Negotiating Gender and Language Barriers: Dual Roles of Vietnamese Married Immigrant Women in Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving roles of Vietnamese married immigrant women in Taiwan, focusing on their experiences as primary breadwinners within the family. Drawing on Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender," it explores how these women handle traditional gendered expectations while fulfilling their roles as earners and caregivers. Through in-depth interviews with 13 Vietnamese women, the study highlights how they perceive self-sacrifice and suffering as integral to their sense of dignity. The article demonstrates that while caregiving remains central to their understanding of womanhood, these women view the breadwinner role as both a responsibility and a means to challenge the stigma of being a "bad mother." The article further reveals how language barriers shape their life and influence power dynamics within the family. The study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, migration, and caregiving; offering insights into the complex intersection of cultural norms, familial obligations, and women's agency in transnational contexts. Future research could examine how transnational caregiving and breadwinning roles reshape gender norms and family dynamics over time.

Keywords: Vietnamese immigrant women, breadwinner women, doing gender, dual responsibilities, language barriers.

Introduction

This study examines the life experiences and gender practices of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan, who constitute the second largest group of married immigrant women (National Immigration Agency, 2018). The phenomenon of transnational marriage migration to Taiwan is closely tied to structural inequalities, where local Taiwanese men—often from working-class backgrounds and with limited educational attainment—face challenges in finding local spouses. In response, many seek foreign wives who are perceived to embody traditional virtues such as obedience, domesticity, and filial piety (Hsia 2004, 2007, 2008; Wang, 2010). This preference indicates that Taiwanese men desire women who will act as caregivers for the family. Moreover, these women are often expected to contribute economically due to the increased financial demands after having children. Working-class men, in particular, struggle with the challenges posed by economic restructuring, and when the husband's income is insufficient to support the family, migrant women are compelled to enter the labor market (Pan & Yang, 2014).

The role of breadwinner for men has long been considered a duty. Failure to fulfill this duty often compels men to protect their identities as they struggle to maintain their privileged status as family breadwinners (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). In the United States, being a good earner has been an aspect of hegemonic masculinity since the industrial revolution. During the early market economy, paid work was discouraged for married women. It was only when a mother at the turn of the twentieth century had no other choice that she could accept work far from home. This focus on a masculine identity is also very prominent in Asia. Elmhirst (2007) notes that in Indonesia, successful masculinity is closely related to success in providing for the family. In the Philippines, men are collectively referred to as "the breadwinners of the family," reflecting both the metaphorical importance of the man in making the home and the material contributions he is expected to make to the family (Parrenas, 2005).

Gender roles play a significant role in shaping the work-family interface, as they reflect societal beliefs about appropriate behaviors based on an individual's socially recognized gender and reinforce the division of labor in most cultures (Wood & Eagly, 2015). In Western societies, the domain of family - particularly housework - is often regarded as a woman's responsibility, which may contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict among women compared to men (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). From traditional gender roles, the conflict between work and family becomes more severe when women are caught between the demands of caregiving and the expectations of the ideal worker (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). The ideal worker is expected to prioritize paid employment and adjust their personal life to meet the demands of work (Kelly et al., 2010). At the same time, traditional gender norms continue to assign women a disproportionate share of family responsibilities. Although women increasingly participate in the labor force and work full-time, they remain primarily responsible for household and caregiving tasks (Coltrane, 2000).

In Vietnam, under the enduring influence of Confucian values, public and family life places great emphasis on men, whose identities are linked to their patriarchal roles in the family (Phinney, 2008; Vu, 2008). The metaphor of the Vietnamese patriarch as the "head of the family" illustrates his authority over other family members and his responsibility to ensure their well-being, particularly by bringing in income for the family. However, women's increased participation in the labor force results from various factors, including men's deficits in agricultural production during and after the war, economic instability heightened after doi moi, and socialist values promoting gender equality (Hoang, 2011). Women have traditionally managed small businesses and played a significant role in handling household assets and budgets (Kabeer & Tran, 2000; Long et al., 2000).

Numerous research papers on immigrant wives in Taiwan have focused on various aspects such as the marriage process (Lu, 2005; Wang & Chang, 2002); life after marriage, including issues of violence (William & Yu, 2006; Wu, 2019), citizenship policy (Lan, 2025; Sheu, 2007; Tsai, 2011), marital bargaining (Tang & Wang, 2011; Wang, 2007), and power and happiness (Chang & Liao, 2014). While significant attention has been given to the economic and social

challenges faced by immigrant wives in Taiwan, relatively few studies have examined how these women negotiate their dual roles as breadwinners and caregivers. Existing research often treats these roles in isolation, neglecting the interplay between economic and domestic labor. Furthermore, the strategies these women employ to balance competing expectations and their implications for family dynamics remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on how Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Taiwan negotiate their dual roles as caregivers and breadwinners. Drawing on Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender," it examines how these women perform and resist traditional gender expectations through their labor inside and outside the home. Special attention is given to how women's strategies reflect and reshape familial power dynamics, as well as how language barriers affect their labor market participation and autonomy. By foregrounding the voices of Vietnamese women through in-depth interviews, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender, migration, and agency in transnational contexts.

Breadwinning, caregiving, and gender boundaries in the household

The division of economic support and responsibility for housework and family care remains a pivotal marker of gender boundaries in contemporary industrialized societies. West & Zimmerman's (1987) influential concept of "doing gender" frames gender not as an innate characteristic but as a "feature of social situations," produced and maintained through social arrangements. They argue that gender is both the outcome and basis of social interactions, achieved through "a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'nature'" (p.126). This notion underscores that gender is not simply a matter of individual identity or perception but is continuously constructed through social activities, carrying implications for how men and women's behaviors are evaluated and sanctioned within specific social contexts. However, the "doing gender" framework has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing the power dynamics and structural constraints embedded in gendered interactions. While West and Zimmerman emphasize the performative aspects of gender, they pay less attention to the institutionalized inequalities that shape the performance of gender roles. For instance, Seo et al., (2020) illustrate how the ideal of the "wise mother and good wife" persists within Korean immigrant communities, where women are expected to exhibit systematic knowledge of child-rearing and domestic work. This idealization not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also links women's domestic labor to their cultural identity, revealing how cultural preservation efforts often depend on women's subordination.

Thompson's (1993) exploration of interactive processes highlights how men and women negotiate gender identities through their roles and capabilities within intimate relationships. In these dynamics, husbands often articulate their sexual and emotional expectations, and wives interpret and respond to these cues in ways that align with their definitions of femininity and care work. This interactional process, while seemingly reciprocal, is often asymmetrical, as women's compliance with their partners' expectations is frequently motivated by the desire

to maintain family stability. This dynamic underscores how gender performance is shaped by both interpersonal negotiation and broader cultural imperatives.

Contemporary research continues to build on this perspective, recognizing that while some traditional gender norms remain persistent, there is also increasing variability in how couples negotiate roles within intimate partnerships. For instance, recent studies have examined how shifts in economic power, increased female labor force participation, and evolving societal norms challenge traditional gender scripts and enable more egalitarian practices—though often unevenly and contextually (Elliott & Umberson, 2008). Moreover, contemporary gender theory emphasizes intersectionality and fluidity, suggesting that gender performance within relationships must also be understood in relation to race, class, and migration status (Connell, 2012; Risman, 2018).

Jack and Dill's (1992) research further problematizes the costs of these gendered expectations, demonstrating how the cultural construction of the 'good woman' often mandates self-sacrifice and suppression of individual needs. This suppression, aimed at avoiding conflict and preserving relationships, is linked to heightened vulnerability to psychological distress, particularly depression. Such findings challenge the assumption that "doing gender" is merely a neutral social process, highlighting its potential to produce significant emotional and psychological costs.

West and Zimmerman's (1987) assertion that gendered social activities often conform to culturally approved standards also merits closer scrutiny. While they suggest that these behaviors serve strategic purposes in influencing others, this perspective risks overlooking the extent to which institutionalized norms constrain individual agency. The division of housework and childcare, often presented as a voluntary performance of masculinity and femininity, is more accurately understood as a reflection of entrenched gendered inequalities. By framing household labor as an arena where gender is enacted, West & Zimmerman's theory provides valuable insights, yet it requires expansion to fully account for the structural and emotional dimensions of these practices.

Building on the "doing gender" framework, this paper seeks to deepen the analysis of daily gendered practices and perceptions of women's roles, emphasizing the interplay between social performance and institutional constraints. Through this critical engagement, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender is produced, negotiated, and contested in everyday life.

Language, Caregiving, and Gendered Power in the Lives of Vietnamese Marriage Migrant Women in Taiwan

The caregiving responsibilities of Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Taiwan are deeply embedded in both historical-cultural traditions and the gendered dynamics of transnational households. These expectations are not only informed by patriarchal ideologies from Vietnam and Taiwan but are also reinforced through structural barriers such as language. The intersection of caregiving, linguistic limitations, and cultural assimilation contributes to a complex system of power and negotiation in these women's daily lives.

Vietnam's history of colonization by China, France, and the United States has profoundly shaped its cultural and social identity. Understanding Vietnamese identity requires an analysis of the evolving influences before, during, and after these periods of colonization. The earliest and most enduring impact came from Chinese culture, which integrated elements of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, shaping gender roles and societal expectations. This cultural amalgamation entrenched the perception of women's identities as subordinate to men's. Vietnamese women were expected to balance work outside the home while fulfilling their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, adhering to the Confucian principle of Tam Tong (three obediences): submission to their father in youth, their husband in marriage, and their eldest son in widowhood (Hoang, 2016; Phan et al., 2005). While these cultural expectations provided a framework for women's behavior, they also confined women to rigid roles, limiting their autonomy and social mobility.

The influence of the United States on Vietnamese identity, although more recent, introduced a significant shift in gender roles during the Vietnam War. With many men engaged in combat, women assumed the role of primary providers, undertaking paid employment to support their families. This period highlighted Vietnamese women's increased agency, initiative, and economic contribution (Jamieson, 1995). However, despite their active participation in the workforce, traditional patriarchal norms persisted, and men continued to be perceived as the rightful heads of households and primary decision-makers.

The resilience of traditional values remains evident in contemporary Vietnamese society, where men are often perceived as more suited to political and professional roles, while women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities (Dalton et al., 2002). Despite widespread acknowledgment that both men and women should contribute to family income, the dual burden on women has intensified rather than diminished (Gammeltoft, 2012; Trinh, 1992). Women's responsibilities encompass not only paid employment but also caregiving and household duties, reinforcing the societal expectation of female sacrifice and endurance (Werner, 2009).

Motherhood remains central to Vietnamese women's identities despite socio-political changes (Rydstrøm, 2004). Even with greater workforce participation, women are still primarily seen as caregivers (Dalton et al., 2002; Kabeer et al., 2005), and judged by their domestic roles (Hoang, 2011). Patriarchal norms persist, creating tension between evolving economic roles and traditional expectations. While past research addresses cultural influences and domestic roles, it often overlooks how these identities shift in transnational contexts. Confucian ideals like *Tam Tong* and the focus on motherhood remain influential (Phan et al., 2005; Hoang, 2016), but limited attention is given to how women negotiate these roles amid migration.

In Taiwan, Vietnamese immigrant women encounter similar patriarchal expectations, including pressure to fulfill caregiving duties and align with filial values (Pan & Yang, 2013; Seaman, 1981; Wang, 2007). Employment is often discouraged due to fears of financial mismanagement or abandonment (Özdemir & Polat, 2024; Tang et al., 2011). Although women have historically contributed economically (Jamieson, 1995), their long-term agency

and status remain understudied. Many carry the dual burden of work and domestic care (Gammeltoft, 2012; Polat, 2022; Trinh, 1992), with little focus on how this affects household power dynamics.

Economic necessity, particularly in low-income households or those facing disability (Wang & Chang, 2002), compels women to work, yet domestic expectations remain unchanged (Pan & Yang, 2013). This reinforces traditional gender norms, with limited exploration of how women assert agency within these constraints (Tang et al., 2011). The contradiction between idealized motherhood and economic productivity (Hays, 1996) forces many to adopt coping strategies like using leisure time to manage stress (Aarntzen et al., 2019).

Language is not merely a means of communication but a form of cultural capital that shapes power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1991). For Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan, although they are often considered among the fastest learners of Mandarin—reportedly achieving fluency within six months—their access to formal language or general education programs is significantly limited. This is due to the time-consuming nature of both unpaid domestic labor and paid employment, which leaves little room for structured learning.

These women face overlapping pressures to embody the ideal caregiver while also contributing financially to the household. However, language barriers hinder their ability to meet either expectation. This tension illustrates how caregiving and communication are politicized acts, shaped by gender norms, migration, and structural inequality. This study sheds light on the ways in which language mediates identity, power, and agency in the lives of Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Taiwan.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach. It utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan. The research was conducted over a period of seven months, divided into two phases: the final three months of 2021 in Eastern Taiwan and the middle four months of 2022 in Western Taiwan. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the dual roles of these women as both breadwinners and caregivers within their families. Given the multifaceted nature of these roles, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable, as it provided participants the opportunity to articulate their daily realities, negotiate their dual responsibilities, and convey their personal narratives. The in-depth interview format facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced insights into their lived experiences.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants, specifically targeting Vietnamese women married to Taiwanese men who currently serve as the primary earners for their families. Prior to the commencement of each interview, verbal informed consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted in a flexible and open-ended manner, allowing participants to share personal anecdotes and reflect on their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The study sample consisted of 13 participants: six from Eastern Taiwan and seven from Western Taiwan. At the time of the

interviews, participants ranged in age from 35 to 51 years, with lengths of residence in Taiwan varying from 15 to 26 years. Detailed participant demographics are as follows:

Table 1: Participant demographics

No	Name	Age	Years of living in TW	Educational background	Job	Living condition
1	Di	40	16	Vocational degree	Vietnamese teacher and housekeeping	With 2 children, husband and mother-in-law
2	Ni	42	20	Grade 3	Kitchen staff	With husband and daughter
3	Mi	37	17	Grade 5	Fried chicken store's owner	With two children
4	Cha	39	20	Grade 4	Farm owner	With 2 children and husband
5	La	43	22	Junior high school	Betel nut selling	With husband and two daughters
6	Tru	40	19	Junior high school	Kitchen staff	With husband and two sons
7	Ha	38	17	Vocational degree	Warehouse manager	With children, husband and parents-in-law
8	Nga	41	19	Grade 4	Factory worker	With husband, daughter and parents-in-law
9	Li	40	17	Grade 3	Factory worker	With husband, children and parents-in-law
10	Bi	37	15	Grade 3	Factory worker	With daughter
11	Ho	51	26	Grade 2	Tailor	With husband and son
12	Lo	50	20	Grade 3	Vietnamese diners	With a son
13	Pha	35	15	Grade 6	Farmer	With husband and a son

The participants' educational backgrounds varied: Two participants held a vocational degree, two had completed junior high school, one had completed primary school, and eight were attending primary school in grades 3 to 5. In terms of occupational backgrounds, the participants came from a wide range of professions, including a tailor who owned a clothing repair shop, a farmer, a farm owner, a warehouse manager at a paper company, two owners of Vietnamese eateries, two kitchen staff members at various eateries, a betel nut vendor, a Vietnamese teacher, and three factory workers. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim immediately following each session.

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of both participants and author, to ensure comfort, trust, and the most authentic expression of their lived experiences. As a Vietnamese speaker myself, I was able to establish rapport and facilitate open dialogue. In instances where participants used occasional phrases in Mandarin—especially when discussing workplace dynamics or interactions with local institutions—these were carefully translated during the transcription process. While most participants were fluent in conversational Vietnamese, some cultural concepts or experiences unique to Taiwanese

society required additional explanation or clarification to ensure mutual understanding during interviews. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, this involved familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding, searching for recurring patterns, and refining these into key themes that reflected the participants' lived experiences. Special attention was paid to preserving cultural nuances and meanings embedded in the participants' narratives to ensure the authenticity and depth of interpretation.

Findings

This study reveals how Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Taiwan navigate the complex intersections of gender, labor, language, and power within their everyday lives. Through in-depth interviews, three central themes emerged that illuminate the layered and often contradictory pressures these women face. These themes reflect their lived experiences of fulfilling gendered caregiving expectations, negotiating voice and belonging in a linguistically and culturally foreign environment, and managing familial power dynamics shaped by traditional norms and transnational realities. The following sections present each theme in detail.

Gendered Expectations: Endurance, Caregiving, and the Moral Weight of Labor

Performing Endurance and Self-Sacrifice

The lives of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan are profoundly shaped by traditional gender roles, which frame their identities and expectations as daughters, wives, and mothers. These roles, deeply rooted in Confucian principles and cultural expectations of filial piety and female sacrifice, influence both their decisions to marry and their experiences within these marriages. For many Vietnamese rural women, the aspiration to marry foreign husbands is driven by the pursuit of economic stability. They often view relocation to Taiwan as a way to improve their families' financial conditions, aligning their personal decisions with the cultural value of fulfilling their duty as devoted daughters (Tang & Wang, 2011). This act of self-sacrifice, aimed at supporting their parents, underscores the enduring importance of filial piety in shaping women's lives. The story of Cha exemplifies this cultural expectation of sacrifice. Coming from a family with limited financial resources and multiple children, she agreed to marry a Taiwanese man to alleviate her family's economic burdens. As she recounted,

> After grade 6, I dropped out of school because I didn't have money to study anymore; then, I harvested rice for a few months and went to the city to work serving the school canteen in District 6. After that, I worked in a factory for a while; someone said your family was too poor, you got married to help your family, then I agreed to marry……Because my family has many girls, so it's okay to sacrifice one. My family has five daughters and two sons.

This willingness to prioritize family welfare over personal aspirations is a recurring theme among Vietnamese women, reinforcing the societal perception that a 'good woman' demonstrates resilience and endurance without complaint (Gammeltoft, 1999). Moreover, These traditional expectations continue to shape women's lives after marriage, as they navigate their roles within their new families in Taiwan. Vietnamese immigrant women often face challenges such as domestic violence, social isolation, financial dependence, and language barriers (Yu, 2014). Despite these difficulties, the cultural ideal of female endurance compels them to persevere in their marriages. Ni's experience illustrates this dynamic:

> Because my husband's children are also close to my age, I did not force them to call me mom, as long as they're nice to him and me...then one day, he borrowed money from me, but I said I didn't, you asked your father. Since then, he hasn't talked to me. Then later, his father had money but did not divide it with him, so he kicked my family out… (Ni)

Despite encountering unexpected challenges with her husband's family, Ni consistently maintains an optimistic and cheerful demeanor, buoyed by the unwavering support of her husband. Feeling his love, she perseveres in her efforts to uphold a happy family life. In contrast, Ha finds herself consistently disillusioned with her husband. Despite his primary occupation as a taxi driver, he fails to prioritize his work, often spending his time socializing with friends over meals, drinks, and karaoke sessions. Left to care for the children alone, Ha takes the initiative to open a breakfast stall in front of their home. One day, Ha discovers her husband has accumulated significant debts, reaching a breaking point in their relationship. Contemplating divorce, she is confronted with the stark reminder from her husband that, as a foreigner without property, she would forfeit custody of their children and be forced to leave the marital home. Fearing the potential repercussions on her children's well-being, she ultimately decides to continue the marriage despite her grievances. She shared:

> When I first got married, he loved me very much; I didn't know how to cook Taiwanese food, so he taught me... Gradually he became spoiled... The money from the breakfast store was used for cooking and buying food for my husband's family, and his money was used to pay school fees and buy things for the children. I have a rule like that, frankly, no one is in charge of anyone's money..... When I heard he was in debt, I wanted to die; I told my father-in-law I wanted a divorce... He [her husband] told me to think carefully: '*You had 2 children, now you are divorced, who will take care of your children? A divorced woman leaves the house empty-handed; I must raise our 2 children'*. I only think of 2 children; now that I go, I have to have 2 children with me, but I can't, so I did not get divorced (Ha).

The personality traits of endurance and sacrifice are commonly ascribed to women, qualities that are often reflected in their marital experiences. Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriages facilitated by matchmaking frequently culminate swiftly after only a few days of acquaintance, typically occurring during the visits of Taiwanese men to Vietnam. Consequently, there is

often insufficient time for the couples to familiarize themselves with each other's personalities. This hurried process has been linked to numerous instances of domestic violence in cross-national marriages, with women disproportionately bearing the brunt of victimization, as documented in various news reports (Wang & Bélanger, 2008). Despite enduring such hardships within their marriages, these women are resolute in keeping their unhappy marital circumstances concealed from their parents. They desire to spare their parent's worry and maintain the illusion of contentment in their lives in Taiwan. This determination to endure silently is also perceived as a societal expectation. Within her own marriage, La consistently conceals the reality of her unhappiness, presenting herself to others as cheerful and optimistic, actively fostering a positive atmosphere for those around her. She has expressed her perspective:

> I have experienced many upheavals in life because of my marriage to Taiwan in hopes of improving my family's economic conditions. I still hope for a happy life with my husband, however, everything is completely different from what I expected when I always encounter conflicts with my husband's family. I have endured a very tough life as a daughter-in-law in Taiwan. However, I don't want my father back in Vietnam to worry, so I always appear optimistic and cheerful. I just wish for my father's health because that's when I feel happy (La).

These narratives illustrate how traditional gender roles frame the lives of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan, shaping their decisions, behaviors, and coping strategies. The expectation of female sacrifice and endurance remains deeply embedded in their identities, influencing their experiences in transnational marriages and their roles within their families.

Caregiving is the central of womenhood

At the heart of this role is caregiving. Traditional gender norms position caregiving as central to womanhood, reinforcing the ideal of women as selfless nurturers, even amid changing socioeconomic conditions. Many of the participants describe how caregiving continues to frame their daily lives. Who spends her days running a sewing shop, still prioritizes housework and cooking for her son on weekends:

> My husband drives me to the store around 8:00 am, and we have lunch there. Then close at 5:00 pm. I finished cooking for us and then went to bed. My son only comes back about once a month, so it's usually just two of us. On weekends, I do laundry, clean the house, and go to church. So a week is over (Ho).

Despite working long hours outside the home, women like Ho continue to shoulder the majority of domestic labor, reinforcing the perception that caregiving and housework are natural extensions of womanhood. This notion is consistent with findings from previous research, which indicate that many Vietnamese still view domestic work as a fulfilling and essential role for women (Dalton et al., 2002). Ni's experience similarly highlights the dual burden of wage labor and domestic care. Although she works long shifts at a restaurant, she

prioritizes preparing meals and spending time with her daughter and husband whenever possible:

> I work from 9 am to 3.30 pm and from 5 pm until 9 pm. I work at a dinner, so during break time, I buy lunch to take home. Because I can not cook for my husband, so I buy lunch, and we can eat together. Then in the evening, I bring some food back home so that the next morning, we have breakfast together. On weekends, I usually spend time taking care of my daughter, cleaning the house….As long as I have good health to work. I see that Vietnamese women are very good. Doing housework is good, but making money is also good (Ni).

Ni's reflection reveals not only her commitment to caregiving but also the internalized belief that a "good" woman must excel in both domestic and economic spheres. This dual responsibility reflects the pressures many Vietnamese women face in maintaining traditional gender norms while contributing financially to the household.

This emphasis on caregiving also extends to the role of motherhood. Western parenting discourses often promote the idea that "good" mothers dedicate their time and resources to their children's well-being and success (Hays, 1996). This ideal is mirrored in the experiences of Vietnamese mothers in Taiwan, many of whom express feelings of guilt when their work obligations limit their ability to spend time with their children. Nga, for instance, balances a demanding job with her responsibilities at home and worries about her children's development:

> Because I usually go to work, I don't have much time for my family, my husband is at home and plays on the phone all the time. So in my free time, I often sit and talk with my children and cook for them. They're studying high school now, so I must watch them, or they'll be spoiled easily. I often take them out on weekends, but sometimes they refuse to go and want to stay home, so I cook for them (Nga).

The cultural expectation that mothers must be both caregivers and moral guides intensifies the pressure Vietnamese women feel to fulfill these roles. When they cannot meet these standards, they often find alternative ways to support their children, such as through financial provision. Cha's case illustrates this negotiation of responsibilities:

> I now have to shoulder many things: worker's salary, family living expenses, then the cost of children's schooling. So I don't have much time to care for my children; I only know how to cook. And learning is their self-study (Cha)

Cha's approach reflects a form of caregiving that emphasizes economic support as a substitute for direct involvement in her children's education and emotional development. This strategy highlights the tension between the traditional role of a nurturing mother and the demands placed on women as financial providers.

Despite significant social and economic changes in both Vietnam and Taiwan, the perception of caregiving as the cornerstone of womanhood remains deeply entrenched. Women are

expected to fulfill their obligations as wives, mothers, and daughters, often sacrificing their own well-being in the process. The persistence of these norms shapes Vietnamese women's experiences in Taiwan, compelling them to navigate multiple roles and reconcile their cultural expectations with the realities of migrant life. Through their caregiving labor, they maintain not only their families' well-being but also their sense of identity and social worth.

Breadwinning is obligation

Alongside caregiving, breadwinning emerges not as an act of empowerment but as an extension of responsibility. Drawing on West & Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" framework, we see how women perform gender roles shaped by necessity and duty. Pha's narrative shows her acceptance of this role:

> I feel normal, nothing. My husband is old and can't make much money, so I go to work. We are a family, and the responsibility of making money is for both of us; if my husband can't make money, I can do it. I feel normal. Now I go to work to feed my children, pay electricity and water bills, and pay monthly car installments (Pha).

Pha illustrates the internalized notion that breadwinning is part of her responsibility as a member of the family. While Pha expresses no burden in fulfilling this role, her acceptance of it reflects how gender roles are internalized and performed. Despite her husband's inability to earn money, Pha takes on the financial responsibility, but this act does not appear to challenge traditional gender roles; rather, it is framed within the familial obligation of ensuring the family's survival and well-being. Her statement reinforces the idea of the "doing gender" framework, where the performance of gender is based on the perceived expectations within a particular context.

Similarly, Li's experience also highlights how gendered expectations shape women's roles. She has been working from a young age to support her family, and when her husband's illness renders him unable to work, she becomes the family's primary earner. This scenario illustrates the flexibility of gender roles, where women, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, take on roles traditionally assigned to men, but they do so out of necessity rather than choice. Li's account suggests that women like her are conditioned to adapt to these roles, not because of a rejection of femininity or domesticity but as a natural extension of their early life experiences of economic hardship. She shared:

> I've been working since I was 12 years old; when I came here, I couldn't work; I just helped my husband sell chickens. Later I went to work to earn money because my husband was an alcoholic. Since he was ill, I have become the primary earner for the family. I rent land to grow vegetables, I grow a lot, and then I also hire workers. Now I make money for the whole family from my children's school fees, daily meals, electricity, and water, and also money for my husband's sister. Because my husband is very weak now, I asked his sister to take care of him, then

> I earned money to pay for her. I have many responsibilities right now, so I hope to be healthy enough to work (Li).

Ha's experience further exemplifies the internalization of breadwinning as an obligation. Despite her husband's claim of illness, which she believes does not fully incapacitate him, she takes on the responsibility for the family's financial well-being. She expresses frustration with her husband's refusal to find work, yet she does not question the notion that she must provide. This reflects the "doing gender" concept, where women continue to perform gendered expectations even in the face of an unequal division of labor. The assumption that it is her responsibility to provide for the family is deeply ingrained in her understanding of her role as a woman and a mother. She recounted:

> He had a disease, but this disease is not that he can't work, he can still do it... He had asthma. The disease doesn't always happen, but relapse while driving is dangerous. But he refuses to find another job... I must give him 10,000 monthly to spend, then pay my children's fees. Living with my parents-in-law, they help me pay for electricity and water. In my opinion, everyone can take responsibility for making money because this is our family. If I don't worry, who will? (Ha)

Ho's experience, where she struggles to support her family with limited income, also reveals the complexity of the breadwinning role. Despite the economic strain, Ho continues to shoulder the financial burden of her family's expenses, all the while feeling unable to visit her family in Vietnam due to financial constraints. This highlights the tension between her responsibilities as the breadwinner and her own personal desires and needs. Her narrative challenges the romanticized notion of familial sacrifice, suggesting that the emotional cost of performing gendered roles as the primary earner can be isolating and burdensome. Ho said:

> In recent years, there have been very few customers fixing clothes. Some days I can do more than 1000NT; others, I can do only a few hundred. But I also pay the rental, and then All living expenses in the family are supplied by me. So I can't save money. I hadn't returned to Vietnam long; my mother called to ask why I didn't visit her. I said I was busy with many things but couldn't say I didn't have money, and then she got worried for me (Ho).

Lo's perspective as a single mother who has become the primary breadwinner after divorce offers an interesting angle. While she acknowledges the burden of responsibility, she also reflects on how her life became more comfortable after the divorce, primarily because she no longer had to care for her ex-husband's family. Lo's experience speaks to the flexibility and adaptability of gender roles. Despite the challenges, she feels a sense of liberation in not having to care for a partner who was not contributing to the family's welfare. This narrative complicates the notion that being a breadwinner is inherently oppressive, suggesting that in some cases, taking on this role can be empowering for women who have been accustomed to doing so, as shared by Lo:

> After the divorce, I became the pillar of the family, from rental fees, and daily expenses, to my child's education fees. Despite the heavy burden, I still feel life is more comfortable because, before the divorce, I was already shouldering these responsibilities. After the divorce, I no longer need to take care of my ex-husband's family, so I have more time for myself. But out of goodwill, sometimes I still go back home to help tidy up the house or buy some necessary items for him. It's also thanks to him that I've come here to Taiwan.

Through the lens of "doing gender," these women's acceptance of the breadwinner role can be understood not as a rejection of femininity or a challenge to traditional gender norms but as an act of conformity to the gendered expectations placed upon them by both family and society. Their actions are motivated by a sense of obligation and responsibility, not by a desire to disrupt traditional gender roles. The emphasis on family and the internalization of breadwinning as a duty rather than an option reveals how gender roles are performed in ways that maintain the traditional structure of the family while simultaneously adapting to the changing economic realities they face. while these women take on the role of the breadwinner out of necessity, the performance of this role is heavily shaped by the cultural and gendered expectations that frame their actions as part of their responsibilities within the family. The "doing gender" framework helps to explain how these women continue to navigate and perform gender roles that align with traditional notions of family obligations, even as they challenge the normative boundaries of gender and work.

Language, Voice, and the Limits of Belonging

Although all the participants in this study were fluent Mandarin speakers, they typically learn quickly and are able to speak Taiwanese within a year (Tang & Wang, 2011). However, some still have limited ability when it comes to reading or writing Chinese characters. This gap between spoken fluency and written literacy had a profound impact on their ability to fully participate in Taiwanese society, especially in navigating institutional spaces such as schools, hospitals, and government offices. For mothers, the most pressing challenge was often their limited ability to support their children's education—an area where written communication is vital.

While most of the women could communicate with teachers in person or over the phone, they struggled with reading written notices, school reports, or homework instructions. Many expressed anxiety about missing important information or making mistakes that could affect their children's education. Nga, a mother of two teenagers, described this dilemma:

> I can talk to the teachers, but when they send paper notices, I don't understand. I have to wait for my children to come home and explain it. Sometimes I'm scared I missed something important, like a parent meeting or payment deadline.

For women like Nga, being unable to read Mandarin placed them in a dependent position, where they had to rely on their children or husbands to interpret school documents. This not only compromised their autonomy as parents but also affected their confidence and sense of

responsibility. The pressure to be involved in their children's academic lives—a central expectation of "good" motherhood—clashed with their limited ability to navigate school systems independently.

Cha shared a similar struggle, noting how her inability to help with schoolwork made her feel inadequate:

> I said that I try to work now, so my children try to study and have a stable job. I always encourage my children like that, then I even tell them to study hard and I will pay for money for schooling. I don't know Chinese, so I can not teach them, so I give them money. I won't give them money if they don't focus on studying (Cha).

For Cha, caregiving takes the form of financial support rather than direct educational involvement. This reflects a broader pattern among participants: when they could not fulfill the ideal of the hands-on, attentive mother promoted in both Taiwanese and global parenting discourses, they redefined their roles by emphasizing their labor as providers.

For some women, this literacy gap meant deferring important aspects of school engagement to their spouses, even when they were otherwise the primary caregivers. Ho, who speaks Mandarin fluently but cannot read Chinese characters, shared how this limitation shaped her involvement in her children's schooling. Despite managing most of the domestic responsibilities and caring deeply about her child's education, she often chose not to attend parent-teacher meetings. Instead, she asked her husband to go in her place:

> I can speak Mandarin, no problem. But when the teacher gives papers or writes things on the board, I don't understand the characters. I worry I'll miss something important or embarrass myself. So usually, my husband goes to the meetings. He can read, and he tells me what the teacher says later. I still care a lot, but I feel more comfortable staying home.

Ho's experience illustrates how structural constraints—particularly around literacy—shape the everyday lives of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan. Although she speaks Mandarin fluently, her inability to read Chinese characters excludes her from full participation in her child's education, pushing her to rely on her husband to attend school meetings. This is not a sign of disengagement but a survival strategy in a system that assumes parental literacy and offers little accommodation for migrant families.

Such constraints are not individual shortcomings but products of a broader social structure that marginalizes marriage migrants through language, institutional expectations, and gendered roles. Women like Ho internalize these barriers, often blaming themselves, while quietly adapting to fulfill their responsibilities through other means. Their agency lies not in challenging the system directly, but in navigating it—maintaining their roles as mothers and caregivers despite being excluded from formal spaces of belonging. This highlights the urgent

need to recognize how everyday institutional norms reproduce inequality and limit migrant women's visibility and participation.

This literacy barrier highlights a specific but often overlooked dimension of language marginalization: it is not always about fluency in speaking, but about access to systems of knowledge, participation, and power. For these women, the inability to read does not diminish their capacity to care, guide, or advocate for their children—it simply forces them to do so in different, often less visible, ways.

Negotiating power

In contemporary society, the traditional gender roles that position men as the primary breadwinners and women as reproductive workers remain influential, especially within transnational families where Vietnamese women marry Taiwanese men. In these families, patriarchal norms often persist, with the husband expected to be the head of the household. However, as economic pressures shift, particularly after the birth of children, Vietnamese women increasingly find themselves stepping into the role of financial providers for the family (Pan & Yang, 2014). This change has led to a noticeable shift in power dynamics within the household, albeit without a complete transformation of traditional gender hierarchies.

In families where the husband is unable to contribute economically, the woman often becomes the primary breadwinner, which can significantly alter the power dynamics. As women take on the financial responsibility, they not only provide for the family but also gain increased authority and decision-making power within the household. As Tru shared, her husband's declining health resulted in her taking on the role of the family's decision-maker:

> My husband is weaker than before, so I have complete decision-making power in the home. I buy all the household items and repair the house and room for my 2 children. Now I have to be the decision-maker in the house.

This shift in authority is not just about finances; it also reflects an increased agency for women in shaping family life. Tru's narrative highlights how her role as the financial provider has led to her assuming greater control over household decisions.

Similarly, Ho's experience further illustrates how women's agency grows in relation to their financial contributions. With her husband unable to work due to a disability, Ho becomes the sole provider for her family. This economic responsibility, in turn, grants her more power within the household:

> My husband doesn't do anything, he drives me to the store in the morning, and then he plays the phone all day. Everything in the house is done by me. If I can't do anything, I will ask him to help me; he only does what I ask him to do. When he finishes, he continues playing on the phone (Ho).

In this case, Ho's increased authority is not just due to her financial contribution, but also because her husband's lack of engagement in household labor and decision-making reinforces her role as the one in control of the family's functioning. While her husband's presence still

shapes the family structure, her growing responsibility enables her to wield more influence in daily decisions.

However, while these women exhibit greater agency and power, it is important to note that this shift is not absolute. In many cases, women still feel the need to negotiate and discuss decisions with their husbands. For example, Nga, despite having increased responsibilities and agency, emphasizes the importance of consultation:

> Family affairs are common, so I don't make decisions in my opinion. I often have to discuss it with my husband before deciding because it is related to my family, so I cannot make decisions by myself (Nga).

Nga's account reveals that although she has more decision-making power than before, she continues to value the process of joint decision-making, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal norms that still shape her understanding of family dynamics.

This negotiation of power and agency within the family reveals the complexity of women's roles in transnational marriages. While economic necessity pushes women into roles of breadwinners, their agency is often negotiated within the context of established gendered expectations. Although these women may hold more power in the household due to their financial contributions, they are still influenced by the cultural understanding that men should ultimately have authority within the family. The power dynamics are not always as simple as women completely assuming control; rather, the agency they gain through economic roles is tempered by the need to maintain harmony with their husbands and navigate the patriarchal expectations that continue to shape their relationships.

In summary, while the roles of Vietnamese women as breadwinners challenge traditional gender norms in their families, these women's agency and power are complex and multifaceted. They gain power and authority in response to their economic contributions, yet their decisions and agency are often shaped by the continuing patriarchal framework that defines their marriages. Thus, while power dynamics have shifted in some ways, the negotiation between agency and traditional gender expectations remains central to the lived experiences of these women.

Discussion

This study contributes to a growing body of literature on transnational migration, caregiving, and gender by offering an in-depth account of how Vietnamese married migrant women in Taiwan navigate their dual roles as breadwinners and caregivers. Drawing on West & Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," the findings reveal that gender is not a fixed identity but a social practice that is continuously constructed and negotiated in everyday life. The participants in this study perform gender in ways that both conform to and subtly resist dominant norms, with their roles shaped by intersecting factors such as cultural expectations, economic necessity, and institutional barriers.

As prior studies have noted, caregiving remains central to cultural constructions of womanhood in Vietnam (Dalton et al., 2002; Gammeltoft, 2012). Confucian values, especially *Tam Tong*—the three obediences—continue to frame women's identities as daughters, wives, and mothers, emphasizing sacrifice and duty over autonomy (Phan et al., 2005; Hoang, 2016). The participants' narratives echo this cultural script, showing how they internalize caregiving not just as a role but as a moral obligation. Even while working full-time, many women emphasized their responsibility to manage household chores and emotionally support their children, echoing Hays' (1996) concept of the "intensive mothering" ideology.

The pressure to excel both at work and in the home contributes to what Van der Lippe & Lippényi (2020) identify as the intensification of work-family conflict, especially for women who are caught between the expectations of the "ideal worker" and the "ideal mother." As Cerrato & Cifre (2018) argue, this conflict is exacerbated by persistent gender inequality in household labor, which continues even as women's participation in paid work increases. Participants in this study reported feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with their children and described coping strategies such as compensatory caregiving on weekends—similar to those reported by Aarntzen et al. (2019), who found that mothers experiencing work-family guilt often try to "make up" for perceived absences.

While breadwinning is often framed in feminist literature as a potential avenue for empowerment, the participants in this study largely viewed it as an extension of their familial obligations rather than as a challenge to traditional gender roles. As Buzzanell & Turner (2003) and Elmhirst (2007) suggest, breadwinning may sustain rather than disrupt dominant gender ideologies, particularly when women see their economic role as part of their duty to support the family. In this sense, their labor reflects a gendered moral economy that places family needs above personal autonomy or empowerment.

Yet, the act of becoming the family's primary economic provider does shift power dynamics within the household. As Pan & Yang (2014) note, role mobility is a common strategy for immigrant women in Taiwan who navigate both traditional gender norms and economic constraints. In this study, several women reported gaining more decision-making authority as a result of their breadwinning role, particularly in cases where the husband was unable to contribute economically. However, as Risman (2004) and Connell (2012) caution, such shifts in agency must be viewed in context—women's gains in one domain (economic power) may still coexist with structural limitations in others (legal status, social expectations, family dynamics).

The findings also reinforce Bourdieu's (1991) argument that language functions as symbolic power, shaping inclusion and exclusion in institutional spaces. Although most participants achieved oral fluency in Mandarin, their limited literacy in written Chinese significantly affected their ability to participate in their children's education and public life. As Tang & Wang (2011) point out, language barriers intersect with gendered responsibilities, reinforcing women's dependency and marginalization. In this study, women often relied on their

husbands or children to interpret written information, which limited their autonomy and contributed to a sense of exclusion from public and parental roles.

In sum, the study underscores the complexity of "doing gender" in transnational contexts. Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan do not passively conform to traditional roles; rather, they actively perform, negotiate, and at times resist these roles within the constraints of culture, family, and policy. Their experiences reveal that caregiving and breadwinning are not mutually exclusive but interwoven practices through which gender, power, and identity are continually reconfigured. Whether by redefining caregiving through financial provision or by relying on oral communication to stay involved in school matters, these women adapt and resist in subtle but meaningful ways. Their practices are not overt acts of resistance but everyday negotiations that challenge simplistic notions of either submission or liberation.

Conclusion

The women's practices of endurance and self-sacrifice in the context of their roles as breadwinners highlight the complex dynamics of gender and caregiving. In this case, the women's decisions to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their families reflect the deeply ingrained gender norms within the Vietnamese kinship system, as well as the familistic care regime where children are expected to provide for aging parents. Their acts of endurance and self-sacrifice not only reflect the inferior status women hold within this system but also illuminate the ideological contradictions that arise when they become the primary earners in transnational families. Their increased economic power clashes with societal expectations of womanhood, where their ability to fulfill the ideal of the "perfect" woman—nurturing, self-sacrificing, and present—is compromised by the demands of breadwinning.

The study also sheds light on how the Confucian value of "filial piety" plays a significant role in the lives of Vietnamese migrant women. Filial piety—rooted in the duty to respect, care for, and provide for one's parents—remains a powerful cultural force that governs familial obligations. This sense of duty, linked to feelings of debt and gratitude towards parents, shapes women's roles as caregivers, even as they take on the economic burden of supporting their families. While their work in Taiwan allows them to financially support their families, it also emphasizes their inability to fulfill the ideal of the "good mother" who is physically present and nurtures her children. As Hays (1996) argues, good mothers are expected to devote most of their time and resources to their children's healthy development. This ideal becomes a source of tension for migrant women who, while fulfilling the role of breadwinner, feel they are falling short in their roles as mothers.

The pressure to live up to the societal ideal of being a "perfect" mother adds emotional strain to the already demanding dual roles these women play. As studies have shown, mothers who face this pressure tend to struggle with balancing their responsibilities, and some use compensatory actions, such as leisure time, to cope (Aarntzen et al., 2019). Breadwinning mothers, in particular, express feelings of guilt for not having enough time to spend with their children, and this guilt often motivates them to seek ways to make up for lost time. However,

some women in the study also used their role as breadwinners to reduce the pressure of being a "good" mother, viewing their financial contributions as an important, albeit different, way of fulfilling their maternal duties.

In addition to the challenges of caregiving and economic provision, this study also reveals how language and literacy shape women's experiences of belonging and autonomy. While most participants speak Mandarin fluently, many cannot read Chinese characters—an often overlooked barrier that affects their ability to navigate institutions, especially in relation to their children's education. Women like Ho delegate parent-teacher meetings to their husbands not because of a lack of interest, but because of the fear of misunderstanding or being excluded in written-dominant environments. This dynamic illustrates how structural constraints—such as the presumption of literacy—continue to marginalize migrant women and reduce their visibility in public and institutional spaces. At the same time, women adopt creative strategies to maintain their roles as caregivers and moral guides, including relying on verbal communication, support networks, or economic contributions in place of direct involvement. Language, therefore, becomes both a site of exclusion and of negotiation—where women assert their care and agency even within constrained conditions.

Women in transnational marriages, therefore, continue to negotiate power and authority within their families, balancing their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. While they increasingly assert their agency through breadwinning, they remain constrained by deeply embedded social norms and expectations that limit their ability to fully reclaim their voice within the family. These norms act as significant barriers to achieving greater power and autonomy in their relationships, as they are constantly negotiating between their personal needs, familial responsibilities, and cultural expectations.

The dual roles of breadwinner and caregiver in transnational marriages are undoubtedly complex and multifaceted. These women are not only responsible for the economic well-being of their families but also for maintaining the caregiving roles expected of them by both Vietnamese cultural norms and familial expectations. Their experiences offer valuable insights into the intersection of gender, power, and identity in contemporary society, especially within the context of migration. While these women's roles as breadwinners provide opportunities for personal growth, resilience, and empowerment, they also highlight the persistence of gendered expectations that continue to shape their lives. Addressing the unique challenges faced by these women—through policies and support systems that promote gender equality and recognize the complexities of their roles—can help improve their well-being and further empower them in transnational contexts.

Future research could explore how the experiences of Vietnamese migrant women evolve over time, particularly as they transition through different life stages (e.g., becoming grandmothers, returning migrants, or aging in host societies). Longitudinal studies could shed light on how sustained breadwinning roles reshape family dynamics, gender expectations, and personal identity in the long run. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how

children of transnational families perceive and respond to their mothers' caregiving and economic contributions, and how these intergenerational dynamics impact notions of motherhood, success, and filial piety. Comparative studies between different host countries (e.g., Taiwan vs. South Korea or Japan) could also reveal how local institutional and cultural contexts mediate these experiences.

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