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Sociocultural factors affecting women smallholders: the case of ethnic minority women in the highlands of Southeast Asia

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1 Introduction

Women smallholder farmers in Asia are highly diverse in culture, religions, languages, and agricultural landscapes, especially among ethnic minority people who are concentrated in the highlands of Southeast Asia, northeastern India, and southwest China (e.g. Michaud, 2009, 2017; Scott, 2009). This upland region is distinguished from low-land areas in terms of agricultural, cultural, and political landscapes, forming unique research agendas in area studies. Farming conditions and gendered experience of these minority men and women farmers, including the young generation, are very different from those of the rice-based lowland region.

However, agricultural technologies (e.g. mechanization, hybrid seeds, and new cash crops for the global market) are developed from the majority

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ethnic groups' perspectives in response to the needs of low-land agriculture, especially with men's interest. Women with minority backgrounds face double discrimination by the majority-centered and male-oriented agricultural technology design, policy, and interventions. Hence, it is deeply problematic to generalize farmers' interests and challenges in agriculture in Asia without considering gendered, cultural, and geographical differences.

The major narratives of agricultural development in the upland region focus on boom export crops such as cassava, coffee, rubber, and spices. The literature on political economy highlights the negative consequences of those mono-crop investment for the minority and poor farmers through environmental degradation, land grabbing, exploitative labor, and, most importantly, uneven and unequal distribution of benefits over space and time (Akram-Lodhi, 2005; Castella et al., 2023; Évrard and Baird, 2017; Hall, 2013; McElwee et al., 2023). In terms of gender, studies suggest that women are often losers of the shift from diverse farming systems to mono-crop cultivation, because their involvement in household decision-making over crop management is reduced, as those new cash crops require interactions with (male) outsiders and decisions on high investment, which are considered as men's domains (Bonnin and Turner, 2014; Douangphachanh et al., 2021; Kusakabe and Chanthoumphone, 2021).

Although women still play significant roles in agricultural production both for cash crops and home consumption, less attention is paid to the contribution of women's unpaid labor to overall household economy. This oversight of women's unpaid labor contribution is also discussed in feminist critiques of capitalist ideologies that women's unpaid labor for domestic work and care is neglected in their account of capital accumulation (Curty, 2020; Mies, 2007). Since farming is unpaid work for ethnic minority women in the Southeast Asian uplands, their contribution is under-recognized in economics-oriented agricultural research and its frameworks where women's roles in agriculture are classified as reproduction activities along with domestic work and care. Similarly, the narratives of women's empowerment in general in the global south have focused on women's involvement in paid labor work in the agricultural sector and elsewhere, neglecting women's unpaid work in reproduction and its relations to economic activities (see critiques: Calkin, 2015; Cornwall, 2018; Hickel, 2014; Wilson, 2015). Current research trends focusing on the economic aspect of agriculture are thus gender biased, contributing to reproducing gender inequality in knowledge production. This chapter addresses this challenge.

The concepts of feminist political economy and political ecology allow researchers to uncover women's hidden but important roles in unpaid work by exploring how unpaid labor functions the household's operation of economic activities (Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Morinville and Van Lier, 2021; Philipps, 2008; Power, 2004). In this book chapter, we apply this concept in the analysis of

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women's unpaid agriculture through the case study drawing on the experience of ethnic Thai young married women and men.

We demonstrate how women's unpaid labor in agriculture influences and is influenced by household economic activities that are mainly performed by men. The two contrasting components of unpaid and paid labor, women's and men's work, and on-farm and off-farm activities are inseparable from both conceptual and analytical viewpoints of explaining the lives of young married couples under disadvantaged conditions. The key message we bring in this chapter is the importance of integrating the often-forgotten aspects of women's unpaid labor in farming into research frameworks to position the ethnic minority women as key actors in agriculture. By so doing, we seek to contribute to producing pluralistic knowledge in agricultural and development scholarship. We believe that this is a first step to discuss how development policy and interventions can support those marginalized women in the uplands in transformative ways.

2 The narratives of agricultural development in the upland regions of Southeast Asia

As discussed in the introduction, less attention is paid to the roles of women in agricultural development in this region due to the narrow positioning of agriculture as an economic activity. There are limited studies on the roles of women in other aspects of agriculture such as small-scale farming and livestock production for both home consumption and local trading. A single model of agrarian change with cash crops masks not only the complexities and diversities in agriculture (Vicol et al., 2018) but also women's significant roles in sustaining local food and environmental systems and kin-based safety nets (Turner et al., 2022).

Ethnic minorities' livelihood strategies are much more complex than a mono-crop model. For example, income sources are diverse with not only cash crops but also labor migration and other non-farming incomes from men and/or women (Cramb et al., 2009; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009; Turner et al., 2015; Vicol et al., 2018). Meanwhile, subsistence farming remains an integral part of agriculture for household food security with diverse crop varieties associated with their cultural value. As a result, high genetic diversities are observed in the upland region, such as rice varieties (Vanlalsanga et al., 2019), minor horticultural crops (Deka et al., 2012), maize, banana, root crops (Son et al., 2021), and indigenous pigs (Ho et al., 2022).

Historically, swidden agriculture (shifting cultivation) played a major role in farming among ethnic minorities in the region, and women are the ones who manage and control swidden agriculture (Erni, 2015; Sengupta, 2015). As swidden agriculture has been restricted in many countries in this region,

farming systems among ethnic minorities become more diverse with so-called 'composite systems' which include swidden agriculture, permanent wet-rice farming, home gardens, perennial crop farming, and enduring three-crop cultivation in which women play central roles (Cairns and Brookfield, 2011). Composite systems allow ethnic minorities to ensure household food security meanwhile they invest in cash crops for local and regional markets.

In patriarchal societies in the upland region, women face a vicious circle of disadvantages throughout their life in male-privileged gender norms, such as girls' lower attainment than boys in both primary and higher education, early marriage, and having many children (Inui, 2022; Jones et al., 2018; Thi et al., 2023). As a consequence, women and girls often have limited physical mobilities and are more likely to stay at home and work for family farms and livestock production as (unpaid) family laborers (Jones et al., 2018; Kawarazuka et al., 2019; Le et al., 2023). This is very different from low-land areas where both married and unmarried women's labor force is absorbed in emerging industrial zones as well as in the informal sector in cities (Huijsmans, 2014; Kusakabe, 2020; Phouxay and Tollefsen, 2011; Resurreccion, 2005). Although ethnic minorities in this region cannot be generalized as they are extremely diverse linguistically and ethnologically, they must have certain commonalities in the challenges they face due to cultural, geographical, and political marginalization. In order to recognize women's roles and opportunities and constraints in agriculture among minority ethnic groups, it is essential to explore social organizations of households and women's positions as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother.

3 Revisiting women's roles in (unpaid) agriculture labor work

The lack of attention to women's unpaid roles in agriculture research appears to be related to the dominant capitalist concepts employed in various disciplines. Women's unpaid labor in farming activities is classified as the domain of reproductive activities rather than that of productive activities. Productive and reproductive activities are then separated in theoretical, conceptual, and analytical frameworks with reproduction being the secondary importance in agricultural research and elsewhere. This is partly because the original theories were developed by men from men's perspectives: unlike women's, men's productive activities are usually independent from reproductive activities (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Little, 2016). Recent feminist approaches propose integrating the two domains into one framework and explore relationships between the two domains and women's roles therein (Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Gustavsson, 2021; Kawarazuka et al., 2023; Morinville and Van Lier, 2021). This is a starting point to appropriately recognize the complexities of livelihoods and women's roles therein.

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Another concept relevant to this theme is the concept of the conjugal contract (Jackson, 1995; Whitehead, 1981), which provides useful insights to explore the role of women in unpaid work including subsistence farming. The conjugal contract explains that in contexts where women do not have direct access to resources, they are able to ensure security via spouses by fulfilling gendered obligations (unpaid and intangible) for their husbands, children, and other family members (Jackson, 2007). In exchange for their (unpaid) contribution, women could interpret their husbands' resources as theirs and access resources such as land, crops, and food (Hanrahan, 2015; Jackson, 2007). A conjugal contract is flexible and can be continuously reinterpreted and manipulated in women's favor (Moore, 1986). Obligations that women fulfill through conjugal contracts can also improve their bargaining position over the life course (Kandiyoti, 1998). In old age, women's roles turn from providing labor to receiving support, and in Asia especially, supporting old parents is an expression of filial piety for adult children (Eklund, 2018; Göransson, 2013; Knodel, 2014). In this way, a conjugal contract is interwoven by an intergenerational contract (Croll, 2006; Göransson, 2013) as women's interdependent relationships often shift from their husbands to their sons and daughters. The notion of a conjugal contract also emphasises the highly gendered nature of obligations and rewards in the life cycle in interdependent and intergenerational family relationships. Conjugal contracts thus significantly influence women's strategic choices for productive and reproductive activities.

Some studies on youth confirm that providing unpaid labor for family farming and domestic work – especially by women – is a means of receiving future support from their parents. In the matrilineal context of Laos, some young unmarried women choose not to migrate and instead to support family farms and domestic work. In exchange, they receive significant support from their mothers for childcare after marriage (Huijsmans, 2014). Huijsmans (2014) points out that young women's decisions to stay home to follow their parents' wishes rather than to migrate to a city to pursue their own aspirations is a strategic choice because women's inter-dependent relationships with their parents more strongly influence (positively and negatively) their life cycles compared with those of young men. Such young women's strategic choices are similar to those made by married women to contribute unpaid labor for access to their husbands' resources (Jackson, 2007; Moore, 1986). Hence, both married and unmarried women's unpaid labor for family farms should not simply be viewed as the issue of unemployment or women's immobility.

Building on concepts in forementioned literature, the following section describes a case study to explore ethnic minority women's lived experience in managing family farms.

4 Case study: 2018 Thai ethnic minority commune in Dien Bien, Vietnam

4.1 Methods

This case study is based on a qualitative study conducted in October 2018 in a Thai ethnic minority commune in Dien Bien province in Vietnam. The study began with a series of participatory activities to establish a rapport with the villagers and to obtain background information on the research context through participatory photos and videos and then held an event to receive feedback on these. Thereafter, data collection was undertaken through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (Table 1). In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 young women and men under 30 years of age. The stories described on this paper mainly draws on these conversations in in-depth interviews (Table 2).

4.2 Study context

The study commune is located approximately 400 km northwest of Hanoi and has a population of around 4800 people, 80% of whom are members of the Thai ethnic minority group. This Thai ethnic group is a patrilineal society, and it is common for three generations to live together. According to information from KIIs, most children in this commune complete primary school education, while girls have slightly higher enrollment rates for secondary and high school education than boys (around 50% complete high school). Girls who drop out of school tend to do so for marriage, while boys drop out to migrate for labor. Thai women and men in our study site usually marry in their mid-to-late teens and early twenties, respectively. Marriage is considered a very important and an expensive life event: although simplified over the past 10 years, the average

Table 1 The lists of participants

	Men	Women	Total
Participatory video (film making)	6	6	12
Key informant interviews*	4	2	3
FGD (above 30 years old)	6	6	12
FGD (under 30 years old)	6	6	12
In-depth interviews	6	6	12
The community events (in two villages)	18	28	46

*A village leader, a farmer's Union leader, and a women's Union leaders.
FDG, focus group discussion.

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Table 2 The lists of respondents

	*Name	G	Age	**Economic Status	Living with parents or in-laws	Migration destination	Paid work
1	Dung	F	25	Poor	Yes	Hanoi***	Construction
2	Phuong	F	22	Poor	Yes	No experience	
3	Hanh	F	24	Poor	Yes	Hanoi***	Construction
4	Thuy	F	25	Better off	No	Hanoi	Factory
5	Mai	F	22	Poor	Yes	Hanoi***	Construction
6	Lan	F	28	Poor	Yes	No experience	
7	Nam	M	29	Poor	Yes	Within the province	Rock mining
8	Hieu	M	27	Poor	No	Five provinces	Construction
9	Sang	M	29	Poor	Yes	South-central coast	Construction
10	Minh	M	20	Better off	Yes	Hanoi	Construction
11	Vien	M	22	Poor	Yes	Hanoi	Construction
12	Duc	M	23	Poor	Yes	Hanoi, Dien Bien	Construction

*Proxy names.
**Self-reported, based on personal perceptions.
***These women go to Hanoi with their husbands and work as construction assistants for a short time during the winter season.

cost of a wedding runs between VND[1] 60 million and 70 million (USD 2500–3000) for the groom's household and VND 10 million (USD 420) for the bride's household. The money is provided by parents and relatives and the groom's own savings (if he has any).

The commune's poverty rate is 42% for the Thai ethnic group and less than 20% for a small number of Kinh people (the ethnic majority in Vietnam). Agriculture and livestock are central to lives and livelihoods. However, engaging in farming, including animal raising, is often not considered as an economically viable occupation for men. The commune used to grow mountain rice, but then shifted first to cassava and then maize in response to rapid soil erosion and price declines for cassava. Indigenous species of buffalos, cattle, pigs, and chicken were originally highly valued for cultural events, such as weddings and Tet (New Year cerebrations). However, many families now raise livestock as an income source and a hybrid cattle variety has been introduced to poor households through the government's poverty-reduction schemes. Cattles and buffalo are taken to the mountain areas for grazing.

Women of all ages and marital status have responsibility for feeding animals, growing vegetables and root crops in their home gardens, and contributing labor in farm fields. In contrast, most young men – married and

1 Vietnamese dong (VND): one US dollar equals approximately 23 000 VND at the time of fieldwork.

unmarried – work outside the village throughout the year. Around 15% of the commune population (700 people) are regularly absent from the village, working outside the province and sending remittances home. During winter, married women and middle-aged men also go to work in Hanoi or neighboring districts and provinces, while children are left in the village with their aunts or grandmothers. Building a house, purchasing new motorbikes, and/or agricultural machines are symbols of success in male labor migration. No cases of international migration were recorded in our study site.

5 Findings: gender pathways, dependencies, and opportunities

5.1 Gendered transition pathways from schooling to marriage

In our study site, we found a clear gender difference in the transition process from schooling to marriage, contributing to women's concentration in (unpaid) farming work. Young men typically spend at least a few years earning money outside the village before marriage, while young women tend to marry immediately after leaving or completing school, between 15 and 18 years old. We provide short case studies, turning first to the experience of young men.

Sang (29-year-old man) stopped studying in the 11th grade because his parents could not afford the school fee of VND 800 000 (USD 34). His father tried unsuccessfully to borrow money from a moneylender to enable Sang to graduate to high school. Observing the difficult situation, Sang decided to leave school to support his younger siblings still in school. He found casual labor work in various locations through social connections, going as far away as 700 km near the north-central coast. Through the experience, he acquired welding skills which helped him increase his salary over time from VND 180 000 (USD 7.7) per day to VND 400 000 (USD10.79) per day. He said, 'I learned a lot during my first four years of work … I learned about the way Kinh people live, work and save money as well as their dialects and culture. I learned more as I moved far away to the South.' In addition to his young siblings, his remittances to the family are also used to support his sister studying in college – and Sang takes great pride in this. He married at 19 and, by virtue of his work, was able to purchase some items considered essential for young men such as a motorbike and a mobile phone.

Similarly, Nam (29-year-old man) left school after completing the sixth grade at 15. In his first 3 years, he worked in road construction in a neighboring district. Through social connections, he shifted to work in mining and found consistent job offers for more work. He married at 19 and continues to migrate to work in the mines while his wife lives at home with his parents. Hieu (27-year-old man) also left school at 15, and worked as a laborer on national road and infrastructure projects in the northern mountainous region. He used to give

some money to his parents when he returned home, but he kept most of his income for personal consumption including clothes, drinking, a smart phone, and a motorbike. He married at 23 and is now working in road construction within the district.

The narratives illustrate that work experience allows young men to have certain autonomy and freedom in spending money during their transition between schooling and marriage. At the same time, however, they also face some discrimination. Being ethnic minorities and of a young age with limited education, they run the risk of being cheated by their employers in Hanoi or industrial zones. Minh another 20-year-old man went to Hanoi when he was 15. He said he was cheated many times, either not paid wages owed or paid less than promised. From this experience, he said he learned he could not trust people in Hanoi. Sang reported that he had run away from some construction work at a foreign-invested company because he was assigned extremely dangerous tasks without training and safety equipment. For these reasons, men in our study site reported preferring to work with employers who were connected to their relatives or village neighbours – even though the wage was likely to be lower.

In contrast, since young women are less likely to travel seeking work, they have fewer opportunities for learning new skills, interacting with people living outside the village, and earning income. Rather, marriage is central to their youth experience in their late teens as the following examples demonstrate.

Lan (28-year-old woman) stopped her studies for marriage at 15 after completing the ninth grade. Her marriage was arranged by her parents and her husband's parents: 'I did not know what love is. My husband and I had no feeling of love for each other, but we had to sleep together. I just felt very sad and under considerable pressure. I was too young to marry. I used to weep alone at night, but gradually I got used to it. Now my husband is very sympathetic. We live together with happiness.' While arranged marriages have become less common in our study site, leaving school for marriage is still common. Hanh (24-year-old woman) also stopped her studies when she completed ninth grade as she did not find value in studying further even though her family could afford it. She helped her mother with cooking, farming, and animal husbandry for 2 years until her marriage at 17. When she lived at home not schooling or married, she recalls feelings of weakness: 'I did not have any power in the family. I just followed what my parents asked me to do. I did not have money and did not go anywhere outside the village. The only thing I decided was who I was going to marry.' Her reflections clearly indicate her unpaid labor contributions to the family were not considered as 'work' and went unrecognized while her position in the household remains low. However, when women marry, this situation changes as they begin working for their in-laws, which we now discuss in the next sub-section.

5.2 Intergenerational dependency and the roles of agriculture

Young married men's incomes from casual labor depend on the demand for work, which is unstable. Sang told us, 'I need to provide VND 50 000 (USD 2.5) per week for school meals for my child, but many times I have failed, and it places me under a lot of pressure.' As such, it is essential for married men to have support from his parents and relatives. Both married men and women ask support by working as laborers on their parents' or in-law's farms. Support varies from offering accommodation, food, farmland, care services to grandchildren, and connections for finding paid work.

Vien (22-year-old man) works in Hanoi while his wife and their child live with his parents. He sends 80% of his income to his parents but he thinks this only meets 30% of his parents' expectation. His wife works on the farm and looks after three heads of cattle and one buffalo. He returns to the village during planting and harvesting seasons to help his father even though he loses potential income because the farm is his top priority. In exchange with unpaid labor to maintain family farms, Vien and his wife secure accommodation and food.

Minh is the second son in his family. His youngest brother will inherit his father's house, but Minh and his wife live with his parents' support at the moment because his income from casual labor is too low to build a house. In turn, he gives 75% of his salary (USD 130) to his wife who then purchases daily necessities for his whole family, including for his parents and younger siblings. In addition, his wife works on his father's farm as a laborer and looks after three heads of cattle and one buffalo. Thus, although his remittances are limited, his wife's labor contribution in agriculture allows the couple to receive support from Minh's parents for accommodation and food.

Young men also receive material and non-material support from the family of their wives. Hung (24-year-old man) lives with his in-laws and works in his father-in-law's farm full-time and is unpaid. His parents-in-law and brother-in-law provide food, accommodation, and basic necessities for him, his wife, and their child. In our study site, a man living with in-laws is not common, but it does occur. In Hung's case, his own family is too poor and the family land is too small to divide among four sons. On the other hand, his wife's father has a large farmland, but his only son works outside the province. Therefore, Hung's labor, rather than remittances, was needed in this circumstance. Hung grows rice and maize, while his father-in-law oversees farm management and sales of rice and maize. This arrangement allows Hung to live under the safety net of his wife's family while establishing his marriage.

Young men can also receive support from their wives' parents in exchange with their wives' labor contribution to their natal families. Vien has constant offers for wage labor work due to his father-in-law's social connections. In

return, Vien sends his wife to work as a laborer during the peak farming season to help his father-in-law. Similarly, Minh (20-year-old man) was given a small plot of farmland from his father-in-law. In return, his wife returns to her home village to help her parents and relatives with farming and animal husbandry. Another case, Thuy's husband borrowed money from his father-in-law (Thuy's father) to renovate his parents' house so that the newly married couple could live together with his parents. They knew that her husband would not be able to return the money in his circumstance with unstable employment, so to keep showing her appreciation to her own parents for this arrangement, Thuy takes care of her grandmother who lives in a distant village twice per month.

Thus, young married men have substantial support from their parents and in-laws. In turn, they offer not only their own labor but also the labor of their wives. Although this opens up an opportunity for young married women to visit their natal village, their visit must be coordinated with their mother-in-laws who help with domestic work including child care during young women's absence. This indicates that the ways women's labor contribution turns to cash/goods/services are complex and diverse. We now move on to highlight women's cases.

Phuong (22-year-old woman) is in charge of all farming work including raising pigs and chicken. Her mother-in-law then sells the pigs and chicken in a local market and controls the money. Her husband sends remittances to Phuong and she hands them over to her mother-in-law who controls it and gives some to Phuong. She said, 'If I need to buy something such as clothes and shoes, then she can give me money I would need. Everything I have bought for my daughter has been purchased by my parents-in-law.' Her unpaid labor contribution is, however, under-valued by herself. She continued, 'I cannot make money as I am staying at home. I am always scared of being criticised by my parents-in-law. I have to work hard even when I feel very tired. I am also under pressure from my husband. He often asks me by phone where I go and why I go out for so long and so on. I work hard at home every day. That is only the way for me to avoid being criticised.'

Dung (25-year-old woman) manages the farm of her parents-in-law with whom she lives, feeding chickens, grazing two heads of cattle and one buffalo, cooking, cleaning, and caring three children, including one of her brother-in-law's children (whose wife is working in Hanoi with him). Dung's mother-in-law is too old to do farming work and she can only do some light domestic work when Dung is in the farm. Dung's husband returns to the village only twice per year during planting and harvesting seasons, and he sends his remittances to his parents. When the family has a financial shortage, she asks her own parents for food and/or some money (around USD 10–20 per request). In turn, she goes to her parents' house during the peak farming season to help with their farm work and some domestic chores to relieve her mother's burden. Thus, the

reciprocal support from her parents is as important as those with in-laws as her labor to her parents' farm turns to cash in times of need.

Mai (22-year-old woman) desires to be independent from her in-laws both physically and financially. She thinks it will take a long time as her husband is still paying off debts from their wedding 5 years ago. To help with repayment, she works in Hanoi with her husband during the off-farm season in winter. Her additional income from working as a laborer in construction is used primarily for repaying the debt, but she also puts aside some money for when her mother-in-law needs to attend weddings and funerals. Mai does this because her mother-in-law looks after her children and livestock during her absence.

These stories of men and women confirm that farming and domestic work are central to young couples' safety nets. Their labor contribution justifies support from their parents and parents-in-law. Young wives have a joint obligation with their husbands to sustain reciprocal relations with their in-laws as well as their parents.

5.3 Young married men's and women's opportunities in agriculture

In this sub-section, we present findings on young Thai men and women's perceptions about agriculture as income sources. Although both young men and women work on family farms, many of them do not consider it as 'work'. Hung who lives with his in-laws says he feels less important than his other male family members because 'I am not a breadwinner. I am dependent on my father-in-law who earns incomes from farming and a brother-in-law who sends remittances. I am under a lot of pressure from them to work hard and behave properly. If I don't do so, they will criticize me. I don't have any decision-making power in this house where I live. I follow what they say.'

However, young men are able to negotiate with their father or father-in-law. Hung, for example, has built trust relations with his father-in-law and gained some degrees of autonomy and independence in farming. He said, 'Two months before we met, he had planted 400 orange trees.' The local government had distributed planting materials to two households with large farms to test orange tree growth – one of them was Hung's father-in-law. Orange groves would be a new addition in this area as most farmers grow only rice, maize, and cassava. Hung's father-in-law assigned him to look after the trees, and Hung was excited to see if the trees produced fruit.

Young men who live with their parents often interpret their fathers' farmland and livestock as shared assets in which they are co-owners although they have not yet inherited the farmland. This interpretation allows them to access their fathers' farmland. For example, Vien has not yet inherited his father's farmland, but he is interested in grafting plums after seeing a video on YouTube. Nobody

in his village has tried plums. In the case of Nam, his father was given two cattle as part of a local government's poverty reduction scheme for supporting poor households. The cattle produced four calves, eventually bringing in VND 15 million (USD 652) as additional income to his family. Nam still owes the debt of 50 million (USD 2170) for his father's buffaloes which died before they began generating income. Furthermore, Nam's father is sick, and he must pay the hospital bills while his wife looks after Nam's father. With this interdependency, Nam has a notion of co-ownership for and control over the cattle as his asset, even though it is his wife who invests the labor to take care of them.

Women also actively seek opportunities for themselves. Phuong looks after pigs and chickens that were originally purchased by her parents-in-law when she married. While the income from the pigs is taken and controlled by her mother-in-law, Phuong has a certain notion of ownership and autonomy over the pigs she breeds:

> As a daughter-in-law, I have very limited decision-making power. Many decisions in everyday lives are made by parents-in-law or my husband, but raising pigs is an area where I can make decisions. In my household, I know the best how to raise pigs and which pigs are ready for selling.

Although Phuong is not physically taking any money from raising pigs, her work certainly gives her power and space for negotiating other things such as asking her mother-in-law to help with domestic work and childcare. Similarly, Hanh has control over raising chickens. She learned from a friend in her natal village how to raise chickens in a cage and using artificial feed instead of rice. Adopting these lessons, she learned that chickens grow faster. Her role model is her sister-in-law who is economically independent and earns income from breeding buffaloes, pigs, chickens, and ducks. Earlier, Hanh had thought that earning cash incomes in Hanoi would be better, but she and her husband were cheated by their employers and exhausted by dusty and overcrowded urban life. She decided not to go to Hanoi again with her husband. Instead, she is improving her skills in livestock production and learning to manage the business like her sister-in-law.

In the last case, Lan's situation is different from others who live with their in-laws. She has full control of farm and livestock activities (including the income) as she lives independently from in-laws while her husband is absent from the house earning an income from mining work. Her main income source is breeding cattle, which produce one or two calves per year and she has sold six calves over the past 4 years. She also raises other livestock such as pigs, chickens and fish but they are mostly for home consumption. She perceives cattle breeding to have great potential for generating income for women, as it is less labor- and time-consuming compared with raising pigs. Her case demonstrates that young women are capable of independently managing

agriculture including livestock production although their contribution is less recognized by themselves and their families.

6 Conclusion

This book chapter has discussed the challenges of women farmers who have double disadvantages from current mainstream male-oriented and the low-land centered agricultural policy and research priorities and frameworks. The example case was drawn from ethnic Thai women in the upland region of Northern Vietnam. We particularly looked at women's unpaid labor for domestic work, care, and farming and its relationships with economic activities to uncover women's significant roles in agriculture in this marginalized upland region.

The findings revealed that young married women are responsible for meeting greater labor contributions than men in both family farming and domestic work, managing overall household economy within the patrilineal organization. In return for unpaid labor, women receive both material and non-material support from their kin in times of need. This mechanism of safety nets is particularly important in the context where men's off-farm incomes are precarious. Hence, women's unpaid labor contribution to family farming and care work is an integral part of maintaining household economic activities.

In the literature, women's reproductive roles are often viewed as support for other family members' participation in productive activities (Shah and Lerche, 2020) and/or constraining their opportunities and capacities to enter labor markets (Ferguson and McNally, 2015; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015). Our findings suggest that reproduction is an integral part of economies (Ahl, 2006; Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Little, 2016; Philipps, 2008) and is also a tool for bargaining access to cash, food, goods, and childcare services for themselves in times of need (Jackson, 2007). In this respect, women's hidden roles in agriculture should not be excluded from the analysis of livelihoods. Research frameworks and models for exploring cash crops (as a productive domain) are not sufficient to understand women's roles in agriculture as farming systems and gender and social systems are interwoven with each other.

Our study also confirms that married young women living with in-laws eventually gain bargaining power through their unpaid labor contribution to the family: a sort of conjugal contracts in which women ensure access to resources via their husbands through their contribution to reproduction (Jackson, 1995; Jackson, 2007; Whitehead, 1981). Hence, the effect of unpaid work on bargaining should not be overlooked in research on women's empowerment. Young married women build their skills and experiences in agriculture and seek income generating activities within a small domain where they have autonomy such as livestock rearing. In thecase of Hung who lives with his wife's parents,

he had a similar experience as women who live with their husbands' parents. This confirms that it is the relational position of young men and women in their family as daughter-in-law or son-in-law that determines their bargaining power and roles in agriculture.

Furthermore, ethnic minority young married women's challenges are closely associated with the struggles of their husbands as minority young men, who face various discrimination and challenges in non-farm employment in the low-land region. This confirms that ethnic minority women and men are socially embedded in existing family, gender and cultural structures within which they seek to find advantageous entry points for incremental change. Understanding women in isolation from their social and family backgrounds results in a misdirected focus on individual characteristics such as lack of knowledge, skills, and employment opportunities. Given that, any discussions on agriculture for women's empowerment among ethnic minority communities in upland Asia need to start by looking at their positions as a mother and a daughter-in-law. Simply promoting individual women to participate in income-generating activities and assessing the level of women's empowerment based on their involvement in economic activities is very narrow and superficial.

Our findings also highlight methodological implications for research on gender and agriculture. Young married men and women often tell researchers they are 'unemployed' or 'just staying at home' and express their limited decision-making power. These modest assessments of their position in conversation might simply reflect their understanding of how outsiders might value their agricultural contributions, especially their apprehension of outsiders' value for and interest in agriculture as a source of income. Oftentimes, respondents' words hide their aspirations to, dependency on and interests in family farming. Careful attention is therefore needed to understand smallholder farmers' especially women's paradoxical contributions to and benefits from agriculture, a situation in which small innovation spaces can open up opportunities for both women and men.

7 Future trends in research

Recently, there has been a trend to understanding the complexities of agriculture consisting of farming and non-farming incomes and from farmers' perspectives to re-evaluate swidden cultivation in the upland region of Asia (Mertz and Bruun, 2017; Pritchard et al., 2019; Teegalapalli and Datta, 2016; Vicol et al., 2018). Farmers' agency is central to these studies, contributing to enriching our understanding of the dynamics and flexibility of agriculture. Incorporating women's perspectives is, however, still a challenge in such crop-focused research. Although the study is from Latin America, Turner et al. (2022) employs the concept of food sovereignty and gender to understand women's unpaid- and under-valued contribution to agriculture as well as their roles in

a sustainable environment. Miller and Gibson-Graham (2019) also propose new concepts to explore relationships of household economy, environment, and non-material aspects of life (e.g. gifts and reciprocal support). The concept of degrowth (Dengler and Lang, 2022) may be another important theme in this area to challenge the paradigm of (unsustainable) economic growth maintained by the exploitation of women's unpaid labor. The shift in the focus of agriculture from the quantity (productivity) to quality (e.g. well-being, cultural value, and environmental sustainability) is an important aspect of new knowledge production in both agriculture and gender scholarship.

As mentioned earlier, another important new trend relevant to this topic is feminist approaches to political economy and political ecology (Cohen, 2018; Curty, 2020; Gustavsson, 2021; Mies, 2007). The approaches have been applied to various themes from the analyses of natural resource management (Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Morinville and Van Lier, 2021), entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006), and more broadly women's experience during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic (Stevano et al., 2021; Sultana, 2021). Agriculture, especially for understanding the role of unpaid labor, could be the next area to apply the forementioned feminist approaches. This allows researchers to be free from the ideology of capitalism and its research frameworks, enabling us to think of the problems of women farmers as structural than individuals' lack of skills and capacities.

To better incorporate the minorities' social, gender, and cultural contexts into research on agriculture, anthropological and ethnographic studies are very important. However, seminal work on ethnic minorities in the upland Southeast Asia has been led by Western scientists (e.g. Bonnin and Turner, 2014; Kunstadter, 1967; Michaud, 2009; Scott, 2009; Turner et al., 2015). They are very rich and extremely valuable to knowledge production, and some of them critically address subjectivity and reflexivity of themselves as outsiders (Bonnin, 2010; Turner, 2010). The future trend we hope to see is more studies conducted by local researchers, especially minority backgrounds and women scientists. Research with insider viewpoints would strengthen not only agricultural scholarship but also anthropological, geographical, and regional studies and help develop appropriate agricultural policy and intervention strategies with stronger notion of ownership by local communities, especially women.

Studies on ethnic minority people's structural problems are also conducted in various other sectors such as public health, education, and nutrition. Intersectoral and interdisciplinary research in those sectors to identify and address common research questions could help improve our understanding of agricultural challenges in the upland region.

Lastly, to link science into practice to transform the communities on their own, applied research learning from (failure) cases in agricultural and/or multi-sector development projects would be important. This is the first step to offer

tailored approaches for ethnic minority men and women with different steps to agricultural technologies and development interventions.

8 Where to look for further information

- IFAD indigenous people.
- https://www.ifad.org/zh/indigenous-peoples.
- Journal of Mountain Research and Development.
- https://www.jstor.org/journal/mounresedeve.
- Journal Asian Ethnicity.
- https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/caet20.

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