I first met Tram in 2006 in a tiny bar on Pham Ngu Lao Street in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), in a neighborhood frequented by backpackers from abroad.

Tram and other sex workers in the bar, disguised as bartenders, catered to Western budget travelers seeking brief encounters or longer relationships-for-hire. They were the bar’s key attraction, but the women received no wages from the owner; they were independent entrepreneurs in a niche of the sex trade.

Tram, 27 years old and adorned with bracelet, rings, and a diamond necklace, was a model of success and economic mobility. She lived in a brand-new luxury condo with two servants, a full-time housecleaner and a cook who prepared Western foods for her new American husband. Tram had come from a poor village, she told me, where the only jobs were in the rice fields. In Ho Chi Minh City, she worked first as a maid and then in a clothing factory. But after two years of earning no more than the equivalent of US$70 a month, Tram had saved no money, could barely cover food and rent, and saw no hope for improvement. “Life in the city is so expensive,” she said. She saw sex work as her best route out of poverty.

Tram met William, 70, as a client, and quickly began to develop a more intimate relationship with him, hoping that her emotional labor might lead to ongoing economic support—in a remittance relationship, or marriage. Many Western men come to Vietnam seeking wives, or they become attached to women they hired once there, sympathizing with their plight, and wanting to take them out of the sex trade and care for them. Six months after they met, William asked Tram to marry him and move to North America. They were married in 2007.

She had hoped to move to the United States, and had dreamed of living in Los Angeles or New York, “a big city, like the movies.”

In 2009, I reconnected with Tram, along with William and their three children at an airport outside of Montreal, Canada. As we drove the three hours to their home, passing lumber farms, acres of undeveloped land, and pastures sprinkled with sheep, I commented on its beauty and tranquility. But Tram expressed no such sentiments. She had never intended to escape small town Vietnam, she said, only to end up in another small town in rural Canada. She had hoped to move to the United States, and had dreamed of living in Los Angeles or New York, “a big city, like the movies.”

Instead, she found herself isolated, in a cold climate and working long hours. Williams’ savings had dwindled, thanks to the expense of immigration, and they had arrived in North America smack in the middle of a global recession. For a year and a half, she worked nights and weekends for her brother-in-law’s lumber company. She did see progress: By June of the year I came to visit, she had saved over US$20,000 and, with her sister-in-law, opened a small shop selling local produce. But she was now the primary breadwinner, while William, retired but without much of his savings, stayed home with the children. “This is not what I thought my life would be like,” she lamented.

The story of Tram and William, like that of other couples in my study, suggests a reversal of the usual trajectory of marital journeys. Ethnographers Denise Brennan and Amalia Cabezas have shown that sex workers often feign love as a strategy to obtain visas to migrate abroad. In Vietnam, the opening to the West in recent decades has inspired some women, usually between the ages of 17 and 32, to seek strategic marriages with Western men through sex work. Of the 71 sex workers I interviewed, 30 got married, and of the 30 just 12 women were able to obtain visas and emigrate. While 12 may not represent a large sample, I followed them for three to six years, spending as much as a week at their homes after they landed in the United States, Australia, France and Canada. While women who

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**transnational gender vertigo**

by Kimberly Kay Hoang | May 20, 2013 | Spring 2013 | contexts
traveled from Vietnam to Western countries to be with their husbands did not intend to seek out employment, two-thirds of the women in my study ended up becoming their family’s primary breadwinner—reversing typical expectations.

William, like most men in my study, had come to Vietnam deliberately seeking a wife, while others discovered these opportunities once they arrived on visits. Either way, they were eager to find women who would enter a marriage with traditional gender roles that were fast disappearing at home. Their expectations were simple; the men would provide the economic support and the women would provide care, housekeeping and emotional labor.

What happened instead was a classic case of “gender vertigo.” Sociologist Barbara Risman used this term to describe the dizzying effect on people who adopt, or find themselves having to embrace, a radical and unfamiliar social role that upends their ideas of how family structures and society work. Dating back to the 1970s at least, this vertigo hit couples engaging in egalitarian role sharing, where husband and wife occupy both roles—breadwinner and nurturer. But in recent years, especially since the Great Recession that began in 2007, this model has shifted 180 degrees. In my study, most of the women had expected to end their working days once they reached their destination. Instead, most of them quickly ended up finding jobs, looking for income to supplement their husbands’ and hoping to send some home to family in Vietnam, and 8 of the 12 women quickly became the main breadwinner, often working double shifts, with husbands working less lucrative jobs or at home doing childcare.

In Tram’s case, she was able to move beyond the daily grind to open her own business. Others struggled more—and longer.

from sex worker to wife

Thy, then 28, had met her future husband, Mitchell, in 2007. “When I first met him I did not really love him,” she explains. But “life in Vietnam was hard, and I was looking for a way to get out. Even after we married I had other boyfriends because I did not think that he would get me out [of Vietnam].” But after two years of visits back and forth, and paying fees to immigration lawyers both in Vietnam and Australia, Thy was finally able to migrate.

In the mid 2000s, stung by marriage scandals, and wary of enabling sex trafficking, more visas were denied by the United States, and the emigration process became increasingly long and arduous, taking an average of two years after a couple married. Most of the men in my study depleted their savings on attorney fees, on the cost of flights back and forth, and by sending money from the United States to support wives or fiancés waiting in Vietnam. The uncertainty in turn could complicate the marriage dynamic; many women hesitate to make the commitment unless it came with some kind of
assurance that they would be supported; nor did they want to drop out of the sex business if they weren’t assured support.

Thy landed in Melbourne in 2010. Using Skype, she walked me through her and Mitchell’s modest apartment, joking about how her standard of living in Australia was much lower than the one that she had in Vietnam. “The first time I went to the grocery store was a shock,” she remembered. “Eggs were $4 (Australian dollars) and a whole chicken was $15. Mitchell just kept filling the cart. The bill was $150. It was so expensive.” Soon both spouses were working just to cover the necessities.

“I feel like a machine,” Thy said, tears welling in her eyes. Everyday we wake up at 6:30 to make breakfast and pack lunch. He leaves, and then around 8:00, I walk to his mom’s house,” where she works as a maid for neighbors. Mitchell’s mother had introduced Thy, and spent three weeks working alongside her to instruct her on how to meet each homeowner’s personal expectations. “I work [all day] in empty houses when everyone goes to work, and when I come home, Mitchell is all I have,” said Thy. She has come to love Mitchell and to be grateful for all he sacrificed to bring her to Australia and in his work there. “Everyone in his family is very nice to me,” says Thy. “His mom buys me clothes in the winter, and she always tries to make me feel welcome. But it is very lonely.”

None of the 12 women thought of returning to sex work. Most held typical working-class jobs, although one told me in confidence that she worked in a local massage parlor that offered a number of erotic services (but not sexual intercourse). Her husband didn’t know this about the spa. She agreed to perform some of these services in order to earn more money, but she drew clear boundaries for herself around the kinds of sexual practices she would perform. What she did like about the job was that she didn’t have to struggle to speak English to colleagues or customers. “I don’t have to talk to anyone. It is mostly body language.”

For their part, many of the men in these relationships felt great anxiety and guilt that they couldn’t provide for their wives as they had promised. Most of the couples had arrived in the men’s countries in the middle of the worldwide financial crisis, and many found that they had lost their savings or retirement funds in the faltering markets. If they wanted to keep working, or to come out of retirement, they had trouble finding jobs, especially the older men.

Lawrence, in his 60s, living with his wife Nhi in Florida, told me that she “didn’t know much about life in the United States—except that I promised I would take care of her and provide her with a better life than the one she had in Vietnam. She wants so many things, and it’s hard to say no when she asks for things.” Brian, who spends idle days in Vermont, just says he’s afraid to turn on the TV to hear more news about how bad the economy is doing. His 401(k) fund is nearly gone and his $1200 a month Social Security payments are “barely enough for us to just get by.”

Younger husbands too had been through futile and humiliating job searches; 3 of the 12 were unemployed. Even for couples lucky enough to have two jobs, money was tight. Jeremie, a French man in his early 40s, had traveled to Vietnam as a tourist, and found that he and his lover, Quyen “could live it up.” Food was cheap, housing was cheap, and labor was cheap. Western men also had more opportunity; they could take up jobs as English teachers or as editors or translators for local Vietnamese companies. Back in the West, the exchange rate and status they had enjoyed in Vietnam evaporated.

But it didn’t help many of the couples to seek out other Vietnamese immigrants abroad. Some of the women found jobs in the Vietnamese ethnic enclaves, in nail salons, restaurants, or coffee shops. But when the details of their marriages were revealed, they suffered new isolation. The stigma associated with being a young Vietnamese woman married to a Western man made it difficult to establish trust or social bonds with them.

Hoai told me, “When the [Vietnamese] owners [of a nail salon] found out that I was married to an older white man, they started to trust me less with the money. They look at me like I might steal...
something from them because I was a bar girl in Vietnam. The female boss always watches me around her husband.”

**between love and money**

As I heard more stories of struggle and isolation, I began to wonder—and ask—why some of the women didn’t leave their husbands, either to live on their own, in different locations or communities in their new countries, or to return to Vietnam. Most of the women in fact, believed that they could easily escape their marriages but remain in their new countries if they claimed that their husbands were abusing them; authorities would believe they were victims of human trafficking. But none wanted to do this, and none wanted to return home.

Illustration by Corey Fields

One reason was pride. Like many immigrants who boldly leave home, full of grand expectations, some of the women hid the truths of their new lives from family at home. Thanh Ha, age 26, was painfully reluctant to reveal what she was doing to earn a living in the United States. She told me at first that she had found work in a tortilla chip factory. I spent nearly four days with the family in their cramped apartment before she finally revealed what she was doing. “I work in a chip factory,” she said, haltingly. “But I don’t work on the line.” She hesitated. “My job is to collect garbage.”

Struck by her emotion, I tried to reassure her that this kind of job could be a stepping-stone to better things. Shaking her head, she said, “When I was in Vietnam, my first job [in a wood factory] was a step-up from my village; the bar was another step up. I was making more money. Picking up trash in America is both a step up and a step down.”

When Jeremie suggested returning to Vietnam to live, his wife Quyen was unwilling. She couldn’t imagine returning without enough money or Western luxuries to display. One of the reasons the women wanted to send money home, in fact, was to maintain the veneer of upward mobility.

But perhaps the bigger surprise in these developments is the way the women and men began to acclimate to their vertiginous situations. One pleasure for the women was how supportive their husbands were about their earning money—even when they out-earned the men. Thu was surprised by her husband Roger’s approach to the money she earned. “He never tells me how to spend it. If I was married to a Vietnamese man, it would probably be hard for him to accept. But Roger is proud; he calls me superwoman.”

“I’m lucky because Thomas lets me work,” says Xuan, 26, “and he never asks me how I spend the money I earn.” Xuan’s Vietnamese co-workers who are married to Vietnamese men “always have to ask their husbands if they can send money to Vietnam.” These immigrants may “look down on me for my past life in Vietnam, but I have more freedoms, and I live a more carefree life than they do.”
Not only were many of the men supportive, they were comforted to know that their wives would be self-sufficient without them. Stanley, a man in his late 70s, said, “She is young, and I want her to be able to take care of herself when I pass away. I had my whole life to work and build my career. She should get to do that too.” The women, meanwhile, seemed to have developed affection, even love for their husbands, and certainly a sense of loyalty, a belief that they owed their husbands a great deal. “When I married Jeremie he took care of me and paid for everything,” said his Quyen. “When you marry an older man you will have to pay back your debt to him and take care of him too.”

Several of the women were still optimistic about their economic prospects, and they maintained the pragmatism that had made them marry these men in the first place. Van explained to me, “We are saving money to open a small shop together. He knows English and can handle the paperwork, and I can run the shop.”

Seeking economic security and a pathway out of Vietnam, the women in my study found themselves, thousands of miles away, in marriages where they became the breadwinner. Although they wanted women whom they could support financially who would offer them emotional security, the men found themselves in non-traditional relationships they had not bargained for. This experience of transnational gender vertigo reframes our understandings of sex work, migration, and gendered relationships across transnational spaces.

These couples stayed married, for better or for worse, as the transformation of marriage, migration, and love gave rise to new and different dreams for the future. As Van said, “Do Tinh Den Bac;” a phrase that means when you have luck with love or romance, your economic luck may decline. While she and the other women I studied embarked on migration journeys believing that they were sacrificing love for economic fortune, many ended up struggling economically—and some found love along the way.

Kimberly Kay Hoang is in the sociology department at Boston College. She studies globalization, gender and development.