it was only for workers who had labor contracts, and who worked in companies.”
– 40 years old female construction-site cleaner, 3 months in Hanoi

Even some ethnic–minority migrant workers with labor contracts found it difficult to apply, especially those who had returned home just before lockdown and did not have the necessary paperwork with them.

“The procedure was really complicated. My son stayed at home for half a month, but when he asked about the procedure, they required some documents. If he was to travel to where he worked to ask for the documents, the support wouldn’t be worth the travelling fee, so he just gave up.”
– 40 years old female construction-site cleaner, 3 months in Hanoi

Research participants who were better informed about the process tended to be more active members of their social networks and,

in some cases, had strong links with women’s unions back home. However, even those who knew their rights could be stymied by a lack of Hanoi residence booklets or other official documents.

“I knew my job was categorized as eligible for that program but I didn’t have temporary residence in Hanoi, so I didn’t have enough documents to be supported. Besides, no one certified my porter job.”
– 23 years old male porter, 4 years in Hanoi

KINDNESS, SMALL LOANS, AND NOODLES STAVE OFF HUNGER AND DESPAIR

Some interviewees therefore turned to their employers for a wage advance to get them through lockdown. For those without savings, a common coping strategy during the lockdown was to borrow money from relatives, friends, and colleagues. However, not everyone had friends or relatives with enough money to lend them. One interviewee racked up debt at the grocery store close to her home, as the owner allowed her to buy basic items on credit. Another interviewee was in debt to her landlord for a few months’ rent. Other interviewees described how, even months after the lockdown, they were still earning less than before the pandemic – even half as much – often because they returned to jobs with fewer hours or had to resort to new jobs that paid less.

Some research participants described coping on a very restricted diet without any protein, eating nothing but rice and noodles during the entire lockdown. Their families in northern provinces, dependent on their income, also had to survive on restricted diets. Ethnic–minority migrants working in construction usually had meals provided by their employers pre-

pandemic; for many, lockdowns meant the loss of both meals and incomes, although several employers kindly continued to provide meals. Many interviewees agreed that their financial

capital and physical or mental health became so depleted that they could not have coped if the first lockdown had gone on for longer than a month.

Women selling fruits and vegetables on the street food market of old town in Hanoi, Vietnam, 2020
Photo: OlegD /Shutterstock



4. CAPABILITIES: POTENTIAL FUTURE PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This research illustrates some of the ways in which the pandemic lockdowns often exacerbated the depletion of migrants' already minimal financial, social, and human capital. Questions remain on how to help the ethnic migrants overcome barriers to not only recover from their pandemic-related losses but to go beyond those in order to find greater prosperity and wellbeing in the future. The research suggests four areas for particular attention.

PRECONCEPTIONS AND DISCRIMINATION CONTRIBUTE TO A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF UNDERPERFORMANCE

The research interviews revealed discrimination toward ethnic minorities that stems both from the dominant group's prejudices and from the migrants' own, self-reinforcing preconceptions. For example, research participants spoke about how they would likely face discrimination by the Kinh ethnic majority on arrival to Hanoi. This raises a question of the extent to which their expectations shape their behavior at their destination. It is possible that their fear of discrimination leads them to limit their movements only to urban areas where they feel safe or at ease. This leads to less socialization outside their ethnic group, weaker local social capital, and less integration with urban society. Stereotypes about the self-organization of ethnic minority migrants held by the government may also negatively impact minority participation in Hanoi's public life.

Official and unofficial discrimination or even prejudice may also lead to a lack of access to proper paperwork, such as residence papers or relief programs, which greatly reduces migrant workers' access to social protections, government support systems, and formal work opportunities.

Discrimination manifests, too, as a lack of fair pay in jobs when employers hire migrant workers especially for their cheap labor and inability to advocate for themselves because of ignorance about labor laws, lack of social support, and language barriers. When migrants see staying with a group of the same ethnic minority as a way to avoid discrimination or bullying at work, they remain subjected to low-paid and potentially risky jobs.

WOMEN FACE INTENSIFIED DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AND CARRY DISPROPORTIONATE BURDENS

Among research participants, the four female migrants who head their own families felt they experienced the worst impacts of the lockdown and seemed to confront more challenges to recovery. In fact, because the 62-Trillion Dong Program claimed a gender-neutral approach in supporting vulnerable groups, it did not take into account the specific challenges facing female workers of various groups, such as those working informally and/or from ethnic minorities. Despite awareness of failures to disburse all first-round relief monies, the government maintained the same approach in developing a second relief package for vulnerable groups in 2021, again bypassing many low-paid women workers. This lack of financial support compounds the

misery of migrant women who must work informally at, for example, construction sites, where they are prone to sexual harassment and who may also be reluctant to return to their hometowns because negative perceptions there of women who work outside the home.

THE PANDEMIC'S TOLL ON ETHNIC-MINORITY MIGRANTS MAY CHALLENGE THEIR LONG-TERM RECOVERY

Some participants explained that, following the lockdown, their income gradually increased to pre-pandemic levels. Yet they pointed towards a longer term financial impact beyond the month-long lockdown because those hit hardest have spent or borrowed to a point where their financial situation has become incredibly precarious. Some remain afraid that they will not be able to survive future similar shocks.

Interviewees also highlighted the first lockdown's long-term impact on their mental health and lasting stress and anxiety. This was partly attributed to ongoing concerns about the virus itself, but others spoke about the pervasive sense of hopelessness they felt because of financial and mental stress. One participant worried about a potential third wave and another feared another lockdown and whether she would be able to feed her children. These negative impacts on social and human

capital can be especially devastating because of how much ethnic migrant workers depend on informal social networks for finding jobs, information, and communities in the city.

ENHANCING JOB SKILLS AND INFORMATION WOULD IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS AND CONDITIONS

Our research reinforced the general perception that those who know how to use the Internet to search for jobs have ever increasing advantages over those that don't. Moreover, reliable and affordable Internet access enhances the possibility that someone can learn new skills and expand his or her ability to find a job. Both of these foundations are necessary to address the rapidly growing digital divide in countries like Vietnam.

Obtaining formal employment, with proper work contracts, also depends on ethnic-minority migrant workers overcoming their own low expectations and increasing their knowledge of worker's rights and the importance of formal contracts. However, ethnic-minority migrant workers appear to have few formal, government-provided or -validated sources of employment-related information that they can tap into. They have even less access to information about prevailing wages, which reduces their ability to negotiate fair and reasonable wages.

CONCLUSION

Internal migrant workers in Vietnam count among the country's most disadvantaged populations, and the pandemic has only made them more vulnerable – both to future economic shocks, but also to social isolation and mental health issues. Our desk research and interviews with migrants from minority ethnic groups reveal the depth and multifaceted nature of the pandemic's impact on them.

Despite the apparent tenacity of ethnic-minority migrant workers efforts to overcome multiple economic and social hardships, our research highlights many long-standing and

some new issues that could be resolved in order to help this population not only recover from the pandemic, but better lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

To shift towards an equitable recovery phase, post-Covid, governments and their international and local partners should ensure that efforts are made to understand the perspective and lived experiences of disadvantaged groups such as ethnic-minority migrant workers and to fully incorporate these – such as those captured above – into the creation of policies, laws and regulations and their implementation.

Street vendors are arranging their working locations in the morning in Hanoi, Vietnam, 2020
 Photo: NamLong Nguyen



ANNEXES

ANNEX A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research began with an initial desk review of the literature, which was conducted in October and December 2020. The literature review was followed by a set of 19 semi-structured interviews that were used as the key data collection method for this research. Participants were purposefully selected and invited to take part in the research in order to achieve diversity among the samples based on where they had migrated from, their occupation, age, and ethnicity.

Literature review

While the literature reviewed provided rich information about internal migration, generally, they shed little light on the migration of ethnic-minority groups. The literature came from a range of sources, including the Vietnamese government. These include information from the General Statistics Office, international organizations, including United Nations agencies, the World Bank and international NGOs, as well as Vietnamese NGOs and newspapers. To a limited extent, relevant government regulations relating to migration and the Covid-19 response were also included. In total, approximately 30 reports and news articles were consulted, as indicated in the Bibliography.

Semi-structured interviews

In conducting the set of 19 semi-structured interviews from October 2020 to January 2021, an interview guide was developed in order to explore the five overarching research questions, which were informed by the literature review so that prominent issues facing urban migrants were explored. For example, the issue of household registration emerged from the literature as one of the main obstacles for urban migrants to access public services. The lead researcher chose the government's 62-trillion relief program for social groups from among a number of government Covid-19 relief programs to explore with participants because of its relevance and strong coverage in the media. The researchers tested an initial draft of the interview guide with several migrant participants and revised it after reflection and discussion.

A total of 15 migrant workers joined the research and their age ranged from 18 to 53 years old, with the majority of participants being female. Initially the sample consisted of only female migrants, but two male migrants were invited for interviews as the research progressed in order to explore the topic from male perspectives, at least to some extent. Ethnic-minority participants represented were from six ethnicities, including Tay, Thai, Muong, Hmong, Nung and Khang, who had migrated from nine northern provinces. They had been living in Hanoi for a minimum of three months up to seven years at the time of the interviews. All participants were doing informal jobs such as working as construction site workers, domestic workers, waitresses for diners and small coffee shops, porters, shippers, and so on.

Interview participants were initially recruited for the interview through a snowballing strategy; however this did not prove to be as effective as hoped. Once the researcher had finished interviewing the first interviewee, the second interviewee was not introduced from the first contact

in some cases. In the end, a range of other approaches were employed, including introductions through NGOs working with migrants in Hanoi, tapping into migrants and ethnic minority networks, and accessing personal contacts. In addition to the 15 participants of ethnic minority migrants, one construction contractor and three NGO representatives were also invited for interviews in order to explore topics from their perspectives. Altogether, there were 19 participants participating in the research interviews.

All except two of the participants agreed to have their interviews recorded. For these two, detailed notes were written during the interview. For all interviews, the immediate reflections by the researcher were also recorded. All recordings were later transcribed in detail in Vietnamese and then fully translated into English. The translated data was then coded against each of the five overarching research questions. Initial interpretative analysis was then followed by thematic analysis. At each stage of the analysis, emphasis was placed on participants' own voices, with constant reflection on any differences between the researcher's own initial assumption, evidence from the literature review and the newly collected data. See Annex B for more information on interview guidelines.

Research ethics

The following ethical principles were identified at the beginning of the research process in order to guide all aspects of design and delivery:

1. Respect for human beings
2. Bringing benefit and doing no harm
3. Conducting the research based on merit and integrity
4. Upholding fairness in the research process

In order to abide by these principles, a number of decisions were made, including to openly share information about the motivation, purpose and scope of the research with all participants and relevant stakeholders, to give space to participants to decide whether to participate in or withdraw from the research at any point; to let participants take the lead in the research, for instance making sure they felt comfortable to ask any questions about the research process and letting them decide the location and timing of interviews. As a result, interviews tended to be conducted in person and in people's homes, places where they worked or in coffee shops. Two of the interviews were conducted over the phone because participants had returned home to their villages in order to attend to family matters. For further information on ethical protocols developed for the research, see Annex B.

Research limitations and bias

It is important to emphasize that this research was focused on generating in-depth qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Although some quantitative data was picked up through an initial literature review, there was no primary quantitative data collection. The purpose is therefore to shed light on issues and experiences emerging from a small set of interviews. It is therefore not possible to explain how commonly these might apply to ethnic minority migrants in Hanoi.

The initial assumption that ethnic-minority migrants could be approached easily in Hanoi proved

not to be the case. Many would not agree to an interview without an introduction from someone they already knew. Researchers, therefore, deployed several strategies to approach ethnic-minority migrant workers in Hanoi. This included contacting informants through NGO's networks and these informants may have more chances to engage in some social activities through NGO-funded projects.

In terms of the initial literature review, the evidence specifically on ethnic-minority migration was extremely limited. As a result, the questions included in the semi-structured interview guide were largely informed by the literature on general migration.

It is also important to note that only ethnic-minority migrants working in the informal sector were invited to participate in the research. Workers in the formal sector in Hanoi were not invited to join so their voices are not included in the findings since their working conditions are generally less precarious than that of informal workers.

The research includes ethnic minority migrants working across a range of sectors, including construction, hospitality and domestic work. Although part of the research explores the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers, it was not designed to specifically capture the experiences of those likely to be hardest hit by Covid-19 and the restrictions imposed to control the spread of the virus (such as those working in tourism).

The initial intention was to approach people who had recently migrated to Hanoi due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but it proved difficult to identify and approach more than just a few. As a result, the research sheds only limited light on the experiences of newer migrants. In addition, most of the participants in the research interviews were female migrants, so the findings mainly reflect the voices of women rather than men ethnic-migrant workers.

Finally, it is important to note that a deliberate decision was made not to include any questions about violence and harassment. Although this is an important issue where further research is needed, it requires specialist expertise in order to be conducted safely.

ANNEX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

In order to conduct effective semi-structured interviews, the researcher must follow the research ethics guidelines and practical notes as follows:

- Researcher must respect the rights of interviewees and let them take the lead in the research process. All interviewees should be well informed of the research's purpose and scope, and empowered to take part in and withdraw from the research process at any point. All places and timing of interviews should be decided by the interviewees.
- Researcher must observe, during the interview, to make sure that interviewees feel comfortable to continue the interview or stop the interview if interviewees feel uncomfortable.
- Researcher must make sure if a translator was needed if the interviewee wishes to speak in their own languages. If so, a translator should be arranged prior to the meeting.
- Researcher must prepare a semi-structured questionnaire to guide through the conversation with interviewees. Researcher should be flexible in skipping the questions where they are not applicable with interviewees, and use follow-up questions to make sure that the researcher

understands correctly what the interviewees mean.

- Researcher should ask if interviewees agree to have the conversation recorded. If so, all recordings should be stored in a safe way and should be transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews.
- All transcribed notes should be kept in a safe way, and the names of Interviewees should be coded in those notes.

ENDNOTES

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