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Social reproduction: the sidelined aspect in gender and agricultural research

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Introduction: This study explores women's agribusiness by employing feminist theories to gain an understanding of the gender dimension of business beyond economic value, including non-material and non-market aspects associated with social reproduction.

Methods: We conducted fieldwork between July and October 2021 in Vietnam through in-depth interviews with 16 women entrepreneurs in towns on the border with China, who engage in livestock-trading, and in the Central Highlands, who engage in domestic and international horticultural trade.

Results: Our findings confirm that women entrepreneurs manage their business, family, and family relations together as one consolidated commitment in flexible, informal, and creative ways. Research focusing solely on economic analyses obscures not only women's hidden labor and time in the household that enable men to dominate agribusiness, but also women's resistance to male-privileged agribusiness.

Discussion: Positioning social reproduction at the center of women's economic activities enables researchers to have a full picture of how male-privileged agri-food systems are sustained, which is the first step towards disrupting existing inequalities in agri-food systems.

KEYWORDS

feminist approaches, entrepreneurship, COVID-19, agribusiness, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Gender and agriculture scholarship exploring women's economic activities often fail to recognize analytical interdependency between economic activities and social reproduction (e.g., care, food provisioning, maintaining kinship), tending to frame gender narrowly within the aspect of economic activities. The fundamental challenges women face in agriculture lie in the realm of social reproduction and its relationship with economic activities, but these remain unexplored. This leads researchers to misconceive the problems of gender in agricultural entrepreneurship as well as agri-food systems.

For example, substantial evidence from economics-focused agricultural research explains that women lack access to markets, financial capital, technologies, entrepreneurial skills and knowledge compared to male counterparts (Lourenço et al., 2014; Babu et al., 2016; Dvouletý and Orel, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020). These women-lack-of narratives attribute women's problems as technological and individual instead of political and structural. Recommendations drawing on such narratives are to provide more training and financial support to "close the gender gap" and "empower" individual women. In consequence, the underlying structural

problems that persistently disadvantage women are unaddressed, leaving individual women in disadvantageous conditions (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Hickel, 2014; Wilson, 2015; Cornwall, 2018).

Although gender is a growing topic in the field of agriculture, evidence generated by the economics-focused research methods thus paradoxically support sustaining male-privileged agricultural market systems. At the same time, it also supports monopolistic economics-focused knowledge production in research, as opposed to the feminist principal that values pluralistic knowledge production.

Devaluing social reproduction in economic research in agriculture stems partly from the dominant capitalist ideologies which ignore social reproduction in their accounts of how capitalist systems work (Peterson, 2003; Mies, 2007; Fraser, 2016; Werner et al., 2017; Cohen, 2018). Feminist scholars have made significant progress to theorize and revalue social reproduction (Katz, 2001; Power, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017). However, social reproduction is consistently side-lined in dominant economic research because of the prevailing scientific gender bias (Dunaway, 2014). Furthermore, institutional divides and disciplinary hierarchies make it difficult for researchers to discuss economic activities and social reproduction within one integrated framework (Curty, 2020).

Recent feminist political economy scholars call for focusing on understanding interdependent relationships between two spheres rather than making dual theories and analyses (Miller and Gibson-Graham, 2019; Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Prügl, 2020; Sultana, 2021). Mezzadri (2019) points out that the concept of capitalism is derived from a Western-oriented knowledge and experience of capitalism. Deploying it as a default concept excludes diverse views of social reproduction and economic activities from the majority of the world where the dichotomy hardly makes sense in their lives and livelihoods.

Our research builds on these feminist efforts to challenge the dichotomy and seeks to demonstrate how bringing the aspect of social reproduction from women's own perspectives generates different knowledge to and implications for women's economic activities in agriculture. We draw from a case of micro- and small-scale women entrepreneurs in the horticulture and livestock sectors in Vietnam through in-depth interviews with 16 women.

In Vietnam, women's economic opportunity and participation is relatively high, ranked 31st out of 146 countries in 2022 (WEF, 2022, 15). There is a long-standing social expectation for women to earn incomes to support their families. At the same time, however, women are also expected to be fully responsible for domestic work and care, and maintain a family harmony and hierarchy, following Confusion belief (Pettus, 2004; Schuler et al., 2006; Khuat, 2016). The gender policy in socialist Vietnam also tends to embrace stereotypical gender norms through advocacy and practices (Waibel and Glück, 2013). In rural areas, in particular, women earning more than their husbands by compromising their domestic responsibility create tension within the household and the community, influencing women's strategic choices in entrepreneurship, thereby making a considerable difference to men's entrepreneurship.

Women also have strong presence in officially registered micro-, small- and medium-enterprises, almost equal to men in terms of the size of business and revenue in Vietnam (IFC, 2017, 9). However, enterprises related to agriculture, forestry, and fishery are minor, accounting for 1.5% of the total registered enterprises, and dominated by men with the number of registered businesses of 298 for women and 1968 for men (IFC, 2017, 19). On the other hand, agriculture is the largest sector for female employment followed by the industry sector (CGEP, 2021, 109), but the women in this category work on family farms as unpaid labourers and engage in informal low-paid micro businesses (IFC, 2017, 13). This contrasting picture of men dominating the formal sector and women concentrated in the informal sector represents the structural problems of gender in agriculture in the global South: poor women's option for business is limited within an extension of subsistence farming through mobilizing unpaid family labourers. In many cases, their business is initiated by necessity rather than by choice (Margolis, 2014).

Against this background, three research questions are set in this study: (1) How do women entrepreneurs manage their responsibilities and emotional relations attached to social reproduction? (2) How do women's mobilization of unpaid labor (in both social reproduction and economic activities) or lack thereof influence women's agri-entrepreneurship strategies and practices? and (3) How does exploring social reproduction contribute to bringing different knowledge to economics-centric gender and agriculture scholarship, especially on our understandings of women's economic activities in agriculture?

In order to closely look at social reproduction and its relations with agri-entrepreneurship, we draw on the literature on gender and entrepreneurship, especially post-structural perspectives of entrepreneurship. Like current gender and agriculture scholarship, entrepreneurship theories historically have drawn on men's business models and economic value, and statistically significant methods were preferably employed (Ogbor, 2000; Hughes et al., 2012). Feminist scholars have challenged this over the past few decades, developing alternative approaches to understanding women's entrepreneurship, which has been deeply embedded in their gender identity and context-specific, gendered business norms (Bruni et al., 2004; Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009).

However, both feminist theories and empirical studies on entrepreneurship have been limited to middle-class women's experiences in the global north. In the global south, economic systems have been found to be closely associated with kin systems offering material and symbolic resources (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Harriss-White, 2010; Das and Mishra, 2021). Entrepreneurship embedded in kin systems in the global south also involves patriarchal power relations within the household in which social expectations as a mother and wife pose a difficult dilemma for women entrepreneurs (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Xheneti et al., 2019; Afshan et al., 2021).

Our study seeks to provide more nuanced understandings of social reproduction and its relationships with agri-entrepreneurship by building on fore-mentioned methodological and conceptual discussions: First, social reproduction is almost absent in frequently employed economics-centric research methods in entrepreneurship; second, although feminist approaches consider the aspect of social reproduction, they often draw on middle-class women's experience in the global North; and third, studies focusing on social reproduction are side-lined as a result of disciplinary barriers and hierarchy, and not adequately taken into account of gender and agricultural policies and interventions.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the section of research concepts, we begin with defining social reproduction and its relationship with economic activities drawing on the literature on feminist political economy. It is then linked to the concepts of gender and entrepreneurship to frame women's economic activities within the

discussions of entrepreneurship studies. The method section describes research methods used in this study, which was affected in the pandemic by the restrictions on travel. The results section illustrates key findings. The last section offers theoretical and methodological reflections for gender and agriculture scholarship and suggests approaches to moving from the women-lack-of narratives towards ensuring equitable treatment of women in current male-privileged food systems. It concludes with further research steps required to disrupt male-privileged food systems for transformation.

2. Concepts: gendered entrepreneurs in the global south

2.1. Interplay between economic production and social reproduction

We begin with explaining social reproduction and its relationship with economic activities. Although there are various definitions and interpretations of social reproduction in the literature, in this article, we narrowly define social reproduction drawing on Laslett and Brenner (1989):

> The activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organization of sexuality. (1989: 382–383)

This concept includes not only roles and responsibilities but also emotions and relationships in activities related to everyday lives. Social reproduction tend to depend largely on women's (unpaid) labor within the household. As discussed in the introduction, the cost and value of social reproduction is, however, disregarded in the ideology of capitalism in their account of how the economic system is operated, assuming that women's unpaid labour is forever available free of cost (Peterson, 2003; Fraser, 2016; Werner et al., 2017; Cohen, 2018). The capitalist economy is thus inherently patriarchal (Mies, 2007).

This capitalist ideology of devaluing social reproduction is pervasive in the fields of gender, agriculture, and development. For example, women's greater involvement in economic activities is a priority agenda in agricultural development. On the other hand, men's limited involvement in social reproduction in the household is rarely problematized (Rai et al., 2019). Similarly, women's empowerment indicators are heavily focused on economic aspects such as the ownership of productive assets and incomes, whilst other dimensions of empowerment are not thoroughly examined (Bayissa et al., 2018). Moreover, in the literature on agricultural value-chains, market-oriented crops are promoted to women as if linking to market can uniformly lead to women's empowerment. In contrast, less attention is paid to crops for home consumption that are produced by women's (unpaid) labour (Nakazibwe and Pelupessy, 2014; Gengenbach et al., 2018). Economics-centric approaches to women's empowerment in agriculture and development thus remain silent about the issues of social reproduction and thereby supporting the capitalist ideology, instead of challenging it (Hickel, 2014; Wilson, 2015; Cornwall, 2018).

Feminist political economy scholars propose framing social reproduction and economic production within one integrated framework (Miller and Gibson-Graham, 2019; Collard and Dempsey, 2020; Prügl, 2020; Sultana, 2021). This approach is not entirely new in the gender and agricultural scholarship, but it has been side-lined from major agricultural research focusing on economic/production aspects. Classic ethnographic studies on women's informal business in sub-Saharan Africa portray how women's experience in informal business are shaped by their marriage and associated roles and positions as a wife and a mother. In her seminal work on women in Kumashi Central Market in Ghana, Clark (1994) devotes one chapter to describe the details of Asante women's family lives. The women strategically invest their time, labor, and money in maintaining their relationships with kin as much as they do in their business, through which the women traders ensure their access to (unpaid) labor support for care and domestic work, gifts, connections, credit as well as varied forms of safety nets in times of need. These women's negotiation with kin directly determines their performance in trading business. Similarly, in fisheries, the mechanism of capital accumulation is closely associated with women's reproductive capacity. For example, having many children, especially sons, has a symbolic power and determine women's business capacity. In this context, investing in social reproduction and kinship is important for women to initiate and sustain their economic activities (Overå, 1993; Kawarazuka et al., 2019).

Hoodfar's (2023) rich ethnography on Arab Muslim women in Egypt also highlights how women's roles in social reproduction determine their interpretation of what income earning means. Hoodfar points out that women's significant contribution to income earning through agriculture, livestock and other small-scale family-run business are underreported and undervalued by statistics as well as women themselves, due to their value and importance of being "housewife". Women's economic activities remain invisible if we use the same definition as what economic activities mean for men. The author highlights the importance of incorporating careful understandings of gendered cultural and religious norms in social reproduction in the analysis of economic activities.

Another aspect of interplay between social reproduction and economic production discussed in gender and agriculture scholarship is about the asymmetric relationships between husband and wife within a "joint" framework in terms of ownership, economic activities, decision-making and household resource allocation (Quisumbing, 2003; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Women access to household productive resources through marriage and based on their contribution to social reproduction and their subjective interpretations of the ownership (Whitehead, 1981; Moore, 1986; Jackson, 2007; Hanrahan, 2015). When women are involved in income earning through farming, there are tensions over resource allocation, resource ownership, and labour distribution for economic production and social reproduction between husband and wife. In the patriarchal society, it is women who compromise their labour and time for social reproduction to justify and sustain their involvement in and ownership for economic activities (Dolan, 2001; Elias and Arora-Jonsson, 2016; Friman, 2022).

Social reproduction and associated patriarchal relationships can thus both positively and negatively influence women's economic

activities. This raises the question of the reliability of employing the capitalist-centered framework as a basis of understanding women's entrepreneurship, which now we turn to.

2.2. Feminist approaches to gender and entrepreneurship

Since, as mentioned, the gender and agriculture scholarship has focused on the economic aspects of agricultural activities in isolation from women's roles in social reproduction. Similar issues were observed in earlier research on entrepreneurship. However, the entrepreneurship scholarship has made a considerable progress in incorporating feminist approaches in its concepts. In our study, we employ the feminist concepts of entrepreneurship as a foundation of the analysis of women's agribusiness.

Entrepreneurship research was originally modelled after men's experiences and value, it has tended to compare women's entrepreneurship with men's through male-oriented standards, such as number of employees, degree of investment, and economic growth. They also have favored statistically significant studies, limiting knowledge production in entrepreneurship research (Hughes et al., 2012). However, such male-guided economic scales and approaches have been insufficient to understand women's businesses, misguidedly labelling women as underperformers compared to men (Hamilton, 2013).

Traditional academic literature has also tended to narrowly define "entrepreneurship" as economic activities within formal market systems, excluding diverse entrepreneurial activities in informal market systems, on which many women entrepreneurs depend (Babbitt et al., 2015; Gustavsson, 2021). The related male-oriented framework explores individuals' capacity in isolation from social, cultural, and historical contexts that have marginalized women in entrepreneurial activities (Marlow, 2002). Thus, women's subordination to men in business activities has been reproduced through such discursive practices in entrepreneurship research (Bruni et al., 2004; Ahl, 2006).

Feminist scholars have reframed entrepreneurship research through more critical, theoretical, and reflexive approaches, offering pluralistic views of definitions, concepts, and methodologies. Poststructuralist approaches to entrepreneurship (e.g., Bruni et al., 2004; Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009) set gender at the core of the entrepreneurship framework. They regard the concept of gender as dynamic processes and practices involving power, in which various social identities intersect with gender identities.

Doing business is deeply embedded in women's and men's everyday practices of doing gender. Therefore, exploring entrepreneurial activities in research requires a greater understanding of those everyday gender norms and practices. Gender relations in entrepreneurship are not static but dynamic, with women exercising agency, reinterpreting existing norms, and challenging and changing practices (Calás et al., 2007).

Indeed, empirical studies have found that doing business and doing gender coexist and affect women entrepreneurs' choices and strategies. Women entrepreneurs can challenge gender norms dictating actions in their cultural contexts and perform "masculinity" if required for business, or stick with their gender norms and instead take "feminine" approaches to management. Examples of the latter have included doing business within their family space (Bock, 2004; Jennings and McDougald, 2007; Ekinsmyth, 2014), and targeting women consumers and channeling interpersonal skills and women's networks as business strengths (Hanson and Blake, 2004). Women's business strategies and goals can also change along their life cycles (Davis and Shaver, 2012; Gustavsson, 2021). Their continuous crossing of boundaries in gender and business norms makes entrepreneurship more diverse, dynamic, and creative in terms of concepts, approaches, and goals (Calás et al., 2007).

Feminist approaches thus highlight non-material and non-economic aspects that facilitate or impede the growth of women's entrepreneurial activities. Since feminist scholars are interested in social change, identifying opportunities for negotiation and environments enabling the crossing of boundaries is a first entry point to understanding the scope of women's entrepreneurship (Hughes et al., 2012; Hamilton, 2013; Huq et al., 2020).

2.3. Applying feminist approaches to entrepreneurship in global south contexts

The feminist reframing of entrepreneurship has so far been premised upon the experiences of women in the global North, which is not simply applicable to global South contexts (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Xheneti et al., 2019). While more studies have emerged on women entrepreneurs in developing countries in recent years, a literature review suggested that a limited number of such studies had employed feminist approaches (de Vita et al., 2014).

The application of a Western-oriented framework without considering contextual differences may end up reproducing the mislabelling of women entrepreneurs, this time with claims that women in the global South underperform in business compared to those in the global North. What are, then, the distinct characteristics of entrepreneurship in the global South?

The economic systems on which women depend in the global South are diverse and complex. Gibson-Graham (2008) proposed the concept of "diverse economies" as an alternative to research within the capitalist economy which has narrowly focused on formal economic activities and their value in the global North. Scholarship on diverse economies (e.g., Fickey, 2011; Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016) has embraced plurality and diversity in economic activities, including informal markets, cooperatives, and gift-giving; as well as various forms of workforce, such as seasonally hired labour, unpaid family labour, and labour exchange. An interplay between capitalist-and non-market-oriented activities is thus often observed, invalidating the drawing of explicit boundaries between entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial activities. This notion is particularly important to understanding microenterprises run by women.

Women in microenterprises often face blurred boundaries between work and family, in terms of labour, resources, and spaces (Babb, 1984; Harriss-White, 2010). Although family-embeddedness has also been linked with women entrepreneurship in the global North (Bock, 2004; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Gustavsson, 2021), evidence has pointed to such middle-class women's use of familial space and resources in business as a strategic choice. By contrast, family labour is capital for many women's microenterprises in precarious economies

in low-income countries; and it creates dependency on or interdependency with their relatives. Neglecting this aspect can lead to undervaluing women's and girls' labour and economic contribution to entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, local economies are often extremely precarious and hierarchal. Such women entrepreneurs must contend with and resist given social and economic conditions for maintaining and expanding their enterprises (Eversole, 2004). Hence, careful attention is required to understand women's positions in broad kin systems, and their negotiations over the mobilization of labor and resources within their social relations.

On the other hand, women agri-entrepreneurs initiated by unpaid-paid or low-paid labour are not a homogenous group. The Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada (FINTRAC, 2018, 3) proposes four categories in agri-entrepreneurship in the global South: (1) producers who have at least one non-family employee, (2) traders, buyers, and aggregators, and (3) processors, and (4) agro-input suppliers and dealers. These four categories allow us to carefully look at diversity, hierarchy, and differences among the agri-entrepreneurs. They are influenced differently by external changes and events, for example, food system policies, economic recessions, COVID-related restrictions, and/or marriage, divorce and child birth. A woman agri-entrepreneur might have multiple roles between above four categories or make several steps to eventually move from a producer to other groups such as traders and processors. Those diversities have important implications for the analysis of social production and economic reproduction in agri-entrepreneurship.

3. Research contexts and methods

3.1. Research contexts and site selection

We conducted our fieldwork in Lao Cai and Lam Dong provinces, where there are opportunities for agri-business for women, and we have local partners who can identify respondents based on our selection criteria. Our study period overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. In Vietnam, strict COVID-19 measures resulted in mobility restrictions, supply chain disruptions, increased input costs, and decreased consumer demand. The pandemic deeply affected our respondents and their families. COIVD-19 was central to our conversations with them. Hence our study explored women entrepreneurs' experience of and responses to the pandemic from social and gender perspectives.

Lao Cai province lies on the border with Yunnan province in China, where informal cross-border trade has been restricted since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020. At this site, we explored women's agribusiness related to livestock-and fish-trading.

Lam Dong province is Vietnam's largest horticultural hub. Supply-chain disruptions due to COVID-19 have heavily affected the industry's exports and local activities, and decreased the demand for flowers, fruits, and medical plants. There, we focused on women's horticulture-related businesses.

We selected two communities in each province, based on the following criteria: (1) Women entrepreneurs (small-or middle-scale) were not uncommon in the community; and (2) our local partners (research organizations) had close contact with the community's local authorities.

3.2. Selection of respondents

We used purposive sampling (Patton, 1990; Hamilton, 2006) to identify potential respondents with rich experience in entrepreneurship. Local authorities in Vietnam helped us find women entrepreneurs in each of the communities. We selected a total of 16 women (eight per province) with diverse familial and economic backgrounds, and of two business types: (1) livestock and fish retailers in local food markets; and (2) entrepreneurs in formally registered companies or cooperatives. We obtained verbal informed consent and anonymised their names (see Table 1).

3.3. Interview methods

We conceptualized the in-depth interviews from an explorative, storytelling approach to women's personal and professional lives (Jackson, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2008; Cole, 2009). Through it, we carefully considered our own reflexivity and subjectivity as researchers (Callaway, 1992).

We conducted interviews face-to-face in Lao Cai. In Lam Dong, due to travel restrictions during the pandemic, we used a hybrid method, with one local-based researcher visiting respondents and interviewing them face-to-face, and the first author joining online.

We built interview questions around three thematic areas: (1) the process of respondents' ventures and challenges they faced, (2) gender norms, family relations, and social reproduction, and (3) agrifood systems and economic and non-economic aspects of respondents' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. We employed thematic content analysis (Smith et al., 1992) to identify key themes emerging from the interviews.

4. Results

4.1. Navigating patriarchy within the household

In the patriarchal and patrilocal contexts of Vietnam, a wife leading a formally registered company can be seen as a threat for her husband, especially in rural areas. How do women entrepreneurs deal with such challenges?

Some women undertake the strategy of "jointly" running a business with their husbands, at least at the beginning or on the formal document. This helps women to navigate patriarchy in the household, reassuring their husbands by giving some control in their "joint" business. It also helps women to deal with the male-privileged business culture by assigning specific male-oriented tasks to their husbands. This is similar to the women's business strategy of partnering with men in male-dominated industries observed in the global North (Godwin et al., 2006), but it is arranged with the household.

Our interviewee, Mai runs a business which imports aqua feeds and fish seeds (salmon and sturgeon) "jointly" with her husband who has his own transport business as his primary job. At the beginning, she asked him to learn fish-farming technologies from his friend, and now she asks him to help with specific tasks "suitable for men", such as participating in drinking parties with clients, collecting debts from regular buyers, and travelling far away.

TABLE 1 Details on the respondents.

#	Name changed	Age	Occupation	Location	Business type	Ages of children under 18 years old	Remarks
101	Mai	40s	Fish eggs import	Lao Cai	Formal	15	
102	Van	30s	Vegetables, fruits trade	Lao Cai	Formal	6, 2	
103	Xuan	n/a	Poultry retailer	Lao Cai	Retail		Widow
104	Hien	30s	Chicken and pork coop	Lao Cai	Formal	11, 7	Ethnic Nung
105	Thao	50s	Pork retailer	Lao Cai	Retail		
106	Lan	50s	Fish retailer	Lao Cai	Retail		Widow
107	Tuyet	50s	Poultry retailer	Lao Cai	Retail		Ethnic Nung
108	Thanh	30s	Pork retailer and coop	Lao Cai	Retail	17	
201	Le	30s	Horticultural trade	Lam Dong	Formal	14, 10	
202	Quynh	30s	Horticultural trade	Lam Dong	Formal	6, 1	
203	Tu	40s	Horticulture, agritourism	Lam Dong	Formal	9	
204	Vuong	50s	Medical Plant coop	Lam Dong	Formal		
205	Giang	20s	Pumpkin nuts processing	Lam Dong	Formal		
206	Phung	50s	Horticultural seed trade	Lam Dong	Formal		
207	Tram	30s	Earthworm coop	Lam Dong	Formal	8, 1	Single mother
208	Trang	30s	Agritourism	Lam Dong	Formal	7	Divorced

Similarly, Hien established a new cooperative for marketing chickens "jointly" with her husband who has another livestock business as his primary job. While she manages the business, her husband oversees activities which require negotiations with male-dominated stakeholders, such as animal feed companies, veterinary drug sellers, the government livestock department, and banks. Her husband thus facilitates her access to resources and information from male-dominated institutions.

While this strategy enables women to enter into the male-privileged entrepreneurship arena with their husband's agreement and support, it also hides women's leadership and management capacities as their husbands dominate most visible and powerful parts of their business. For example, when Mai, the aquafeed and fish seed importer, went to a business party with her husband, male participants only recognized her husband, and they asked him who she was. Similarly, during our visit to Hien for interviewing, her husband explained her business to us as if he was her boss. These findings indicate that family embeddedness in entrepreneurship makes it difficult for the women to completely separate their relationship with their husbands in the family from those in the business.

Seeking support from someone other than their husbands is another strategy to make their business economically independent. Some women initiated their business by depending on their female friends or their sons rather than their husbands. Vuong started her medical plant business by her female friend's support. She learned from the friend how to grow them and how to purchase quality planting materials. The friend also connected her to a company who can purchase her produce. She was able to borrow money from a bank on the security of her friend's farmland. Her husband agreed with her investment in this business as she had support from the wealthy friend. In 2018, she established a cooperative with 35 households (total 38 hectors). Her second son helps her both farming and business management.

Another strategy observed in our study was women physically separating themselves from patriarchy. Space is both political and highly gendered (Elias and Rai, 2019). Hence, women who manage to remove themselves from a heavily patriarchal context can find an especially enabling environment. One of our respondents, Trang, divorced her husband because he disagreed with taking out a loan to expand her business, saying that running a small business was "enough for a woman". She took her daughter and now lives with her mother, which has ensured her freedom in the household.

Similarly, Thu, hires 30 farm workers and 15 technical staff in her mushroom production and agritourism company in Lam Dong. She produces 30 types of mushrooms and exports mushroom to Japan. She also opens her farms to local and international tourists. Her husband and child live in Hanoi with her in-laws while Tu lives and works in Lam Dong, a two-hour flight from Hanoi. This enables her to isolate herself from gendered obligations as a wife and daughter-in-law on a daily basis, although she compromises her role as a mother.

Above two cases resonate with findings from Nepal, where some women moved to urban areas with their husbands to be away from their in-laws and their conservative expectations of their daughters-in-law, which enabled them to establish enterprises (Xheneti et al., 2019).

Negotiating gender roles and managing domestic work and childcare are also a major challenge for women entrepreneurs. Hiring someone for childcare and domestic work is not very common in rural areas in Vietnam, regardless of their income levels. Among nine respondents who have children aged 18 or under, eight of them have

support from their mother or mother-in-law for their childcare and domestic work on a daily base. Two respondents have daughters who mainly do domestic work including cooking. Only one respondent has a retired husband who is fully in charge of domestic work. Women's agribusiness, like men's, is thus sustained by other women's unpaid family labour for domestic work and care. However, women entrepreneurs face various gender-based challenges, which differs significantly from male counterparts.

Van, a cross-border food and livestock trader, has two children aged 2 and 6, and her mother-in-law takes care of them. She had faced many challenges after her maternity leave for her second child. Her mother-in-law complained as Van was often absent for travelling and taking clients out to drink, which is essential to building business relations in male-dominated sectors in Vietnam. Her husband suggested that she quit working (which indicates that a husband doing childcare or hiring someone is not an option in her household, or more broadly in rural Vietnam). She recalled:

> When my children were healthy, it was okay for me to manage both (family and work). But when my kids were sick, I was overwhelmed. The procedure of importing goods needed to be completed on time, while I had to take my kids to see a doctor and look after them at home. When my husband suggested that I quit my job, I thought about it over and over, but I decided to continue. I feel sorry for my children. I am wondering if my children are disadvantaged because I am busy all the time and I cannot be with them.

Her feelings of guilt increased as COVID-19 demanded additional tasks and time to focus on her business. Cross-border trade regulations were rapidly changing, constantly requiring immediate actions and responses to her truck drivers and clients. She failed to pick her children up at school several times, asking for support from her relatives and her neighbours. This observed sense of guilt is in line with findings from literature on entrepreneurship and motherhood in the global North (Bock, 2004; Gustavsson, 2021), with the pandemic having worsened existing work–family conflicts.

Similarly, Hien, the director of the portly cooperative, also had a challenge of managing domestic work and childcare. She wanted to hire someone. However, her live-in father-in-law objected her idea as it was not common in rural Vietnam. She asked her sister-in-law to convince her father as he would not listen an opinion of his daughter-in-law. This strategy worked. Hien started from hiring a house worker for small tasks in a few days per week and then eventually the farther-in-law agreed with hiring full-time. She recalls:

> For the past 2 years, I do not have to cook for my father-in-law, my husband and children. Now I just need to go to a market (to buy food). If my friends or clients invite me to Lao Cai city, I'm ready to go. Sometimes I also go to treat our clients and business partners (for drinking) and attend conferences. I enjoy going out, interacting with people and learning from them.

In the literature on women's entrepreneurship in the global North, the family-embeddedness of women's business is discussed in relation to work–family conflict in which women's business is incorporated within time, labour, and space in their households (Bock, 2004; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Gustavsson, 2021). Our findings add an additional aspect of navigating patriarchy with their husbands and in-laws, and its influence on women's struggles, strategic choices and business approaches.

4.2. Navigating patriarchy in the workplace

Undervaluing women's work is also observed in the respondents' workplace. There are 11 interviewees who reported running a business in a formally registered company or a cooperative. In Vietnam, formal agribusiness and livestock enterprises tend to be male dominated. Below Quynh's statement represents women entrepreneurs' challenges.

> When I work with men, they treat me unfairly. For example, a man quoted high prices when I consulted him about the equipment for building mushroom houses. Another man advised me to buy unnecessary equipment. I do not think they can easily do the same to male clients, especially senior men. They treat me unfairly because I am a woman.

How do women entrepreneurs address gender-specific challenges in the workplace? Some women, especially young-educated women, challenge and change male-dominated norms. Thu, the director of a mushroom production and agritourism company, has overcome gender-specific labour problems. She said:

> It is difficult to find hard-working male labourers in remote areas (where the labour market is not competitive, and labourers have incomes from their own farms). Male workers often drink rice wine and delay their work, which significantly reduce the productivity of our business. Therefore, I decided to learn how to drive a tractor and use a lifting machine. I also learned how to undertake some heavy tasks. Now I can do it by myself without depending on men.

Tram is the director of the cooperative of producing vermicompost for clean organic vegetables and ornamental plants in Lam Dong. She intentionally chooses women members, as her mission is supporting women farmers. This strategy also makes it easy for her to take the leadership and managing roles. Similarly, Trang has 10 full-time staff (nine women and one man) in her company of the organic vegetable production and agritourism. She preferably hires young women as she found that male staff often face a difficulty to work with a female boss.

Some women channel male expert knowledge into establishing and growing their businesses as men are dominant in the agricultural sector and they have strong networks among themselves. Quynh, the manager of a vegetable and mushroom production and trading company, requested a male university professor to be her business mentor and he provided some technologies and a new market to her. Thu, the director of a mushroom company, had several male technical experts advise her when she launched her mushroom and agritourism business.

Likewise, Trang's male mentor is the CEO of a famous food processing company whom she can ask for advice via email. In this way, our respondents transfer men's knowledge and networks to their own business.

Above women's strategies suggest that women entrepreneurs are flexible in terms of gendered practices in the patriarchal context: they

negotiate patriarchy by staying within gender norms and also moving outside the feminine sphere. This makes women's entrepreneurial activities creative, diverse and dynamic compared to men's business activities (Calás et al., 2007).

4.3. Working in feminine entrepreneurial sphere in microenterprises

For women from poor households with limited capital, working in a feminine entrepreneurial sphere, such as food retail in the informal sector, is likely to be the best and only option. It requires limited capital, as they can start up a small trade by purchasing produce on credit, from producers or wholesalers.

In the literature, women's concentration in microenterprises in the informal retailing sector is considered as a response to structural disadvantages they have faced in the male-oriented formal sector (Chant and Pedwell, 2008; Babbitt et al., 2015). Given that the informal sector is subordinated to the formal one, women doing business in the latter fits with stereotypical gender norms in Vietnam, and hence less likely to be challenged by their husbands. It can open entrepreneurial opportunities for women contending with difficult economic conditions. Xuan's story below illustrates how this entrepreneurial route can work for women with limited financial resources.

Xuan, a widow poultry retailer, raised two sons alone on her poultry-retailing. She started this business soon after her husband died 25 years ago. First, she sold chickens on a street. Her investment was only a cage. Her regular customers gradually increased. Her fellow women retailers provided her information on wholesalers and on how to rent a market space. She settled into her shop in a main local market, and eventually expanded her customer base to restaurants and hotels. She bought a range of poultry breeds on credit. As she recalls, "this was only a business which women like me (widow, no education) could start up. It enabled me to be economically independent without depending on my (male) relatives after my husband died." Thus, her business—although categorised as a "microenterprise" on economic terms—is highly valuable for her, as it has built up her self-esteem and allowed her economic independence.

Women entrepreneurs from poor households often depend on family labour for both their business and domestic work. Lan, a fish retailer, lost her husband 21 years ago. She raised two sons with her fish retailing business by working 12 h per day. Her mother helped childcare and cooking. In return, Lan now looks after her 95-year-old mother. Currently, her younger son, a security guard, helps her to pick up fish from a fish collector at 3 am every morning. She said:

> I have been selling fish for 30 years. My elder son told me to retire because I'm now weak. Working is getting harder. He told me to stay home to look after his children. But I do not want to retire. I want to be economically independent as many years as I can.

Thus, safe gender spaces found in the informal livestock and fish retailing sectors are extremely important for women retailers from poor households including widows. They do not have to compete with men for a market share and can appear less threatening to their husbands, as the business has potentially limited economic growth.

However, above narratives also suggest that women are not a homogenous group and poor women remain in the informal and low-paid work, reproducing gaps in entrepreneurship by gender and socio-economic conditions. This finding resonates with a study on women's microenterprise in Bolivia (Eversole, 2004) which points out that poor women have few options to transform their positions through entrepreneurship, as they must accept easy-entry business with low investment and low returns. It is structural barriers which limit their scope of business rather than individual women's skills, knowledge and capacities.

4.4. Women entrepreneurs' responses to the pandemic

The last sub-section explores how women entrepreneurs managed both social reproduction and their businesses during the pandemic. It reveals the intensified interdependency of those two spheres during the economic and social crises of COVID-19.

The findings show that women make full use of their (unpaid) family labour, time, and social networks to cope with or take advantage of the crisis for adopting new practices.

Vuong mobilized her family members' labour to maintain her business. She used to produce and sell medical plants by organizing a cooperative with 35 households and a total area of 38 hectares. Since 2018, she has contracted with several traders to sell her cooperative's produce. However, due to the lockdown and subsequent economic recession, all her produce had remained unsold, and her storage was full. She started drying roots for processing into herbal tea at home manually with the help from her sons and daughters-in-law.

Similarly, Phuong asked her son to help her business. She used to import horticultural seeds and then distribute them to her clients and then export cut flowers and fresh vegetables. In 2020, she lost market for 10 tons of lisianthus flowers. She immediately turned to pumpkin, as it had domestic consumer demand and could be stored awhile. However, since provincial borders closed during the outbreak of COVID in Vietnam in 2021, migrant workers from northern Vietnam could not come to work. She asked her son to search for labour-saving methods on the internet and found the method of using bees for pollination. This worked well, helping her to save both labour and costs. She has decided to continue to focus on pumpkins with this new method, even once the pandemic is over.

Some respondents sought new market through online selling through their own and their husbands' networks, knowledge and skills. Hien produces and sells high-quality chickens to hotels and restaurants. In April 2020, her trade came to a complete halt after she had earned VND 126 million (USD 5,522) from the first two batches shipped. Meanwhile, extra costs emerged for feeding stranded chickens. She immediately switched to online sales by using social media through her own and her husbands' networks, targeting individual wealthy consumers and retailers in Hanoi. This created new markets, enabling her to diversify and expand her customer base. She reported plans to continue to expand her online sales even after the pandemic.

In a similar vein, Mai lost her market for selling salmon. The stranded salmon kept growing, while her business incurred additional costs for renting space to accommodate the stranded fish, feeds, and caretaker labour. She and her husband asked their friends to help find contacts in supermarkets in Hanoi and managed to ship all the salmon to some of the supermarkets.

Thus, women make full use of (male) family members for coping or seeking new business opportunities, which allow women to access male-oriented social networks, male knowledge and ideas during the crisis. In this respect, family-embedded women-led enterprises consist of both economic and non-economic based strategies and resources including reciprocal kinship relations and personal social networks with friends as observed in other contexts in the global South (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Harriss-White, 2010; Das and Mishra, 2021).

Women retailers in the informal sector used their own and family labour and time to compensate their loss related to COVID-19. However, their adaptation strategies have been quite limited.

Before the pandemic, Xuan, a poultry retailer, used to sell 30 kg per day (20 kg to local restaurants and hotels and 10 kg to individuals) in the border town of Lao Cai. During the pandemic, she lost market to local restaurants and hotels, selling only one or two chickens to individuals, sometimes even zero, per day. While she used to sell a few breeds of chicken, she was down to selling one—the cheapest breed. However, she noticed that local low-income people bought frozen chicken imported from China due to its lower price. She started accepting phone orders and deliveries without extra charge, doing the deliveries herself on her motorbike.

Similarly, Lan used to sell 100 kg of fish per day at a local market in Lao Cai, but saw that drop to 20 kg or less with the pandemic. She then turned to freezing the leftover fish and selling them on other days at lower prices. Meanwhile, Thanh, a pork retailer who used to sell one pig per day, now shares one pig with another pork retailer. She recently started to sell sausages by using leftover pork.

As we have shown here, retailing facilitates market entry for many women entrepreneurs of limited economic resources. However, this type of enterprise depends on a growing local economy and local demand, and it gets no social security or support from the government. Their businesses are fragile and vulnerable during crises, as was also the case in the past financial crisis (Floro et al., 2009).

COVID-19 affected not only their business, but also childcare as schools were closed during lockdown between May to October in 2021. Feminist scholars point out the contradiction of capitalist economy that keeps neglecting women's reproductive roles from economic activities and its consequences in times of the pandemic (Agarwal, 2021; O'Laughlin, 2021; Rao, 2021; Stevano et al., 2021). The aspect of care in the pandemic therefore cannot be separated from women's agribusiness as they interplay with each other. How do women entrepreneurs in Vietnam manage increased childcare tasks? Below we illustrate four women's experience of childcare during the pandemic.

Le, a cut-flower business owner, depended on her lived-in mother-in-law to look after her two school-aged children at home during the lockdown. She had enormous work and pressure to manage her business during the crisis, while her husband works for the military, being away from home. Due to the pandemic, her children had an extended summer holiday and then started a new term by online. Her mother-in-law had extra work for looking after them, especially cooking their lunch and helping online learning.

Quynh also asked additional support from both her mother and mother-in-law during the pandemic to take care of her two young children. Her husband is busy, working at an IT company. Before the pandemic, she used to send her two children to a nursery school. However, since the nursery school was closed as part of state-led COVID-19 measures, she and her husband asked their mothers to come to look after them. Their help was essential for her to focus on her business in times of the crisis.

Thu took an additional responsibility of childcare by herself. She usually lives alone in Da Lat, while her husband and her 7-year-old son live with in-laws in Hanoi. During the summer holiday in 2021, her son visited Thu, but he was not able to return to Hanoi as domestic transport systems were suddenly closed as part of COVID-19 measures. Thu stayed with her son for additional 3 months in Da Lat. She took him to her office and mushroom fields.

Trang, a single mother, asked her mother to look after her 7-years-old daughter at home during the lockdown. While her mother was very supportive, she also felt guilty that she had limited time to spend with her daughter. During our interview, Trang said "I have been working hard in the past 10 years. I work from 8 am to 10 pm. In the next 10 years, I want to spend more time for myself and for my daughter." This indicates that family-work balance remains a great challenge emotionally for women even if they have someone who can physically support childcare, highlighting how women's entrepreneurship is associated with motherhood.

Above narratives show that women's agricultural entrepreneurial activities in Vietnam are sustained by unpaid family labour both for their business and domestic work, especially during the crisis when additional urgent labour and time are required. In particular, childcare is embedded in intergenerational support between an adult daughter and her mother and/or mother-in-law, rather than depending on public or private care services. In this respect, there is no clear demarcation between family and work as well as productive and reproductive activities in terms of time, space, negotiations and identities shared within their households. Our findings therefore emphasise the importance of incorporating the aspect of family into understanding women's agribusiness in the global South.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study explored women entrepreneurs' agribusiness strategies by exploring social reproduction and economic activities together, drawing on feminist approaches to entrepreneurship.

Our findings confirm that women entrepreneurs manage their business, family and family relations together as one consolidated commitment in flexible, informal and creative ways. Research focusing solely on economic analyses obscures not only women's hidden labor and time in the household that enable men to dominate agribusiness, but also women's resistance to male-privileged agribusiness. Positioning social reproduction at the center of women's economic activities enables us to have a full picture of how male-privileged agri-food systems disadvantage women.

Much academic discussion on family-work interfaces has centred on individual women's dilemma to manage their roles between the two separate dimensions of production and reproduction. For example, entrepreneurship scholars have argued that women's caretaking and domestic work duties have shaped their entrepreneurial strategies (Bock, 2004; Jennings and McDougald, 2007; Ekinsmyth, 2014; Gustavsson, 2021). Moreover, in some contexts—especially in the global South—women's businesses have been conditioned by patriarchal gender norms restricting them within the domestic sphere (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Xheneti et al., 2019; Afshan et al., 2021).

Our study in the context of Vietnam demonstrates that family and work are two dimensions of one integrated and fluid sphere. The family can function not only to constrain women's entrepreneurship, but also to facilitate it, through labour exchange, access to resources, and the provision of information, knowledge, and skills in which women's negotiations with patriarchy are central. It includes a mother-in-law helping with childcare, a son facilitating access to new technologies, a husband communicating male clients and using his network for developing new markets. To make full use of the family as their business supporters, women entrepreneurs invest in negotiating with patriarchal relationships in everyday lives including fulfilling their roles in social reproduction. This strategy of navigating patriarchy was increasingly important during the pandemic, as women entrepreneurs had to address additional challenges in the workplace to sustain their businesses as well as in the household to manage additional time and labour for childcare with limited public support.

Exploring family and work as one integrated framework in entrepreneurship also helps us to avoid reproducing "women-lack-of" results using a male-oriented economic-focused framework in isolation from familial and social contexts (Ahl, 2006; Hughes et al., 2012). Our study confirms that it is not a lack of individual technical capabilities that limits women's business options and adaptation strategies; rather, it is the systemic challenges of male-privileged agribusiness, which marginalize women and forces them to operate their businesses via their personal efforts and negotiations. Post-crisis development policies on gender therefore need to address systemic problems, moving beyond narrow concepts of economic production and technological and apolitical interventions for individual women's empowerment (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Hickel, 2014; Wilson, 2015; Cornwall, 2018).

Our study also highlights that the process of business growth is diverse among women, challenging the construction of women as a universal category. In particular, the pandemic has interplayed with structural problems of inequality, and with a limited or absent public social safety nets. Women's businesses, especially those of retailers, have heavily depended on family labour for both economic production and social reproduction. The consequences of the pandemic can thus lead to the reproduction of social conditions and marginalisation among women as well as between men and women, through the close interplay of work and family relations, leaving vulnerable women in the vulnerable informal sector with limited business growth (Eversole, 2004). This also echos Mies (2007) on the contradiction of capitalist economy, which is sustained by capitalist exploitation and patriarchal exploitation. The heterogeneity of entrepreneurship also has significant policy implications. Policies that aim at supporting "women entrepreneurship" impact different types of women agri-entrepreneurs (FINTRAC, 2018). Although infrastructure and social welfare policies are highly relevant for mitigating women's constrains in social reproduction, careful attention is required to reaching to the most vulnerable groups of entrepreneurs to ensure their benefit and business growth.

Our findings also alert current economics-centric approaches to gender and agriculture which simply promote many more women from rural farming communities to be entrepreneurs without addressing structural problems, leaving women in disadvantaged conditions in the male-privileged operation of economic activities and social reproduction. There is an urgent need for pluralistic knowledge production through accommodating diverse concepts and methodologies in the gender and agriculture scholarship.

This empirical study from Southeast Asia also adds value on knowledge to regional entrepreneurship development that feminist approaches can play a central role in explaining unique challenges which entrepreneurs face in a specific region and cultural context. As shown by our respondents' lived experiences of agribusiness, women's entrepreneurship takes place in various forms with blurred boundaries between formal and informal, production and reproduction, and family and work, which differ significantly from the context in the global North. Further studies with feminist approaches in the global South related to men's gendered experience and differences among men in entrepreneurship can enrich our understandings of gender, agriculture and entrepreneurship. Studies on women who were previously entrepreneurs, but failed or chose to withdraw from the business is another research area which could contribute to our understandings of gendered entrepreneurship and agri-food systems.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because we used a verbal informed consent because written informed consent makes our respondents (women in informal market) very scare. They are mostly illiterate and the verbal consent is the most suitable.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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