The homeland and the high seas: cross-border connections between Vietnamese migrant fish workers’ home villages and industrial fisheries

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Abstract
Heeding the call to examine industrial fisheries with a migratory lens, this article explores how homeland processes in Vietnam—linked to the 2016 chemical spill—affect migrant fish workers’ work on the high seas. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Vietnam and Taiwan, my paper relays two findings. First, the disaster’s negative consequences undermined many men and women’s ability to adequately contribute to household subsistence. Second, the inability to sustain livelihoods in Vietnam compelled migrant fish workers to exchange longer, and potentially more hazardous, workdays for additional wages and wage advances. These findings illustrate the benefits of studying industrial fisheries with a transnational prospective and can be applied to other contexts, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords International migration · Industrial fisheries · Labor relation · Unfree labor · Vietnam · Taiwan

Introduction
Migrant fish workers and their plight in industrial fisheries burst onto the global stage in 2014 when The Guardian newspaper published a series of investigative pieces on migrant fish workers toiling in Thailand’s industrial fisheries.3 Framing their work as forced labor—work that is performed involuntarily and under the threat of penalty—The Guardian’s critically acclaimed reports led to intense coverage from other news outlets and non-governmental organizations.2 Other cases of labor abuse in industrial fisheries were soon exposed across the Global North and South. These initial portrayals of industrial fisheries’ labor relations as overlapping forms of forced labor, modern-day slavery, and human trafficking productively drew mainstream attention to these migrant fish workers’ plight and catalyzed civil societies to demand policy changes. Nevertheless, social scientists have become increasingly critical of such framings.

As Vandergeest and Marschke (2020, p. 292) suggest, these portrayals potentially oversimplify the multidimensionality of forced labor (see LeBaron, 2015). Specifically, they inadequately account for how prior conditions in home countries compel migrants to sell their work in the first place and how there might be little recourse about where and to whom these persons sell their labor. Instead of endorsing these frames, some scholars (Decker Sparks et al., 2021; Garcia Lozano et al., 2022) have called for a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple dimensions of free and unfree labor relations in the context of industrial fisheries, with specific attention to how prior and existing compulsory conditions shape fish laborers’ work on the high seas. Since the industrial fisheries’ workforce overwhelmingly depends on migrant labor, scholars propose connecting scholarship on industrial fisheries with international migration theories to refine existing conceptual frameworks centered on forced labor and to improve policies and practices.

1 Akin to The International Organization for Migration’s definition, a migrant is defined as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border and is away from their habitual place of residence. Although offshore migrant fishing persons are considered migrants in this paper, I acknowledge the uniqueness of fishing work, specifically with how the occupation intersects with state sovereignty.
2 https://www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/, https://www.theoutlawocean.com/, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/fault-lines/2016/3/9/seafood-slaves, https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/02/01/582214032/was-your-seafood-caught-with-slave-labor-new-database-helps-retailers-combat-abu

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associated with industrial fisheries (Derks, 2010; Marschke & Vandergeest, 2016, p. 42).

To this end, this article focuses on the cross-border connections between the “homeland” of Vietnamese migrant fish workers and their workplace, the “high seas.” Studying these connections has been part of the transnational turn that international migration scholarship has taken in recent decades (Basch et al., 2005). Instead of only studying assimilation processes or what happens after migrants arrive to the hostland (see Alba & Nee, 2003), scholars have expanded the scope of inquiry and begun examining homeland processes, as well as the transnational ties that entangle societies (Andrews, 2018; Shams, 2020; Waldinger, 2015a). The need to bridge the literature on fishing work and international migration is even more urgent because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has intensified the vulnerabilities these migrant laborers face (Havice et al., 2020; Marschke et al., 2021; Vandergeest et al., 2021).

This article helps answer the call for “understanding fishing work through the lens of migration” (Marschke & Vandergeest, 2016, p. 42) by studying the cross-border connections between Vietnamese migrant fish workers’ homeland and industrial fisheries amidst a 2016 chemical spill, what some call the worst environmental disaster in Vietnam’s modern history (Cantera, 2017). In April 2016, toxic chemicals spilled from a faulty discharge pipe belonging to Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation, a subsidiary of the Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa Plastics Group. Hundreds of tons of fish and other kinds of seafood died due to the contamination. Beyond its sizable political impacts (see Trang, 2017, Ives, 2016), the spillage of toxic chemicals upset the local economies, including that of Lang, that heavily depended on the sea (Paddock, 2018). Many maritime villages near the spill experienced precarity because, on average, people stopped all fishing-related activities for over 9 months (Van Truong et al., 2021).

I draw on 7 months of ethnographic data from Lang, a Vietnamese maritime village that has a tradition of sending migrants to work on East Asian fishing vessels, and 22 interviews with Vietnamese fish workers in Taiwan (all names of specific places and people are pseudonyms), to illustrate how homeland processes affect migrant fish workers’ labor and labor conditions on the high seas. First, I find that changes brought on by the chemical spill undermined many of the local men and women’s abilities to adequately contribute to household subsistence. Second, I show how these homeland changes put even more stress on migrant fish workers to be their family’s primary wage earner. The inability to earn livelihoods in Vietnam ultimately compelled migrant fish workers to exchange longer, potentially more hazardous workdays for additional wages and wage advances.

In what follows, I start by describing the recent developments in the literature on industrial fisheries’ migrant labor relations. I then outline the importance of importing migration theories to the study of industrial fisheries before describing my methodology and case study. To follow, I show how homeland processes are inextricably linked to the plight of Vietnamese migrant fish workers on the high seas. These findings contribute to scholarship on industrial fisheries and international migration and can be applied to other contexts, especially considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial framings of industrial fisheries’ migrant workforce

The Guardian’s investigative pieces attracted the attention of other prominent news outlets and non-governmental organizations (Vandergeest & Marschke, 2020). Initially, the framing of industrial fisheries’ labor relations as forms of unfree labor (including human trafficking and modern-day slavery (Chuang, 2014)) became an innovative strategy to propel various private actors and states to improve these fish workers’ labor conditions (Marschke & Vandergeest, 2016; Vandergeest & Marschke, 2020). For the former, non-governmental organizations like FishWise worked with seafood corporations to develop strategies for identifying the risks of unfree labor in their supply chain.4 For the latter, the framing urged governments to grapple with the poor work conditions endemic to industrial fisheries. For example, the Thai government ratified ILO C-188 in 2019 to improve working conditions on industrial fishing vessels.5 The Control Yuan, Taiwan’s official government ombudsman body, has recently issued several orders to deal with systemic work abuse against Southeast Asian fish workers laboring on Taiwanese fishing vessels.6

Although initially helpful, Vandergeest and Marschke (2020, p. 310) argue that such framings are limited for conceptual and practical reasons (see Garcia Lozano et al., 2022). These framings, centered on simplified dichotomies such as freedom/slavery and good/evil, overlook the multiple

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4 https://fishwise.org/myths-of-modern-day-slavery-in-the-seafood-industry/.
5 https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_666581/lang--en/index.htm.
6 https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/taiwan-ordered-to-address-forced-labor-on-its-fishing-vessels/.

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I use transnational and cross-border interchangeably in this paper. However, I acknowledge there is much contention in the usage of the term transnational among migration scholars (see Levitt, 2015; Waldinger, 2015b).
dimensions of free and unfree labor relations including (1) the compulsion to sell labor in the first place, (2) the sphere of circulation and accompanying coercive relations, and (3) unfreedoms in the labor process, i.e., the ability to collectively organize and negotiate work conditions. Consequently, these framings flatten the multidimensionality of industrial fisheries’ labor relations in ways that are unproductive for scholars trying to connect a specific case study of forced labor with broader social forces. The framings might also advocate for inappropriate actions such as rescue and repatriation, even though workers often desire better working conditions over returning to their homeland where they could not earn decent wages.

A migratory lens to studying industrial fisheries’ labor relations

Scholars have recently begun analyzing industrial fisheries with a migratory lens. Some researchers have considered how states and intergovernmental organizations play crucial roles in creating and regulating the working conditions of migrants on the high seas (Belton et al., 2019; Vanderveest, 2018). Others show how the migration industry, specifically migrant brokers—generally defined as private actors who seek economic gains from assisting in external mobility facilitation (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013)—play an influential role in the migratory journey of Vietnamese fish workers across the Global South (Le, 2021a). Le (2021a) explores how Vietnam’s migration system has become broker-centric, to a point where aspiring migrant fish workers and foreign employers must rely on migrant brokers to connect with each other. Beyond Vietnam, Derks (2010) shows how brokers help Cambodian persons cross borders and find work in the Thai fishing industry.

The importance of homeland processes to understanding labor migration was presciently pointed out by Burawoy (1976) nearly five decades ago. Although differentiated and physically separated, the processes of renewal and maintenance in a migrant labor system are “indissolubly interdependent” (Burawoy, 1976, p. 1052): renewal processes are dependent on economic remittances by migrant workers. Conversely, migrants require continued support from their families engaged in renewal at home because they cannot legally settle in the hostland.

Contemporary migration scholarship further illustrates the importance of homeland processes on migrant lives (Green & Estes, 2022). For example, Le (2021b) shows how the homeland’s lack of viable economic opportunities and a culture of migration helped lead Vietnamese migrant fish workers to commit desertion from Taiwanese offshore fishing vessels and abscend onto the shores of Trinidad and Tobago. In the context of Latin America, much research shows how migrants use their newfound economic power to develop the hometowns they left behind and how, in turn, these developed hometowns create infrastructure to help (or hinder) the lives of migrants abroad (Duquette-Rury, 2019; FitzGerald, 2008; Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2005). Due to the impacts of climate change, contemporary researchers also explore how environmental distresses in hometowns can influence migratory trajectories and experiences (Bylander, 2015; Hunter et al., 2013; Massey et al., 2010). Beyond the linkages between productive and reproductive spheres, scholars (Bosniak, 2008; Zolberg, 1997) have noted that sojourners are inherently disenfranchised by their migrancy, which both strips them of their citizenship rights and renders them less visible and accessible for state protection.

In this paper, I continue bridging the gap between scholarship on fishing work and international migration by exploring the transnational connections between migrant fish workers’ homeland and the high seas, their workplace. A cross-border perspective allows scholars to further investigate the multiple dimensions of free and unfree labor relations, specifically how homeland processes compel migrant fish workers to sell their labor in the first place and inform fish workers’ orientation toward their work and workplace. My transnational approach illustrates how homeland processes connected to a 2016 environmental disaster in Vietnam compelled migrant fish workers to exchange longer, and potentially more dangerous, workdays for additional wages and wage advances.

Research design and methodology

This paper draws on 102 interviews with aspiring or returned migrants and 7 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Lang, a village in the province of Ha Tinh that was severely disturbed by a chemical spill. Although I entered the field site interested in out-migration processes, it quickly became clear that migration was deeply intertwined with the disaster and its impacts. Subsequently, I embraced a less structured approach by taking notes and asking questions when interviewees discussed the disaster.

I have longstanding relationships with several villages in Ha Tinh province: I visited a nearby rural village in 2008 for a related project; I spent two weeks visiting people’s homes to discuss migratory options; and in 2012, I conducted research on how Vietnamese migrant fish workers deserted their Taiwanese fishing vessels and earned a livelihood in Trinidad and Tobago (Le, 2021b). Keeping in regular contact with these migrants over the years, one of the participants invited me to live with his family in Lang. I believe my longstanding relationship with community members granted me a level of access that would have been impossible otherwise due to the environmental disaster’s politically
sensitive nature. I was thus able to snowball sample many of the migrants from Lang and neighboring villages for interviews as villagers became aware of my presence (or return).

My analysis also draws on 22 interviews conducted with Vietnamese migrant fish workers in the Taiwanese port of Su’Ao during the summer of 2016. Many of these migrants’ home villages were affected by the chemical spill, so I approached Vietnamese migrants at the port and explained my study before asking if they wanted to be interviewed. Being fluent in Vietnamese, I conducted all the interviews myself, while the transcriptions were completed by either myself or a team of Vietnamese research assistants. The interviews lasted anywhere from 35 min to 2.5 h.

The timing of the data collection helps contextualize the connection between the homeland and the high seas. I completed my first stint in Taiwan just 4 months after the 2016 chemical spill. These interviews were completed before the Vietnamese government’s compensation plans were outlined. My second stint in Vietnam occurred a year and a half following the spill; though the plans had been formed, they were still being implemented. It is possible that immediately after the disaster, migrants were more willing to continue enduring poor working conditions in order to send remittances home, whereas if I had spoken with them later, they might have been more reluctant to accept such circumstances.

Case study: Lang, Vietnam

Vietnam has experienced exponential economic growth over the past 30 years (Hoang, 2018). The Vietnamese state decided to transition to a socialist-oriented market economy in 1986 (Turley & Selden, 1993) and join the World Trade Organization in 2006, as the penetration of international economic forces has stimulated much state-led development in Vietnam (Davies, 2015). Nonetheless, the development has been geographically uneven, with core provinces receiving much Vietnamese state attention and peripheral ones being largely ignored. Peripheral provinces in the North Central Coast region, where Lang is located, have been historically underdeveloped.

Being located near an estuary, Lang villagers have relied on the local shores and waters to earn their livelihoods. Men traditionally contribute to household subsistence through kinship-based fishing of local waters. Women and children also play crucial roles in household subsistence by farming salt (capturing salt water in shallow ponds where the sun evaporates moisture) and gleaning (collecting marine organisms from the littoral zone). Salt farming and gleaning are especially important to household subsistence in the months that the men do not fish. With higher yields and subsequent incomes relative to agrarian communities, families can invest in more sophisticated fishing technologies and diversify household occupations. For instance, families have invested in aquafarming to raise various types of fish and shrimp. Subsequently, although historically underdeveloped, Lang’s maritime-based economy has rapidly grown in recent years. As a local describes, “Back then my mother used to walk to the market, ten years ago I rode my bike, and now my children ride around on motorbikes.”

Lang’s outmigration

Vietnam’s migration system transitioned to a labor export system based on commercial activities by individual enterprises after 1986 (The Communist Party of Vietnam 1986, p. 9). Labor exportation appeared on the political agenda and was aimed at three outcomes: economic development of local economies through migrant remittances, balancing the national labor division by way of work abroad opportunities for unemployed workers, and sustaining Vietnam’s relations with the communist bloc by designating Vietnamese laborers to work in various countries (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, p. 11). By the mid-90s, export labor programs became a crucial aspect of Vietnam’s development aspirations. In 2015, there were about 500,000 Vietnamese workers living abroad, with 104,317 laborers set to work overseas in the first 9 months of 2019. These labor migrants have contributed to 17 billion USD in remittances, leading Vietnam to become one of the top remittance-receiving countries in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.7

Contributing to Vietnam’s robust migration system, Lang has been sending male migrants to work on East Asian fishing vessels for almost three decades. Lang’s strong tradition of maritime fishing made it a recruitment hotspot for Taiwanese companies desperate for competent, yet cheap migrant fish workers starting in the early 1990s. Taiwanese captains described Ha Tinh seafarers as “healthy and strong,” “understanding of sea life,” and “cheap.”8 Over time, Japanese and South Korean employers began recruiting in the region too. The established migratory pattern of Vietnamese men had kickstarted development in Lang and nearby coastal towns by the time I started my fieldwork in 2018. I saw the development firsthand as large numbers of two-story homes were built with remittances.

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7 Data is from The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development at https://www.knomad.org/data/remittances?tid=5B264%5D=264. The published values are not limited to migrant laborers but inclusive of remittances from relatives living abroad.

8 These direct quotes are from 2016 interview data from a related project with Taiwanese boat captains that employ migrant Vietnamese fish workers.
Maritime disaster and its impacts on Lang

In April 2016, toxic chemicals spilled from a faulty discharge pipe belonging to Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation (see Van Truong et al., 2021). The ensuing effects were immediately apparent, as masses of fish and other seafood were found dead hours after the spill was reported (Cantera, 2017; Ives, 2016; Paddock, 2016, 2018). Beyond its political effects (see Trang, 2017, Ives, 2016), the spillage of toxic chemicals upset the local economies, including that of Lang, that heavily depended on the sea and nearshore (Paddock, 2018; Van Truong et al., 2021). From the supply side, the spill instantly killed thousands of potentially harvestable fish and contaminated millions of different types of sea organisms including fishes, mollusks, seaweeds, and crustaceans (Hanoi Bureau, 2017). From the demand side, the desire for local seafood dropped to zero after the contamination. People from neighboring communities were unwilling to buy potentially contaminated foods. Unemployment soared after the spill, with many households not being able to rely on the local waters for subsistence for 9 months (Van Truong et al., 2021). After admitting fault, Formosa pledged 500 million US dollars to affected individuals in September 2016. The Vietnamese state outlined seven affected categories of primary and secondary wage earners with compensation based on an assumed loss of income over 6 months.9

Unemployed and waiting for disaster compensation

Although the Vietnamese state outlined its compensation plan in 2016, there was much confusion about the fine details. For instance, Vietnamese state officials announced that primary wage earners should be present to collect the funds but did not specify when the compensation would come. Consequently, men who worked the seas for months at a time, stayed home to wait for news concerning pending compensation. This was the case for Hoang, a 31-year-old lifelong fish worker who decided to stay unemployed for an indefinite amount of time after the spill. Unsure if he would receive a phone call at sea, Hoang opted to stay home to wait for more information. When I met Hoang, he had not received payment and was unsure when the money would come. “One day they say it’ll come soon. Another day, they say I need to fill out more paperwork and wait… No one knows.” Not wanting to risk his compensation, Hoang became resigned, “What choice do I have? My family needs the money and if I leave to fish no one can call me.” For Hoang, the unemployment led to the inability to earn any income. “I’m living day-to-day now. I’m glad you paid for my coffee because I couldn’t have paid for yours.”

Confusion about the compensation process also forced Tuong to stay home. A 24-year-old man who lived with his parents near the local church, Tuong was worried his compensation would not be processed if he was at sea. “It has been over a year. I heard that Long villagers [a nearby village] were compensated before everyone filled out the paperwork. But someone told me I needed to fill out paperwork before we get compensated… then someone else told me I needed to be present to accept the money [that my parents could not accept the money on my behalf].” This led Tuong to be unemployed in Lang. “I know that I get compensated if I am here… If I am at sea, I might not get my money.” Hearing disparate information, at this point, Tuong was only sure that compensation would be received if he was present to accept it. Due to contradicting compensation instructions, Tuong could not contribute to his family’s subsistence and had to ask his parents for money during his extended time at home.

Changes to fishing practices

In addition to waiting for disaster relief, many men changed their fishing practices to catch seafood. Before the spill, 38-year-old Van did well for himself with a boat that he and his brother-in-law captained. Van and his crew would bring back thousands of US dollars every year because of their expertise in seafaring and harvesting fish. With enough money, Van bought an automobile and built a large two-storied house along the edge of the village, near the ocean. However, after the disaster, Van had to take extended trips. The transition was a struggle for him. “Of course [it is more difficult now]. I had to research [how and where to go further]. It [Going further] takes a different wisdom and skill.” After much deliberation, Van and his crew traveled south to Khanh Hoa province to harvest fish. The initial voyages were unsuccessful, and Van lost a great deal of money because he did not have the expertise required to make longer voyages. “I didn’t know! Came home with empty hands.” The acquisition of “different wisdom and skills” required a steep learning curve that Van and others had to endure. As a result, seafarers lost money due to their lack of experience in making longer voyages at sea.

Thanh, a 45-year-old man with five children, migrated further away from his family after the disaster. He had toiled 9 The details for the financial compensation of the environmental disaster were outlined for the provinces of Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien-Hue. The Vietnamese state outlined seven affected categories of primary and secondary wage earners: (1) seafood harvesting; (2) aquatic farming; (3) salt production; (4) coastal seafood business activities; (5) fishing logistics; (6) coastal tourism services; and (7) seafood stockpiling and purchase.
for decades as a crewmember before saving up enough money to buy and captain his own boat. Thanh mainly profited from sailing to a series of small islands in north Vietnam, near Ha Long Bay, to fish the fertile waters once a year. Those 4 months away from home were difficult, but Thanh was thankful to earn almost a year’s income in 4 months and avoid borrowing money from his relatives. The disaster changed everything for Thanh. “I was angry [when I first heard the news]. But I couldn’t be depressed. My family counts on me. I couldn’t let it affect me.” Instead of 4 months away from home, Thanh decided to bypass the local waters and spent almost 7 months in the waters of north Vietnam. Thanh noted the economic challenges of harvesting seafood for longer periods of time: “I have plans and strategies for a four-month harvest. Now, I must double that time at sea… What if my fishing equipment breaks? What ports are open to me? Who will buy my fish?” Although he harvested more seafood, Thanh found that the implementation of new plans and strategies decreased his profits. “I made a lot of mistakes… I’m not as nimble as other fishermen.” Consequently, at the end of the fishing season, Thanh lost money from boat maintenance and equipment repairs. As with the men who stayed home to wait for compensation, the longer voyages led to lost income and the inability to contribute to household subsistence.

A different dilemma for local women

The women I interviewed were left with a different dilemma after the spill: on the one hand, their importance in household subsistence required them to continue earning an income; on the other hand, they could not migrate as they were bound to their household duties. During a visit to the home of Linh, a 35-year-old mother of four, she lamented about her inability to glean the local rivers and estuaries for shellfish. “It has been two years. I haven’t caught and sold any oysters!” She fidgeted with her shellfish harvesting tool, reminiscent of a gardening rake, as we talked. “The spill must have changed your life a lot,” I commented. Linh could glean shellfish when she was not tending to her domestic chores. However, zero demand for local seafood meant that Linh could no longer contribute to household subsistence through gleaning.

Before the disaster, Linh could glean shellfish when she was not tending to her domestic chores. However, zero demand for local seafood meant that Linh could no longer contribute to household subsistence through gleaning.

The spill also disrupted Lang women’s salt farming. Women typically farmed salt in the early mornings and would have just enough time to return home to complete their household chores. “I always had time to return home to cook dinner,” commented Bac Huong, who farmed salt before the chemical spill. During the spring and summer, between March and July, she worked for 7 h before returning home to fulfill household duties. To farm salt, Bac Huong would collect salt water from the nearby estuary and evenly place it on the nearby cement planes. She would then wait for the saltwater to evaporate and crystallize into salt. In 2015, Bac Huong could sell a kilogram of salt for upwards of 4000 Vietnamese dongs (17 cents). Though the wages were low, Bac Huong was proud that she could competently complete her domestic chores while using the money she earned farming salt to pay for her children’s school supplies.

After the disaster, market brokers who previously distributed their salt across the region began refusing to buy from the salt farmers. Mai, a 38-year-old woman, stated, “When they [salt brokers] did not come to us, we brought our salt to them. But they chased us out. They told us not to bring the salt there because it will contaminate the clean salt.” The price for 1 kg of salt dropped from 4000 to 1000 dongs (from 17 to 4 cents). The low price made salt farming unprofitable. Lang, an older woman who had farmed salt since she was 9 years old, gave up on salt farming altogether after the price dropped. “For 1,000 [4 cents], I cannot work. I would rather figure out a different way to earn money… City beggars make more than 1,000 dongs.” Another former salt farmer stated, “It might make sense for me to pay them to take my [contaminated] salt.” After the spill, without the ability to migrate like their husbands, women sought to become wage laborers to contribute to their household subsistence.

Lang women becoming wage laborers

To describe how the spill catalyzed Lang women’s introduction to the wage labor domain, I tell the story of two women who left home to become wage laborers for the first time. I met Vy, a 24-year-old woman, as she transitioned from being an oyster gleaner to a construction worker in the early spring of 2018. After getting married 2 years after graduating 12th grade, Vy was tasked with managing her in-laws’ home, but still gleaned with her mom and sisters during the warm months. With her husband working abroad, Vy’s goal was to earn enough money from gleaning to pay for the daily market trips. However, the chemical spill left Vy’s plan in shambles. Vy and her husband were already in debt from...
purchasing materials to build their house, and she could not allocate her husband’s wages to pay for groceries and child rearing expenses. Vy decided to enter the workforce to offset the mounting costs. She was hired as a construction worker, where she earned 200,000 dong (8.62 USD) per day. According to Vy, the work was “not complicated,” but the pay was low, and she could not adequately contribute to her household subsistence. “I would work 12 h a day but still not have enough money to pay my debts. I had to ask relatives to help repay my debts.” Though she worked full days, the low construction work wages required Vy to borrow from relatives.

Quynh also became a wage laborer after the spill. She had gleaned shellfish for most of her life, only pausing briefly during the last trimester of her pregnancies. However, Quynh felt much shame in being unable to pay for her children’s school supplies and further burdening her husband, a migrant fish worker. “I told him [husband] don’t worry, I will figure something out. Don’t work overtime and get into an accident… You need to focus to work.” Quynh soon turned her harvesting rake in for a hammer. She began helping build two-story homes for families receiving remittances in the district center. Quynh soon discovered that her wages were not enough. “If there were two of me working [it might be enough]. But I only make a small fraction [compared to gleaning].” As this section illustrates, the chemical spill catalyzed women to enter the wage labor domain, yet the low pay could not fully sustain their households in the disaster’s wake.

Migrants’ shifting attitudes toward work conditions

In response to various external and internal pressures, the Taiwanese state recently revamped existing labor policies to improve Vietnamese migrant fish workers’ labor conditions (Le 2021b, Yen & Liu Huang, 2021). Indeed, the participants in my study acknowledged that their work conditions had improved. Nonetheless, the chemical spill and its uncertainty also shifted the migrants’ attitude concerning their work and work conditions. The spill’s impact on their work was a masssive topic of conversation among the Vietnamese migrant fish workers I met in the summer of 2016. Sharing drinks with four men at a local port in Taiwan, we discussed the uncertainty that the spill brought before the Vietnamese state outlined its compensation program:

Interviewer: How did the contamination (at home) impact you?
Migrant 1: So much [laughs]. Can you believe it? Of course, I work abroad to send remittances home— we don’t have much money at home. But my wife and children worked at home [before the spill]… After the spill, life is even harder! No one can work… They only rely on me for income.
Migrant 2: I had the same issue. [After the spill], everyone is waiting for me to send money home… The economy is so bad that they don’t even have enough money for rice— I pray to fish every day. I hope we are busy because that means I can send [remittances] home this month.
Migrant 1: Yes, I would still work if they cut my hand off [laughs]. How could I stop? It’s simple… we don’t work, then they [families in Vietnam] don’t eat. Migrant 2: At this point, if they gave us a cash advance to work 22-hour days, most of us would sign up.
Migrant 3: The attitude [of migrants from affected regions] is different too. Before there was more grumbling about long hours, now [after the spill] there are less complaints. Everyone just accepts the work… Look at what’s happening at home.

The spill’s impact on the workplace came up organically when I conversed with Phap in Su’ Ao port in Taiwan. Having just got off the phone with family in Vietnam, Phap was noticeably flustered. “What happened?” I inquired. Phap answered, “Every time I call home, the situation gets more complicated! They keep finding more effects of the contamination, but the government isn’t saying anything.” Not knowing what to say, I suggested that perhaps Phap could return home to help his family. “That would be the last thing! I return home, and now my family has no money. I must continue working here… There are no other options after the contamination.” Danh shared similar sentiments as Phap when he and I shared a quiet conversation about Danh’s changing goal of working abroad. After I asked him why he decided to work in Taiwan, Danh paused for a minute or two before replying:

I thought I was here to save money, and eventually have enough to build a house and start a family in Vietnam. But there are no more savings now. My money is used to keep my family alive in Vietnam. No more grousing about this or that. No bricks [for building a house], it’s for rice and water…

Danh believed the chemical spill at home erased any reluctance to work. “Before I’d wake up and grouse about not sleeping well, hurting… Now I wake up and don’t even think about it. People are being poisoned and dying in Vietnam. What’s there to complain about? At least I can work here” The change of perspective was also mentioned by Tre, a young migrant who stylishly wore soccer jerseys to work. “How can I complain? The work is hard, but the water is clean, we get paid on time… The contamination...
helped me understand the importance of remitting. It’s about helping my family.”

When the fishing vessels entered the port where I interacted with migrant workers, some Taiwanese captains had their migrant fish workers stay in the port to guard the ships. I often saw Indonesian migrants lounge in the harbor, watching videos on their phones or sleeping in makeshift hammocks, exhausted from the rigors of fishing work. My initial thought was that there were not many Vietnamese in Su’Ao port. However, I discovered that the Vietnamese fish workers were less visible after the spill because many would pick up extra work cleaning ships, processing the seafood, and making local deliveries for other ship owners to earn additional wages. One migrant commented, “How can I sit and do nothing after such news? We all must do more work after the contamination.” Another said, “A little more work every day, and we can help our families struggling in Vietnam.”

Near the Taiwanese port, there were small gambling rooms with slot machines for migrant fish workers to use at their leisure. The slot machines were major stress relievers but could be addictive. Nam confided how he was losing upwards of 50 USD per week. “[Before] I could play the machines to release stress. It is fun, the place is airconditioned, and you don’t have to talk to anyone… sit down and push a button.” However, Nam discussed how he stopped gambling after hearing that his family in Vietnam could not work after the disaster. “After the contamination, I went to ask for extra work to send more money home… My family was surprised I was sending so much money [laughs].” Instead of leisure activities, Nam was compelled to seek out potential employers for extra work to send more remittances to his family after the disaster.

As these conversations show, the environmental disaster altered the migrant fish workers’ attitude towards their work and workplace. No longer was the remittance goal saving for the future, for their eventual return to Vietnam, but for the present, to be their family’s primary wage earners in the disaster’s wake. Instead of hoping for days off and grumbling about the work and work conditions, the migrants I interviewed begrudgingly accepted brutal work conditions and would even exchange longer and potentially more hazardous workdays for wage advances and additional wages.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I provide a more textured understanding of the characteristics and causes of industrial fisheries’ poor work conditions. Answering the call to investigate industrial fisheries with a migratory lens, I apply a cross-border perspective to understand the connections between Vietnamese migrant fish workers’ homeland and their workplace, the high seas, amidst the 2016 chemical spill. This paper explicates two main findings based on 7 months of ethnographic fieldwork from Lang, Vietnam, and 22 interviews with Vietnamese migrant fish workers in Taiwan. First, after the disaster, many Lang men could not adequately contribute to household subsistence while waiting at home for disaster compensation and after making changes to their fishing practices. Similarly, Lang women could not make ends meet even though they gave up salt farming and cleaning to enter the local wage labor economy. Second, once disaster struck the homeland and the livelihoods of both local men and women were threatened and undermined, migrants who were then abroad bore the responsibility of being their family’s primary wage earner. This increased stress changed the migrants’ orientation towards their work on the high seas, with some exchanging longer and potentially more dangerous workdays for additional wages and wage advances.

Although the initial framings of industrial fishing work as forms of forced labor were productive in drawing mainstream attention and propelling policy changes, it has become increasingly clear that such framings have theoretical and practical limitations (Decker Sparks et al., 2021; Garcia Lozano et al., 2022; Vandergeest & Marschke, 2020). Instead of relying solely on these framings and studying migrant fish workers after they are employed on the high seas, I suggest scholars should study the transnational processes that intertwine different places. A cross-border perspective expands the scope of inquiry by studying homeland processes and the transnational connections that entangle societies (Basch et al., 2005; Waldinger, 2015a). More specifically, this approach shows how homeland processes are inextricably tied to why migrant fish workers initially agree to toil on the high seas and how these migrants continually reorient themselves to their work and workplace. Consequently, the discussion concerning forced labor in industrial fisheries would be improved if scholars bore in mind the plight of migrants’ families in the homeland and the work of migrant fish workers on the high seas are “indissolubly interdependent” (Burawoy, 1976, p. 1052). Only after we adopt a transnational approach can scholars properly explore how the industrial fisheries’ migrant labor relations are linked to social forces beyond the high seas and discern the actions necessary to ameliorate poor working conditions.

This paper also contributes to the study of international migration. Much has been written about how migrant remittances help transform the hometowns they leave behind and how, in turn, these developed hometowns shape migrant lives abroad (see Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2005; Waldinger, 2015a). In addition, other works focus on how migrants, with their newfound economic power, transform homeland politics (Duquette-Rury, 2019; FitzGerald, 2008). Yet, little research explores how the ability to sustain livelihoods in the homeland shape migrant laborers’ work conditions and labor relations abroad. Future research must continue to investigate how work
conditions and labor relations abroad are inextricably linked to economic opportunities in the homeland.

Finally, my findings have implications for how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected industrial fisheries. Scholars of industrial fisheries have noted how the pandemic has added more layers of vulnerability to this migrant workforce (Havice et al., 2020; Vandergeest et al., 2021). A notable preliminary finding is that migrants are compelled to extend their work contracts when COVID-19 travel restrictions make replacement crews near impossible. Captains and company agents have considered the source of the coercion to renew contracts (Vandergeest et al., 2021, p. 3). Nonetheless, as my paper shows, the compulsion to toil on fishing vessels extends well beyond the high seas. This compulsion is inherently cross-border and encompasses the migrants’ home villages in Vietnam. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic could be threatening livelihoods of the migrants’ families in the homeland, which could then induce migrant fish workers on the high seas to begrudgingly accept contract extensions, exchanging longer and potentially more hazardous workdays for additional wages or wage advances.

Although this case study does not allow for generalizability, it is worth asking if these processes pertain to other contexts. For instance, have Burmese fish workers in Thailand become more willing to endure poor working conditions due to their country’s coup d’etat, political unrest, and the pandemic? How has the pandemic affected Indonesian and Filipino migrant fish workers’ willingness to accept contract extensions during the pandemic? Ultimately, the study of COVID-19’s impact on industrial fisheries would be more comprehensive if scholars and policymakers asked how homeland and cross-border processes transform the migrants’ work on the high seas.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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