

As in China, migrant workers in Southeast Asia are leaving behind a generation of children

Monday 24 May 2021, by [NGUYEN Sen](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2021).

- **From Vietnam to Indonesia, the Philippines and Cambodia, millions of children are being raised by extended family members as their parents migrate to find work**
- **Many parents accept separation as the price they pay for working. And while there are fears for the effects on children, places like the Philippines have come to view migrant workers as heroes**

Thach Di Thi Phuong Thuy and her husband have their eyes glued to a smartphone screen in their tiny studio apartment in an industrial township near Ho Chi Minh City in [Vietnam](#). They are on a video call with their son Sarum, 11, who is keen to show them the cashew nuts he helped his grandmother peel that day.

Sarum lives with his brother Saruon, 13, about 180km away in the Mekong Delta, where they are being raised by the extended families of Thuy and her husband Thach Saret, who are both ethnic Khmers.

For the past three years, video calls like this have been the main source of intimacy for the two boys and their parents, who moved to the city to find jobs in the construction industry and have recently seen their incomes hit due to the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), despite Vietnam's relative success in containing the virus.

"When we decided to move we were very sad. My younger one cried and cried," Thuy said, her eyes welling with tears. "But I couldn't make ends meet living at home so I decided to leave my kids to my parents."

The two boys are among millions of children of their generation who have been "left behind" with extended family members, friends, institutions or even by themselves as their parents migrate to cities or other countries in search of job opportunities.

A 2019 study published in the *PLoS ONE* journal estimated there were some 70 million left-behind children in [China](#) alone, most of them in rural areas. It also found these children were more likely to exhibit behavioural and developmental problems.

But the issue goes far beyond China, pervading Southeast Asian countries such as [Indonesia](#) and the [Philippines](#) where it is relatively common for married women and mothers to migrate overseas for work, many finding employment as domestic workers in more affluent places such as [Hong Kong](#) and [Singapore](#). A project on Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia at the National University of Singapore suggests women make up a growing proportion of the two countries' transnational migrants and that an increasing proportion are leaving children behind.

With some 580,000 of its citizens working abroad, Vietnam is experiencing a similar issue - intensified by its robust levels of internal migration. Within Vietnam, more than 6.4 million people - about 6.7 per cent of the population - are migrants, according to the 2019 census survey. The most popular destination for internal migrants like the Mekong Delta natives Thuy and Saret is Vietnam's southeastern region, which accounts for 45 per cent of the country's GDP.

The couple, who together earn about 400,000 dong (US\$17.4) a day, send money to their sons every month and visit them every two or three months. Each visit is marked with lingering hugs and the boys' pleas for their parents not to leave again.

Unfortunately these are pleas Thuy and Saret cannot afford to grant. In the township, the couple work seven days a week. Each missed shift is a payday lost. "If we visit home for too long, we don't work and have no money to spend," Thuy said.

In 2019, the couple tried to beat the pain of separation by bringing their sons to live with them in the township. But after a month, the claustrophobic 8 square metre apartment and unfamiliar neighbourhood took a toll on the boys, who asked to return to their grandparents in Tra Vinh province.

A 2018 Unicef study said the impact of being left behind on Vietnam's children was under-researched, but "significant and wide-reaching".

No place like home

For those migrating, a plethora of problems await. In Vietnam, a 2015 national internal migration survey co-authored by the General Statistics Office found inadequate housing topped the list of problems reported by Vietnamese internal migrants, followed by lack of income, problems in finding employment and struggles in adapting to a new environment. Some 40.5 per cent of migrants reported living in spaces of between 4 and 10 square metres, compared with 15.9 per cent of non-migrants. Migrants can also find it hard to access health care and schooling for their children, as these services often require proof of permanent household registration. However, the same survey found the vast majority of respondents said such challenges would not put them off migrating.

In [Cambodia](#), Khann Sophea has been unable to visit her children in her hometown in Prey Veng province due to a recent Covid-19 outbreak. Sophea, 33, who works in a garment factory in the capital Phnom Penh, relies on her parents to raise her daughters - ages 4 and 10 - as her husband has also had to migrate for work.

"Leaving behind our kids in the village is not what we want, but I can't bring them to work with me as we don't have day care service in this factory. Even [when I worked in a bigger factory with day care] it was not a proper service, none of the workers brought their kids in," said Sophea.

She does not trust commercial day care services, fearing they may beat or drug her children to make them sleep all day.

Internal migrants like Sophea play a significant role in Cambodia's 600,000-strong garment sector, the country's second-biggest employer after [tourism](#). The industry accounts for 16 per cent of Cambodia's GDP and 80 per cent of its export earnings, according to a recent report by the Asian Development Bank. Ninety per cent of garment workers are women.

The pandemic has slashed about one third of Sophea's income, leaving her with a salary of about US\$230 a month with overtime - half of which she sends home for her children. Her husband, a tuk tuk driver in Phnom Penh, has also suffered from the pandemic-induced tourist shortage.

Sopheha is far from alone in struggling to find childcare. The International Finance Corporation has reported that a lack of affordable childcare is a problem for employees in all business sectors in Cambodia – but especially those in low-income populations.

“That is why I leave my kids with my parents as I can trust that they love and care for their grandchildren,” she said.

A problem shared

When children are left behind it is not only the children and their parents who are affected. A 2015 study published in the *Social Science and Medicine* journal found that elderly carers for left-behind children in Southeast Asia experienced higher levels of depression, loneliness, cognitive impairment and anxiety.

In Indonesia, Arsyah, 11, is being raised by her grandmother Jumirah. Arsyah’s mother, Hesty Marettasari, moved from Lampung province on Sumatra island to [Taiwan](#) eight years ago to work as a caretaker.

“Arsyah would ask ‘When will you come home?’ but she understands that her mother is there to work,” said Jumirah. Marettasari, 28, usually sends home about 40 per cent of her salary of around T\$17,000-18,000 (US\$600-630) every month. Arsyah’s father walked out on her when she was three months old, after he and Marettasari divorced.

Wahyu Susilo, founder of Migrant Care, a local migrant workers advocacy group, said it was common for Indonesian female migrant workers to leave children with their extended family rather than their fathers.

“The society’s patriarchal construction makes it very rare for the father to get involved,” Susilo said, adding that this had led to a stigma that painted working women as irresponsible parents.

Susilo’s organisation has been providing educational and counselling activities to change this by encouraging fathers to be more active in caring for their children. However, he acknowledged the reach of the activities was limited.

More than 9 million Indonesians are employed abroad, and about three-quarters of them are blue-collar workers, according to a 2017 World Bank report. They mostly work in [Malaysia](#), Hong Kong, Taiwan, and [Saudi Arabia](#). Almost 70 per cent are women, according to the International Labour Organization.

During the pandemic, children of Indonesian migrant workers have become especially vulnerable as their parents have faced mass job losses and deportations. About 176,000 Indonesian migrant workers have returned home since the pandemic began, according to the Agency for the Protection and Placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers, a governmental body.

In the Philippines, Mary Rose Erzando has been raising her five children alone while her husband works abroad even amid the pandemic.

“There [are days when] you really feel that you’re doing all the parenting yourself,” Erzando said. “But it’s got better over the years as we can now do video calls. Sometimes it feels he’s right here at home.”

After two years working abroad herself, Erzando came home and switched places with her husband Fernando, who has been working at a construction firm in Qatar since 2004. Since then, he has not

been home for more than a month at a time. The eldest daughter has moved out, but the four other siblings, including two who are at university, are still living at home.

Overseas workers play a key role in the Philippine economy with as many as 2.2 million Filipinos working overseas on limited work contracts, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. In 2019 the remittances they sent home hit a record of US\$33.5 billion, according to the country's Central Bank, while the World Bank database shows the Philippines has been the biggest recipient of remittances in Southeast Asia since 1986.

Indeed, OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) who toil abroad for years on end to support their families are widely revered as modern day heroes in their hometowns.

While the Philippine government has created various agencies to assist OFWs and those who want to work abroad, experts say there remains a lack of support for the families these workers leave behind.

Harriet Erzando, 26, the second eldest daughter of Mary Rose, has spent most of her childhood with at least one parent living abroad. Consequently, she has learned to step in for her mother when needed.

"Growing up, we knew our roles at home. We know who will do the chores, we know who's responsible for who, and for what," she said.

"Growing up, we knew our roles at home" - Harriet Erzando

"Every time my father comes home, he takes the time to talk to us and make us understand why he's leaving to go abroad," Harriet said. "I think that was inculcated in me even as I grew up. That I should be grateful for having parents who work hard to provide for our family."

Filipino sociologist Maria Aguilar, an assistant professor at the De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, has extensively studied OFW children. She said this debt of gratitude - or "utang na loob" in Filipino - set Filipino parent-child relationships apart from Western counterparts.

"*Utang na loob* has survived the times. It is still used to justify why one has to make sacrifices. To an extent, it helps kids become better prepared emotionally, but only among those who can understand the need to provide [for the family]," she said. "Young children can't understand. To them, parents working abroad mean they have been abandoned."

A 2018 study published in *The Lancet* journal about left-behind children and adolescents in low- and middle-income countries found they were more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, suicidal ideas, substance abuse and growth disorders.

"Policies concerning whether and how children are left behind - including migration management and labour migration policies - often ignore the impact on children," a regional spokesperson for Unicef said.

She said teachers, health-care providers, and carers in the region should be trained to provide emotional and psychological support to such children, while governments should contemplate migration policies that allowed families to travel together.

The spokesperson said that while remittances could fund access to health care and education, they were no substitute for addressing the fundamental causes of migration. However, she said the phrase "left behind" must be used with care to avoid stigmatising children, demonising their

caregivers for “leaving”, or creating the impression that these children necessarily experienced negative emotional or psychological impacts.

More data and research into the challenges faced by left-behind children were needed, she added.

For now, many migrant parents like Thuy and Saret from Vietnam accept that separation is the price they pay for making a living and for ensuring the best possible future for their children.

“We have to work hard so the kids can go to school. The more they can learn, the better,” Thuy said. “If they drop out now, they will only do manual work.”

The couple are saving up to return to the delta for a holiday this month. They will see their sons for three days, then drive back to their working lives in the concrete jungle.

Sen Nguyen

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South China Morning Post

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3129803/china-migrant-workers-southeast-asia-are-leaving-behind-generation>