

**Navigating the Waters of Precarity:
Dynamics of Work in Vietnamese Offshore Fisheries**

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Ottawa in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in International Development

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Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

Vietnam, a major exporter of fish products and one of the top ten capture fisheries producer countries by volume, is currently undergoing fisheries reforms under international and national pressure. The country's fisheries have been under criticism for environmentally unsustainable and harmful practices, violations of international maritime borders, and a lack of traceability of both fish and fishers, among other things. And yet, much of this criticism ignores the livelihoods, experiences, tough choices, and the social-environmental situations of fishers themselves. It is in this context that this thesis seeks to understand working conditions, labour dynamics and social relations in Vietnamese offshore fisheries. In the format of three journal articles, I examine the compounding challenges faced by Vietnamese offshore fishers and explore the ways in which fishers navigate these challenges and adapt to change, including policy and legal change at various levels. As a dangerous, environmentally-dependant job where pay is tied to inconsistent catch amounts and where fishers become subject to the legal authority of multiple states as they move through international waters, fishing is precarious work. Through interviews and participant observation, this research illuminates the perspectives of workers, captains, and boat owners in Southern Vietnam to uncover the ways in which precarity shapes offshore fishing. This thesis seeks to explain both material and social relations in a market deeply embedded in global capitalism.

Acknowledgements

A PhD thesis is truly impossible to complete alone. I have been lucky to have had the support of so many throughout the various stages of this process.

Thank you first of all to everyone who took the time out of their busy days to speak with me about their lives. I am especially grateful to fishers (including captains and boat owners), their family members, government officials, and those in Song Doc. I truly appreciate you sharing your knowledge and experiences with me.

Thank you to everyone at Tra Vinh University, especially those in the International Cooperation Office and the Department of Agriculture and Aquaculture who facilitated my research through invaluable advice and coordinating the necessary permissions. I appreciate your professionalism and enthusiasm for my project. Thanks especially to Đông Lâm, Nguyễn Thị Mai Khanh, Trịnh Ngọc Ái, Nguyễn Thành Tựu, and Nguyễn Hoàng Lâm.

Thank you to my Vietnamese language teachers in Canada and Vietnam. I learned so much from you and appreciated your patience and suggestions. Despite all that you taught me, I could not have completed my research without the brilliant research assistants, transcriber and translator that I hired to help me conduct this cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research. Thank you to Dương Sắc San, Châu Mỹ Duyên, Thảo Anh Lê, and Đặng Thị Bình Nguyên.

To my supervisor, Melissa Marschke, I am beyond grateful for your expertise, guidance, encouragement and support throughout my entire PhD journey. I am not sure that I would have finished without your regular check-ins and direction. I am also grateful for the generous and thoughtful comments of my committee members Susan Spronk, Nicole Power, Barbara Neis and Chris Huggins.

Thanks to fellow students, secretariat staff and faculty at the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. Our opportunities to discuss research, theory, praxis, mental health and many other things were a truly important part of this process. I also appreciate the opportunities to collaborate with other academic communities: Work at Sea (York University), Wellbeing-Ecosystem Service Bundles (University of Waterloo), and Feminist Feminists (Memorial University). Thanks to these groups for involving me, and especially to Melissa Marschke, Peter Vandergeest, Derek Armitage, Jessica Blythe, Christine Knott and Madeleine Gustavsson. Thanks also to Iftekharul Haque for help with using FishStatJ data, Terence Rodolph for help with maps, and Mallory McDonald for her guidance on technical aspects of boats and ecology.

I am grateful to many colleagues and friends who I learned from and who helped me through this process in one way or another. These include Nguyễn Hiếu Thảo, Bùi Thị Diễm Hằng, Rachel Soubra, Camille Quignon, Đồng Đình Giám, Louise Coventry, Joe Buckley, Luke Holmes, Nguyễn Văn Quốc Thái, Emi Koch, Ogochukwu Udenigwe, Somed Shahadu, Akalya Kandiah, Jess Notwell, Adrian Murray, Jessica Cadesky, Ben McTaggart, Colleen Cranmer, Sallie Lau, Danika Brisson, Genevieve Nevin, Khadijah Kanji, Colin Palmer, Emma Landy, Kayleigh Jooste, Karen Hamilton, Lori Waller, and many more.

Thank you to my parents Daphne Taçon and Norberto Alonso and my brother Adrian Alonso, as well as my extended family who have always been supportive and enthusiastic about my academic and other pursuits. Thank you to my dog Lucille for keeping my feet and heart warm and for taking me on lots of walks.

Thank you to Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the International Development Research Centre for their financial support for my research.

This thesis was completed in the territories of the Anishinaabe Algonquin, the Saugeen Ojibway, and Vietnam, all of which have a rich history of resistance. I am grateful to these nations as well as to the students at the University of Ottawa who pushed to hold the university accountable for ties to the ongoing genocide of Palestinians by organizing an encampment in 2024 that lasted 71 days. I recognize that I will be obtaining my degree at a time when no universities are left standing in Gaza.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This research began with a desire to better understand the dynamics of work in offshore fishing in a Vietnamese context, a poorly understood area in academic literature, non-profit reporting and global media, and one which merits attention. Less than two years before I arrived in the major fishing port of Song Doc in Ca Mau, Vietnam, the main site of my field research, the country had been issued a yellow card (warning) by the European Union (EU) for Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, meaning that the country was required to undertake several fisheries management reforms or else face potential trade sanctions from the EU which represents an important export market (VASEP, 2018). As of writing, the yellow card remains. The significance of fisheries to the national economy and the current international pressures for fisheries reform make Vietnam a particularly important focus for this research.

In the wake of the exposure of so-called ‘slavery scandals’ in Thai fisheries (c.f. Chantavanich *et al.*, 2013; Greenpeace, 2016; Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016) and the growing attention to forced labour in fisheries across Southeast Asia and globally (c.f. Urbina, 2019; Strating *et al.*, 2024; Stringer, Whittaker and Simmons, 2016; Yen and Liuhuang, 2021; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020; Decker Sparks and Hasche, 2019), institutional concerns regarding fisheries management have extended beyond the ecological (c.f. Kadfak and Linke, 2021; ILO, 2023; FAO, 2016; US Trade Representative, 2021). With an increase of the global North’s public and institutional awareness of labour abuse in fishing (largely of that experienced in the global South), there are growing stated efforts to address the problem as demonstrated through global institutional and bilateral diplomatic initiatives to figure out solutions between countries (ASEAN, 2021; Yuliantiningsih and Barkhuizen, 2021) and threats of trade sanctions, with the United States and Japan joining the EU in trying to weed out IUU products from the goods they import. And yet, while it is of great importance to deal with labour abuse in fishing, much of the research and policy initiatives fail to understand worker perspectives or to get at the root causes of this abuse. Policies meant to crack down on labour abuse may even result in the increased

criminalization of fishers for their involvement in systems under which they also suffer (Page and Ortiz, 2019; de Coning and Witbooi, 2015; Vrancken, Witbooi and Glazewski, 2019).

For offshore fishers, oceans are not simply where fish and the ecosystems that support them are found; they are also workplaces. Boats out at sea come with a unique set of working conditions including: turbulent waters and weather that may cause sea sickness, challenge the ability to navigate and work, and increase the risk of falling overboard or capsizing boats which could result in fatalities; isolation and distance from medical help, social supports, community and family, which creates an inability to leave without planning and coordination; and highly mobile workplaces that may move through international borders (sometimes unclear or contested) becoming subject to multiple state jurisdictions and corresponding security forces (Vandergeest, 2018). These conditions are part of what makes fishing one of the most dangerous jobs in the world (ILO, 2004; Willis *et al.*, 2023). Fishers also deal with particular health and safety risks at sea such as dangerous equipment on board (ropes that can become tangled and pull workers overboard, sharp blades that can sever a limb or worse) as well as intense and long work periods which depend on weather, behaviours and movements of targeted fish species, lunar cycles and gear, among other things (see Windle *et al.*, 2008 for an overview of the direct and indirect impacts on fishing occupational health and safety). The dangers also come, notably, from the exploitative working conditions that are normalized in fishing (Campling and Colas, 2021; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020).

In many parts of the world, work in fisheries is also fairly strictly segregated by gender. Generally speaking, men work on boats while women are an integral part of the industry both through productive and reproductive labour but remain on shore. Underlying this division of labour are often gender norms that create numerous gendered assumptions, expectations and impacts which uphold and shape particular relationships (Shrestha *et al.*, 2020; Berdahl *et al.*, 2018). These relationships are central to workplace dynamics and labour relations in fisheries, as highlighted in the rich North Atlantic literature on gender and fisheries that draws on feminist sociology and anthropology, and that has in many cases positively contributed to policy changes especially by highlighting the often-ignored roles of women in fishing (Knott *et al.*, 2022). Some of this body of literature has also grappled with masculinities in fisheries (c.f. Caicedo, 2004;

Power, 2005). In Southeast Asia, studies on masculinity in fisheries have highlighted illegal fishing methods as a way that young men in the Calamian Islands in the Philippines gain status through displays of masculinity (Fabinyi, 2007), and the shifting notions of masculinities and power dynamics among fishers and fishmongers in a Philippine fishing community in Quezon province amid fish stock decline (Turgo, 2014). Still, masculinity remains an under-researched area of gender and fisheries.

With all of this in mind, this thesis is an attempt to understand the labour and gender dynamics in Vietnamese offshore fisheries and how these fit into a particular political economic and environmental context. Examining the interplay of ecological decline, labour relations, gender dynamics, and governance in Vietnamese fisheries can help develop an understanding of the intersecting challenges that formulate complex precarities for those involved in offshore fish work and how these workers navigate these challenges. My focus is on the perspectives of those who work in the Vietnamese offshore fishing industry themselves. Policies, including new laws and enforcement strategies implemented in Vietnam as part of the country's ongoing IUU crackdown, informal policies between workers, boat owners and captains, as well as broader strategies such as a decent work agenda, are assessed through the perspectives of fishers as workers with attention to captains, boat owners and, to a lesser degree, spouses of those who go to sea.

Theoretical grounding and conceptual framework

From a Marxist feminist grounding, my research is an effort to understand what capitalist relations look like in Vietnamese offshore fishing labour, how existing policy deals with these issues, and what components of labour justice are missing. In my research, I examine relations including labour relations among and between workers (fishers), managers (captains) and employers (boat owners), gender relations, human-nature relations, and governance at multiple levels. I combine several personal and collective experiences from interviews and observation to demonstrate how the findings of my study reflect a broader picture of fish work in southern Vietnam and how injustices for Vietnamese workers caused by systemic and policy design should raise concern of similar injustices elsewhere, especially given political economic similarities.

In looking at labour and gender dynamics in fishing, I draw on the Marxist concept of ‘relations of production’ which refers to the social relations between capital and labour that are formed under capitalism (Marx, 1859). Relations of production encompass power dynamics and relationship within and beyond the workplace as capitalism shapes society as a whole. Marxist feminists have built on the concept of ‘relations of production’, and have recognized thirteen theses of Marxism feminism, originally proposed by Haug (2016) and later debated, contested and reaffirmed at the fourth international Marxist feminist conference and in an ensuing special issue of *Capital and Class* (Goikoetxea and Clua-Losada, 2024). Thesis III states that:

It is clear that gender relations are relations of production, not an addition to them. All practices, norms, values, authorities, institutions, language, culture, and so on are coded in gender relations. This assumption makes feminist Marxist research as prolific as it is necessary. The contemporaneity and connectedness within global relations, and the simultaneous heterogeneity of historically concrete kinds of women’s oppression require international activists bring together their knowledge and experiences (Goikoetxea and Clua-Losada, 2024).

Labour relations highlighted in my research include the relationships between fishers, captains and boat owners at sea and on land, in the context of relations with the Vietnamese state and foreign governments that govern or otherwise impact the supply chain. This also includes attention to the particular work and life experiences of each group of local actors and especially the working conditions of fishers. In order to assess these conditions, I utilize the concept of labour precarity which refers to “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg, 2009). While the concept of precarity has been defined in multiple ways and can be interpreted as an abstract concept (Millar, 2017), I use a framework that unpacks the various dimensions of labour precarity (Marschke *et al.*, 2019; Rodgers, 1989) to provide a more structured analysis of fisher experiences in Vietnamese fisheries.

A Marxist feminist lens highlights the importance of an analysis of gendered relations that is intertwined with capitalism as a structure (Haug, 2016). Rather than looking principally at

women's oppression, however, my research on work in fishing looks at gender through the concept of masculinities. Understanding masculinities is not simply about understanding the behaviour linked to the innate biology of the male sex, but rather about focusing in on the socially constructed ideas and ideals of what it means to be a man, or manly, and how those are performed in varying ways (Butler, 1990). I draw on Connell's (1987) framework that provides a hierarchy to understand the power dynamics involved in the interactions of different portrayals of masculinity. This includes hegemonic (dominant), complicit, submissive, and oppositional masculinities. Hoang's (2020) concept of *engendering global capital* is also useful in relating financial flows to the gendered bodies upon which they rely, in particular through embodied gendered labour. While Hoang (2020) discusses the importance of woman sex workers in Vietnam to international businessmen brokering, in some case, multimillion dollar deals, I also use the concept to unpack how the international seafood trade relies on the masculinities performed by labouring Vietnamese men at sea and the women that they hire as entertainment for social masculine bonding back on land.

The term "Marxism feminism" emerged in the 1970s as part of the struggle for women's liberation (Haug, 2016). The concept of social reproduction, or social reproduction theory, highlights the numerous ways in which life is reproduced, particularly domestic work largely done by women, and the labour and processes that go into reproducing people and the conditions of work. It expands on the narrow dynamics of productive labour to incorporate social relations not explicitly found in the workplace, with attention especially to gender, but also race and nature, among other dynamics (Battistoni, 2020; Arruzza et al., 2019; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). Some social reproduction theorists such as Nancy Fraser argue that the distinction between reproductive and productive labour is an "institutionalized separation" (as interviewed in Goikoetxea, 2024, p. 5), generated by capitalism and the "root of oppression" (as interviewed in Goikoetxea, 2024, p. 5). Similarly, Bhattacharya (2015) and Dinerstein (2024) argue that production and social reproduction should be analyzed in tandem as they are deeply intertwined. I therefore use a Marxist feminist lens as a valuable theoretical tool for understanding both productive and reproductive labour. For the purposes of my research, this lens helps to get at questions of class and gender in a way that prioritizes the experiences of workers and understands how they respond to the conditions of capitalism.

Social reproduction theory can also apply to the human-nature relations that are necessary to and created by production. The natural environment is essential to capitalist reproduction and production. Capitalism therefore extends beyond the exploitation of workers and those humans (often women) essential to supporting the lives of workers and their ability to work, to also require environmental exploitation for profit-making (Fraser and Jaggi, 2018). Similarly, Moore's (2015) "world-ecology" theory lays out the argument that capitalism encompasses a broad set of relations, including the natural environment, as part of its functioning. As an example specific to fisheries, Foley (2020) looks at shifts in Newfoundland fisheries, arguing that an integrated social-ecological reproduction theory is necessary to more fully understand the relations between capital accumulation and ecological life-producing relations. While my research does not include a deep examination of the marine ecology and environmental changes at play as one might do in an environmental sciences or environmental social studies thesis, the environmental conditions are an essential part of the context for understanding labour and gender as labour and gender aspects of fisheries inevitably shape and are shaped by environmental conditions, namely fisheries decline but also climate change and others.

Two policy solutions that have been applied, to different extents, in dealing with issues in fisheries governance are 1) IUU fishing policy and 2) decent work. IUU fishing policy consists of a broad governance approach to reforming fisheries that contain illegal and unregulated practices. It is perhaps the main fisheries-specific policy approach used by the EU, though the US and Japan now also have IUU policies, for comprehensive fisheries reform abroad as they issue warnings to countries to improve their fisheries practices or else face seafood trade sanctions. For the EU, this has included working with national governments to provide guidance and assessment, sometimes over several years, in order to ensure that EU supply chains are more sustainable (IUU Watch, 2015). IUU policy is most concretely focused on environmental sustainability and economic concerns over mismanaged fisheries, but labour issues have been woven into the IUU warning issued to Thailand in 2015, given the use of migrant forced labour (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). Decent work, in comparison, is a policy-concept that came out of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1998 with a goal of ensuring a basic level of acceptable working conditions in the face of precarity. Recently, scholars and civil society

groups have been using the concept to advocate for better working conditions for those in fishing (c.f. Garcia Lozano *et al.*, 2023), though the concept itself was not developed as something specific to fisheries. This is particularly relevant as IUU policy has not thoroughly incorporated labour issues into its policy approach. Having been born out of the ILO, the liberal ideological orientations built into decent work limit its potential in fully realizing labour justice (Hauf, 2015).

In summary, I draw from Marxism feminism to focus on understanding relations of production and reproduction under capitalism, as shaped by both relations of production and social reproduction (McDonough and Harrison, 1978; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). I understand the Marxist concept of ‘relations of production’ as a gendered concept of labour relations with broader social and environmental implications. I examine the intertwined class, gender and environmental issues particular to the capitalist relations of fisheries in Vietnam, primarily: labour precarity, masculinities and hierarchies of masculinities, and fisheries decline.¹ I then assess current policy meant to address some of these issues in fishing, namely decent work and IUU fishing policy. This is not to say that IUU or the decent work agenda are adequately positioned to deal with the negative impacts of capitalist relations in Vietnamese fisheries. I have assessed them here as they represent approaches that are being used to improve fisheries governance. I then look beyond these policies towards what labour justice would require and entail. Notably, neither policy deals explicitly with gender.

Marxism feminism ↓ Social relations of production and reproduction (Fraser, 2017; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018; Battistoni, 2020)	Class	Gender	Ecology
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¹ Notably, race is missing as a central aspect of capitalist social relations. Race is central to any analysis of capitalism (Davis, 1981; Wills, 2018; Post, 2023), but racial cleavages did not play a central role in the labour relations of my particular thesis case study since the analyzed local spaces were fairly homogenous with respect to race and ethnicity. However, race is a significant factor in fisheries with international migrant labour and in terms of the racialized inequality of global capitalism (Marschke and Vandergeest 2023, Clark 2022).

↓ Capitalist relations in Vietnamese fisheries	Labour precarity (Rodgers, 1989; Marschke <i>et al.</i> , 2019, Millar, 2017; Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, 2019)	Masculinities and masculinity hierarchies (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) Engendering global capital (Hoang, 2020)	Fisheries decline and governance issues (Pomeroy, Nguyen, and Thong, 2009; Teh and Pauly, 2018; Phuong and Pomeroy, 2022; Roszko, 2021; Song <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
Policies to address consequences of capitalist relations	Decent work (Hauf, 2015; Brill, 2021)		IUU (Nolan <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Kadfak and Linke, 2021; Kadfak, 2024)

Table 1.1: Conceptual framework.

My three research chapters focus on different aspects of this conceptual framework, with some degree of overlap as is inevitable when looking at the intertwining of these concepts and how they draw from or impact each other. The following section outlines the central research questions guiding the operationalization of this framework.

Research Questions

In light of the context described above, my research examines the Vietnamese offshore fisheries, looking primarily at the major fishing port of Song Doc, Ca Mau, through the following research questions:

1. What are the working conditions experienced by offshore fishers in Southern Vietnam?
What does labour precarity look like?
2. How are masculinities and broader gender dynamics linked to labour dynamics in offshore fisheries in Southern Vietnam?
3. What impacts do fisheries reforms have on offshore fishers? How can a nuanced understanding of workers' experiences – and the gender and labour dynamics that exist among workers, captains and boat owners – contribute towards better fisheries governance?

Structure of the thesis

This thesis answers these questions in the form of three journal articles.² These articles are informed by more than six months of qualitative data collection in 2019 and 2020 and contribute to the academic and policy knowledge gaps briefly outlined above. *Chapter 2* describes the broader research context and the methodology implemented to answer my research questions within the parameters of my study. There, I outline the particular context of Vietnamese fisheries, gender in Vietnam and the specific location of my research. I also reflect on the methods chosen in light of my research goals and positionality as well as the strategies taken to overcome research limitations. *Chapter 3* is an article that examines the ways in which Vietnamese offshore fishers experience multiple dimensions of precarity, and it assesses the potential of the ILO's decent work agenda to address this precarity. In this chapter, I make use of a framework developed by Marschke *et al.* (2019) who expand on Rodgers' (1989) earlier work to understand six dimensions of precarity: temporal, organizational, protection, economic, ecological and biophysical, and spatial. *Chapter 4* is an article published in *Gender, Place and Culture* in 2022 for a special issue on gender and fisheries titled *Fishy Feminisms*. In it, I analyze the gendered labour dynamics in offshore fishing and demonstrate how a hierarchy of masculinities serves to keep men in fishing, how these dynamics are place-based (differing at sea versus on land), and how labour dynamics among workers, captains and boat owners rely, in part, on the bodies of women. I also demonstrate how performances of masculinities are closely linked to pressures of capitalism. *Chapter 5* is an article published in *Maritime Studies* in 2023 for a special issue on work at sea, co-authored with my PhD supervisor Melissa Marschke. Together, we examine the agency of fishers in the face of ongoing fishery policy reforms, the numerous impacts of these reforms, and the importance of centering labour justice in reforms. This incorporates an analysis of differing class experiences, again within the context of fisheries decline and governance issues. *Chapter 6* is a conclusion chapter that serves to summarize the findings of my three articles, highlight intersecting themes and how they respond to my research questions, and identify contributions to academic literature.

² Due to the earlier publication dates of Chapters 4 and 5, statistical data may not be up to date and newer relevant news and references may not be included in these chapters.

Chapter 2

Context and Methodology

Vietnam and its fisheries

Vietnam is a country in Southeast Asia with an extensive coast line 3,260 km long, mainly bordering the South China Sea (referred to in Vietnam as the East Sea), extending to the Gulf of Tonkin in the North and the Gulf of Thailand in the Southwest. The country has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)³ (417,663 km²) larger than its land size (331,210 km²), although some of the former remains disputed with China, the Philippines, and Taiwan. As a rapidly growing coastal country with a population of more than 98 million (World Bank, 2021), Vietnam has maintained an impressive economic growth rate in recent decades, between 5 and 8 percent of GDP since the early 2000s lasting up until the COVID-19 pandemic when growth slowed below 3 percent, still well above the global average (World Bank, 2021).

The political economy of the country has varied over the centuries and decades through periods of colonialism and independence and differing domestic and international goals. The Chinese, the French, and the Americans all instituted different regimes that shaped Vietnam's political economy with impacts such as a tradition of colonial resistance, a legacy of Confucianism and the influence of Western liberal political economy that are still felt today (Kiernan, 2017). In 1986, post-reunification of the north and south in 1976, the country introduced a policy known as *Đổi Mới* which began structural economic reforms that liberalized the economy, opening it up to a deeper integration with global markets. This eventually led to rapid economic growth and urbanization that is still ongoing. Vietnam is ruled by a single-party government that describes itself as communist with a "socialist-oriented market economy" (Fforde, 2019). While this description has been hotly debated, Buckley (2021) argues that Vietnam is a capitalist state since

³ The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is an area that extends up to 200 nautical miles from a country's territory and over which a country has extractive rights including fishing. This was established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982.

it adheres to Marx's definition of capitalism in that it operates with the goal of capital accumulation by maintaining capitalist social relations.

Fishing has been a factor in the impressive economic growth of the country. While fishing has been a part of the Vietnamese culture and economy for hundreds of years, the development of an industrial fishing sector began in 1976 following the reunification of the country and the approach was one of state management which established state fishing companies and cooperatives (Nguyen and Hoang, 2024). As laid out by Nguyen and Hoang (2024), the first fisheries 10-year plan began in 1991 and focused on the rapid growth of the industry. The expansion of offshore fisheries accelerated in the late 1990s and the government emphasis on offshore fishing was in part a deliberate effort to reduce the strain on coastal and inshore fisheries (Ehlert and Faltmann, 2018). In the 2000s, new attention to fisheries management, including the first Fisheries Law in 2003 and various subsidy programs which incentivized more people to enter the offshore industry through boat ownership, meant that the industry both became more regulated but also grew tremendously to make Vietnam one of the leading seafood exporters (Nguyen and Hoang, 2024). It is only in the last few years that the government has phased out subsidies, emphasized sustainable development and come to recognize the limits of capture fisheries growth (Nguyen and Hoang, 2024; Tuan and Chieu, 2023). The 2024 government legal decision 389/QĐ-TTg *Planning for protection and exploitation of aquatic resources for the period 2021 - 2030, with a vision to 2050*, addresses this recognition through policy changes meant to curb the growth of capture fisheries.

Internal migration and livelihood transitions have resulted from a shift towards a manufacturing and service-based economy typical of growing middle-income countries, yet many still remain attached to the more 'traditional' sectors in agriculture and fishing (Betcherman and Marschke, 2016; Betcherman *et al.*, 2021). Despite the fact that urban manufacturing now makes up a greater share of the national economy, the exploitation of natural resources, including the fishing industry, remains a major contributor to Vietnam's economic growth and Vietnam has ranked as the third largest exporter of fish products globally every year since 2017 (World Bank, 2022), producing a total of 8,276,400 tons of fisheries products in 2021 (FAO, 2022). This statistic incorporates the export of seafood from domestic inland, nearshore and offshore fishing,

domestic aquaculture, and seafood processing (of domestic and imported seafood). Major export destinations for Vietnamese seafood include the United States, the European Union, Japan, China, Korea and Thailand, as shown in *Figure 2.1*. *Figure 2.1* also shows the main species for export. These include shrimp and pangasius (catfish or tra fish) which are mainly obtained through aquaculture, and to a lesser extent, tuna which is caught by offshore boats. Exports reflect not simply domestic seafood but also imported and processed seafood for re-export. *Figure 2.2* shows the major suppliers of seafood (and types of seafood) for imports to Vietnam. Major suppliers are China, other Asian countries, the United States and the European Union, and the main imports are similar to exports: shrimp and pangasius (catfish or tra fish), and to a lesser extent, tuna.

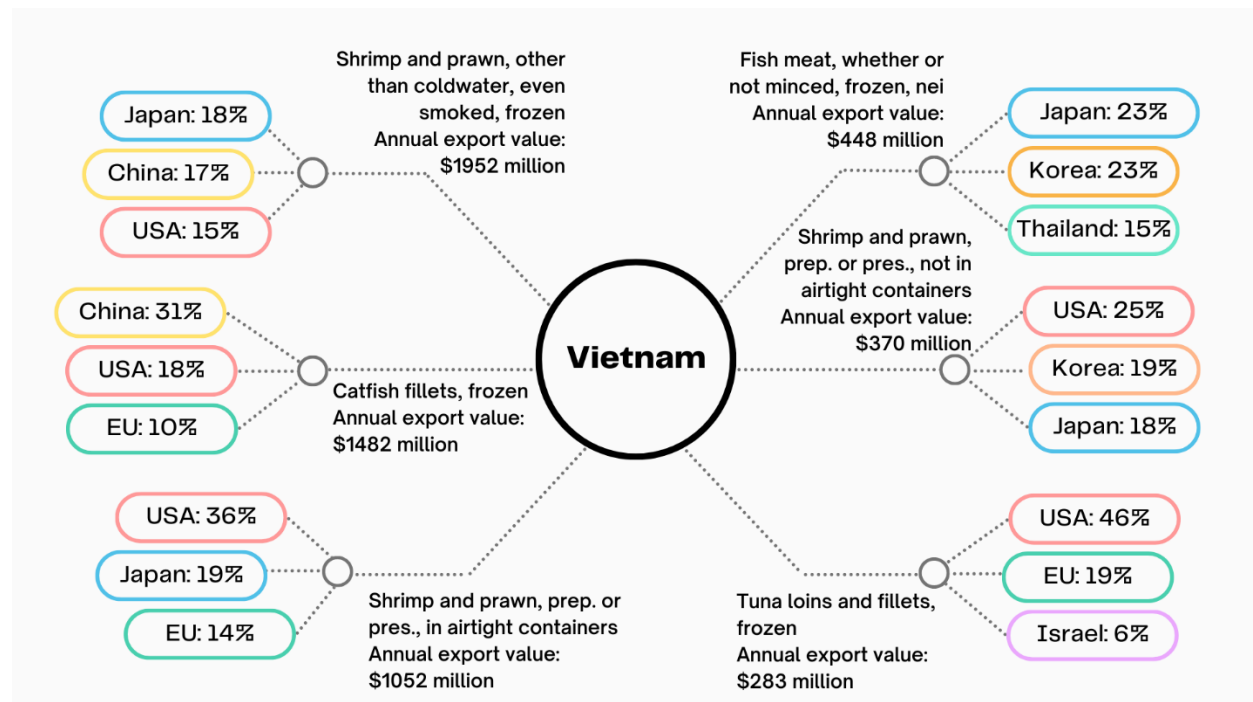


Figure 2.1: Seafood exports from Vietnam. This figure is adapted from a figure produced by Iftekharul Haque with data from the FAO's FishStatJ, based on average export values from 2019 and 2020. Note that "nei" stands for "not elsewhere included".

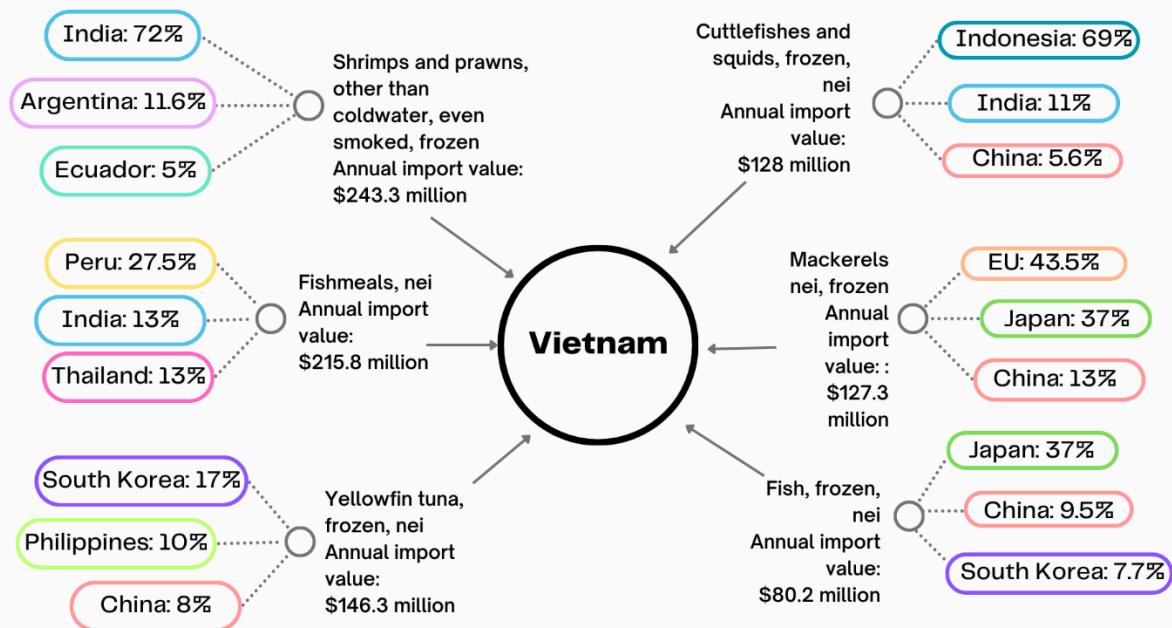


Figure 2.2: Seafood imports to Vietnam. This figure is adapted from a figure produced by Itekhharul Haque with data from the FAO’s FishStatJ, based on average import values from 2019 and 2020. Note that “nei” stands for “not elsewhere included”.

Capture fisheries

Capture fisheries fall into three categories in Vietnam: inland, nearshore and offshore fisheries. Inland fisheries refer to fishing in lakes and rivers in fresh or brackish waters. Nearshore fisheries involve boats less than 15 metres in length that are meant to fish within 12 nautical miles from the shore. Offshore fisheries refer to fishing activity that is meant to occur between 12 and 200 nautical miles from shore. This area is targeted by boats known as ‘blue boats’ which are between 15 and 24 meters in length and most often fish on monthly 20-day trips, carrying out industrial fishing and the largest catch landings. The workers on blue boats were the main focus of my research, and details of blue boat fishing activity are further explained in subsequent chapters. There are also a limited number of distant water vessels that may travel to the high seas and are typically out at sea for longer than 6 months. Higher-value species targeted by blue boats include tuna, mackerel and squid; low-value catch includes much smaller species, juvenile fish and bycatch, sometimes referred to together as ‘trash fish’ (Marschke and Betcherman, 2016). The latter makes up a substantial portion of the fish being caught by Vietnamese fishers, having increased significantly since 2002 (Marschke and Betcherman, 2016). ‘Trash fish’ as an

unintentionally high percentage of total catch is typically an indicator of over-fishing of high-value species or fishery collapse (Tacon and Metian, 2009).

Aquaculture

Vietnam has become a global leader in aquaculture production and export, with the sector growing steadily since the 1980s when it became important to the national economy (Thi Thanh Vinh, 2006). Vietnam now ranks fourth globally for aquaculture production (FAO, 2022), and is the leading producer globally for pangasius. Shrimp is another significant part of the country's aquaculture industry (FAO, 2022). Aquaculture has overtaken the capture fisheries sector in overall production since 2005 (see *Figure 2.3*). Aquaculture is mostly found along the coast and includes both inland ponds and cage farming in nearshore coastal waters (Thi Thanh Vinh, 2006). *Figure 2.3* shows that while overall seafood production continues to increase, exceeding an unprecedented 9 million tons in 2022, this is largely due to a growth in aquaculture. Capture fisheries production in 2022 shows a slight decline in production for the first time in decades (Government of Vietnam, 2023).

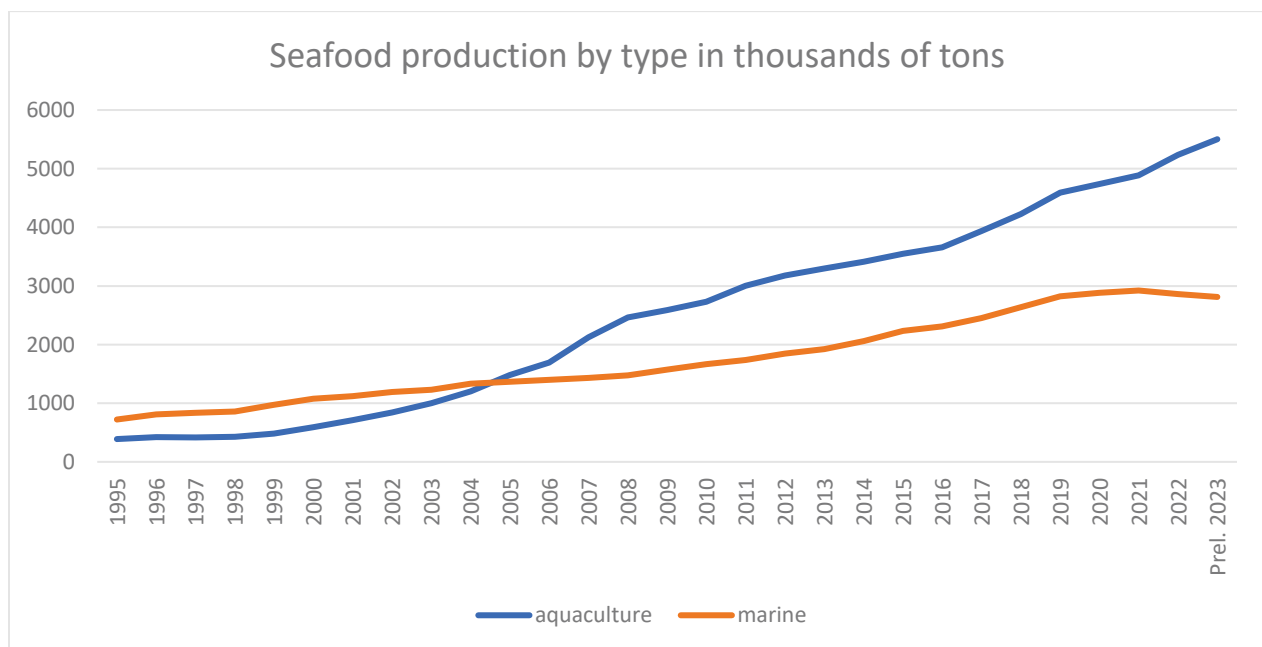


Figure 2.3: Seafood production by type in thousands of tons. This figure demonstrates the growth of seafood production from aquaculture and marine capture sources in thousands of tons over 23 years. Data for 2023 is preliminary data. All data is obtained through the Vietnamese General Statistics Office last updated on July 10, 2024.

Seafood processing

Vietnam has established a significant processing sector (FAO, 2022). The country is also recognized as a seafood processing hub due to its capture fisheries and aquaculture production, but also its processing of imported seafood. Beyond this, aquaculture is linked to capture fisheries through processing: low-value ‘trash fish’ captured at sea are sold to processing plants that make fish feed for aquaculture (Leadbitter, 2019; Changing Markets Foundation, 2019). The proportion of capture fisheries catch used to make fish feed is approximately 30%, similar to bordering countries (Teh and Pauley, 2018). In terms of exports, yellow fin tuna is the most significant wild-caught fish for Vietnamese export markets (WWF, 2023), despite seafood from aquaculture being a much larger factor for exports (see *Figure 2.1*).

IUU and current fisheries legal reforms

Vietnam is currently in a period of extensive fisheries reform spurred by the EU’s issuing of an IUU yellow card. While studies of the livelihoods of Vietnamese fishers have focused primarily on small-scale fishers in nearshore waters (c.f. Pomeroy, 2009; Andrachuk and Armitage, 2015), current reforms are largely targeting those involved in the offshore sector. Vietnam’s recently updated Law on Fisheries (18/2017/QH14) that came into effect in 2019, replacing an earlier 2003 fisheries law, includes notable changes addressing the EU’s IUU concerns including: greater law enforcement; an improved registration, licensing and monitoring system; enhancing the traceability of fish products; preventing illegal seafood from entering Vietnamese territory; and improving cooperation with other countries and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (VASEP, 2018). While the EU will not publicly state its recommendations to the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese government has noted that all of these recommendations were incorporated in the Law on Fisheries (VNA, 2024). Additional reforms including policies for issuing of fines have been implemented, but enforcement efforts remain a particular challenge. More recent data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Development show that ongoing challenges include vessels travelling illegally beyond Vietnam’s EEZ; vessels deactivating their Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) equipment, equipment which enables authorities to track the location of the vessel; and vessels operating without licences, registration or the required monitoring (VietnamNet, 2024). Details on the causes and consequences of these actions are explored in *Chapter 5*.

In May 2024, legal decision 389/QĐ-TTg *Planning for protection and exploitation of aquatic resources for the period 2021 - 2030, with a vision to 2050* came into effect to further tackle fisheries management issues with the goal of having the IUU yellow card removed. This decision takes the country in a new direction of trying to reduce capture fishery exploitation, including by: a) reducing the number of workers from 730,000 to 600,000 – currently about half of these workers work on offshore ‘blue boats’ (World Bank, 2021; Tuan and Chieu, 2023), and it is unclear if that fraction will remain the same in the overall reduction of workers; b) reducing the number of vessels to 83,600 – again, it is unclear how many will be inshore, nearshore and offshore boats; c) increasing regulations for protected areas and establishing 27 new marine protected areas; d) a stated commitment to improving people’s “material and spiritual lives”; and e) additional administrative penalties for owners, both those who do and do not captain their own boat, for illegally crossing into foreign waters. In October 2024, the EU conducted its fifth inspection to assess Vietnam’s compliance and success in implementing recommended reforms, and to determine whether the country’s yellow card and associated seafood export restrictions should be lifted (VNS, 2024).

Gender and masculinity in Vietnam

Vietnam ranks 115th of 191 countries listed in the 2021 Human Development Index (HDI), a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) ranking which measures development according to income, education, and life expectancy (UNDP, 2022). This puts the country as the last in the “high human development” category. When factoring in the UNDP’s gender inequality index, Vietnam moves up to 71st in human development. While these rankings help us understand how countries compare across certain quantitative indicators, they do not account for the messy, complex, subjective, qualitative, and structural nature of ‘development’. *Chapter 4* includes a review of the literature on gender and masculinities in Vietnam in this messier sense by looking at the political economic contexts for the development of particular masculinities and broader gender relations. In the chapter, I identify multiple masculinities with varying degrees of fluidity as informed especially by class and with dynamics differing at sea versus on land.

Vietnam is an example of a country in which offshore fishing includes the stark gendered division of labour: offshore work done exclusively by men, while women play an essential role in other aspects of the fishing value chain on land (processing, vending, reproductive labour, etc.) but are not part of fishing crews that go offshore. The fishing boat workplace, like other workplaces, is also a key site in which masculinities play out (McKay and Lucero-Prisno, 2012). In Vietnam, the intense bonding through spending so much time together and relying on each other's hard work and commitment for safety can be similar to a military brotherhood (Rydstrøm, 2019). The combination of historical (and also sometimes misrepresented) understandings of gender roles in Vietnam (Chiricosta, 2010; Su, 2024), Confucian gender norms (Chiricosta, 2010) and more recent liberal gender equality beliefs present particularly in urban areas (Earl, 2015) present a complex gendered political landscape which should be further examined as capitalist relations deepen in Vietnam. This context is discussed in *Chapter 4*.

Ca Mau and Song Doc

The main site of my research was the town and port of Song Doc in Ca Mau province. Ca Mau province is a largely rural province located in the south west of Vietnam, at the edge of the Mekong Delta, with Ca Mau city as the main urban centre. The province faces many environmental challenges including erosion, increased storms, salinity intrusion, and flooding, with women and poor populations being more vulnerable to these environmental changes (Ha and Nguyen, 2014). Song Doc port is the largest port in Ca Mau province and one of the main fishing ports in the country, together with Ta Cau port in Kien Giang province and Tho Quang port in Da Nang (Changing Markets, 2019). Ca Mau's geographic location at the southwestern tip of the country features surrounding waters that border on Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. This means that boats do not have to travel far before they end up in other countries' waters, a practice for which blue boats are notorious and one of the practices that earned them a yellow card (Song, 2019; VASEP, 2018).

Offshore fishers in Ca Mau also face declining or depleted fish stocks in their portion of the EEZ which includes parts of both the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. One indicator of declining fish stocks is a high percentage of 'trash fish' in capture fisheries landings since it means that the main targeted higher value species and mature fish are less abundant (Tacon and

Metian, 2009). In 2005, Southern Vietnam in particular was shown to have a much higher proportion of ‘trash fish’ in their total capture fisheries landings (60%) as compared to the central (14%) and northern (4%) regions (FAO, 2005). In their 2012 survey of households in Ca Mau province, Marschke and Betcherman (2016) also found that ‘trash fish’ were the most fished species in terms of total kilograms with rates increasing significantly since 2002, and this was particularly high among offshore fishers. The declining availability of high-value fish in Vietnamese waters is linked to one of the reasons why blue boats travel beyond the country’s EEZ. With these factors in mind, Ca Mau is one of the principal regions that have been targeted in efforts to crack down on illegal fishing in Vietnam (Nhan Dan, 2021). In 2021, Ca Mau had 1,525 fishing vessels larger than 15 meters meaning that they were required to be installed with VMS equipment, of which 99.5% had this VMS equipment installed, higher than the national average (Phuong and Hang, 2023). However, failure of VMS equipment on these boats is common (Phuong and Hang, 2023), in part due to intentional removal of this equipment by boat owners or captains (as explained in *Chapter 5*).

The importance of fishing in Song Doc is evident throughout the town as it largely centres around the fishing economy. Song Doc is one of the many fishing towns in Southern Vietnam that has an *Ong Nam Hai* temple honouring whales and the *Cá Ông* (whale god). The temple in Song Doc has a 20-metre-long skeleton of a whale that washed ashore in 1925 and other sacred objects honouring the *Cá Ông* (Nguyen, 2016). Whale worship is closely linked with the importance of fishing to the area as the *Cá Ông* is seen as a protector of fishers (Lantz, 2009). In addition to regular prayers and offerings at the temple from boat owners and the wives of those at sea asking for the safety and protection of fishers, a yearly festival occurs in Song Doc in mid-February of the lunar calendar to honour *Cá Ông*.

Methodology

Fieldwork is rarely straightforward. When dealing with the oceans and politically sensitive topics, this is even more true. While ocean research has most often been the domain of natural science and economics (White *et al.*, 2021), social science ocean research is gaining traction as oceans are recognized as workplaces (Vandergeest, 2018), homosocial settings (Rydström, 2019; Gustavsson and Riley, 2019), scenes of conflict over territory and resources (Spijkers *et al.*,

2019), and where illegal activity occurs far from view of authorities (Stringer and Simmons, 2014; Urbina, 2019). Social science research at sea has been described as fluid (Sampson, 2019) in an effort to explain the need to adapt to changing conditions. To borrow more ocean metaphors, it can also be described as vast and powerful, at times choppy and at others calm. This was certainly my experience. Boats out at sea are also connected to land through ports and the home communities of fishers. Conducting research in fishing communities can be challenging as these communities are often remote and insular, and may have a distrust of government officials or researchers (White *et al.*, 2021). The chosen research site in Vietnam only enhanced these dynamics: there was no ability for me to blend in due to visibly being a foreigner and not being fluent in Vietnamese and my presence brought significant government surveillance during a time of high sensitivity around the topic of my research as EU delegations were conducting inspections regarding IUU activity. I designed this study with these challenges in mind and was able to mitigate some research issues as I detail below.

Preparing for fieldwork

Prior to leaving for Vietnam to begin my research, I sought and obtained research ethics approval from my home institution, the University of Ottawa (see *Appendix 1*). Fieldwork for my thesis was conducted principally in Ca Mau province between September 2019 and March 2020, ending somewhat abruptly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In preparation for my fieldwork, I sought the help of contacts that I had at Tra Vinh University (TVU) located in Tra Vinh city in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. I had volunteered there for 6 months in 2016-2017 as an intern in the university's Ho Chi Minh Youth Union office and the university administration generously helped me get the required permissions to return to the country as a researcher. After arriving there in May 2019, I still had to secure permission from the Ca Mau provincial government before beginning research. I knew that getting research permission through official government channels was going to be a long bureaucratic, albeit important, process. It took longer than I presumed, however: about 4 months.

Ca Mau city, where the provincial government is located, is approximately 185 km from TVU in Tra Vinh city. Ideally, partnering with a university in Ca Mau would have been better for developing a research partnership. However, no such university exists. TVU's Department of

Agriculture and Aquaculture includes researchers who have carried out various studies in Ca Mau. They reviewed all my documentation, helped translate it, sent it to the university authorities for approval, and then sent final documents to the Ca Mau government for approval which allowed me to gain access to my chosen field site. Through connections at Tra Vinh University, I was also able to find a research assistant (RA #1) with previous research assistant experience who accompanied me to the field site, conducted interviews, and translated responses.

During this waiting period, I also undertook a preliminary scoping visit in order to observe and get a sense of the field site: Song Doc, located on the western coast of Ca Mau province, with the province's largest port. I travelled with a friend who could help me translate and we met up with another friend of a friend: a fisher who was keen on showing us around the port. While we were not able to conduct any interviews officially, I was still able to see the boats in port and get a sense of some of the obvious dynamics at play: both men and women on the docked boats repairing nets, mainly women selling fish products along the road, and busy coffee stalls where those not working were chatting or playing cards. The fisher friend, who was with his wife and kids, negotiated for a driver of a small boat to take us around the harbour to get a sense of the number of boats. There were dozens of blue boats back to shore for their monthly break. In addition to the fishing boats, we also saw the docks of the various seafood companies where boats sell their catch, either directly or via a transshipment boat (a boat that meets the fishing boat out at sea and collects the catch to free up space and keep the fish fresh, allowing the fishing boat to stay at sea longer).

In addition to all the document preparations and the scoping visit, while waiting for permission to begin fieldwork I also completed a 1-month intensive Vietnamese language course at the Vietnamese Language Studies school in Ho Chi Minh City. While this did not make me fluent enough to carry out interviews, the ability that I developed to introduce myself as well as communicate some basic ideas was important for building rapport with research participants. This also helped me to follow along as my research assistants conducted interviews and to have a sense if the discussion was going in a new direction.

To further prepare for beginning fieldwork, I attempted to make contact with numerous Vietnamese academics in Ho Chi Minh city at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh city as well as at Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta. My attempts at contact with researchers at University of Social Sciences and Humanities were unsuccessful, but I was able to speak with several researchers at Can Tho University. There, I sought advice about how to best connect with fishers and their families, what other organizations might be working in the area, and what adequate compensation for interviewees might look like. Through connections at Can Tho University, I was also able to secure my second research assistant (RA #2) who had extensive research experience interviewing farmers on social-ecological issues.

Finally, in mid-September 2019, I got the call that the Ca Mau Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had accepted my application and that I would be able to have an introductory visit and interview with them the following week. I hired a car and driver and travelled 5.5 hours to Ca Mau city with a representative from TVU's Department of Agriculture and Aquaculture as well as RA #1. I brought small gifts for the government representatives as is customary (TVU-branded mugs) and conducted the interview through my research assistant. The next day, the university representative who accompanied me to Ca Mau city returned to Tra Vinh city with the driver, while my research assistant and I travelled to Song Doc town to begin data collection.

The Study Design

A priority for me in conducting this study was to highlight the perspectives of the people who work on fishing boats and examine the dynamics of their work and implicated social relations. I, therefore, conducted interviews with fishers, boat owners, captains, and partners (in this case wives) of those involved in offshore work, as well as participant observation with these same people in Ca Mau. Answering my research questions required a qualitative approach as I wanted to understand the complex, messy, subconscious and embodied dynamics of fish work, in a material, social and relational sense. The combination of interviews and participant observation as methods allowed me to have in-depth conversations (through research assistants) with those associated with fish work and to experience how they related to each other which was necessary to be able to map out the particularities of fish work and to analyze the implications of these particularities for labour and gender dynamics.

These methods are common in Western qualitative social science research including international development research, despite the prevalence of positivism and perceived authority of quantitative research in many circles (Desai and Potter, 2006). While I continue to believe that my chosen methods were the best methods for me to carry out this study, in the Vietnamese context more quantitative ‘objective’ research is heavily favoured for the reason that research is seen as needing to be ‘apolitical’, especially by the Vietnamese government (Scott *et al.*, 2006; Gillen, 2016; Sowerwine, 2013). Legitimate research methods in this context are therefore things like questionnaires and closed interviews which can be used for statistical data analysis (Scott *et al.*, 2006). Since I partnered with TVU in order to obtain necessary research permissions, the university’s Department of Agriculture and Aquaculture reviewed my research materials and encouraged changes before sending the materials for government approval. This meant converting an interview guide with many open-ended questions to something that more closely resembled a questionnaire and setting a goal for the number of interviews to be conducted over a specified amount of time rather than stating an uncertainty and flexibility in my research design depending on how things played out in the field. This is part of why it was difficult to engage in the deepest levels of ethnographic research: it was not practical for me to stay in the fishing village full time as ethnography was not an approved method to combine with my interviews. (I detail more later in this chapter on what happened in some instances when I tried to do this anyway.) While this change in methods initially seemed counter to my research goals and methodology, I was able to make this work.

Interviews

The majority of participants interviewed in this study were connected to boats that go to sea to fish on a monthly basis, being offshore for 20 days or so at a time. It was important to interview multiple men involved in fishing at different class levels (workers, captains (managers) and owners (employers)) in order to properly unpack labour dynamics. Partners of these men were also included in order to get broader a sense of how gender and labour dynamics are experienced and shaped by women. I also interviewed a government official, a representative from Ca Mau’s Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to get a sense of fisheries issues from a

government perspective. For workers, captains and owners, interviews lasted an average of 30 to 40 minutes and included four sections in the interview guide (see *Appendix 2*):

- 1) Working conditions: This section involved questions about the fisher/captain/boat owner, the boat itself, and details of the work and risks involved. Many of these questions were based around the standards set in the International Labour Organization's *Work in Fisheries Convention No 188*, such as working hours and hours of rest, documentation (contracts), standards for payment, availability and quality of food and fresh water. I also asked fishers to explain in more open-ended terms what life is like on the boat, what they like and dislike about their work, and to describe their opinions on these conditions.
- 2) Fishing governance: This section was purposely vague due to the sensitivity of the topic and the questions having to be approved by the government. It asked about fishers' experiences with the law. Here, the questions on the page were minimal, but my research assistants tried to use the questions to open up a larger conversation and ask follow-up questions to participants' responses. This section included questions like:
 - Are you familiar with working conditions and environmental conditions in other neighbouring countries? Are Vietnamese conditions similar or different? (This was especially meant to get at the issue of forced labour in Thailand, but also brought up other unexpected answers.)
 - Have you heard of the EU's 'yellow card' and, if so, what does it mean for you?
 - Where are you allowed to fish and what happens if you go elsewhere? (While I did not explicitly ask if fishers had fished illegally outside of country borders, this sometimes came up in conversation, which was part of the intent of this question.)
- 3) Environmental conditions and experiences of environmental change: These questions asked participants to list and rank environmental changes they had observed over the previous 1, 5 and 10 years, to identify the drivers of these changes (in their opinion) and to explain the impact that this has had on fish work. While environmental data, such as fish stock decline and the number of large storms per year, can be verified through other

means, the goal here was to understand the perceptions of those working at sea to see if and how these perceptions influenced their work.

- 4) Labour and social relations: The final section asked participants, through a series of questions, to reflect on their relationships to fishers, captains, boat owners and their own families, including both work relationships and social relationships. This was designed as the final section of the interview as it required some rapport to have been built and participants to feel free answering openly. I also asked about taboos around women working on offshore boats, how workers spend their free time and who makes decisions in different contexts.

The interview with a government official included the same types of questions but asked so as to give a broader picture of the Ca Mau fishing scene, from a government perspective. Interviews with partners of those involved in fishing were shorter and asked about the interviewees' work and responsibilities, their feelings about their partners being involved in fishing, and how their partners' work impacts them (see *Appendix 3*). Interviewees in Ca Mau also suggested that we try to interview fishers in Kien Giang province. Kien Giang includes Phuc Quoc Island where offshore fishing is abundant and Tac Cau port on the mainland which is the largest fishing port in Southern Vietnam. I did not have official government permission to conduct interviews at the port but was able to speak with one fisher, a friend of a friend, in his home.

The initial idea was to ask mainly open-ended questions, after getting past some initial background and context questions, in order to explore the boundaries of what research participants deemed important to discuss. This would allow for a feminist in-depth interviewing style which asks individuals to explain their own perceptions of their circumstances in whatever way they see fit, providing not only specific details that might be asked in a questionnaire but also interpretations of what those details mean (Cuadraz and Uttal, 1999). However, as mentioned, I was strongly encouraged to develop a questionnaire with short answer and multiple-choice questions in order to get TVU and Vietnamese government approval. TVU's suggestions were helpful not only for government approval, but also for considering which questions might be shortened to save time and which ones I really wanted interviewees to expand on. They also

made a few culturally-relevant suggestions which helped me to develop a more appropriate approach and understand how interviewees might respond. Sowerwine (2013) similarly writes about modifying her research proposal and interview guide in Northern Vietnam to make her materials less sensitive to political questioning and she describes learning the difference between safe and unsafe topics. Despite these modifications to my interview questions, my request to interview the regional coast guard, which was initially accepted, was rejected once they saw my questions.

Ethnography, Participant Observation

Of course, the most direct way of understanding what happens on a fishing boat is to observe life on a fishing boat at sea. Investigative journalist Ian Urbina (2019), for example, has highlighted how the lack of observation on boats is one of the reasons why we understand so little about the activity that happens at sea. While this may be true, he was able to spend significant time at sea in extremely dangerous settings, in part due to the significant resources provided to him by the *New York Times* and because of his positionality. In my case, the dangerous conditions of fishing labour, the lack of safety on board, the taboos against women being on offshore boats, my lack of experience on fishing boats and a language barrier were all good reasons not to take this approach. I did not want to put myself at risk, nor did I want to make workers uncomfortable or interfere with their intense work on which their livelihoods depend. In short, this was not ethical, practical or safe (Sampson, 2019; Chiswell *et al.*, 2021). However, participant observation on land was still incredibly important both for building trust to carry out interviews with participants and for developing a deeper understanding of fishing life (Anbleyth-Evans, 2021).

Through interviews, I could learn about some of the dynamics at sea, and through the ethnographic method of participant observation, I complimented this information by observing how fishers worked together on shore, how they socialized, and how they interacted with their families. I observed boats and life in the Song Doc fishing port (including being invited on boats that were docked), was invited into fishers' homes, and had several meals at homes and in restaurants with fishers, captains and boat owners where I could observe the dynamics amongst them. I was also able to observe Tac Cau port in Kien Giang province for one day which allowed me to compare with Song Doc port.

Abandoned Methods: Photovoice and focus groups

I had considered photovoice as an alternative to going to sea on boats. Having fishers document their work with photos and then explain the photos that they took would allow them to critically reflect on working conditions and labour dynamics, their experiences of masculinity and gender dynamics, and environmental issues affecting fisheries, regardless of levels of literacy, potentially contributing to consciousness-raising, solidarity-building, and policy ideas (Wang, 2003). Dias and Armitage (2021) have demonstrated how useful this method can be in the context of fishing communities. However, due to the physical danger on offshore boats as well as the political sensitivity of the research context, I chose not to use this method for fear of creating unnecessary additional risks to research participants, myself and my assistants. Instead, I was lucky that some fishers took a big interest in my study and decided to take photos and videos at sea on their phones to show me when they returned.

I had also planned to conduct focus groups with fishers as a way to understand interactions among them, as a complement to individual interviews. This was not feasible given the schedule of fishers, captains and owners: when fishers are back on land, they often still have work to do to prepare boats for the next trip and they spend their limited time on shore with their families and friends, including drinking with coworkers. It was more respectful of their time to spend shorter amounts of time interviewing them and observing them as they went about their business, and talking with them about it when invited to do so. Coordinating focus groups seemed extremely difficult given both fishers' limited time and the likelihood of attracting the attention of authorities which would make the sharing of information less safe. I decided not to continue with this plan. Instead, I sometimes conducted interviews in pairs or groups of three when it was convenient. I also likely gained deeper insights into dynamics among research participants through participant observation than I might have through focus group as this approach allowed research participants to behave in a more natural manner.

Timeline of Research Activities

Interviews and participant observation were carried out mainly between September 2019 and March 2020. However, as described previously, a number of research activities were carried out prior to this while awaiting research results. A timeline of research activities is described below.

Date	Action	Details
March 2019	Obtained research ethics approval from the University of Ottawa	See <i>Appendix 1</i> .
June – September 2019	Working with Tra Vinh team to get government research permission	
June 2019 – January 2020	Volunteering at Tra Vinh University	Helping with various tasks and especially offering English language skills to various departments at TVU.
June 2019	Scoping trip to field site	Visited Song Doc fishing port in Ca Mau. Met with a fisher who took us on a small trip of the harbour and tested the interview questions with me and a friend acting as a research assistant.
	Finding first research assistant/ translator	Recent graduate from Tra Vinh University in the School of Foreign Languages (English major).
July 2019	1-month intensive language course	Completed A2 level of Vietnamese at Vietnamese Language School in Ho Chi Minh City.
August 2019	Visit for networking and advice at Can Tho University	
September 2019	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 1 interview with Ca Mau Department of Agriculture and Rural Development representatives; 4 wives of owners; 5 owners
October 2019	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 8 owners; 2 wives of owners
	Found second research assistant	Found through contacts at Can Tho University
November 2019	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 4 owners; 8 captains; 7 workers
December 2019	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 1 owner; 5 captains; 10 workers
January 2020	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 2 owners; 5 workers; 2 wives of owners; 1 wife of worker
February 2020	Interviews and ethnography in Ca Mau field site	Interviews: 3 owners; 4 captains; 15 workers; 1 wife of worker

March 2020	Visit to Phu Quoc for interviews and ethnography	Informal interview with 1 worker (not included in Ca Mau interview numbers)
	Visit to Ta Cau port, Kien Giang province	Was not able to speak with anyone at the port but we observed and talked to some shop owners.
	Some observation of a fishing festival in Song Doc	I had planned to conduct interviews but the situation became very tense with COVID-19 travel so we ended up leaving the area.

Table 2.1: Summary of field activities.

Data collection and analysis

I was mainly based in Tra Vinh and travelled to Ca Mau province monthly once I understood the fishing rhythms: for the majority of offshore fishers who depart from Song Doc port, this meant fishing once per month for approximately 20 days and being back on land for those 10 days in between trips. This was based on the lunar calendar with the purpose of avoiding the full moon at sea. Many boats fish at night and use bright lights to attract fish to the surface. This does not work when the moon is shining brightly. Figuring out fishing rhythms is essential to fisheries research although it takes some time and requires flexibility (Gustavsson, 2021). I also spent some time in Song Doc and surrounding areas when boats were out to sea. This allowed me to connect with boat owners and the partners of fishers without fishers being present. I was also able to observe the differences in the town when they were away. However, the intensive research happened during those 10 days when fishers were back every month.

Type of interviewee	n
Workers (all men)	37
Song Doc	(23)
Ca Mau province (outside of Song Doc)	(6)
Other provinces	(8)
Captains (all men)	17
Song Doc	(15)*
Ca Mau province (outside of Song Doc)	(2)
Boat owners (all based in Song Doc)	23
Men	(21)
Women	(2)
Partners of workers (all women)	3
Partners of boat owners (all women)	7
Government representatives	1

Total	88
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Table 2.2: Summary of interviewees. Two captains were originally from other provinces but moved to Song Doc permanently.

Table 2.2 lists the types of interviewees that I spoke with and the number of each. In total, I interviewed 37 hired workers working as offshore fishers, 17 captains, 23 boat owners (some of whom also captain their boats but are counted only as owners), and 10 partners of these men in Song Doc. Participants were recruited in person at Song Doc port, on the Song Doc–Ca Mau City bus, at the bus station, at coffee shops, and through other research participants as part of a snowball strategy. While I know from asking all interviewees that the blue boat workforce is largely made up of internal migrants coming from other provinces, these migrants would leave town immediately after returning to shore and were therefore difficult to interview. *Table 2.2* is therefore not a representative breakdown of the location in which workers are based as this would normally include more workers from other provinces. Another methodological, and potentially ethical, issue that arose early on was that a government official from the Ca Mau Department of Agriculture and Rural Development took it upon himself to take my research assistant and me to houses of those who work in the fishing industry. There were important advantages to this method of recruitment. Most obviously, I was able to meet many research participants without having to ask around, and as a foreigner, I came with the legitimacy offered by an accompanying government official. However, this presented two potential problems: 1) those with connections to the government were mainly boat owners rather than workers, and 2) the presence of a government official meant that respondents may censor themselves in not wanting to say anything critical of the government. I was eventually able to interview participants without government officials present. The issues of a representative sample of interviewees and government presence at interviews are discussed further in *Chapter 6*.

All interviewees were presented with an official document explaining who I am and what I was doing for the purposes of informed consent and they were offered a small payment for their time. Interviews were intended to be individual, but often my research assistants and I showed up to an interview at an agreed time and location with a research participant to find that they had brought along a couple of friends, a phenomenon that Gillen (2016) also documented in his research with Vietnamese men. The data that I collected through my field work was recorded in the form of

notes (both comprehensive summaries of interview responses and general daily observations) as it took place. These notes were kept in an excel document which kept track of the date and location of each interview for easy reference. A separate document recorded corresponding names and telephone numbers for possible follow-up.

Research assistants (often only one was with me at a time, but occasionally both were present) would conduct interviews with individual or sometimes several participants in Vietnamese, writing down the answer to each question in Vietnamese. Later in the evening or in between appointments, we would go over the participants' answers. I would type the answers that my research assistants explained to me in English and record the answers on my computer. This involved a lot of clarifying, especially at first to make sure that the language barrier between myself and my research assistant was not leading to a misunderstanding. Over time, we became very familiar with the content of the questions, the possible answers and each other, so this improved. I also audio recorded interviews when interviewees consented and hired assistants to transcribe and translate them in order to have another way to account for misunderstandings and be able to obtain more direct quotations from interviewees.

In order to analyze the collected data, I categorized interviewees in an interview log by their position (owner, captain, worker, other), gender, age, length of time at sea, monthly pay, whether or not they had a contract, the location of the interview and any notable circumstances. This way I could more easily compare interviewees of a certain type. In this log, I also included a summary of each interview and identified key themes. Separately, I kept documents for each individual interview and referred to their answers on specific questions as necessary. The language barriers and the sensitivity of the research context meant that truly in-depth, detailed and nuanced interviews were more difficult and summaries were the main source of understanding. However, the transcribed and translated versions were helpful in order to verify the summaries and to obtain direct quotations.

Fieldwork challenges

All field work comes with challenges. Two methodological challenges for me in this study were dealing with surveillance and navigating the politics of drinking alcohol. Both of these were

influenced by my positionality as a foreigner woman researcher which limited my ability to blend into the community and to observe fishing life unnoticed.

Surveillance

In addition to having a Ca Mau provincial government officer accompany me to some initial interviews, I also faced issues with local police or government officers observing my activity. It was often unclear what the requirements and expectations of me were despite having official authorization from the provincial government and provincial police. A couple of times I was told by police that I was not allowed to visit the field site as more documentation was required. In September 2019 at the beginning of my field work, my research assistant and I tried to visit the unloading area of the port and we were immediately followed and subsequently questioned by a plain-clothed police officer who said foreigners were not allowed there. We left right away, but this led to the police showing up during a scheduled interview at an interviewee's house to look at my documentation and monitor what I was doing. After some discussion between my research assistant and provincial and local authorities, we were assured that everything was in order for me to continue with my research.

However, in November 2019 we were stopped by police once again when they saw us conducting interviews with two blue boat captains near the Song Doc police headquarters. The police brought me and my research assistants (both were with me at this point) into their office and asked us to cease all research activity. They explained that I needed a special letter from immigration giving me permission to be in the sea boundary area as a foreigner. I (through my research assistants) explained that I had all the correct paper work and gave them copies of Ca Mau provincial government approval, TVU approval, my schedule, and my passport, but they responded that I needed an approval letter from the police and immigration. One of my research assistants called our contact at the Ca Mau provincial government again and he tried to resolve this with the police officer telling him we have permission but the police refused without additional documentation. The police then told me I would have to immediately leave the sea boundary area (which begins about 5km from Song Doc, see *Figure 2.4*) until I had obtained the correct letter from the Ca Mau provincial police. They asked what hotel I was staying at and said they would come check later to make sure I had left. We left Song Doc and it was an ongoing

challenge to get the proper documentation, but we were assured by multiple parties that it would be okay to return to Song Doc so we did the next day. After another incident of the police looking for me at my hotel, arguing that foreigners did not have permission to stay at hotels in the sea boundary area, my research assistants and I decided to no longer stay in Song Doc overnight. We did not get the official permission form from the local police until January 2020, and even after that we continued to face scrutiny and surveillance from plain-clothed police officers.



Figure 2.4: Sign marking the ‘sea boundary area’ about 5km from Song Doc, Ca Mau. Photo by author.

COVID-19 was also, of course, an unforeseen problem which resulted in me having to halt my research slightly earlier than anticipated. Increased attention from police and the monitoring of foreigners by police in other parts of the country seemed to indicate that police often used COVID-19 as an excuse to monitor more closely any activities of foreigners in addition to

nationals. In my experience, this policing was partially out of a genuine concern about the spread of the virus, but it was also being used as an added reason to monitor me and my research. On my final day in my field site, I was stopped by police several times and people seemed quite afraid of me as a foreigner who could potentially be spreading the disease. I decided to leave the field after this experience as further research was not going to be possible. I returned to TVU and, within a few days, to Canada.

Drinking

In researching fisheries and masculinities in Vietnam, it was inevitable that alcohol would enter the picture. As I explain further in *Chapter 4*, while drinking alcohol is an activity popular across ages and genders, it is also an activity through which workplace and gender dynamics are negotiated and reinforced. As these topics are directly related to my research, it was useful for me to observe and participate in social spaces with alcohol. Even more importantly, being invited into these spaces was sometimes the only way to speak with fishers as a group and observe group dynamics. Often interviewees had a chance to further reflect on questions that I may have asked them earlier that day – this was akin to what I sought to achieve through focus groups but less rigid and not as suspicious to police. It also allowed me to meet other possible research participants that I might follow up with at another time.

There is a “masculinized form of binge drinking” (Gillen, 2016, p. 590) that is common in these spaces where toasting requires everyone at the table to drink to the toast and where individuals challenge each other or the entire group to drink a certain amount of a drink, often saying “100%” (i.e. the full glass of beer). Gillen (2016) notes some of the ethical objections that this might entail from a North American standard, but argues that we might challenge this assumption due to the fact that avoiding these spaces may inhibit understandings of social dynamics and prevent access to key participants. Indeed, Vietnamese researchers that I spoke with highlighted the importance of building rapport through drinking alcohol.

On the other hand, while I was open to drinking a little bit, I was often concerned about how to avoid drinking too much. I did want to engage with people, but I also did not want to be drunk for practical and personal safety and comfort reasons. The police surveillance presented a tense

and stressful situation and I wanted to have full control over my actions and be able to reasonably observe what was happening around me. Vietnamese women friends told me about their strategy to fill their glasses with ice and let the ice melt somewhat so that a drink became very watered down. My research assistant who is a man sometimes chose to engage more deeply in these masculine drinking practices which allowed us to learn more from the fishers we were with.

Epistemology and positionality

As with any project, my understandings and analysis are filtered through my epistemology and positionality which inform both my approach to research and what research participants chose to share with me. As previously noted, I came up against an epistemological clash with Vietnamese standards of academic research. Their idea of quality research entailed a well-designed questionnaire with closed questions and a high number of respondents, while mine was less reliant on the number of respondents and placed greater emphasis on the depth of interviews and ethnography. The compromise that I came to was to use what looked like a questionnaire as a means to spark deeper discussions (which were recorded) and to find a high number of participants as an approach to allow me several opportunities to better observe social dynamics.

My methodological approach comes from a Marxist-feminist epistemology which privileges the voices of those with direct experiences of oppression. Feminist research that seeks to understand gender relations values lived experiences rather than purely scientific data, pre-existing theories, or the researcher's preformulated views (Cuadraz and Uttal, 1999). Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) explain that agency and self-definition of those being researched is key to intersectional analyses of race, class and gender. The government official who helped grant me research permission introduced me to several boat owners and hoped that this would be enough for my research. Although this was generous, I really needed to talk to workers to understand working conditions and precarity. Boat owner and elite perspectives provided useful insights, but the perspectives that workers shared was often very different. While my research does focus on men and masculinity, this is different than simply perpetuating dominant masculinist epistemologies. Rather, men are the focus because they are offshore workers (and boat owners) and understanding masculinities is part of deconstructing normalized gender relations. Researching

masculinities in this way is a feminist approach to research. Researching gender as linked to class and a Marxist understanding of capitalism is a Marxist feminist approach to research.

Often it is hard to know all the ways in which differing aspects of positionality are interpreted by others. The purpose of reflecting on positionality, however, is to better understand the ways in which research is mediated through power dynamics. This is important both in interpreting research results as well as in navigating ethical challenges. My positionality is highlighted throughout this chapter as well as subsequent chapters as it comes up in relation to my research context, research support network and research participants. I do my best to centre fishers and the fishing community throughout this thesis, but I also sometimes need to contextualize this information and my positionality comes up when relevant.

There are many aspects of my identity that shape who I am, but my positionality refers to how I relate to my research context and informs the dynamic between myself, research participants and my research support network (including those at Tra Vinh University who helped me navigate research procedures, government officials, and research assistants). The most obvious aspects of my positionality that mediated my relationships in the research context were nationality (specifically being a Western foreigner), my job (as an academic) and my gender (as a woman).

My positionality presented some obstacles, but also many opportunities. For example, the fact that I clearly stood out as a foreigner made it hard to blend in and meant that I had police surveilling me constantly, especially when in the sea boundary areas. At the same time, people often came up to me to chat as they were curious about my presence in areas not frequented by tourists. Sometimes this led to conversations where we met research participants or people who led us to research participants. In many instances, I could defer to the positionality of my research assistants as Vietnamese: one Kinh (woman), one Khmer (man). A rigorous research process and the involvement of many different people allows for a wider lens of understanding.

Chapter 3

Addressing Precarity in Vietnamese Offshore Fisheries: The Possibilities and Limitations of the Decent Work Agenda

Introduction

As has been documented in the publicization of NGO reports (c.f. EJF, 2019; Greenpeace, 2016), journalistic investigations (c.f. Urbina, 2017) and academic research (c.f. Vandergeest and Marschke, 2021; Yea and Stringer, 2023), the increasing public and institutional awareness of poor working conditions in fisheries globally has led to a greater emphasis on the need to address these conditions by international institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023). Work at sea is incredibly dangerous and deadly (ILO, 2004; Campling and Colas, 2021; Willis *et al.*, 2023), and there is a wide range of what this entails. In some fisheries, workers are deceived into a particular agreement in which wages are withheld, physical and sexual abuse occur at sea, and leaving boats is a major challenge as access to ports is restricted (Pocock *et al.*, 2018; Strating, Rao and Yea, 2024). This can amount to forced labour (Stringer and Harre, 2019; Mileski *et al.*, 2020). In other cases, a lack of regulations around work hours, rest hours, access to adequate food, and occupational health and safety (Pocock *et al.*, 2018; Stergiou-Kita *et al.*, 2015; Power, 2008) may not qualify as forced labour under the ILO definition, but create unacceptable working conditions. Often, migrant workers experience more pronounced abusive conditions (Seo, 2018; Le, 2022; Marschke and Vandergeest, 2023). Given these distinct but widespread unacceptable working conditions, decent work and the Decent Work Agenda (DWA) have recently emerged in fisheries research and advocacy as part of the solution to address poor working conditions and labour abuse through improved research and policy (Garcia Lozano *et al.*, 2021; Garcia Lozano *et al.*, 2023; Kartikasari *et al.*, 2022).

The concept of decent work is largely associated with the DWA developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1998. It was integrated into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as part of Goal 8: “to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN,

2015), as well as in numerous other human rights declarations and UN resolutions (ILO, 2023). The four pillars of the decent work agenda are: 1) full and productive employment, 2) rights at work, 3) social protection and 4) the promotion of social dialogue (ILO, 2023). These include ten elements that must be considered: employment opportunities; adequate earnings and productive work; decent working time; combining work, family and personal life; work that should be abolished; stability and security of work; equal opportunity and treatment in employment; safe work environment; social security; and social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation (ILO, 2023).

The DWA was a response to the exploitative conditions experienced by workers, especially in the global South, through the process of globalization (Lerche, 2012; Lopez, 2022). It was lauded by many advocating for attention to workers as an important part of continued globalization and development, as well as by some feminist scholars since it explicitly recognized unpaid reproductive work in addition to informal and nonstandard work (Hauf, 2015). As Lucy Brill (2021) explains, the crux of the academic debate has been whether the concept of decent work, and its deployment through the DWA, can be a useful tool for setting acceptable standards and collaborating to make sure that working conditions live up to those standards (c.f. Rodgers, 2002), or instead, whether it weakens pre-existing labour justice efforts by failing to identify the real trends in worker experiences and their root causes (c.f. Spooner and Waterman, 2015; Hauf, 2015).

In addition to an overarching decent work agenda promoted by the ILO, the ILO also works with countries to develop a results-based framework around the country-specific context for implementing a DWA, known as the Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP). Vietnam's current DWCP runs from 2022 to 2026 and sets out to achieve an ambitious agenda which aims for an inclusive, sustainable, safe and comprehensive economic transformation that is enshrined in Vietnamese law and thoroughly enforced with the goal of achieving multidimensional poverty reduction, especially for those at risk of being left behind (ILO, 2022). The fishing sector is named multiple times in Vietnam's DWCP, with particular emphasis on the importance of occupational health and safety, eliminating child labour and ensuring rights and protections for Vietnamese workers leaving to work as migrants in other countries as necessary for achieving

decent work in the fisheries sector (ILO, 2022). These mentions are included in the Table 3.1 below.

Priority	Output	Contribution
Priority 2: Protection	Output 2.2.1: Social protection services for child and forced labour incorporated into strategies and actions to tackle child labour in all its forms and forced labour.	Contribution 2.2.1.4: Strengthen relevant agents' capacity, including employers' representatives, to implement national laws and policies through knowledge of child labour, monitoring and enforcement, particularly in the fishing sector and traditional craft villages.
	Output 2.3.2. Promote control and mitigation of workplace OSH [occupational safety and health] risks, including those posed by COVID-19, within a broader framework addressing preparedness for future OSH crisis in the world of work.	Contribution 2.3.2.1: Reduce risks by building capacity of workers and employers in labour-intensive sectors, including in coffee, electronics, wood, fisheries and garment production sectors on risk assessment and management.
Priority 3: Governance	Output 3.2.1 Labour market governance is improved through strengthened rule of law respecting fundamental principles and rights at work.	Contribution 3.2.1.3 Combat child labour through action implementing the National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Reduction of Child Labour, for the period 2021-2025 with vision to 2030 and Roadmap, particularly in the fishery sector .
	Output 3.3.2: Well-maintained public and private migration institutions created or improved to protect the labour rights of migrant workers.	Contribution 3.3.2.1 Improve capacity of recruitment agencies and of employers in the fishing and seafood processing sectors to protect labour rights and ensure good labour practices.
	Output 3.3.3: Workers' rights are respected through application of the rule of law, enabling prospects for freely chosen and productive employment for women and men through safe and regular migration.	Contribution 3.3.3.2 Strengthen the legal, policy and regulatory frameworks related to labour migration and labour standards, with a focus on the fishing and seafood processing sectors .

Table 3.1: Places with mention of fisheries in Vietnam's Decent Work Country Programme.
Table 3.1 is adapted from Vietnam's DWCP and pulls together all the mentions of the fishing and seafood processing sectors from the much more extensive document. In total, the DWCP has 3 priorities, 21 outputs and 92 contributions. I have put mentions of fishing in bold.

Following the call from Garcia Lozano *et al.* (2021) to apply the decent work concept to fishing, this paper examines how a decent work approach could improve Vietnamese offshore fishing labour and what the limitations of this approach may be. Before being able to conduct this assessment, I first look at multi-dimensional experiences of precarity in Vietnamese offshore fisheries using an expanded framework first deployed by Marschke *et al.* (2019) in their study of Jamaican fisheries. I argue that the DWA could help rid the sector of some extreme abuses and improve many unsafe and poor working conditions, especially in combination with the ratification and implementation of the ILO's Work in Fishing convention (C-188) (which sets some international standards for working conditions in fishing – Vietnam has not yet ratified this convention), but that the DWA approach fails to get at some of the deeper issues that perpetuate precarity in the first place.

A precarity framework

Precarity is a concept that has been used in multiple ways across the social sciences (Millar, 2017; Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, 2019). Indeed, as Millar (2017) argues, the act of defining precarity has both analytical and political implications. She provides three broad conceptualizations of precarity: precarity as a labor condition, a class category, and an ontological experience. A central and foundational stream of precarity literature, one which I apply here, focuses on the conditions of productive labour (Hewison and Kalleberg, 2013). Precarity has also been prominently discussed as a condition of a class of worker, the *precariat*, a combination of *precarious* and *proletariat*, who experience increasingly insecure livelihoods under the conditions of late capitalism (c.f. Standing, 2011), and more broadly, as a state of being affecting life in general, influenced by political economy and demonstrating the interactions of class, gender, race and other dynamics (c.f. Butler, 2006; Munck, 2013). Certainly, precarious conditions in productive labour are intimately linked with social precarity for workers, their families, and others in society (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). In the context of the

trafficked migrant workers in the fishing industry in Southeast Asia, Yea (2019) refers to the precarious conditions faced by these workers' families at home as a *secondary precarity*.

The concept of labour precarity is useful in helping to unpack how insecurity, vulnerability, contingency, and exploitation impact people's lives, pointing primarily to the structural conditions related to work that have shaped these impacts (Strauss, 2018). The concept has gained traction in the 21st century as a way of explaining the destructive impacts of post-Fordism and late capitalism on productive labour and social reproduction, particularly in the Global North. Fordist policies, while not confronting capitalism itself, emphasized a living wage and labour protections to enable workers to participate more fully in the economy (Rodgers, 1989; Kalleburg, 2009). The post-Fordist era has seen diminished wages and labour protections combined with increasing worker precarity (Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, 2019). Labour precarity emphasizes not just the individualized impacts of labour and social conditions, but the policies and systems that shape these conditions and as such has been used by social justice movements primarily in the Global North due to its political implications that call for alternatives to capitalism (Waite, 2009).

Although precarity studies originated in France (see Rodgers, 1989), the concept has since been used elsewhere to illuminate the particularities of insecure work and life, both as a descriptive and analytical tool. Experiences of precarity are not geographically limited. The emerging discussion of precarity in Southeast Asia, including in Vietnam, centres on the rapid industrialization that has led to a boom in the manufacturing sector, in particular garment factories (Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, 2019; Tappe and Nguyen, 2019; Arnold, 2012). Global processes of capital accumulation, combined with environmental degradation, also impact those who remain in agriculture and fishing: the conditions of late capitalism and growing capitalist accumulation have made work in fishing less predictable, and indeed, more precarious (McCall Howard, 2012). The impacts of these conditions are, of course, not equally distributed as some lives are more precarious than others (Strauss, 2018). Under capitalism, state security is commonly justified as the logical response to the insecurity of precarity. The normalization of precarity is used as a tool of neoliberal governing involving increased security and regulation that benefits the ruling class rather than the workers (Lorey, 2015).

Precarity has been used to describe fishing in very few academic analyses (see, however, Marschke *et al.*, 2019 and Asif and Van Arragon, 2023). In their study of precarity in Jamaican fisheries, Marschke *et al.* (2019) outline a framework building on the four dimensions of precarity identified by Rodgers (1989). Rodgers' (1989) dimensions are: (a) temporal – limited or uncertain employment duration; (b) organizational – weak individual and collective control over working conditions; (c) protection – little or no social security benefits and inadequate protection against improper working conditions and (d) economic – inadequate pay, associated with poverty and social exclusion. Marschke *et al.* (2019) identify two additional dimensions of precarity: (e) ecological and biophysical – drivers of change within which labour practices, organizational decisions and economic logics are situated (e.g. biodiversity loss, climate change); and (f) spatial – relating to the characteristic of space. I use this expanded framework, detailed in *Table 3.2*, to understand labour in Vietnamese offshore fisheries before assessing how a decent work agenda could impact these dimensions of precarity.

While the ecological and biophysical are not typically included in precarity analyses that focus on labour, fishing is a line of work that very directly relies on the ecological and biophysical environment and a worker's job quality and income are tied to the conditions of that environment. The environmental damage that comes with biodiversity loss and climate change has a significant impact on the conditions of work at sea. This includes less predictability in locating targeted species, less predictable weather and increased storm activity which affects worker safety. Similarly, the movement of vessels, which may be subject to multiple jurisdictions within each fishing trip as influenced by policy and marine border enforcement as well as the aforementioned ecological factors, indicates a spatial dimension to precarity in fishing in that fishers may face various and differing conditions, including imprisonment, depending on where they go. It is therefore important to use an expanded framework that touches on these, as do Marschke *et al.* (2019).

Temporal & Spatial	Temporal precarity is employment that is limited or uncertain in duration, including jobs with short-term contracts, no contracts or a high possibility of job loss. Spatial precarity speaks to how the physical work environment relates to experiences of precarity.
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Organizational context	The organizational context refers to the amount of control that workers (individually and collectively) have over the conditions of their work and employment details. This includes the presence and power of unions.
Levels of labour protection	This includes legal or customary protection (enforcement of adequate labour law and upholding of customary worker protections) and social protection (broader social services and supports).
Economic conditions	This relates especially to income, debt and other material factors that workers experience as a result of their employment.
Ecological & biophysical change	This refers to the ecological and biophysical conditions and changes that relate to the workplace. This is especially, but not exclusively, relevant to jobs that rely directly on the natural environment.

Table 3.2: Dimensions of precarity. Table 3.2 notes the dimension of precarity as outlined by Rodgers (1989) (temporal, organizational, protection and economic) and Marschke *et al.* (2019) (spatial and ecological). Temporal and spatial have been combined.

Employment and life more generally are never completely stable and guaranteed; uncertainty and instability are always present to some degree. Rodgers (1989) notes that precarity comes from some combination of these elements, thinking more on a spectrum rather than a binary of presence or absence. To be sure, fishing has never been secure, has always been contingent on the weather and fishing intensity, and has not typically operated within a Fordist model (Marschke *et al.*, 2019), see however Neis' (1991) analysis of Fordist regimes in North Atlantic and Newfoundland fisheries. However, the growing call for blue justice in small scale fisheries (Bennett *et al.*, 2021) and the elimination of labour abuse in industrial fisheries (Tickler *et al.*, 2018; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020) speaks to the degree of challenging working conditions that all fish workers experience.

Methodology

Research for this study involved interviews and observation and was conducted over 6 months in 2019 and 2020 in and around Song Doc, Ca Mau province, Vietnam. Song Doc represents one of the largest ports in Southern Vietnam. Those interviewed primarily included 37 fishers (hired workers), 17 captains and 23 boat owners who were connected to 'blue boats', Vietnamese offshore fishing boats that are distinguished by their blue painted exterior. With the help of Vietnamese research assistants who conducted interviews and translated responses, dozens of questions were asked about working conditions at sea, as well as social, labour and environmental dynamics both at sea and back on shore. Due to the sensitive nature of IUU

fishing in Vietnam at this time and the surveillance experienced by the research team, limited discussion on illegal activity took place unless volunteered by interviewees.

Results: Precarity in Southern Vietnamese fisheries

Seafood exports are significant to the impressive growth of Vietnam's economy over the past two decades. Vietnam is the third largest exporter of fish products globally, producing a total of more than 8 million tons of fisheries products in 2021 (FAO, 2022). In 2022, seafood exports reached an estimated total of 9 million tons, representing around USD \$11 billion in exports (Government of Vietnam, 2023; Tuan and Chieu, 2023). These high numbers are largely due to aquaculture and seafood processing, but offshore fishing also makes up a portion of this.

Vietnamese fisheries rely on the labour of workers on 'blue boats.' Of the total 730,000 workers currently employed in fishing, almost half work on blue boats (World Bank, 2021; Tuan and Chieu, 2023). These are wooden boats between 15 and 24 meters in length that are designated to fish offshore in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). While blue boats only make up about 26% of all fishing vessels (Statista, 2022), they have a greater catch capacity and employs more workers than the more abundant nearshore vessel. Blue boats mainly target squid, mackerel, skipjack tuna, and low-value fish, also known as 'trash fish' that are sold to processing plants that make fish feed for aquaculture (Marschke and Betcherman, 2016; World Bank, 2021; Changing Markets Foundation, 2019; author interviews).

Despite the significance of seafood landings of blue boats to Vietnam's economy, many blue boat fishers struggle to make a living in this high-risk and unpredictable job (Alonso and Marschke, 2023). Below, I describe various aspects of precarity in Vietnamese offshore fish work. These descriptions are largely informed by author interviews and observations in 2019 and 2020 with boat owners, captains and fishers in and around the Song Doc port, one of the largest ports in Vietnam, located at the Southwestern tip of the country. Workers on offshore boats are Vietnamese men from within the province, across the Mekong Delta, and sometimes Central Vietnam.

Almost all fishers in Song Doc get paid based on a catch share system. This means that workers are paid not through an hourly wage or salary, but based on how the profits from a fishing trip

are divided. Blue boats fishing offshore in the EEZ typically spend about 20 days at sea and return to shore for 10 days each month. As mentioned, boat owners take between 50-70% of the profits (depending on the boat owner, the gear type and potential for high profits, and the owner's ability to attract a sufficient number of workers) after expenses are subtracted, and the rest is divided among workers based on a point system in which captains get the most and other crew members get the rest which is divided on a scale unique to each boat based on skill and experience.

Temporal & Spatial

At the time of my research (2019-2020), there were no regulations banning offshore fishing for particular fishing seasons in Ca Mau province. *Figure 3.1*, however, shows a small area (in red) where nearshore boats are not allowed to fish for three months in the spring. Despite the lack of restrictions for offshore boats, some boat owners decide not to send their boats to sea at certain times of year when catch is less reliable due to poor weather and therefore trips are less profitable, especially since pay is tied to catch. At these times of year, other boats may continue to operate but with fewer crew. Multiple interviewees noted this, saying that windy weather which is prevalent at certain times of the year has a major impact on fishing success, but that some workers continue fishing during that time because of a lack of alternative options, while others choose not to fish during this period. This indicates a temporal dimension of precarity. Despite the legal possibility for fishers to fish year-round, unfavourable and often dangerous seasonal weather may make offshore fishing less profitable at certain times of the year, leading to a lower pay for workers who work based on a catch share system. Additionally, the lack of crew and increased dangerous weather may make working conditions riskier.

Temporal precarity also relates to the uncertainty of long-term or continued employment. This uncertainty is always a possibility for fishers as they may experience injury, boat destruction, employers deciding to leave the business, loss of a family member (if a fisher has a close family member that dies, as did one interviewed worker, they may be banned from stepping on a boat for a year for superstitious reasons) or arrest and detention of workers caught fishing illegally in other countries. On the other hand, as found in my interviews, workers often obtain significant loans from boat owners as an advance which they must repay before ending work or switching to

another boat. This means that while the continuation of employment may be likely, this employment is also precarious as it could tie workers to continued employment with little pay or choice. For example, one worker who works on a boat that catches a variety of fish mentioned that he typically receives between 1M and 5M VND (USD \$40-200) per monthly fishing trip but that he holds a loan of 17M VND (USD \$684). While 7-10M VND (USD \$302-433) is a more typical salary, especially when higher value species such as tuna are targeted with more efficient gear, workers still hold loans that are much higher than their monthly income. One boat owner explained that some fishers have loans of 20M to 30M VND (USD \$804-1207). The loans are therefore difficult to pay back.

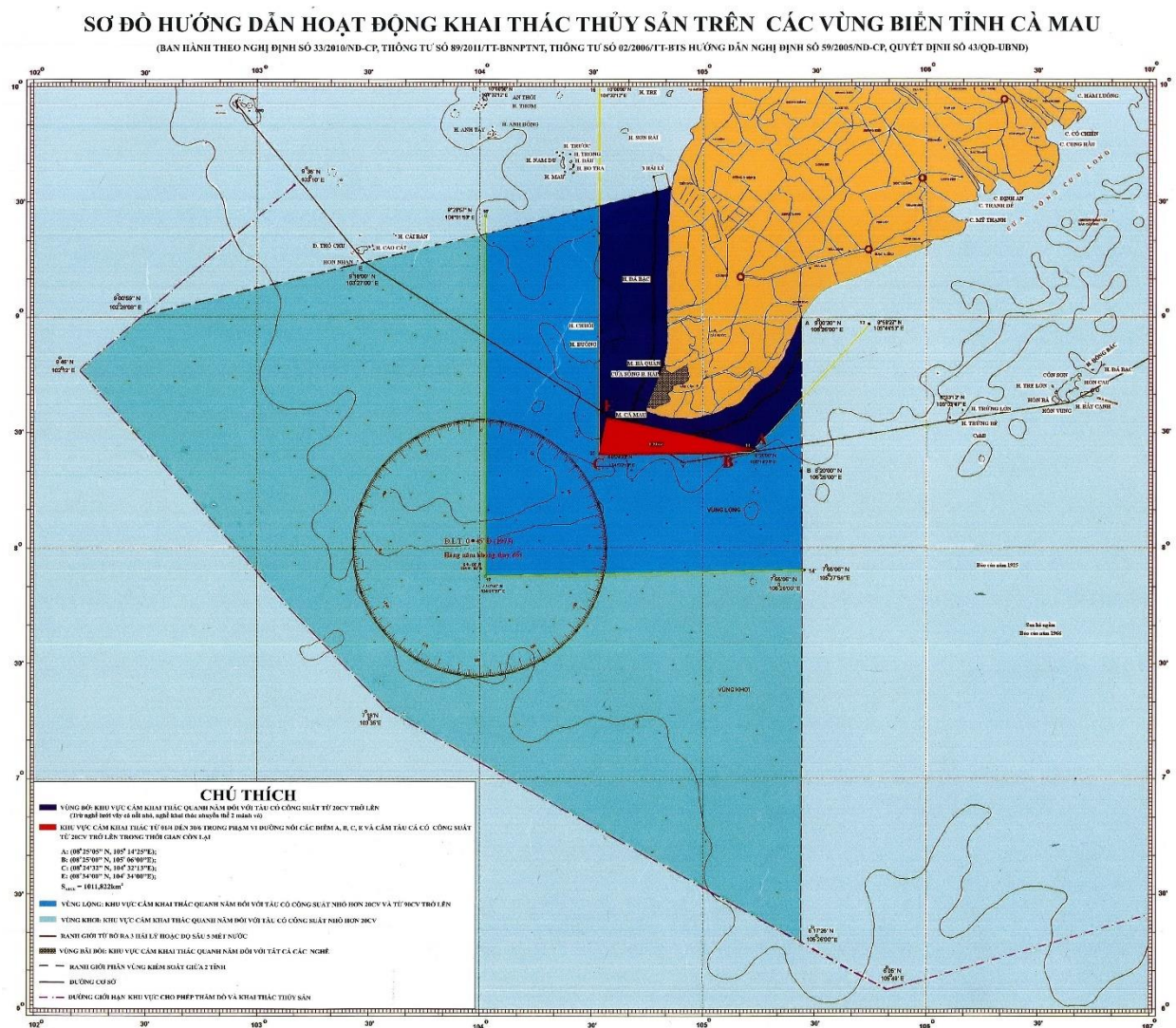


Figure 3.1: Map of Ca Mau fishing grounds. This a map that was distributed during a local training session in Song Doc with captains and boat owners. The map identifies the areas where boats are allowed to operate and when. Offshore blue boats are allowed to fish within the

medium blue and lighter blue areas in the triangle, while nearshore boats may operate within the dark blue area. The red area, typically open to nearshore boats, is restricted from April 1 to June 30.

In terms of spatial precarity, blue boats are motivated to travel further afield due to declining fish stocks and the pursuit of particular fish species. The increasing drive of Vietnamese fishers to fish beyond the EEZ combined with political tensions around illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and maritime border disputes have made the spatial aspect of precarity a significant one due to the potential for arrest, fines and destruction of boats when going into international waters that fall within the jurisdiction of other countries (see Alonso and Marschke, 2023). All interviewed boat owners and captains were aware that they were required to stay within Vietnamese waters. Occasionally, interviewees would admit that they had illegally traveled outside of Vietnamese waters and on some occasions had faced foreign prison or fines. Some captains explained why they took this risk despite the consequences. A worker with over 20 years of experience working on a purse seine boat explained that nowadays, fishing conditions in Vietnam are such that those in the industry are simply doing their best to catch as much as they can in order to make enough money to live. He explains that sometimes this means participating in illegal practices.

Organizational context

Vietnamese fishers based out of Song Doc are not organized into unions. Vietnam has a single authorized union federation, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), which has never led a strike, despite numerous wildcat strikes that have occurred particularly in factories throughout the country (Buckley, 2021). The country's union structure has only recently begun to open up to other types of legally sanctioned organizing with the signing of international trade agreements, particularly the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). In any case, fishers are not members of the VGCL. For blue boats in Song Doc port, there is no central employer. Conditions of employment are negotiated verbally with boat owners. The difficulty in obtaining labour has also led to boat owners increasing catch share amounts in favour of workers (i.e. the boat owner might take 50% of total profits instead of previously having taken closer to 70% before distributing the rest among workers). This shift was described

in several interviews with boat owners, captains and workers. For example, one boat owner explained that he keeps the workers working for him by increasing the benefit share: he used to take 60% of the profits leaving 40% to workers and reduced this to 55% leaving 45% for workers. It is worth mentioning that the majority of workers believed both that they did not make enough money and that the pay was fair, attributing the problem of low pay to the conditions of work rather than the way in which the pay was divided. While there is no formal organizing of workers or representation from unions, workers have been able to gain some improved conditions through the close social relationships in the community; however, they do not always apply to all workers.

Levels of labour protection

Vietnamese workers have legal rights and protections under Vietnam's Labour Law which was most recently updated in 2019, this version coming into force on 1 January 2021. The law includes several rights and responsibilities of workers and employers and outlines the legal protection of workers from discrimination, forced labour, being forced to carry out illegal activities, human trafficking, sexual harassment, and underage employment (Government of Vietnam, 2019). Given the particular context of offshore fishing which differs dramatically from most onshore workplaces, there are many exemptions in Vietnam's Labour Law for this type of work. For example, mandated maximum work and minimum rest hours do not apply to work at sea. However, Vietnam's Labour Law names offshore fishing as one of the sectors in which it is prohibited for those under the age of eighteen to work, even with parental consent (article 147). In my research, those who I encountered that were underage workers (or who were referenced by others as underage) were mainly older teenagers 16-18 years old. In one instance, a father who was with his 11-year-old son told me that his son works on offshore fishing boats. Research carried out by the Environmental Justice Foundation (2019) which involved interviewing Vietnamese fishers caught in Thai waters highlighted the use of child labour which also was mainly found to be older teenagers but included children as young as 11 years old.

Despite existing legislation, my interviews with fishers revealed gaps in labour protections. This includes several workers under eighteen, one as young as eleven, many who started fishing around age fifteen, and one older fisher who told me that he started fishing offshore when he was

eight years old. The Environmental Justice Foundation (2019) also reported finding a number of workers under eighteen, some as young as eleven, on Vietnamese boats apprehended in Thai waters. Additionally, almost all fishers reported that they worked as necessary on boats and did not have any set rest or work hours: work hours depend on when and how frequently targeted species are found. However, they noted that they usually had time to rest since it can take time to locate a decent potential catch. The ILO (2019) reports that workers in the fishing sector in Vietnam work the highest number of hours per week on average of any sector.

I also found significant issues with documentation. Almost all interviewed fishers lacked written contracts, except in cases where they were contracted to be at sea for six months or longer. Additionally, some boat owners admitted to keeping the citizen identification cards of employees while they were at sea. These are both illegal.

Furthermore, occupational health and safety seemed to vary across different boats. Many interviewees were not able to explain a clear safety plan or emergency plan. Some mentioned that if there was a serious injury, they could turn the boat around and head back to land. However, they noted that this is a very rare scenario as it would take time (1-2 days if the boat is in the designated offshore area) and jeopardize the entire trip which could be costly. Some interviewees said that there were life jackets on board while others said they had no access to life jackets. One worker spent four days at sea after going overboard before being rescued.

Economic conditions

With the catch share systems in place on blue boats, workers could make as much as VND 7–10 million (USD \$302–433) in one month under the right conditions, but this varies and workers could also end up earning less than Vietnam’s rural monthly minimum wage of VND 3.43 million (USD \$148) (Government of Vietnam, 2019). Some interviewed boat owners noted that if they do not make a profit from a fishing trip, workers do not get paid anything, while others said that they set a guaranteed minimum monthly income of VND 2-3 million (USD \$87–130) for workers regardless of profit. Still, this minimum falls below the locally set minimum wage and workers might try to make extra money doing boat or gear maintenance while back on shore between trips, limiting the time they can spend with their families. Advanced loans, as

previously described, are an incentive used to attract workers though these may result in increased economic precarity if workers are not able to pay these loans back.

Ecological & biophysical change

The amount of seafood fished from overexploited or collapsed fish stocks in Vietnam's EEZ has increased significantly in the past decade, and the country ranks as one of the worst globally for use of trawling gear which significantly harms the ecological integrity of oceans (Wolf *et al.*, 2022). Several fishers, captains and boat owners interviewed explained that difficult fishing conditions were related to a decline in available fish stocks because they had to travel farther to find fish, which they explained made the job harder and resulted in lower incomes due to the catch share system. Many argued that this was a result of "too many boats" competing for limited resources, while others noted poor environmental management from the government. Regardless of the cause, fishers are having to work harder and travel further afield to make a decent income. Locating targeted species requires workers to be working, even if they are not in the process of hauling in a catch. As mentioned, if boats do not find satisfactory amounts of fish in Vietnamese waters, captains may decide to head illegally beyond the EEZ with the risk of arrest and imprisonment, which demonstrates the relationship between ecological precarity and spatial precarity. Additionally, climate change leading to increased frequency and intensity of storms at sea also creates a more dangerous work environment with less predictable work periods and income. As an example, an interviewed boat owner described losing two of her boats due to a storm. The captains of her boats attempted to escape the storm by taking refuge in Thai waters where they were apprehended by authorities, causing a loss of income for workers.

Discussion

Approaches to addressing precarity in fishing

Following an account of each dimension of precarity experienced by Vietnamese offshore fishers described above, *Table 3.3* ranks the degree of precarity for each dimension. It also lists some possibilities for addressing these dimensions of precarity, which I further explain below.

Following this, I discuss the ways in which a DWA could help and what gaps remain. It is worth keeping in mind the interconnectedness of these dimensions. For example, improving economic conditions through fisheries management and other supports could also improve spatial precarity

by reducing the economic incentive to fish beyond the EEZ, thereby reducing the likelihood of fishers ending up in foreign prisons. Another example is that improving the organizational context and the ability of workers to take collective action could improve both levels of labour protection and economic conditions.

Dimension	Degree of precarity	Possibilities for addressing precarity
Temporal & Spatial	- Temporal: medium - Spatial: high	- Temporal: possible targeted fishing seasons with support or alternatives for the off-season - Spatial: reduce incentives to fish illegally
Organizational context	- Medium	- Unions or worker organizations - Improved labour relations
Levels of labour protection	- Medium	- Ending child labour at sea (included in DWCP contributions 2.2.1.4 and 3.2.1.3) - Ratification of C-188 - Enforcement of labour laws (included in DWCP contributions 2.2.1.4 and 3.3.3.2) - Improvement of occupational health and safety measures (included in DWCP contribution 2.3.2.1)
Economic conditions	- High	- Livable wage rather than simply a catch-share system - Addressing poverty holistically
Ecological & biophysical change	- High	- Restrictions on fishing seasons, gear, targeted species, number of boats - Other environmental initiatives not explicitly fishing-related

Table 3.3: Summary of an assessment of degree of precarity by dimension for Vietnamese offshore fishers based in Song Doc port and possibilities for addressing precarity.

Temporal precarity is ranked as medium as fishers based in Song Doc are able to fish throughout the year without their work coming to a complete halt for designated months. However, many interviewees noted that certain months are less viable as they are much less profitable. Several called for environmental regulations including fishing seasons which might give fish populations a chance to restore themselves and could eventually result in more abundant catches during the designated fishing season. In order to reduce precarity, however, this would require alternative employment or other supplemental income to support fishers in the off seasons. Some fishers already have this arrangement and spend certain months of the year working in agriculture if they deem it a better financial option.

Spatial precarity is high due to the ecological incentives to fish further afield coming into conflict with the crackdown on boats fishing beyond the EEZ. This could be addressed by continuing training sessions with captains and boat owners as well as by reducing the incentives to fish illegally. Importantly, this includes addressing the underlying issue of poverty, as further detailed by Alonso and Marschke (2023). A highly punitive approach does not seem to be working to prevent boats from leaving Vietnam's EEZ as reports show that this is still an ongoing issue and this often results in significant loss of income for those who end up in prison abroad or captains who are faced with extreme fines.

The organizational context is a medium level of precarity because despite a lack of formal unions, which, beyond fisheries, do not exist as such in the context of Vietnam (Buckley, 2021), workers are bonded around particular performances of masculinities (such as drinking and enjoying women as entertainment while on shore) that, when performed, allow them to negotiate working conditions to a certain extent (Alonso, 2022). Additionally, boat owners' struggle to hire enough labour to send their boats to sea has resulted in a shift in catch share breakdowns that favours workers. More formal unions, however, could help ensure that working conditions and labour relations, including pay, are standardized and that workers are informed about these before they begin work. Unions could also help ensure that labour relations are not so attached to performances of masculinities and are instead formally negotiated for all workers.

Labour protection can be directly addressed through improved enforcement of labour law. As noted, labour laws, while perhaps inadequate, are not absent. For example, Vietnam's Labour Law clearly bans those under eighteen from working on offshore boats. Labour laws pertaining specifically to the situation of offshore fishers could be improved by the ratification and enactment of the ILO's C-188 to include more detailed work standards specific to fishing, especially around occupational safety, documentation, working and rest hours, and other workplace regulations. However, this must come with enforcement as many of the existing laws are not being effectively enforced.

Economic conditions, perhaps the most obvious dimension of precarity, include addressing poverty, low wages and debt of workers. These can be addressed by implementing a minimum

wage that is high enough to be a living wage (i.e. a wage that is adequate for living without additional income) and shifting away from catch share arrangements that may result in workers making very little or no money. Furthermore, while advanced payments to workers are a major incentive for men to go work on boats, it may not be clear to them how difficult it is to make enough money to pay this back and therefore how long they are committing themselves to continue working for the same employer. Although there is typically no interest charged, advances should not be so high that they bond workers to employers.

Ecological and biophysical change have a significant impact on precarity and influence other dimensions of precarity. Policy changes such as restrictions on gear, targeted species and the number of boats at sea, as well as the implementation of fishing seasons, could help improve ecological and biophysical conditions so as to make fishing more environmentally sustainable. Attention to environmental issues, however, must simultaneously contend with attention to labour issues as both are linked.

A DWA and precarity

The decent work approach does not explicitly challenge neoliberal globalization or capitalism and remains somewhat open and adaptable, rather than specific and critical (Brill, 2021). Some have argued that this is strategic for an international body such as the ILO, especially in a politically volatile time, and that measures can be ramped up as countries get on board with these more basic ideas (c.f. Rodgers, 2002; Barrientos, 2007). Others such as Hauf (2015) argue that by advocating for soft labour regulation and voluntary corporate measures, the approach serves to “to ‘re-ethicalise’ neo-liberal production” (p. 150). Standing (2008) adds that decent work as conceptualized by the ILO is vague, non-confrontational, and lacks any real power to change or even the ability to properly understand labour relations.

The DWA certainly presents an opportunity to improve working conditions and address aspects of precarity in Vietnam's offshore fishing industry. Despite Vietnam having not ratified the ILO's C-188, reforms to the fishing sector in Vietnam have been ongoing since the country was issued an IUU yellow card from the EU in 2017. Emphasis on the improvement of labour legislation and its enforcement with regards to fisheries in the DWCP is a welcome sign of

attention to the labour protection aspect of precarity. Furthermore, child labour could be something that is weeded out through a seriously implemented DWA and is one of the stated goals for fishing mentioned in the DWCP. This is important and welcome as the risks at sea are extreme and it is particularly dangerous for children and teenagers. However, ending the practice of child labour does little to improve working conditions for average fishers. Further, it does nothing to improve labour relations and ensure better quality livelihoods. The reason children are fishing in the first place is because of intergenerational poverty and the desperation of families needing to make ends meet (Ha and Nguyen, 2014). Alternatives are needed to support youth and families needing extra income to survive. Brill (2021) explains that scholars critical of the DWA take issue with the fact that a “focus on core labour standards... [does] not challenge the increasing precarity of work within global supply chains” (p. 14). The global context of supply chains that particularly exploit racialized workers and workers in the global South (Hickel *et al.*, 2024; Clark, 2022) can undermine the effectiveness of labour legislation.

As suggested, unionization could help address organizational precarity. However, the DWA focuses on “promoting social dialogue” rather than unionization (Selwyn, 2013). This is problematic because using the concept of “social dialogue” presents each party as having equal power and interest in compromise. This entirely misunderstands how labour organizing works and the importance of collective negotiation and action in achieving better pay and conditions for workers. On the other hand, Vietnam’s DWCP includes a focus on respecting worker’s rights which could signal the government supporting and making an effort to specifically improve workers’ interests. It is unclear how much workers would be involved in this process.

The DWA notes the importance of decent work happening in the context of environmental sustainability. However, the framework is based on sustained capitalist growth. The inherently contradictory notion of environmentally sustainable capitalist growth (Hickel, 2019) is perhaps more obvious in fishing than in other sectors. An ‘inclusive’ blue growth is appealing to financial institutions, international environmental NGOs and global North governments because it is still rooted in capitalist profit. Fisher movements have rejected the idea that workers or the environment would see real benefits. A DWA that relies on economic growth threatens to worsen the ecological and biophysical dimension of precarity, as well as other dimensions. Only

recently in 2024 has the Vietnamese government made a legal decision to reduce capture fisheries by reducing the number of workers and boats involved (Government of Vietnam, 2024). This represents a major shift from a previous government approach dating back to the 1970s to expand capture fisheries and pursue significant growth goals (Nguyen and Hoang, 2024). However, fisheries decline still represents a factor in the precarity experienced by workers and new measures will be important to addressing this.

Even with a robust agenda in which Vietnam's approach to decent work in fishing included implementing the regulations outlined in the ILO's C-188 and IUU reforms meant to target the socially and environmentally harmful aspects of the fishing industry, there are still limitations to what a DWA could achieve. This is because of the political orientation of the DWA, which is rooted in the liberalism of the ILO, strives for reforms under capitalism rather than confronting capitalism itself (Brill, 2021). One of the key problems with the DWA is that it misunderstands (or misrepresents) the relationship between capital and labour and assumes the possibility that, even in an industry so directly connected to global capitalism, they can be in a long-term, mutually-beneficial dynamic (Selwyn, 2013). Rather, capital exploits labour and the environment in the pursuit of profit (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). There are no guarantees that labour sees any benefits from these profits (Selwyn, 2013); in fact, it is highly unlikely unless explicitly negotiated in a context in which failing to do so poses a threat to capital.

Conclusion: Towards labour justice in fisheries

The widespread nature of unacceptable working conditions in fisheries makes it clear that improving the working conditions of fishers should be a priority for the sector. A DWA could make work better for fishers to some extent by addressing aspects of precarity to varying degrees. However, truly decent work involves changes to labour relations that are inherent to capitalism. This includes the way that capitalism exploits both labour and the environment. In the decent work agenda, a misunderstanding of capitalism and the basis of inclusive growth weaken the potential for widespread, truly decent work. Nonetheless, a focus on decent work would help prioritize labour amid other policy changes which is essential for labour justice and the sustainability of the industry.

In Vietnam, the numerous intertwined aspects of precarity are not all being tackled equally. There is a danger that efforts to improve labour legislation, including addressing child labour and occupational health and safety, could be undermined by an inability to address economic precarity, such as when poverty becomes a motivating factor for engaging in illegal fishing in other countries, for example. Temporal and spatial precarity must also be considered as part of a holistic approach to improving labour experiences in fishing. Recent attention to ecological and biophysical dimensions of precarity through policies meant to reduce fishing activities could help those who remain in the industry in the long term but requires an adequate employment transition plan for those moving out of the industry. With regard to this new offshore fishing reduction approach, Vietnam has shifted from the DWA's core tenant of inclusive growth, one which is problematic. This shift inspires hope for steps towards labour and environmental justice reflects a reprioritization of workers and the environment over continued economic growth in the sector. It remains to be seen how this will play out.

Chapter 4

Managing Masculinities: Dynamics of Offshore Fishing Labour in Vietnam

This chapter was published in Gender, Place and Culture (volume 29, issue 12) on October 5, 2022 for a special issue entitled “Fishy feminism: Feminisms in fisheries research”. It is reprinted with minor edits with permission from Taylor & Francis.

Abstract

Vietnam’s offshore fishing industry remains a space dominated by men, with fish work being tied to notions of what it means to be a man. This paper uses interview data and participant observation to assess the ways in which masculinities shape and are shaped by labour relations in offshore fishing in Southern Vietnam. Findings show that labour relations are maintained through an emphasis on the abilities of men to do difficult physical work, behavioural expectations associated with masculine norms, and a homosocial bonding culture at sea, in addition to a bonding culture on land that involves drinking and women as entertainment. Multiple masculinities are identified with varying degrees of fluidity as informed especially by class and with dynamics differing at sea versus on land. In a context of fish stock decline and international pressure for strict fisheries reform, efforts to sustain an offshore fishing workforce rely, in part, on the reproduction of a particular local hierarchy of masculinities.

Introduction

As a rapidly growing coastal country, fishing plays an important role in Vietnam’s national economy. In 2019, Vietnam was the third largest exporter of fisheries products worldwide and ranked seventh globally for capture fisheries production (FAO, 2021). The Vietnamese government is striving towards a goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2035 (World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, 2016). This plan includes increasing Vietnam’s offshore fishing fleet for even greater fishing capacity, in part to reduce the strain on nearshore and inshore fisheries (Ehlert and Faltmann, 2018; Harper and Sumaila, 2019; Le, 2016) but also in response to tensions over disputed maritime territory, particularly with China

(Roszko, 2020). The impetus for an expansive fisheries sector in the country is not just internal – France and the US have historically pressured Vietnam to intensify fishery production (Butcher, 2004; Hayton, 2014). Further, the economic liberalization restructuring (known as *Đổi Mới*), introduced in 1986, has fostered the rapid growth of industrial fishing as an economic driver (Pomeroy, Nguyen and Thong, 2009; Teh and Pauly, 2018), as seen in other Southeast Asian countries and in China (FAO, 2022). As a result, the region has experienced an alarming decline in fish stocks in recent decades (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2018; Myers and Worm, 2003; Salayo *et al.*, 2008).

The Vietnamese offshore fleet involves wooden boats that range from 15 to 24 meters long and are intended to remain in the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), between 13 and 200 nautical miles from shore. These boats, however, are notorious for travelling into other countries' waters illegally (Phuong and Pomeroy, 2022; Roszko, 2021; Song *et al.*, 2019). This is in part why the European Union (EU) is pressuring Vietnam to undertake several fisheries management reforms in order to address Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing or else face potential trade sanctions (VASEP, 2018). Additionally, the particularities of fishing in Vietnam include the stark gendered division of labour: offshore work is made up exclusively by men, while women play an essential role in other aspects of the fishing value chain on land (processing, vending, reproductive labour, etc.). Workplaces dominated by men that emphasize the importance of certain masculine traits, competition for precarious resources, and high risks and rewards, produce a culture in which a hierarchy of masculinities shapes workplace conditions and labour dynamics (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018; Shrestha, Joshi and Clément, 2019).

The combination of fish stock decline and an economic growth strategy involving increasing offshore capture fisheries results in a challenging situation for workers trying to make ends meet. As I found in this study, written labour contracts are extremely uncommon in offshore fishing, especially for those who do shorter (20-day) offshore stints. In this context, this paper asks what role social relations, and masculinities in particular, play in the maintenance of labour in offshore fishing. This paper argues that notions of masculinity are tied to class and constructed in part by pressures of capitalism which encourage men to engage in offshore fishing and take on associated risks. Boat owners actively play on the dynamics of a local hierarchy of masculinities,

sometimes themselves and sometimes also through the use of captains, in order to hold on to workers. Workers, themselves, also perform certain masculinities for their own survival in the industry. The dynamic of how this plays out varies based on place, specifically at sea, a homosocial setting, versus on land where women are also involved in social dynamics.

Masculinities in Vietnam

Numerous influences have shaped the distinct and continually evolving gender dynamics found in Vietnam today. The myth of Âu Cơ as the spiritual mother of the country is commonly invoked to suggest that Vietnam had a matriarchal foundation prior to adopting Confucian traditions imposed through Chinese colonialism (Chiricosta, 2010). Confucian traditions involve, among other things, the subordination of women to men, and still inform modern Vietnamese gender dynamics (Huynh, 2021). Gender dynamics have been negotiated together with the many contradictory aspects of elite European ideas of feminism as well as Marxist notions of anti-colonialism prevalent in the struggle for independence (Earl, 2015). Southern Vietnam was also influenced by Western popular and material culture during the years of American presence and war (Earl, 2015). Following this, Đổi Mới restructuring began shifting previous socialist efforts which promoted the importance of women in public roles as nationalist symbols, though gender roles were still reinforced in particular ways (Leshkowich, 2014), and instead re-emphasized women's domestic duties, pressuring them 'not to compete with men in "their fields"' (Chiricosta, 2010, p. 128). Western liberal notions of feminism have also contributed to Vietnamese gender roles through globalization (Horton and Rydstrom, 2011) and many urban women now balance a prestigious career on top of the responsibilities of childcare (James-Hawkins *et al.*, 2019).

Dominant notions of masculinity in Vietnam are still intimately linked with the expectation of men being the breadwinner in the family, or the 'pillar' of the household, and further involve a man prioritizing his career, being powerful, physically strong, taking risks and challenges, not showing weakness, being able to handle his alcohol, and being easily provoked into anger which women are meant to alleviate (Horton, 2019; Horton and Rydstrom, 2011; Huynh, 2021; ISDS, 2020; Rydstrom, 2006). The relationship between workplace success and ideal masculinity means that jobs with low income and few benefits are not only a material strain but also a

gendered one as men have to work for the ‘symbolic capital’ of being the pillar of the family or else have their wives assume this role (Le, 2012). Jobs that are linked with dominant notions of masculinity include government jobs or state security officers while younger men in cities have shifted to idealizing jobs in the modern financial or information technology sectors (ISDS, 2020). In fishing villages, however, employment options are far more limited and local masculine ideals are closely linked to successful fishing livelihoods (Rydström, 2020).

Methods and theoretical approach

Research for this study involved interviews with fishers, boat owners, captains, and partners of those involved in offshore work, as well as participant observation at Song doc port in Ca Mau province, Vietnam in 2019 and 2020. While I was not able to observe workplace dynamics on boats far out at sea for ethical, practical and safety reasons (Sampson, 2019), I was able to spend time with fishers conducting interviews to learn about what happens at sea and making observations on land where workplace dynamics are also constituted, often centring around activities deemed more acceptable for men, such as drinking, smoking and gambling, which facilitate the performance, reformulation and reinforcement of masculine ideals (Gillen, 2016; Horton and Rydström, 2011; ISDS, 2020).

Specifically, with the help of research assistants who provided Vietnamese-English translation, I interviewed 37 hired workers working as offshore fishers, 17 captains, 23 boat owners (some of whom also captain their boats but are counted only as owners), and 10 partners of these men. It was important to interview multiple men involved in fishing at different class levels (workers, captains (managers) and owners (employers)) in order to properly unpack labour dynamics. Partners (in this case women) of these men were also included in order to get broader a sense of how local masculinities are experienced and shaped by women. The majority of participants interviewed in this study were connected to boats that go to sea to fish on a monthly basis, being offshore for 20 days or so at a time.

In this paper, I examine the co-construction of labour relations and masculinities. Capitalist class relations are central for understanding labour relations in fisheries, a sector deeply embedded in global capitalism and central to Vietnam’s economic growth model. Class as an analytical

category has been largely ignored in fisheries research as material understandings are eclipsed by preferences for post-structural analyses (McCall Howard, 2012). Class dynamics are a key site of struggle for life, prosperity, survival, and safety in fishing (Campling, Havice, and Howard, 2012; McCall Howard, 2012). Workplaces are also central areas in which masculinities play out (McKay and Lucero-Prisno, 2012). This is especially true in largely homosocial settings (i.e. made up nearly exclusively of men) such as Vietnamese offshore fishing labour.

Masculinities are sets of ‘repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame’ (Butler, 1990, p. 33) tied to particular understandings of what it means to be a man, and are not inherent to sex, biology or innate disposition. Butler’s (1990) concept of gender as performance, or ‘performativity’ helps explain gender as something that is socially-constructed, fluid, multiple, variable and relational (Ford and Lyons, 2012). Connell’s (1987) framework for understanding hierarchies of masculinities, including hegemonic (dominant), complicit, submissive, and oppositional masculinities, helps explain relational differences in masculinities. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity ‘ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) while numerous smaller-scale examples include a ‘socially-dominant’ masculinity which is not necessarily directly predicated on the subordination of women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gustavsson and Riley, 2020). In this study, I seek to understand local masculinities while also recognizing that regional and international level influences are part of this construction (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Ford and Lyons, 2012).

Results

Fishing and working conditions

Ca Mau province lies in the far south of Vietnam, bordering the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea (referred to in Vietnam as the East Sea). The Song Doc port’s catch landings total more than all other Ca Mau districts combined (Ha and Nguyen, 2014). The town of Song Doc has both a relatively wealthy population as well as many poor local and migrant workers (from within the country) who come to work in fishing (Betcherman, Haque, and Marschke, 2021; Ha and Nguyen, 2014). The wealthy portion of the population is largely involved in offshore fishing

through boat ownership, with some owning multiple boats. Pay is unpredictable: salary is allocated through a catch share system (whereby crew, captains and boat owners split profits based on fish catch earnings) rather than by a fixed salary; fish work is physically demanding and dangerous; oceans are turbulent, and boats are far from medical help. Stock declines near Vietnam's shore results in some boats risking stormy weather or traveling beyond national boundaries to get enough catch for workers to make a decent income.

The boats based at the port in Song Doc are mostly owned by individuals from the area rather than by corporations, and boat owners are often former fishers themselves. Many captains and workers on offshore boats come from Song Doc, but several also travel to the town for work from other towns or districts in the province, other provinces in the Mekong Delta and occasionally provinces much further away in Central Vietnam. Often these crews which range in size from around 5 to 20 workers per boat depending on available labour, gear and targeted species – already have bonds with the captain and each other as they are all travelling on a hired bus from the same region to work together. Occasionally, boats have mixed crews.

Class divides between owners, captains and workers in offshore fishing involve clear differences in pay and power. Pay varies widely and is calculated as a percentage of the total catch, usually after expenses such as fuel, ice, and food have been deducted with the remaining profits split between the boat owner (50–70%) and the captain and crew (30–50%). The latter portion is usually divided according to the individual success of each worker as tracked in a point system wherein captains get the most, then other higher-ranking crew members, then regular crew members. Individual catch amounts are important for boats that use individualized gear such as squid jigging, but not on trawlers or other boats using nets that are cast and retrieved by fishers together as a group. Written labour contracts are virtually non-existent for boats fishing less than 6 months at a time.

Fishing work is 'men's work'

Masculinities are significant to fisher identities as is emphasized by the local acceptance that fishing work is work for men, not women. It is not only the presence of men that shapes the masculinities of the fishing industry in Vietnam, but perhaps more importantly, the justifications

for the exclusion of women. Taboos around women fishing, particularly around offshore fishing work, include the ideas that women's presence onboard will bring bad luck and may lead to a lower catch, or that while women may work on docked boats repairing nets, if they step directly over the net, the net will be cursed in such a way that it will be unlikely to catch many fish. As one fisher noted, it is especially unlucky for the success of a boat if a woman onboard is menstruating, which is much more likely when trips are a few weeks long or longer. Many of those that I interviewed explained that while there are still taboos around women on offshore boats, they are outdated and only believed by older generations. Many interviewees disagreed strongly with these taboos, two of them suggesting that they would have no problem with women working on offshore boats, and many more were adamant about the fact that there is no legal ban on women fishing. Occasionally, women will go on nearshore boats for short 1 to 3-day trips as part of a family endeavour, especially when hired labour is expensive or hard to come by.

Rather than giving the above-mentioned superstitious justifications for the exclusion of women onboard, the majority of interviewees, including all of the women that I spoke to, explained that women should not go offshore for such a difficult and dangerous job due to the reasoning that women are weaker than men and at greater risk of health issues, especially sea sickness (nausea and vomiting), and would therefore be too sick to be able to work effectively. This belief about the inherent weak nature of women implies an inherent strength and ability of men, or at least a certain type of man. In their study of masculinities in Australian fisheries, Waitt and Hartig (2005, p. 410) similarly found that '[w]omen are positioned as naturally "out of place" at sea because of the longstanding social construction of the ocean as dangerous and the bodies of women as weak and emotional'. This idea, socially accepted in Vietnam as in Australia and elsewhere, means that the sea is a masculine environment, nearly inhospitable for women but survivable for 'tough' men. And yet, the reasoning for this has shifted from outdated superstitions to more modern, albeit stereotypical, gender expectations.

The logistics around privacy was another common reason given for the exclusion of women. Men frequently urinate off the side of the boat and take showers on the deck, easily visible to others onboard. One captain, for example, explained that part of his concern is for the safety of women from other men onboard and the potential distraction women would cause, saying: 'Can

you imagine one woman with 15 men onboard when she has no one else around and no data on her phone? Men will not focus on fishing, just on having sex'. Others also noted that women showering would be a distraction. It is again in relation to women that this interviewee indirectly highlighted the assumed gender norms embodied by a fisher in this context: heterosexual and potentially sexually aggressive, at least at sea. Others had more rigid views of a woman's role in the family: that women should stay home and take care of children or at the very least engage in work that is more 'suitable' such as selling street food.

As in many cultures, fishing in this community is often a livelihood that is taught and passed down to the next generation from fathers to sons. Long-term knowledge and skill were often mentioned by interviewees as being important for what makes a good fisher and later a good captain. Underaged boys are sometimes taken out of school early to start working in fishing with their fathers (Ha and Nguyen, 2014). That underaged boys are deemed more suitable fishers than are women of any age reflects another index of imbrication between gender and fishing norms: worker ability, like masculinity, is attached to certain bodies over the lifetime, regardless of specific competencies and characteristics.

The Vietnamese labour code makes explicit that it is illegal for those under 18 to work in the offshore fishing industry. Despite this, at least one third of the boat owners, captains and fishers interviewed in this study began fishing before turning 18, and a handful of those said they began under the age of 15, the youngest interviewed being 8 years old when he first started. My research assistant and I stopped a man at the bus station to ask if he was a fisher, and he said he was not but that his 11-year-old son who was with him had been fishing for a few months. Similarly, a 2019 Environmental Justice Foundation report which involved interviews with crews on Vietnamese boats caught fishing illegally in Thai waters, found a few youths as young as 11 years old working on these boats, often relatives but still working members of the crew.

Masculinities at sea

In order to catch fish efficiently and deal with the various dangers onboard an offshore fishing boat, crew need to communicate and work well with each other. Trust and cooperation are essential to the success of a fishing trip. However, tensions between crew and captains are also

common in fishing due to the pressures of operating for the commercial seafood market (Campling, Havice, and Howard, 2012). In my study, however, fishers interviewed almost universally referred to each other, captains and boat owners as friends, brothers, or family. While this terminology is part of the age and gender hierarchy embedded in Vietnamese language, fishers noted the particular closeness of these relationships. This was the case even when discussing relationships with a clear class imbalance between workers (fishers), managers (captains) and employers (owners).

At sea, captains are the authority. In general, captains decide where the boat will go and who gets what position. Captains also demonstrate authority by embodying all of the masculine qualities that interviewees highlighted as what makes a good fisher. Workers emphasized the importance of having a captain who has good leadership skills and takes care of workers. In this way, captains exhibit the socially-dominant form of masculinity onboard. Despite this distinction and a clear difference in power and pay, fishers rarely talked about the captain as separate or different from the rest of the crew. He was often referred to as being part of the fisher brotherhood. Captains also often called themselves part of a team. As an illustration of this, one captain explained: ‘Even though I’m the captain, I still don’t distinguish myself as different from the workers. I get close to them’.

From the perspective of captains, this intentional blurring of distinct roles is perhaps a way to manage workers by highlighting their masculine abilities in order to make them feel appreciated and maintain productivity. It is also likely a deliberate strategy for captains to smooth over the inherently antagonistic relationship between employees and managers (captains) or employers (in the case of owners who also captain their boat) through close personal relationships. This could also prevent fishers from forming worker unions which were not found in my study. Conversely, fishers may demonstrate agency through using these close relationships to their advantage in order to gain small concessions such as more time for fun on board and less harsh treatment from captains through the fishers’ marketplace bargaining power (Silver, 2003).

Relations on board Vietnamese vessels based in Song doc port differ from those found in other parts of Southeast Asia, including in Thailand where greater forms of mental and physical

violence, human trafficking and forced labour have been experienced by Cambodian and Burmese migrants working in Thailand's fishing sector (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016; Tickler *et al.*, 2018). The Song Doc context, by contrast, relies much more heavily on reproducing the local gender hierarchy in order to maintain labour. The emphasis on homosocial bonding and the fact that fishers often come from the same area, even if migrating from elsewhere in Vietnam, are likely key to this.

Masculinities on land

Back on shore, fishers, captains and owners continue to negotiate gender relations in a different place. The fishers who work around twenty days on and ten days off usually spend the first day or two back on land waiting for pay to be calculated and distributed. In such cases, the boat owner may invite crew members to go drinking, give money to the crew to go drinking themselves, or ask the captain to take the crew drinking. The intertwined masculinity and workplace hierarchies are reproduced in these settings through invitations, drinking challenges, and spending (Gillen, 2016; Harms, 2013). The consumption of and tolerance for alcohol is considered to be a marker of masculinity and a way to strengthen bonds among men (James-Hawkins *et al.*, 2019; Nguyen *et al.*, 2019; Vu, 2008).

Many fishers said they prefer working for an owner who is social and who will take them drinking, considering this to be a defining attribute of a good owner. One owner explained that in order to maintain labour he is friendly with workers and spends time going out to eat and drink with them, in addition to increasing their pay. Here, it is not only pay that seems to be important, but the continuation of homosocial bonding that men experience at sea now on shore. One boat owner went so far as to say that he must spend time drinking with workers or else 'they will leave me to go work for other people'.

Sometimes this role of providing a space for masculine bonding on land falls to the captains. One captain explained that his role involved having to 'go play' (*đi chơi*) more than others, including eating, drinking, karaoke, and hiring women as entertainment with workers. Interviewees did not talk to me directly about engaging with sex workers. However, my research assistants and I observed that there were many sex workers in the small fishing village and heard stories about

them joining groups of fishers at karaoke establishments and having paid sex with fishers, sometimes at hotels with their own karaoke set-ups like one where we often stayed.

One of my research assistants and I attended a dinner in which a relatively wealthy boat owner purchased the time of a woman who was selling candy by buying all of what she was selling so that she could sit and drink with us, and she did drink and laugh with the group until after my research assistant and I left. Hoang (2015) explains that women are often hired in a similar fashion as entertainment at karaoke bars or drinking establishments. They may be sex workers, but they are often just meant to hang out with men and boost their masculine credentials through compliments and attention, especially when these women comment on wealth and spending, as was the case at the dinner we attended (Hoang, 2015). Bonding among men also happens through hiring sex workers and those who refuse to participate in extramarital sex may be teased and risk having weak bonds with other men (Phinney, 2009). Socially-dominant masculinity is bound to gendered relational norms: masculine dominance is played out through heterosexual encounters with sex workers and women hired for entertainment, while masculine camaraderie is enacted through homosocial bonding. For both, class is central, as those who are able to spend more – drinking with their co-workers and paying for sex – are considered closer to a masculine ideal.

Women boat owners and the women in heterosexual boat-owning couples can also occupy a powerful position as they may be in charge of managing loans to workers. My research assistants and I witnessed the wife of a boat owner loudly and sternly warning workers about not fighting on board before they headed out to begin a monthly fishing trip. She exhibited qualities associated with Vietnamese notions of dominant masculinity (assertive, powerful, bold, etc.) in this situation as workers waited quietly, listening and unloading boxes of noodles and bags of vegetables being brought in on motorbikes to be put on the boat. Women can access authority and its privileges through their proximity to idealized masculinity – as an extension of their husbands and/or through embodying masculinized traits themselves especially through class status. However, women's authority in these situations is always partial and precarious. Indeed, some workers complained in interviews about women boat owners being present if they go to drink on land. Since alcohol-based socialization is considered central to the formation of working

relationships and the work itself, women's exclusion from these experiences represents a significant barrier to achieving the same level of power as male boat owners and they may not be able to hold on to workers as easily. In this way, dominance in fishing is still inextricably tethered to the masculinized bodily form, reflecting and reifying the gender essentialism necessary for global capitalist patriarchy.

Discussion

Piecing together a local gender hierarchy

As the above sections have demonstrated, the local gender hierarchy is heavily informed by class and shifts based on the place context. This creates a dynamic that goes beyond a simple gender binary. Some degree of ambiguity and fluidity in masculinities is common in contexts of effective hegemony since this allows for masculinities to adapt to different contexts and power dynamics (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Fluidity goes beyond hierarchies between men; women boat owners can achieve a relatively high level of authority due to their class status. It is through this dynamic that masculinities are used as a tool to manage labour and played on by workers for some degree of social benefits.

In terms of identifying a local socially-dominant masculinity, boat owners who are men are most likely to be able to achieve this dominance. Boat owners are an elite few who control the means of production and make the most money as compared to captains and workers, striving to keep costs low in a context of overfishing and declining productivity. If they are men, these boat owners also likely have years of experience fishing and earn respect for the knowledge and skill that has led to them becoming boat owners. Since hegemonic masculinity relies on the subordination of women and femininities, it is not only having high-paid positions and well-respected experience and skill, but also the way that they position themselves in relation to women in the community, such as when they take workers drinking and hire women as entertainment, that allows them to embody a hegemonic form of masculinity. The importance of women as entertainment on land to the bonding among men is an example of Hoang's (2020) theory of engendering global capital in which women's bodies and labour are used to broker deals and strengthen networks for business among men.

Women boat owners have a certain authority approaching the local socially-dominant masculinity, but they do not command the same respect as boat owners who are men because, despite the power that is afforded to them by class, they are also constrained by their gendered bodies and lack of fishing experience. The discomfort that some fishers feel at drinking with them is also indicative of this. For women who are not boat owners, the possibility of financial and social power in the fishing community is much less than it is for men.

Captains direct the ‘performance’ of workers both as employees and as men. They may slip in and out of positioning themselves as on the same level as fishers versus enacting a socially-dominant masculinity in contrast to a subordinate masculinity of fishers when it is useful to do so for the purposes of labour management. Distinct masculinities onboard may become somewhat blurred as teamwork and social bonding are emphasized while hierarchies of masculinity become more obvious again back on land as workers and captains get paid distinct amounts and as boat owners and captains invite everyone to drink while maintaining a dominant position, sometimes purposefully displaying their wealth. This adaptation to differing place-based contexts demonstrates the importance of place in shaping gender relations.

Typical fish workers striving to make a decent income by taking risks and engaging in masculine bonding activities embody a complicit masculinity which respects and idealizes the hegemonic or socially-dominant form, striving towards it but not necessarily attaining it. Fishers may also exhibit a submissive masculinity if they take on subordinate positions, especially those who are not as skilled, who do not make as much money, part-time workers or men who do work connected to fishing but not fishing itself. However, they still are seen to have qualities that make them stronger and more powerful than most women in the community (with the important exception of women boat owners). On boats, it is men at the lower end of the hierarchy who end up doing work that in onshore contexts is viewed as work for women, such as sewing nets and cooking.

How this hierarchy keeps men in fishing

Despite the dangers of fishing and the environmental conditions that have resulted in a greater difficulty to make high profits from offshore fishing, many fishers still continue to fish. The hierarchy of masculinities in this context, as informed by class and economic incentives, helps keep men in fishing. Boat owners and captains are able to use their socially-dominant masculinities to create a social environment in which fishers want to continue to work with them. Additionally, fishers who strive towards performing a socially-dominant masculinity may be moved to stay in the industry for the opportunities it may afford in this regard (Fabinyi, 2007). Like the precarity of fish work itself, masculinity in fishing is not a given: workers must perform masculinity according to contextual norms in order to survive in the industry (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018; McKay and Lucero-Prisno, 2012). In workplaces framed by competition and dominance among men as well as the exclusion of women and submissive men, perceptions of masculinity are important to the work performed (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018).

While the Vietnamese government is currently making efforts to tackle IUU fishing, some fishers are still willing to take the risk of getting caught fishing illegally due to dwindling environmental resources and an expectation that offshore fish work should yield a decent income (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2019; Roszko, 2021). Masculinity dynamics are wrapped up in this phenomenon which has implications for management: if officials do not understand how labour and risky behaviour are maintained through social dynamics as shaped by economic structures, efforts for reform may not be adequate. Similarly, efforts to reform certain violent or harmful masculine norms need to be considered together with labour conditions and political economic contexts. A study by Hoang, Quach, and Tran (2013) which involved working with Vietnamese fishers on addressing intimate partner violence showed that many fishers saw their behaviour, and their ability to change their behaviour, as connected to their identity as a fisher.

Conclusion

Masculinities in fishing are not simply set in stone through Vietnamese tradition or Confucianism. These histories are only part of the equation since political economic shifts impact both gender and labour relations, as has been demonstrated through Đổi Mới and the influence of Western liberalism. The political economic trajectory of fisheries — in which

national policy, in line with global capitalist demands, continues to enable overfishing through offshore fishing expansion — produces an important labour-gender dynamic. The performativity of masculinities plays out partially due to the continual, though often indirect, negotiation of labour in a context of a class hierarchy that is heavily informed by a hierarchy of masculinity. The homosocial bonding essential to the reproduction of this particular gender-class hierarchy, which on land is facilitated by the bodies of women, means that fishing in Ca Mau operates differently from other contexts where forced labour and extreme abuse have emerged as a challenge.

Understanding the experiences of Vietnamese fishers in Song Doc helps illuminate how masculinities operate on a local level to maintain a workforce connected to regional and global processes and how a local gender hierarchy is co-constructed together with global capitalism. It also contributes to a better understanding of worker agency which remains underexamined within academic debates about the ‘blue economy’, i.e., capitalist growth extracted through oceanic resources (Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020). Importantly, fishers are not stuck in rigid gender dynamics, but efforts for gender equality must go beyond encouraging changes in cultural norms and understand how class and labour reinforce masculine hierarchies. The efforts to end overfishing and IUU must also contend with these complex dynamics.

Chapter 5

Blue Boats in Deep Waters: How Aspects of IUU Policy Impact Vietnamese Fish Workers

This article was published in Maritime Studies (volume 22, issue 14) on April 4, 2023 for a special issue on work at sea. My supervisor, Melissa Marschke, is my co-author. Using the CRediT author statement format, I contributed: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing; and Melissa Marschke contributed: Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision. This article is reprinted with minor edits with permission from Springer Nature.

Abstract

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) policies in the Asia–Pacific region are impacting Vietnamese blue boats. We examine several aspects of IUU policy, including the effects of hardening marine borders in the Southeast Asian region and the increased surveillance of Vietnamese blue boats, to understand how such policies impact blue boat owners, captains, and workers. We find that under increased surveillance, fishers face greater precarity as they become subject to the legal and political actions of multiple states. When blue boats are caught outside Vietnamese waters, boat owners, captains, and workers face significant, albeit differentiated, livelihood challenges. We argue that policies designed to stop IUU or unsustainable fishing should also proactively address working conditions on blue boats; if not, policies may unwittingly cause problems for those directly involved in the industry, with hired workers facing particular hardships. For these reasons, Vietnam’s IUU yellow card can also be seen as an opportunity for fisheries labor reforms.

Introduction

Vietnamese “blue boats,” named for their brightly painted blue hulls, fish throughout Southeast Asia, often far beyond Vietnam’s territorial waters (Song *et al.*, 2019). Workers on blue boats spend weeks and sometimes months at sea before returning to shore: boats and workers are constantly moving across ocean spaces as they seek out particular fish species. Vietnam’s blue

boat fleet—wooden boats between 15 and 24 m in size, utilizing 90 + horsepower engines (Wilcox and Bergseth, 2021)—grew 25% between 2012 and 2019, rising to 33,000 vessels in 2019 (EJF, 2019). Blue boats most commonly target squid, skipjack tuna, mackerel, and trash fish (Marschke and Betcherman, 2016; World Bank, 2021) and fish along the continental shelf using a mix of trawls, purse seines, and hook and line vessels. The growth of blue boats reflects a series of trends in Vietnam’s fisheries: resource depletion in nearshore waters (Pomeroy *et al.*, 2009; Teh *et al.*, 2014), a market for trash or small forage fish used as feed for fish farming (Marschke and Betcherman, 2016), and a labor force of workers with limited options that can support blue boat activities (EJF, 2019). Reasons for fishing beyond territorial waters are also linked to the mobile nature of seafaring life that spans territories and boundaries (Roszko, 2021).

In recent years, enforcement of maritime borders has intensified in the Southeast Asian region, linked to the creation of national institutions to govern ocean and maritime resources (Raharja and Karim, 2022) and to global seafood trade policies, particularly the European Union’s policy related to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fisheries (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). IUU fishing policy in the EU emerged in the late 2000s out of concerns related to fishing fleets operating in the high seas, but also as an explanatory tool for global fisheries decline (Song, 2021). IUU policy has a broad mandate, requiring states to implement a catch certification scheme to ensure seafood traceability (from vessel to market) to be compliant with conservation and management measures. It also encourages careful monitoring and strict enforcement of a country’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) territory, up to 200 nautical miles out at sea (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). EEZ fisheries policies can further be used by individual countries to strengthen their territorial and political control (Raharja and Karim, 2022).

The policy shifts towards EEZ regulation and IUU management in the region and in Vietnam are impacting blue boats and their crews. Indonesia began to remove Vietnamese crew and, at times, destroy blue boats found in Indonesian waters in the mid-2010s, as part of a campaign to portray IUU fishing as a global crime, not only as illegal fishing, but as a crime that includes drug smuggling, human trafficking, and slavery (Raharja and Karim, 2022). Meanwhile, Thailand has cracked down on arrests of Vietnamese crew on blue boats that have entered Thai waters following the reform of their own fisheries (EJF, 2019) and adherence to broader EU IUU policy

(Kadfak and Linke, 2021). The EU issued a yellow card to Vietnam in 2017, allowing the EU to have a formal dialog with Vietnam to start reworking its fisheries governance system, to comply with international conservation and management measures, and eventually to eliminate IUU fishing practices altogether (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). Management measures include the prevention of illegal fishing, monitoring its national waters (e.g., blue boats fishing beyond Vietnamese waters), and traceability.

In this paper, we examine shifting regional fisheries dynamics with respect to maritime borders, blue boat worker livelihoods, and the choices made by blue boat operators and crew, following the issuing of the EU IUU yellow card. We begin our analysis with reflecting on how IUU policy has been shaped and implemented in Vietnam, before turning to understanding why some blue boats still fish in foreign waters, a practice that can result in boat confiscation, destruction, or crew jail time. We argue that IUU fisheries reforms should take labor into account, as labor is a critical aspect of fisheries governance and not doing so can have unintended consequences on fish workers. In doing so, we offer the opportunity to consider how fish workers and boat owners are impacted by IUU fisheries reforms, and demonstrate how the success of IUU policies is entwined with addressing labor issues.

IUU and Vietnam's fisheries reform

The EU is the world's largest import market for fisheries products. In 2008, the EU adopted a piece of legislation to prevent, deter, and eliminate IUU fishing (Nolan *et al.*, 2022), and since 2010 the EU has used a carding system approach in the fight against IUU fishing (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). When a yellow card is issued as a warning to indicate that a country is not fully cooperating, the EU works closely with the government of that country on changes that aim to reduce IUU fishing. Should a country receive a red card, fisheries products are banned from import into the EU. Such trade sanctions serve as a powerful mechanism to improve fisheries management for many countries. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand each received a yellow card which was lifted after a series of major fisheries reforms (Nolan *et al.*, 2022); in contrast, Cambodia received a yellow card which was turned into a red card when Cambodia did not reform its fisheries. Cambodia cannot export fisheries products to the EU.

The impact of the European Union's IUU policy is seen to generally enhance fisheries management. For example, a study focusing on Belize, Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Thailand found that EU IUU policy was particularly effective at improving legislative agreements, including participation in relevant international agreements, as well as monitoring, enforcement, and overall fisheries management (Nolan *et al.*, 2022). The study also found that the policy's effectiveness was in good part due to the EU's technical assistance programs provided to states under the yellow card. The EU has sometimes included improvements in working conditions, or labor, as an informal requirement for lifting a yellow card: this was the case in Thailand. Creating fisheries monitoring and regulatory infrastructure such as port-based inspection stations for fishing vessels and crew improved enforcement of labor standards as well as fisheries regulations in Thailand (Kadfak and Linke, 2021), and helped Thailand to become the first Asian country to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Work in Fishing Convention, ILO C188, in 2019.

In the case of Vietnam, informal discussions with the EU IUU team began in 2012, with a yellow card being issued in 2017 (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). The EU provided a series of recommendations for reforming Vietnam's fisheries to meet international conservation and management standards which have since been incorporated into the country's 2019 Law on Fisheries (18/2017/QH14), replacing an earlier 2003 Fisheries Law. This included greater law enforcement; an improved registration, licensing, and monitoring system; enhancing the traceability of fish products; preventing illegal seafood from entering Vietnamese territory; and improving cooperation with other countries and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (VASEP, 2018). In Vietnam, working conditions have not been included in the discussions of IUU reforms.

Within Vietnam's IUU reforms, two key aspects of policy have emerged: (a) the prevention and elimination of illegal fishing outside of Vietnam's EEZ and (b) conducting traceability of fish and fishery products (World Bank, 2021). In other words, ensuring blue boats are fishing within Vietnamese waters has become a key priority to illustrate improved fisheries management. In 2019, the Vietnamese government issued Decree 42/2019/ND-CP to stipulate penalties for administrative violations of fisheries regulations, including fines ranging from VND 800,000,000

(USD \$34,968) to VND 1,000,000,000 (USD \$43,710) for fishing in the waters of another state or territory without the proper required licenses to do so (Government of Vietnam, 2019a). This emphasis is also seen in Vietnam's 2018 National Action Plan which seeks to eliminate IUU fishing by 2025 and "to end the situation [in which] Vietnamese vessels and fisher[s]... illegally exploit marine products in the waters of other countries ..." (VASEP, 2018, p. 47). In 2019, Vietnam ratified the FAO-administered Agreement on Port State Measures which allows ratifying states to bar vessels engaged in IUU fishing from using their ports and prevent illegally caught fish from entering global markets.

Vietnam's motivation to reform its fisheries stems, in part, from Vietnam's role as a major seafood producer. Seafood is an important export commodity for Vietnam: Vietnam is the third largest seafood producer globally, supplying seafood to 160 markets. Vietnam's seafood exports to the EU increased sharply over the past 20 years, from USD 90 million in 1999 to nearly USD 1.5 billion in 2017 (and have decreased slightly to USD 1.3 billion in 2019, linked to the yellow card and challenges with seafood exports during the pandemic) (World Bank, 2021). Should Vietnam receive a red card, the country would lose significant export revenue and would also face reputational damage. While there are export markets that do not have IUU policy in place, other major export markets such as Japan and the USA have also developed IUU policy with an emphasis on traceability and EEZ management.

Methods

We focus on blue boat fish workers based out of Song Doc port, the largest port in Ca Mau province at the southwestern tip of Vietnam. Song Doc is an important fisheries port in Vietnam and holds a significant blue boat fleet that fishes in the Gulf of Thailand or the South China Sea, within and outside (historically, but also presently) Vietnam's EEZ. A portion of Song Doc's population is relatively wealthy; those with capital may be involved in fish farming or industrial fishing, with some households owning several fishing vessels (see Betcherman and Marschke, 2016) and having deep roots in fishing. At the same time, the town is the launching point for many internal Vietnamese migrants who work on Vietnam's blue boats (Ha and Nguyen, 2014; Betcherman *et al.*, 2021) since there are not enough workers locally to supply these boats. According to our interviewees, thousands of workers come into Ca Mau from across the Mekong

Delta and central Vietnam, depending on the fishing season. Seafood caught on blue boats is packed on ice and can be offloaded at sea, via supply boats (also known as transshipment at sea), but also at port, and is often for export, making its way to EU and US markets (EJF, 2019; Changing Markets Foundation, 2019).

Key informant interviews took place in 2019 and 2020, with 37 fish workers, 17 boat captains, and 23 boat owners as well as 10 spouses. The focus of these interviews included working conditions, environmental conditions, social relations, and government policy. We asked a series of open-ended questions such as “Where are you allowed to fish?” and “What happens if you go elsewhere?.” Although the topic of fishing beyond Vietnam’s EEZ was sensitive in nature, given that it is illegal, some participants were able to speak openly about which fishing grounds their boats targeted. These interviews were complimented by insights from previous research into offshore fishing conducted by one author since 2012, and a review of the peer-review literature and news media.

When our interviews were conducted, the yellow card was already in place, but boat tracking devices, known as vessel monitoring systems (VMS), were not widely implemented, perhaps around 30% throughout Vietnam (Xu and Chen, 2021). This percentage has grown: by the end of 2021, 99% of all applicable boats in Ca Mau had been equipped (VNA, 2021a). Ca Mau is one of the provinces hailed by the Deputy Prime Minister for doing a great job of raising awareness among fishers on legal regulations (Nhan Dan, 2021), although it is unclear how many boats actually used VMS equipment properly (Phuong and Pomeroy, 2022). In other words, our data cannot speak to if widespread VMS implementation influenced where blue boats went to fish or to how blue boats used the VMS. This is where secondary data such as news articles of blue boats “caught” in other waters becomes helpful, as well as data from Global Fishing Watch which draws from satellite images to show fishing boats operating inside and outside Vietnam’s EEZ.

Results

Blue boat work and precarious working conditions



Figure 5.1: Photo of blue boats docked at the Song Doc port with identification numbers missing or obscured. Photo by author, December 2019.

Fish work from Song Doc port, as elsewhere, involves uncertain pay, seasonal work (based on the fishing season for a particular species), and is a high risk, dangerous job particularly in the face of storms (Campling and Colas, 2021; McCall Howard, 2012). In Vietnam, fish workers do not typically hold written contracts with their blue boat employers. Working conditions and catch share amounts are verbally negotiated and highly dependent on boat size, species, and gear type. According to the Vietnamese Labour Code, a predetermined salary with set work hours and rest periods is required, although this is not how work in fishing is organized (as we explain momentarily). Further complicating labor relations is how fish workers are typically paid by a share of fish catch, and the variation found in offshore fisheries (catch share arrangements,

overall length of time at sea). There are known cases of workers under 18 employed on blue boats which is illegal as defined in the Vietnamese Labour Code. The ILO Work in Fishing Convention C188 notes that fish work should be limited to people over 16 years of age. (Vietnam has not ratified C188).

Our focus was on blue boats that fished offshore but were considered mid-size, between 15 and 24 m, rather than boats that were greater than 24 m and fished offshore for longer periods of time (*Figure 5.1*). In 2019 and 2020, when interviews took place, pay continued to be generally calculated as a portion of catch, ranging from 70/30 to 50/50 between the boat owner for the larger portion and the captain and crew for the smaller portion. Such arrangements translated into varied salaries, depending on boat size, gear type, and fishing grounds. Across our interviewees, fish workers perceive significant inequalities between themselves and captains and/or owners.

Workers on 15-m boats earned as little as VND 1 million (USD \$43) per month (for a 20-day trip) in contrast to workers on boats that were 20 m and longer. Here the catch share system offered workers a greater total percentage of catch, resulting in a monthly salary of between VND 7–10 million (USD \$302–433). The workers we interviewed all followed a similar working cycle, a 20-day trip, followed by 10 days at shore (time at shore was divided between home visits and vessel or gear maintenance). In a few cases, boat owners guaranteed a minimum monthly income of VND 2–3 million (USD \$87–130) to ensure a consistent labor supply in the case of a poor catch, with additional income if the catch share exceeded this amount. The monthly minimum guarantee, however, falls below Vietnam's rural minimum wage of VND 3.43 million (USD \$148) (Government of Vietnam, 2019b).

Boat owners also act as a middle person, granting loans to fish workers. It is common for workers interviewed to hold loans from boat owners between VND 15 million (\$652 USD) and VND 20 million (\$866 USD). The incentive for workers to borrow from boat owners is the flexibility found in this system: workers do not pay interest rates, which can be exorbitant from a money lender, and pay back the loan when they can rather than on a monthly basis which the bank would demand. The catch: workers have to pay back their loans before stopping work,

unless they transfer their debt between boat owners. This, in effect, ties workers to boat owners and means that it is not easy to change employers or to leave fish work.

Working conditions on blue boats can be difficult and do exhibit indicators of forced labor: workers do not have written contracts, cannot easily change boats, and can work in excess of 14-h days at times. That said, human trafficking does not appear to be an issue in Vietnam's fisheries, a finding also observed in a 2019 Environmental Justice Foundation report into blue boats (see EJJ, 2019). This stands in contrast to Cambodian and Myanmar migrant fish workers working in Thai distant water fisheries prior to fisheries reform in Thailand (Tran *et al.*, 2017). Even so, there have been reports of physical abuse on blue boats (see Hung, 2018; Tuoi Tre News, 2020). We do not know of any studies that examine the physical or mental challenges of blue boat fish work.

Unpacking blue boats in foreign waters

According to Global Fishing Watch data for January to December 2021, most of Vietnam's fishing effort tracked by automatic identification system (AIS) signals takes place within Vietnam's EEZ. *Figure 5.2* offers a static representation of this time period. When one digs in closer to this data, and watches the movement of vessels over the year, two points of interest emerge. The first is the significant fishing activity in China's EEZ by Vietnamese boats. This is curious and hints that some type of arrangement may be at play that enables Vietnamese boats to access Chinese waters, or that China is not enforcing its territorial boundaries in this region. Some Vietnamese boats are also seen in Cambodian waters. Secondly, Vietnamese boats are fishing intensely at the edge of the Indonesian and Malaysian EEZs, but do not seem to be going far beyond these EEZ borders.

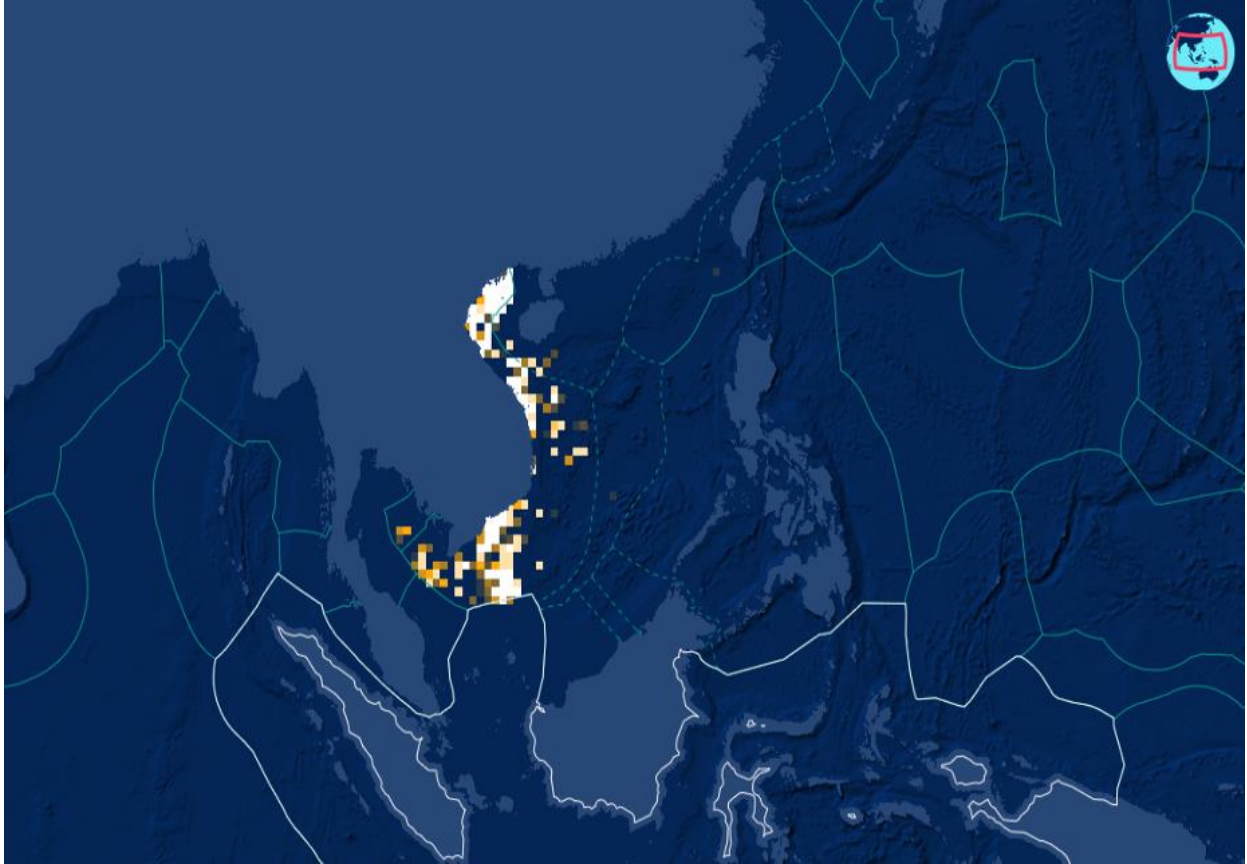


Figure 5.2: Map of Vietnamese fishing effort and surrounding EEZs in Southeast Asia. Source: Global Fishing Watch database.

Figure 5.2 suggests there is little fishing beyond Vietnam's EEZ, other than near China, which differs from media reports of blue boats being caught outside of Vietnam's EEZ throughout 2021 (The Star, 2022), and could be indicative of the observation that in 2020 more than 1400 fishing vessels turned off their VMS equipment to avoid detection (Phuong and Pomeroy, 2022). IUU inspections carried out over a 2-year period in both Kien Giang and Ca Mau provinces found that 47 of the 100 or so fishing vessels inspected did not have their VMS device on board, having left them on shore, or moved them to another vessel (VNA, 2022a).

Although blue boats may have evaded Vietnamese detection by turning off their VMS, blue boats continue to be caught in foreign waters. By November 2021, 60 incidents of foreign coast guards catching Vietnamese boats in overseas waters were recorded, a decrease of 32% from the previous year: this included a total of 98 fishing vessels, as some cases involved groups of blue

boats fishing together, and 775 fish workers (VNA, 2021b; The Star, 2022). Blue boats were detained throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Afifa, 2022), with variable outcomes for crew. For example, at least 500 Vietnamese fishers were stranded in Indonesia throughout 2020, living in shelters and detention centers, waiting until it was deemed safe to return to Vietnam (Dianti, 2021). Few of these fish workers were ever formally charged (Radio Free Asia, 2020). This hints at the prevalence of Vietnamese blue boats fishing beyond Vietnamese waters and the precarity such workers face. To be sure, the pandemic saw major disruptions to seafood supply chains and fish worker livelihoods (see Marschke *et al.*, 2020; Vandergeest *et al.*, 2021).

Our interviewees also spoke of experiences fishing outside Vietnamese waters. Reasons for entering foreign waters vary. In some cases, environmental conditions and unclear borders mean that boats accidentally end up in foreign waters. In other cases, particularly when fishing in the region, it may be worth moving beyond Vietnam's EEZ into other waters to fish for lucrative aquatic species. A former boat owner who had his boats seized in Thailand summarized the risks of deciding which foreign waters to enter:

“The punishment depends on where we get caught. In Cambodia, we can make an arrangement with the local government and pay a small fee. In Thailand, we get sent to prison or get a fine. In Indonesia, they have guns and will blow-up our boat.” (Interview B94)

Blue boats traveling outside of Vietnamese waters to fish is nothing new: this is a practice that has been ongoing for decades (Rozko, 2021). What has changed, however, is a significant crackdown on blue boats entering regional waters from Vietnamese authorities and other countries in the region. According to our interviewees, the Vietnamese navy is more actively patrolling its waters and issuing fines than ever before. For the Vietnamese government, legitimacy on the international stage and continuing important trade relationships that contribute to the national economy drive the efforts to control blue boat actions and their physical movement on the ocean. What is less clear is how the interests of and dynamics between workers, captains, and owners result in decisions for boats to cross marine borders. Below we examine these differing perspectives and respective impacts.

Boat owners

Of the boat owners we interviewed in 2019 and 2020, all were familiar with the EU's yellow card. Most had attended training sessions on regulations and paid for mandated upgrades such as VMS (tracking devices). Moving beyond Vietnam's EEZ provides opportunities to catch a larger volume of fish and to generate greater profits. Although boat owners generally emphasized that they do not want fishers to go to foreign waters illegally, they commented on the motivation of those who do:

“Nowadays in the sea near Ca Mau, finding sufficient fish is rare. Of course, these boats must go to another area to fish! If not, they will not get any profit. How can they live?

They know it's illegal, but they have to go.” (Interview B11)

“People fish in illegal areas just to make a living, but they don't actually want to do that.” (Interview B16)

There are other reasons why boat owners might encourage blue boats to fish beyond Vietnam's EEZ. According to our interviewees, mandated upgrades to boats, increased financial risks, and unreturned loans by fishers resulted in big financial pressures from boat owners. This suggests that owners are incentivized to ensure a return on their investment. Owners may be unwilling to openly endorse such a practice but they benefit financially if their boats generate a more lucrative catch overseas without getting caught.

Boat seizures can result in owners losing boats or fishing gear. We spoke with two boat owners who had boats seized following Thailand's fisheries reforms. The first owner faced the seizure and destruction of his four blue boats that had been fishing in Thai waters, just after the Thai reforms were put into place (Interview B94). This led to bankruptcy for the boat owner as he had taken out a large loan of 900 M VND (38,351 USD) to buy and outfit his blue boats; the repayment of his loan was dependent on a regular, successful fish catch. After this, he transitioned from a life-long career in fishing to working as a security guard at a hotel. For the second boat owner, two of her boats were caught in a major storm in 2019 (Interview B10). The captain called the boat owner, and she made the call for the boats to head into Thai waters to escape the storm. She notified the Vietnamese authorities, who were meant to follow up with Thai authorities. At this point, communication broke down: the Thai authorities seized her two

blue boats which eventually sank due to a lack of proper storage and care. Although government compensation was promised, the boat owner is skeptical if she will see the funds and has faced a significant financial hit. Her boat cost 700 M VND (29,851 USD) to buy, and when combined with salaries for workers and other maintenance costs, was worth 1 billion VND (42,644 USD). This boat owner also decided to quit as the costs were too exorbitant given the potential to lose boats. These two cases illustrate how an active IUU policy can have complex consequences.

Captains

Some owners also captain their boats while others hire captains to be the authority on board. Captains who are not also owners are paid more than workers, but also face greater fines or penalties when boats get captured in foreign waters. All interviewees in our study said that the captain decides where the boat goes to fish. When we pressed some boat owners on this, asking “Do you as an owner really have no say?,” some boat owners said they do not permit the captains to take blue boats illegally abroad, but this was something that boat owners remained vague on in our interviews. This is likely linked to the “illegal” or “non-compliant” nature of such choices.

Captains are generally aware of regulations at sea, particularly given the training sessions that have taken place since the yellow card. In one interview, two brothers working on the same boat as captain and deputy captain commented on the use of tracking devices:

“[The yellow card] means that they don’t allow us to go [beyond Vietnamese waters] to fish. After [Vietnam received the yellow card], the government attached black boxes to follow the boats. If [fishers] violate the rules, they get punished. The black box is like the airplane’s black box: wherever your boat goes, they know. They know immediately. The Fisheries Ministry knows.” (Interviews B36 and B37)

Everyone understands that VMS monitors movement, and the fisheries authority can see when boats go beyond Vietnam’s EEZ territory. That said, some blue boats find ways to handle the tracking device to enable them to fish further afield. One fisher explained how this is possible:

“A lot of Vietnamese boats still go to the international sea, especially to Thailand. If they want to go abroad, they will take the tracking devices out of the boat and put it in another boat that stays in Vietnamese waters.” (Interview B76)

VMS equipment, also referred to by some in fishing as “the black box,” is mandated for boats 15 m and longer. Blue boats are allowed to fish in the designated offshore areas of Vietnam’s EEZ, but not in near or midshore areas. Blue boats are therefore restricted to a particular area where many interviewees noted that it is not always possible to land a decent catch. While these restrictions may be important for ecological sustainability, captains note the challenge of locating abundant fish as reasons why boats may go elsewhere. Interestingly, in our interviews, we heard of cases where smaller boats (less than 15 m) designated to fish in nearshore fishing grounds may go beyond Vietnam’s EEZ and skirt the requirements for a VMS. When a VMS is intentionally disabled or removed, blue boats (owners generally, who may pass costs onto captains depending on the situation) can be fined anywhere between VND 20,000,000 (USD \$874) to VND 30,000,000 (USD \$1311). Thus, it is costly to get caught.

Workers

For fish workers with whom we spoke, illegal fishing was linked primarily to moving beyond national maritime boundaries. While there was not always a clear understanding of the yellow card as compared to owners and captains, they had a strong awareness of maritime borders (i.e., Vietnam’s EEZ). This pre-exists Vietnam’s yellow card, owing to ramped up policing in Indonesia and Thailand in 2014/2015. The vast majority of interviewees were highly aware that they were only allowed to fish within Vietnamese waters.

One worker, who had the experience of working on a blue boat that traveled to Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cambodia, ended up in a Thai prison for 5 months or so (Interview B63). This worker commented how he was wary of fishing beyond Vietnam’s EEZ both due to the potential to end up in prison and because of steep fines. Another fish worker noted:

“I’m not afraid of having to work hard, I’m afraid of having no money” adding, “Now I only go fishing in Vietnam. I don’t go to foreign countries’ waters anymore because I’m too scared.” (Interview B29)

Similarly, another fish worker noted:

“My boat went illegally to other countries ten years or so ago because it was much easier, but now there are tracking devices so it’s hard. We don’t catch much nowadays, so it’s a rough time.” (Interview B95)

Some workers may not have much choice about where they fish and if they move beyond Vietnam’s EEZ. One worker noted: “We must accept it if the captain takes us to international waters. We don’t necessarily know where we are.” (Interview B47 worker). Even if some workers were uncomfortable with going beyond Vietnam’s EEZ, the pressure to do so continued throughout the pandemic, as seen in the number of arrested or stranded blue boat workers (VNA, 2021b; The Star, 2022). Our sense is that workers cannot influence where a captain decides to fish once at sea: sometimes borders are blurry or a storm comes up, but at other times an intentional choice is made to fish further afield in hopes of achieving a better catch. The current catch share system means that everyone working on a blue boat will benefit financially should blue boats go further afield and not be caught.

A recognition of this imbalance of power may be why workers often initially face a smaller fine or shorter prison time as compared to captains when caught in foreign waters. However, workers interviewed noted that boat owners who are responsible to pay for bringing fishers in foreign prisons back to Vietnam, according to Decree 42/2019/ND-CP, sometimes refuse to do so. These interviewees suggested that boat owners are more likely to pay to bring home a well-performing captain than all workers. In this way, workers may actually spend a longer time in prison as captains are brought home more quickly. Furthermore, increased costs to boat owners are likely downloaded on to workers. One of the boat owners mentioned in the “Boat owners” section, who no longer works in fishing, said that when they were a boat owner, payment was dependent on how much profit they made. If they did not make a profit, workers did not get paid (B94).

Discussion

Vietnamese blue boats can be portrayed as greedy, criminal actors causing extreme ecological, social, and economic damage (SIBC, 2017; EJF, 2019). The framing of workers as criminals

conflates administrative violations with crimes such as human trafficking and drug smuggling, placing undue attention on the need for law enforcement rather than addressing root causes driving this behavior (Page and Ortiz, 2019). Blue boat crew detained in foreign waters can be used to serve as examples of effective IUU policy as the political importance of IUU enforcement ramps up across the region (Nolan *et al.*, 2022). Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam are keen to continue to export seafood products to the EU market, and face serious pressure to manage their EEZ and illustrate seafood traceability (World Bank, 2021). From an IUU prevention perspective, blue boats are easier to target than industrial trawls: they are far smaller, slower, and easier to target by maritime authorities compared with distant water fishing fleets operating in foreign waters. As an example, China's industrial fishing fleet has grown to be the largest globally, has significant cases of IUU fishing, and is proving difficult to monitor and stop (EJF, 2022; Myers *et al.*, 2022).

Yet, compliance to emerging rules can also be seen as a social phenomenon (c.f., Boonstra and Dang, 2010). Boat owners may see the need to fish beyond Vietnamese waters as a way to “keep up with the rest” (Boonstra and Dang, 2010, p. 1256). Border enforcement only began in earnest in the region in the 2010s and in the past few years in Vietnam. Thailand underwent major fisheries reforms only when major “slavery scandals” emerged (Marschke and Vandergeest, 2016), including EEZ border management and fleet reorganization; Indonesia began enforcing its borders actively, linked to a process of re-territorialization (Raharja and Karim, 2022). The issue of offshore fisheries management in Vietnam is nascent and compliance needs to be understood as more than simply involving individual blue boats.

A significant part of Vietnam's IUU reforms is the implementation of a VMS system, a form of traceability. Concerns over unsustainable and IUU fishing have worked in good part by using new technologies to track both vessels and seafood (Kadfak and Widengård, 2022). In the case of Vietnam, the VMS system is designed as an incentive to stay within Vietnam's EEZ; however, this management system remains in its infancy and is not always followed as is reflected in the number of blue boats who turn off their VMS signal (Phuong and Pomeroy, 2022; VNA, 2022a). This is a practice we also heard of in our interviews. Vietnam's IUU fishing

policy may result in crew tampering with the VMS governance system, taking an even greater risk of additional fines if caught, in order to continue fishing in foreign waters.

VMS systems cost money to upgrade, expenses typically borne by vessel owners. However, these costs are often passed on to workers in that it is yet another expense that is recouped in catch sales and accounted for before profits are divided among workers. Moreover, although VMS increases the traceability of boats, this system does little for workers. Fishing has been identified as having particularly unacceptable working conditions (Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020), and these challenges are also seen in Vietnam. Our data shows that pay is low, contracts are nonexistent, and there are strong patron-client relations between vessel owners and workers, which may include forms of bonded labor. This is where Thailand provides a useful example: Thailand has a port management inspection system that considers the traceability of boats and workers (Kadfak and Linke, 2021). The Thai case illustrates how the creation of a fisheries monitoring and regulatory infrastructure can facilitate improved enforcement of labor standards as well as fisheries regulations, and further illustrates why a context-specific approach is critical for implementation (Kadfak and Widengård, 2022).

As our data illustrates, it is risky for blue boats to move beyond Vietnam's EEZ, perhaps even more so in 2022 (VNA, 2021b) than when our interviews took place. In a context of perceived fisheries decline, moving beyond Vietnam's EEZ is where many blue boat owners and captains believe an abundance of higher value fish species can be found. While our data did not allow us to go into the costs of blue boat operation including when blue boats are most profitable nor the dynamics between captain and crew, insights from other fisheries suggest that captains and vessel owners will hold considerable sway in terms of targeted fishing grounds (Tran *et al.*, 2017; Marschke *et al.*, 2020). Labor dynamics across Vietnamese fisheries point to power dynamics in which blue boat workers are unlikely to have much agency in picking a fishing ground. At the same time, the current catch share system offers a financial incentive to push for bountiful catches, even as the ratio split works in favor of captains and boat owners.

Examining Vietnamese blue boats allows for a better understanding of the position(s) in which blue boat fish workers find themselves. With poverty and precarious livelihoods at the center of

offshore fish work, it is unclear if a delineated EEZ and better enforced boundaries will restore fish stocks or help fishers make a decent living. Boat owners may continue to find ways of skirting the law in search of more abundant fish stocks, and perhaps some will exit the fishery. Workers might find themselves arrested and detained in foreign countries, facing fines or job loss, meaning enhanced precarity in pursuing a fishing livelihood. If Vietnam continues to think of offshore fishing growth as part of its ambitious economic goals, including having a modern fishing industry while protecting marine biodiversity (VNA, 2022b), then IUU fishing policy will need to move beyond policing efforts. IUU reforms can also serve as an opportunity to reflect on working conditions: labor is a critical aspect of fisheries governance.

This by no means suggests that fisheries reforms are unnecessary. The challenge is that IUU policies can unwittingly cause problems for hired workers in these fisheries, and this needs to be carefully considered. Although the EU's IUU policy was initiated and remains oriented primarily to improving fisheries management, we know from the Thai case how innovative IUU policy can be leveraged to improve working conditions. In Vietnam, this includes making fisher income more liveable and stable by shifting to increased minimum monthly wages rather than relying on catch share arrangements that require significant catch volume to be viable. Contracts and other means of worker documentation can also help ensure workers' rights and protect fishers who get caught by international authorities. It remains far too easy for blue boat owners to deny responsibility and cut off ties with fishers who are left stranded or in prison overseas (Song *et al.*, 2019). Key to all this will be considering the needs and perspectives of blue boat workers themselves, and ensuring that workers have the right to collective action and unionization. This all contributes to a decent work agenda for blue boat workers (Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020; Garcia Lozano *et al.*, 2022). Protecting biodiversity requires that we tackle larger-scale industrial extractive relationships with the ocean and protect fishers' ability to make a living at sea (Bennett *et al.*, 2021; Campling and Colas, 2021).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The three research articles presented in chapters 3 to 5 serve to showcase different aspects of my research findings. My methodology, as explained in *Chapter 2*, shaped my findings by leading me to particular people, conversations and opportunities to observe. This allowed me to get a picture of work in fishing based in Song Doc port over a period of several months (six months of formal, approved research plus additional observation) and during a time of ecological decline, regulatory reform and governmental scrutiny. As explained in my introduction, I originally set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the working conditions experienced by offshore fishers in Southern Vietnam?
What does labour precarity look like?
2. How are masculinities and broader gender dynamics linked to labour dynamics in offshore fisheries in Southern Vietnam?
3. What impacts do fisheries reforms have on offshore fishers? How can a nuanced understanding of workers' experiences – and the gender and labour dynamics that exist among workers, captains and boat owners – contribute towards better fisheries governance?

While each question is primarily answered in one of the three academic articles that make up this thesis, there is overlap due to the interconnection of these issues. Empirically, I was able to show what experiences of work in fishing looked like in terms of conditions of work, labour relations, and levels of precarity more broadly. This included an analysis of experiences of work as they relate to environmental changes such as climate change and biodiversity loss and also to the crackdown on illegal fishing beyond Vietnam's EEZ that has accompanied IUU reforms. As a theoretical contribution, I was also able to unpack labour relations among workers, captains and boat owners, including the intertwined social relations of gender (notably a hierarchy of masculinities) and class that factor into productive work but that also exist outside the workplace on shore. My research also included an assessment of how both the policy and theoretical

underpinnings of a decent work agenda could improve the conditions of precarity experienced by fishers, with support from other policy measures including the ILO's C-188, and greater attention to labour under IUU reforms.

In Chapter 3, I argue that offshore fishing in Southern Vietnam is highly precarious work that needs to be addressed through various measures that get at the root causes of labour precarity, as examined through numerous dimensions of labour precarity. I also argue that a decent work agenda, while likely an important tool, can only go so far in this pursuit. In Chapter 4, I argue that the masculinities of Vietnamese offshore fishing are not simply inherent to Vietnamese culture or fishing culture, but rather co-produced together with the conditions of production and reproduction under the pressures created by capital accumulation. The construction of these masculinities is, in part, a response to the precarity of offshore fish work. In examining the intertwined material and social aspects of fish work, my research findings demonstrate that in addition to financial incentives, efforts to maintain an adequate labour force also rely on notions of masculinity. In Chapter 5, I show how the declining ability to make a decent livelihood from offshore fishing results in perverse incentives on the part of fishers, captains and boat owners, such as taking risks at sea by going into storms and foreign waters. I argue that rather than focusing on aggregate fisheries data or ecological policies, centering the perspectives of workers and others directly implicated in Vietnamese offshore fishing helps reveal the roots causes of harmful practices as well as the livelihood consequences of national and international political economy and ecology.

Prior research on these aspects of work in fishing in Vietnam has been very limited. In part, this is because of the sensitive nature of conducting research in Vietnam in general and, for non-local researchers, in areas that are not frequented by tourists in particular. It is also not something that can be easily done in short visits because of the limited time that blue boats have on shore and the challenges of being able to speak with workers given this schedule. It took time to learn the pattern of boats and when fishers would be available for interviews. It is also a challenge, though possible, to conduct research on what happens at sea while never going to sea.

Concluding arguments

My Marxist feminist theoretical grounding allowed for a more holistic understanding of the relations of production and reproduction in Vietnamese offshore fisheries that was not limited to the formal labour relations of the workplace and instead extended to a broad interpretation of labour precarity, the gendered nature of work, and the fundamental importance of changing ecology, namely fish stock decline. Below I outline four concluding arguments which highlight the ways in which aspects of this framework are linked and bring together the arguments in my three papers. These arguments include: 1) illegal practices at sea (i.e. violating EEZ boundaries, removing tracking devices, overexploiting fish stocks, etc.) are rooted in precarity and capital accumulation; 2) the maintenance of hierarchies of masculinities is part of the gendered relations of production offshore fisheries work; 3) capitalist growth exploits both workers and the environment; and 4) reforms can be beneficial but must take worker well-being seriously.

Illegal practices at sea are rooted in precarity and capital accumulation

As I have demonstrated through my research, motivations for illegal and risk-taking behaviour in offshore fishing are based in precarity and capital accumulation. Activities in offshore fishing, including travelling beyond the EEZ, over-exploiting fish stocks and other dangerous and harmful practices are directed by boat owners and captains motivated by capital accumulation in an increasingly challenging context. These practices cannot be attributed exclusively to a Vietnamese culture with particular notions of masculinity. Rather, masculinity and labour practices are co-constituted under the pressures of capitalism. The struggle for capital accumulation in a changing regulatory and environmental reality resulted in several illegal practices described in *Chapter 5*, such as removing tracking devices from boats. As mentioned, with the IUU yellow card, legislation has been implemented to target these illegal practices. In June 2023, the Vietnamese government claimed that given their reforms, no vessels from Ca Mau had illegally left the country's EEZ in 2023 (VNA, 2023). And yet, news reports of vessels from Ca Mau caught illegally in foreign waters indicate that this is still happening (e.g. Tuoi Tre News, 2024). Fishers may have no choice in their conditions of work both because captains make the decisions at sea and also because the precarious livelihoods of fishers may require them to continue returning to sea even if they are aware that they will be asked to engage in these

practices. Until precarity is comprehensively addressed at the root rather than only punished when it manifests in an illegal activity, this may continue.

The maintenance of hierarchies of masculinities is part of social relations of production

As I have argued in *Chapter 3*, the maintenance of hierarchies of masculinities is linked to capitalism and masculinities vary by class and place in offshore fishing. These are part of the social relations of production (Marx, 1859) and reproduction that I set out to understand in my theoretical framework. Gender relations in Vietnamese offshore fisheries are social relations of production in that particular masculinities are performed by fishers, captains and boat owners in order to succeed in the industry. The benefits of enacting the expected masculinities include workers getting minor concessions, social bonding and higher paying positions, captains getting the same as workers and maintaining authority at sea, and boat owners maintaining labour and keeping production going. Social relations are not merely contained within the realm of productive labour and extend to what Nancy Fraser categorizes as an “institutionalised social order” (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018; Fraser, 2017) or what Jason Moore (2015) calls “world-ecology” which describes a more comprehensive set of relations including the natural environment. The ways in which fishing labour dynamics rely on gendered performativity, the natural environment, and families and communities on shore is indicative of this. This dynamic is also explained by Hoang’s (2020) theory of engendering global capital, especially with regards to the role of women sex workers in offering bonding opportunities for fishers, captains and boat owners.

Capitalist growth exploits both workers and the environment

Following the previous argument noting the relations of production and reproduction, efforts for labour and environmental justice must contend with the structures of capitalism as capitalist growth relies on squeezing greater and greater profit from workers and the environment. Cruz and Rigg (2019) write about how the impressive economic growth across much of Asia in the 2000s, deemed a ‘miracle’ by some, contributed significantly to increased precarity in the region by following a ‘growth at all costs’ model. They write that this ‘paradox’ between growth and precarity caused greater disparity by favouring growth over investing in human wellbeing and basic needs. Similarly, citing Walters and Bailey (2013), Campling and Colas (2021) argue that

the danger of work at sea is not only due to the risks presented by the physical environment, but also importantly results from the conditions created for workers by an industry prioritizing profit above all else. The ‘blue economy’ and ‘blue growth’ have taken off as part of an idea that oceans present a new and growing opportunity for economic growth. Transnational movements such as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), which largely represent small-scale fish workers, have been very critical of the concept of ‘blue growth’ as they argue that it is instead a ‘blue myth’ (WWFP, 2021; Mills, 2023). Growth as a precondition for economic activity requires either increasing gains (through sales, subsidies, etc.) or reducing costs, or both. In order to reduce costs, cheaper inputs like labour and environmental resources are required, which ultimately results in the exploitation of both. My research shows that the ‘blue growth’ that occurred in Vietnam especially over the past 25 years, meaning the steady growth of offshore fisheries until recent years, has not resulted in sustained benefits for average workers. Instead, collapsing fish stocks and an increasing number of blue boats at sea have led to squeezed wages as well as increased costs and risks associated with fishing. Several interviewees noted the decline in fish stocks combined with the increase in the number of boats at sea have forced them into taking illegal measures such as travelling beyond Vietnam’s EEZ to gain enough targeted catch to survive. Measures to crack down on these illegal efforts to compensate for declining incomes have further impacted the livelihoods of workers by making work more precarious in that they may face job loss if boats are seized and could be imprisoned abroad. While exports of seafood from capture fisheries have grown significantly over the years, the benefits of growth are not felt by the workers in the industry.

Reforms can be beneficial but must take worker well-being seriously

As I have shown in this thesis, IUU and decent work policies are attempts to address problematic and urgent governance issues in fisheries that can have negative consequences for workers or can fail to get at the root issues. Still, these policies can be helpful when understood as linked to the political economic context in which they are being implemented and when worker well-being (including environmental protections) is taken seriously. Currently, several countries (mainly in the global North) are working towards implementing mandatory Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (mHREDD) legislation that would put the onus on large companies to ensure, to a reasonable extent, that their supply chains are free of human rights

abuses and environmental violations (Finkbeiner *et al.*, 2024). This would go beyond IUU's threat of trade restrictions on seafood for poor governance practices and would include other sectors and other types of violations, namely those related to human rights abuses. We are still a long way from seeing the potential impacts of this kind of legislation. However, integrating human rights into fisheries improvements, including through mandatory human right and environmental due diligence legislation, is important to addressing labour abuses in fisheries (Finkbeiner *et al.*, 2024). Human rights being intertwined, interrelated and interconnected, means that they cannot be addressed one at a time (e.g. forced labour is best prevented by ensuring all human rights are protected so that workers are not desperate enough to end up in these situations). These policies alone are not be strong enough to take on the consequences of capitalist relations and deeper political economic changes are also important, especially in the longer term. However, these policies may be a useful tool for organized workers.

Contributions to International Development Studies

Situated in the field of International Development Studies (IDS), my thesis contributes to the study of IDS in several ways. Gender, labour, poverty, environment, and political economy are some of the central topics of research and policy IDS (Schafer *et al.*, 2017). The linking of these topics in my thesis reflects the importance of interdisciplinarity in IDS, which I regard as one of the biggest strengths of the field. Too often, specialized academic research in a given area is not linked to related fields which leads to incomplete or even harmful conclusions. This risk is still present in IDS, but perhaps less so as goals of theory and policy of IDS are often meant to be broadly applicable to varying contexts around the world (Schafer *et al.*, 2017). IDS also encourages research goals that advance both theory and policy. Theoretical contributions of my thesis include those linking labour precarity and masculinities, framed within the environmental and political economic context, while the policy contributions include analysis of the labour dimensions of IUU fishing, the potential of a decent work agenda, and a worker perspective on policy. Of course, theory and policy overlap and both are important to understanding particular situations and how they can be improved. 'Development' after all is about improvement and advancement of human well-being, even if interpretations of what improvement and advancement look like are hotly debated or in some cases unacknowledged (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009).

In terms of contributions to understanding the role of workers and labour in development, this thesis has shown how worker experiences differ from the tales told about overall national sectoral economic growth. It contributes to the growing literature on contemporary precarious work and labour dynamics in Vietnam but differs from the literature's focus on urban industrialized zones (c.f. Arnold, 2013; Nguyen, 2019; Tappe, 2019). It shows how rural livelihoods are deeply linked to the natural environment. This research also contributes to feminist fisheries studies by interrogating gender even in a context largely centred on men. As with gender studies globally, gender studies in Vietnam have focused mainly on the experiences of women (An *et al.*, 2022). Still, studies of masculinities in Vietnam are on the rise but these have focused on areas such as gender-based violence (James-Hawkins *et al.*, 2019; Hoang *et al.*, 2013) and a gap still remains in understanding the relationships among men and the gendered nature of work in capitalist social relations. Similarly, studies on masculinities and holistic views on gender are growing in global fisheries research (c.f. Knott and Gustavsen, 2022; Knott *et al.*, 2022; Pauwelussen, 2022; Foley, 2020) but more can be said in linking gender in fisheries to capitalism and class. Recently, and regrettably too late to include in *Chapter 4*, Su (2024) explored the link between gender equality and breadwinner masculinity in urban Vietnam, showing how men perceive women's employment in relation to an often-inaccurate notion of past 'tradition' wherein wives were homemakers. Su's (2024) work is an example of the emerging research on masculinity within capitalist social relations, but this area remains underexplored. As mentioned, social sciences studies of fisheries are fewer than the dominant 'hard' science studies of fisheries. This thesis contributes to the smaller social sciences pool of fisheries research, as well as offshore fisheries research which has been less favoured over small-scale fisheries in nearshore waters both globally and in Vietnam (c.f. Pomeroy, 2009; Andrachuk and Armitage, 2015). The continued significance of offshore fishing combined with political tensions around IUU and maritime border disputes means attention to precarious conditions for blue boat fishers in Vietnam is as important as ever (Song *et al.*, 2019). The Ca Mau region and Song Doc port are key to understanding these dynamics as the area is among the most significant for fisheries in the country.

Limitations

While I had a detailed study design in place, various unpredictable and challenging conditions led to several limitations. These limitations include having relied on research assistants with imperfect English to conduct interviews in Vietnamese and interpret responses back to me. This limited the depth of the interviews but still provided new insights into the experiences of interviewees. I attempted to mitigate misunderstanding by also obtaining transcribed and translated recordings when possible and, while this was helpful, it still was not a solution to obtaining more in-depth responses. The depth of interviews was also limited by the context of researching a sensitive topic under surveillance. The fact that Vietnamese offshore fisheries were being monitored for illegal activity, both by Vietnamese and EU authorities, made deeper discussions about activity at sea and/or illegal activity riskier and attracted Vietnamese police surveillance. As mentioned, a government official accompanied me to several of the first interviews that I conducted which also very likely limited the responses given by interviewees. However, these interviews were mainly conducted with boat owners and wives of boat owners who owned larger houses and were in less precarious situations than workers. Occasionally boat owners insisted on telling me their complaints with the government while the government representative was present, while two others called my research assistant later in the day and asked us to come back so they could share additional information in private.

Further research

As mentioned, internal migrants who were difficult to gain access to in Song Doc as they would immediately head home when their boats came back to shore and therefore my study included limited interviews with internal migrants. Internal migration is a major feature of Vietnamese offshore fishing and migrants from other parts of the country regularly come to Song Doc port to fish. Further research could be done in following these migrants and understanding their lives in their hometowns and why they pursue work on blue boats in Song Doc, which for some who reside in Central Vietnam is far away. Understanding how migration contributes to precarity is another important dimension of this work.

I also only skimmed the surface of gender dynamics in the homes of workers, captains and boat owners, and interviews with their partners were limited in scope and number. A better

understanding of the experiences of women who have husbands who fish, captain or own boats that fish offshore could help unpack gender dynamics at home and the precarity experienced by fisher families. Understandings of the social reproduction of Vietnamese offshore fisheries would be further enriched through a deeper analysis of the labour that goes into supporting the lives of workers, captains and boat owners, including through raising children, managing the household while fishers are at sea, and additional employment, such as working in fish factories, that women take on. Further analysis of the sometimes-invisible labour done by women, including that of sex workers and women hired for entertainment, would provide a more holistic understanding of the social relations of production and reproduction in Vietnamese fisheries.

Further research could also be done with Vietnamese fishers awaiting repatriation abroad and regarding their experiences with the legal systems of other countries who capture Vietnamese blue boats for IUU fishing at sea. This may be challenging work to do because of the difficulty in gaining access to those being held in jails in multiple countries, but research and advocacy for these workers is incredibly important, especially in the context of the criminalization of workers engaged in these practices.

Finally, it may be helpful to have someone who can conduct ethnographic research out at sea on Vietnamese blue boats to truly understand the conditions that workers experience. Again, this is heavily dependant on the researcher's positionality and is a dangerous pursuit that may interfere with fishers' already precarious work. It is not recommended unless under very specific and appropriate circumstances. Vietnamese men and particularly those who have experience on boats might get different information and might be able to appropriately obtain observational data of life at sea. Others may be able to engage more deeply in questions of sexuality, an aspect which would also enhance understandings of masculinities and labour dynamics. These are not research approaches that I was in a position to carry out. Creative methods and multiple researchers with differing positionalities could provide new insights, however.

A new context is set to emerge once the enforcement of Vietnam's reforms, including those to reduce offshore fishing, are fully implemented and the country's IUU yellow card is revoked. At the same time, global neoliberalization and the growing climate crisis, will together create new

or enhanced challenges for fishing livelihoods. The picture of offshore fishing livelihoods that I have presented in this thesis will change over time with shifting global contexts and the increasing threat posed by climate change and other environmental stressors. Policies will need to adapt to these changes. More fundamentally, however, improving the overall sustainability and ethics of fisheries is linked to preserving worker wellbeing and reducing labour precarity.

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Appendix 1: Research ethics approval from the University of Ottawa

13/05/2019

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-04-19-3086
Titre du projet / Project Title	Masculinity and Environmental Decline: Understanding Off-Shore Fishing Labour in Vietnamese Fisheries
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	13/05/2019
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	12/05/2020

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Georgina ALONSO	École de développement international et mondialisation / School of International Development and Global Studies	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Melissa MARSCHKE	École de développement international et mondialisation / School of International Development and Global Studies	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Riana MARCOTTE

Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer

Pour/For Barbara GRAVES Président(e) du/ Chair of the Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board

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Appendix 2: Interview guide for fishers, captains and boat owners

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Research on the offshore fishing activities of Vietnamese fishers

(For fishers, captains, and boat owners)

Note: A Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was used for interviews

Interview number:

Interview type (owner, captain or hired worker):

Location of interview:

Location of interviewee's home (town, province):

Livelihoods

1. How old are you? How many years have you been working in the fishing industry? (If captain or owner, how long were you a worker before you became captain or owner?). If you had a different job before, what was it? If you also work in another job, what is it?
2. How did you get this job?
 - a. Family job
 - b. Found it myself
 - c. Introduced by friends
 - d. Other
3. What kind of boat?
 - a. Crab
 - b. Squid
 - c. Variety of fish
 - d. Tuna
 - e. Other:

Gear type:

Size:

Horse power:

Do you use a tracking device?

How many people work on the boat?

How long is one trip?

4. Is the boat owned by a company or individual? Where are they from?
 - a. Song Doc
 - b. Another part of Ca Mau:
 - c. Another province:
 - d. Another country:
5. Where do other fishers from the same boat come from? (list all that apply)

- a. Song Doc
 - b. Another part of Ca Mau:
 - c. Another province:
 - d. Another country:
 - e. Combination:
6. What are working conditions like? (good, decent, poor?)
 Explain why:
 Is there enough drinking water?
 How much do you use each day?
 What do you usually eat?
 How do you decide who is the cook?
 How many hours a day do you work?
7. Is the salary fair? (What do you consider to be fair?)
 How much are you paid?
 How often are you paid?
- a. Every fishing season
 - b. Monthly
 - c. After each fishing trip
 - d. Other:
- Are you paid on time?
 Do you get an advance loan from the boat owner? (If yes, how much is the loan?)
8. What makes a fishing trip successful or unsuccessful? (circle all that apply)
- a. Weather
 - b. Catch
 - c. Fishing equipment
 - d. Experience catching
 - e. Catch location
 - f. Other
- What qualities does a good fisherman need?
 What qualities does a good captain need?
9. Do you have a contract?
 Is the contract oral or written?
 Is the contract seasonal or annual?
 What language is the contract written in?
 Can you read the language used in the contract?
 If a fisher wants to change to work on another boat, can they? Do they?
10. What happens if you have a problem on board? Is there anyone you can call?
11. Do you plan to continue to be a fisherman?

If yes, why?

If not, what do you want to do?

Would you want your child to work in fishing? Why or why not?

12. What do you worry about most as a fisher?

13. How do you deal with risk and danger in your job?

Governance

1. Are you aware of some of the (labour, environmental) problems that fishers face in other countries (such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, etc.). If so, what is your opinion of why this happens?
2. Are there similar issues with working conditions in Vietnam? Or environmental conditions?
3. Have you heard of the “yellow card”? If so, what does this mean for fishing in Vietnam? How does it impact you?
4. In what area are you allowed to fish? What happens if you go elsewhere?

Understanding perceptions of environmental decline

1. Identify the key changes in the ocean and fish stocks that you have observed or experienced over the past 1, 5, and 10 years (as possible).
 - a. Pollution
 - b. Temperature
 - c. Unusual weather
 - d. Fish stock decline
 - e. Some species are rarer than before
 - f. Rising sea level
 - g. Other:
2. Please describe the speed and scale of change.
3. Please compare to historical benchmarks (1 year, 5 years, 10 years)
 - a. More
 - b. Less
 - c. The same
4. What are the factors, drivers of change?
 - a. Human activities
 - b. Political factors (policies, laws, enforcement)
 - c. Overexploitation of resources
 - d. Lack of awareness of general public
 - e. Local development plans
 - f. Other:

5. Identify and list the impact of environmental change on livelihoods and working conditions; rank the impact of these changes (from biggest to smallest)
 - a. Difficulty in obtaining high catch amounts
 - b. A need to fish at a greater distance from shore
 - c. Fishers transitioning to a different career
 - d. Migration to other regions (where exactly?)
 - e. Lower income
 - f. Increase in societal problems (What specifically? Drug use, poverty, etc.)
 - g. Other:
6. Does this change your fishing grounds? If so, where?

Relationships

1. What is your relationship with other fishers on the boat?
With the captain?
With the boat owner?
With your family?
Do you spend time getting close to fishers/ others on the boat? Keep distance? What types of things do you talk about?
2. What qualities do you like your colleagues to have (captain, owner, worker, etc.)? What qualities do you dislike?
3. Who decides where you fish?
4. How do you decide who gets what position on the boat? Are there better roles among workers?
5. Can you explain the taboo of women being on fishing boats?
6. How do others see fishing work?
7. What is your role in the family?
8. How does this work impact your family? Especially being away from home for so long?
9. What do you do if you have free time on the boat?
10. What do you do when you're back on shore? What do you have to do before you go see your family? Do you hang around with other fishers?

Appendix 3: Interview guide for spouses/partners of fishers

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Research on the offshore fishing activities of Vietnamese fishers

(For fishers, captains, and boat owners)

Note: A Vietnamese version of the questionnaire was used for interviews

Interview number:

Interview type (owner, captain or hired worker):

Location of interview:

Location of interviewee's home (town, province):

1. What is your job? (Does it relate to fishing? If so, how?)
2. What role do you play in your family?
Do you have children? (If so, how many? Genders?)
3. What is it like being married to a fisher?
4. Have you ever wanted to be a fisher?
5. Do you find this job dangerous?
 - a. Very dangerous
 - b. Dangerous
 - c. Not dangerous
6. Have you noticed changes in the environment over the last 1/5/10 years? (More big storms? Unpredictable weather? Other?)
If yes, what specifically?
7. Do changes in the environment impact your husband's work, your work, or your family?
 - a. Yes, specifically:
 - b. No
8. In general, what do you worry about?
9. How long has your husband been fishing?
10. Do you worry about your husband when he is out at sea?
11. Are you satisfied with the money you earn?
Is it enough to pay for family expenses?
Does it vary? If yes, how? (According to market prices, work experience, etc.)
12. Anything else you would like to share?