

When the Shock Hits: Migrant Workers Faced Food Accessibility Issues – Qualitative Research in Central Vietnam*

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The COVID-19 pandemic was a major shock and introduced significant hurdles in food access for migrant workers. There is a notable lack of research in Vietnam that delves into the food access issues encountered by returned migrant workers. Viewing food access as a crucial component of overall resilience, our study employed interviews and discussions to gain insights into the experiences of migrant workers. Our findings highlight the substantial difficulties faced by nearly all migrant workers. The primary impediment to food access was financial constraint. Culture and habits related to food storage and the failure to register place of residence also emerged as significant barriers, leading to disparities in the distribution of food assistance among migrant workers. These results offer valuable insights for mitigating the challenges related to food access for migrant workers. We recommend that policymakers and governments consider these findings when designing and implementing food security programs tailored to the needs of this vulnerable population.

Keywords: COVID-19, food accessibility, migrant worker, Vietnam

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Introduction

Vietnam is a country with a high migration rate in recent years, with nearly 6.4 million migrant workers migrating to big cities and industrial zones such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (Vo 2024). The proportion of female labour migrants is also increasing and is greater than male labour migrants, migrating mainly from rural to urban areas (Junge, Diez, and Schätzl 2015). Most people migrate spontaneously when the economy weakens, leading to challenges in socio-economic development and social security for migrants in the destination area (Simelton, Duong, and Houzer 2021).

The global eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unparalleled challenges to societies worldwide, transcending the realm of public health. This multifaceted crisis has reverberated across various dimensions of human existence, including economic stability, social equity, and food security (WHO 2021). Notably, it has disproportionately burdened vulnerable populations. In 2020, a staggering 800 million individuals worldwide grappled with hunger, marking a stark increase of 161 million compared to the previous year (WHO 2021). The year 2020 witnessed a total of 2.37 billion people lacking access to sufficient food (FAO et al. 2023). Apart from its immediate health impacts, the pandemic has disrupted economic activities, leading to job losses, income reductions, and exacerbated economic inequalities among diverse populations (Alahmad et al. 2020; Tô, Nguyễn, and Đồng 2021). Among these vulnerable groups, migrant workers have endured compounded challenges.

Migrant labourers constitute a substantial yet often overlooked segment of society, contributing significantly to the workforce of numerous nations, including Vietnam. Their occupations often require them to reside far from their places of origin, exposing them to unique vulnerabilities and challenges, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Sen et al. 2023). Despite their crucial roles across various industries, migrant workers frequently encounter difficulties in accessing essential resources, with food being a primary concern (Smith and Wesselbaum 2020).

This study focuses on migrant workers returning to Central Vietnam due to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the coastal region of Thua Thien Hue. The coastal area was impacted by the 2016 Formosa marine pollution incident, particularly the livelihoods of communities (Truyền, Ủy, and Tuấn 2020). Labour migration is a common livelihood strategy in these central coastal areas (Phương and Hồng 2021). Access to food seemed to be a key driving factor of their decision to return to their coastal villages.

This study aims to explore barriers to migrant workers' access to food during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings of this study bear practical importance for attracting government agencies, and non-government organizations (NGOs) to support workers' food access in the future. We hope this endeavour will catalyse positive change and facilitate a more inclusive response to future crises.

Literature Review

This review synthesizes current research on the impact of the pandemic on food security, with a particular focus on marginalized and vulnerable populations. The pandemic exacerbated food insecurity, especially among the urban poor and marginalized communities.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected food security and food supply chains, highlighting critical vulnerabilities in both developed and developing countries. Food is a basic human need and limited access to food is considered a violation of human rights (Reimold et al. 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to food was compromised due to economic disruptions, supply chain interruptions, and increased food prices (Xu et al. 2023). Low-income and marginalized communities experienced the most severe impacts, with many facing unprecedented levels of food insecurity (Béné et al. 2021; Gordon et al. 2020). The urban poor and marginalized communities were particularly impacted (Crush and Si, 2020; McAuliffe et al. 2021).

Research indicates that even in developed countries, such as the United States, individuals faced significant barriers to accessing food. Issues included insufficient income, health concerns related to shopping, and the unavailability of essential food items (Reimold et al. 2021). Research by Loopstra (2020) investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity in the UK and found that households with lower incomes, particularly those reliant on food banks, faced increased difficulties accessing sufficient food. The closure of some food banks and reduced availability of charitable food services further worsened food insecurity among vulnerable populations (Loopstra 2020). In China, government lockdowns further exacerbated these issues by increasing job losses and food price volatility, making it difficult for migrants to maintain food security (Xu et al. 2023).

Similarly, vulnerability due to lack of access to food is common in developing countries. In Bangladesh, it was reported that approximately 90%

of households experienced food shocks due to shortages and income losses (Fahim et al. 2021). Research by Hadi (2022) showed that in Indonesia, the impact of COVID-19 was particularly acute in urban areas where informal sector workers, who lacked job security and social protections, faced significant food access challenges (Hadi, Fikri, and Farina Gandryani, 2022). Thailand experienced notable disruptions to food security during the pandemic as well. As (Husain et al. 2020) found, the pandemic-induced economic slowdown affected employment and income, leading to increased food shocks among lower-income households and difficulty accessing food.

In Vietnam, the pandemic led to significant socio-economic impacts, particularly in the early months of 2020. Government-imposed lockdown measures, including social distancing, mask mandates, and quarantine protocols, were essential for controlling the spread of the virus but severely affected the economy. Migrant workers were hit hard, as many were forced to leave their jobs (Tô, Nguyễn, and Đồng 2021) and faced financial, psychological, and social strains (Sen et al. 2023). This led to increased consumer demand amidst a strained food industry (Hanh et al. 2022). Economic hardships and limited access to government and local food support programs highlighted the vulnerability of domestic migrant workers (Ngân, Sơn, and Huyền 2021; Hanh et al. 2022).

Several studies have identified additional barriers to food access. (Octavia and Rachmalina 2022) highlight that factor such as education level, income, marital status, health insurance, and type of residence significantly impact food security. Furthermore, (Castro et al. 2021) emphasizes logistical challenges, including insufficient volunteer support and transportation issues, which hinder food distribution processes. Xu (2023) adds that migrant workers in China encountered difficulties accessing food due to the lack of household registration, complicating their food security during the pandemic.

The pandemic has highlighted the critical need for effective food access mechanisms to ensure both nutrition and overall well-being. (Gundersen et al. 2021) and (Kent et al. 2022) stress that access to adequate food is essential for maintaining physical health and psychological well-being. This is consistent with (Leroy et al. 2015) theoretical framework, which posits that proper food utilization supports normal cognitive function and reduces stress associated with food scarcity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated existing challenges in food security, particularly for vulnerable populations such as migrants and low-income households. The impact of the pandemic on food

access underscores the necessity for resilient food systems and comprehensive support mechanisms. This study explores the barriers faced by migrant workers in accessing food for food security during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Sampling Design and Site Selection

This study was exploratory and followed a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews. We utilized a specific purposive snowball or chain-referral sampling method (Hanage, Qiu, and Kennedy-Shaffer 2020) to gather data from participants meeting predetermined criteria (Gentles et al. 2015; Palinkas et al. 2015). For this study, the essential criteria for selecting respondents were: (1) being a returned migrant worker due to COVID-19 or (2) familiarity with the barriers/challenges encountered when accessing food during this period. Additionally we sought respondents with (3) a deep understanding of government support measures and interventions; and (4) willingness to participate in interviews and provide comprehensive information.

In addition to these criteria, the study also relied on the registration list of migrant workers to select our initial respondents. All returning migrant workers during the specified period were required to register on the provincial app Hues, providing personal information such as origin, destination address, occupation, health status, sociodemographic details, and registration to receive food support from local authorities. We selected our initial respondents from the registration list based on who met the criteria set by the study. This sampling method facilitated the selection of participants for interviews, ensuring each provided accurate and rich information relevant to the study's objectives. Some potential respondents declined to participate and therefore some participants were on the registration list while others were approached through the recommendation of interviewed migrant workers (snowballing).

Respondents were identified until data saturation was reached. In total, 23 people were interviewed, including returned migrants (8 females, 7 males), and 8 representatives of local women's associations, commune chairmen, directors of commune clinics, and security personnel. The respondents who were migrant workers were identified by a code. The study

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE MIGRANT WORKER RESPONDENTS

Category	Variable	N
Age	20-30	2
	30-40	6
	40-50	4
	50-60	3
Gender	Male	7
	Female	8
Occupation	Restaurant servers	3
	Traders	4
	Workers	4
	Builders	3
	Grab motorbike riders	2
Income	3 million VND/month	4
	5-7 million VND/month	8
	7-10 million VND/month	3

Source: Interviews with migrant workers in 2022

sought migrant workers of different ages who had returned from different provinces (Table 1): 8 people from Ho Chi Minh City (HCM), 2 people from Bac Ninh (Anaf et al.), 3 people from Binh Duong (BD) and 2 people from Dong Nai (Dang, Goldstein, and McNally). The occupations of the migrant workers were also diverse (4 traders, 2 Grab motorbike riders, 3 builders, 3 workers, 3 restaurant servers). The education level of migrant workers was mainly primary and secondary school. The average monthly income ranged from 3 million to 10 million VND per month, indicating that workers had higher, stable incomes than people in other industries.

The coastal area of Thua Thien Hue province was selected for this study based on its unique characteristics. Firstly, the region exhibited a high poverty rate, at nearly 10% in 2021—considerably higher compared to the average of the province at 3.5% and the country at 4.3% (Tran et al. 2024). Additionally, 27 communes in this area were identified as among the most vulnerable in the country. Secondly, the region experienced an increased outflow of migrant workers, notably after the Formosa marine environmental



FIG. 1.—LOCATION OF RESEARCH SITE: THUA THIEN HUE PROVINCE, VIETNAM
 Resource: Modified from (Sen et al. 2023).

incident in 2016, as outlined in the Prime Minister’s Decision No. 353/QD-TTg in 2022. Lastly, 35% of the total returning workers in the province had lost jobs and had reduced income due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ánh et al. 2023). This region, with its mix of urban and rural settings, provides an informative backdrop for investigating the specific challenges encountered by migrant laborers in accessing food during the pandemic.

Research Instruments

This study utilized interviews where the questions aligned with the research objectives, which mainly focused on the challenges in food access faced by the group of returned migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three core questions asked during each interview were:

- 1) What difficulties and challenges did migrant workers encounter in food access due to the pandemic?
- 2) What actions did migrant workers utilise to access food during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 3) How (if at all) have migrant workers received support from the government/local authorities and their workplace?

Ethical Considerations and Data Collection Process

This research was undertaken by Hue University (ID: DHH2023-02-172) and therefore had to follow specific guidelines including that data collection had to be conducted in Thua Thien Hue province in localities that have partnerships with Hue University, and, importantly, in coastal communes.

The study was conducted in adherence to established research ethics, including obtaining informed consent and safeguarding participant confidentiality. The research ethics and study protocol received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Hue University (ID: DHH2023-02-172). Moreover, this research forms a component of a doctoral thesis and adheres to the regulations set forth by the University of Agriculture and Forestry, Hue University.

Before collecting data, consent was obtained from all participants for their involvement in the research. Most interviews were conducted in person at the study site, with only two migrant workers interviewed over the phone (as they had returned to the city for work). Clear instructions were provided to all participants before conducting interviews. Data collection took place from December 2021 to February 2023, following the relaxation of social restrictions to allow for normal economic and social activities.

Data Analysis

All collected data was encoded and analyzed post-collection. A thematic analysis approach (by specific research objectives) was employed in this study (Saldaña 2013). Fundamentally, the study operates under the perspective that the recorded information and data are accurate reflections of reality and can be used to clarify the study's objectives.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to the objectives: the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers, key barriers to migrant workers' food access, and government interventions and support for food access.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers

The interviews with migrant workers showed that before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, migrants worked a range of jobs with an average income of approximately 5 million-7 million VND (\approx 250-300 USD) per month. With this income, migrant workers could meet their basic needs such as food access, health, and daily expenses. However, difficulties arose during the pandemic, and all industries were affected. A high proportion of migrant workers are self-employed, and they were the first to be forced to practice social distancing because their work was mainly on the sidewalk and unstable. Migrant workers suffered a significant reduction in income which led to a situation where they struggled to meet daily living expenses. Many working families reduced expenditure on food, the nutritional value of their food, or the number of meals they ate a day. A migrant worker shared the following:

I've been working here as a worker for about five years, and my income was good for my family. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, I lost my job and had no income. Our family fell into a situation. It was difficult and we had to eat instant noodles to get through the day. After more than two months, we had to return to my hometown.

In addition to the difficulties caused by reduced income, there was psychological stress for migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents were worried about their inability to access food from relief programs, government support, charities or employers/workplaces. Respondents said that food insecurity led to a series of worries such as where to find food, what to do without food, and fear of starving before dying from the pandemic. A migrant worker shared the following:

Most people moved to Ho Chi Minh City to work as masons. When the pandemic broke out, everyone became unemployed. For more than three or four months now, we have received aid from the government of Binh Tan District (Ho Chi Minh City); sometimes there are sponsors in Hue who send food and supplies as reinforcements. The day we left Ho Chi Minh City, my family owed back the rent and had to empty our pockets to have 2 million for the car to get home.

Respondents stated that they were always in a state of anxiety and fear—fear of disease, and predominantly fear of not having food. During the pandemic, the supply of many essential goods could not meet demand. This placed respondents in situations they had never been in before. The respondents also felt stressed for leaving their properties behind to return to their hometown after working for years elsewhere.

Further, the reduced access to food during COVID-19 also influenced social safety. In interviews, respondents said that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, society was chaotic when hospitals were overloaded. Migrant workers were forced to quarantine at home according to government regulations, where they had difficulty accessing food because they were not healthy enough to go to food distribution locations and could not contact the hotline. In addition, the lack of access to food caused chaos in the form of fighting for food at points of sale, leading to difficulties in controlling safety and the spread of the disease. A worker shared the following account:

During the tense pandemic, each person is only allowed to go out once a week; food is limited. Going to buy goods is scarce, causing me to act chaotically when competing with many other people to buy. The scenes in the markets and supermarkets were like the chaos that I don't want to remember; the feeling was horrible and hard to describe.

Key Barriers to Migrant Workers' Food Access

The results of interviews indicate that key barriers to the food access of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic include financial constraints, weak social networking, transportation challenges, food availability, illegal residential status and culture and habits related to food storage and consumption.

Network connection and access to information

Migrant workers stated that they moved long distances to find jobs and send money home. Therefore, they did not have much time to meet and socialise with their fellow migrants and the community at their place of destination. Therefore, migrant workers had few community relationships around their place of residence. A migrant worker shared as follows:

I am 25 years old. After graduating from high school, I went to the South to find a job to take care of myself. I rented a room about four kilometres from work for ease of transportation. It was cheap and located on the outskirts of the city, so it was full of poor people. I work as a factory worker, so I always work the night shift and don't have time to socialise with friends or neighbours. Sometimes I feel shy because I come from far away. So, when the pandemic broke out, I had to return to my hometown because I had no money to cover my living, nor did I receive any support from people or work.

Respondents reported that when the COVID-19 pandemic began, they had a little information about the pandemic and no support from their surrounding communities. Migrant workers had limited social media engagement, with their social connections mainly revolving around hometown associations and friends at work, as well as a lack of interaction with the local community. Respondents reported that they had to register via a mobile app or visit a registration counter in their ward (local government area) to receive food support. However, they were often not members of social groups, and most migrant workers did not have any resources to access devices (e.g. smartphones, televisions), so access to food was very difficult. In addition, many residents reported technical difficulties in using such devices, such as downloading the application software, creating an account, and logging in. As a result, they were unable to access information about the location for food distribution. Therefore, the restriction in social relations made migrant workers feel anxious about securing food support. A respondent stated as follows:

My family of five people only has one smartphone with a social media connection, which my husband uses. My husband is a construction worker, so he hardly knows how to use social media, but when there is no food, we must search and set up to buy food, things we have never done before.

One positive aspect of the food shortage situation was that the need to download apps to register for food and online shopping increased people's ability to use technology they have not used before.

Challenges arising from the lack of temporary residence registration by migrant workers

In Vietnam, there are measures in place to manage migrant workers. However, in large cities with large immigrant populations, there are still cases of unregistered residence. Interviews with migrant workers made it clear that they often change jobs to have multiple sources of income. This requires frequent changes in residence, but it has become common for freelance migrant workers and factory workers to not register their residence so that they do not have to pay personal income tax and can easily find work. This diminishes the government's ability to monitor migrants. The situation of not registering residence has. One migrant worker shared the following account:

I am from Hue, moved to the South to find a job 10 years ago, here mainly do many different jobs such as factory worker, construction worker, and market trader... in all districts in Ho Chi Minh City. I moved house constantly to find suitable work, so I did not register for temporary residence in the ward to easily find a new place to live. But when the epidemic happened, I had difficulty because I was not a citizen of the ward, so I did not receive support.

In addition, our interviews with migrant workers showed that the workplaces of migrants also have an interest in migrants not registering their residence to avoid paying personal income tax, buying health insurance, and complying with the terms of the labour contract. The workplace can also easily change personnel when necessary and decline to undertake administrative procedures for workers. Although the rights of workers are violated, the migrants still accept these conditions because of the high income they can earn. However, this lack of residential status during the pandemic was the biggest obstacle for them to access food because they were not on the local government list and could not receive food support. A male migrant worker shared as follows:

I am 40 years old, working as a security guard for a company but was not required to submit a temporary residence permit or residential address to the company, I received a monthly salary according to the agreement and did not have a labour contract. When the epidemic broke out, the company only supported food and cash for employees with official contracts. I did not eat rice for many days, only ate instant noodles and had to ask for help from

neighbours.

Migrant workers not on the local government registry were forced to receive food last and, in many cases, not at all, as authorities ran out of food. Many community conflicts arose between local people and migrants in competition for aid when food resources were scarce. Unregistered migrant workers were forced to accept different conditions or were vulnerable to exploitation in exchange for food. A female migrant worker shared as follows:

My husband and I trade goods from Ho Chi Minh to Binh Duong, so we often change our place of residence to receive and deliver goods to customers on time. We are busy with work and want to avoid taxes, so we did not register for temporary residence in the ward. When the epidemic broke out, goods could not be transported due to social distancing, and there was no food at home, so I had to find a way to buy goods and was forced to pay high prices at the stores.

Migrant workers said that because of this, they did not have access to food and had to endure many consecutive days without a proper meal. Families with young children faced increasing stress and conflict due to the inability to ensure food for all family members. Therefore, the respondents decided to return to their hometown, even though they encountered numerous difficulties upon their return and did not receive any food assistance on the way back. One migrant worker shared:

My wife and I have been working for five years. We rent affordable accommodation to save money for our family. Each time we change jobs, we find new lodgings. During the pandemic, we couldn't afford to buy food, and this led to arguments because we didn't have enough food for our children. We attempted to register for assistance with the local government, but our lack of residence registration made us ineligible for priority support. Fortunately, we received support in the form of instant noodles and rice from charity organizations.

Culture and habits related to food storage and consumption

Cultural factors in lifestyle also partly affected migrants' ability to access food sources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vietnamese people often buy food at local markets every day for daily consumption because food is fresher and

more nutritious if purchased and processed daily (Hiến 2022). Because of these habits, migrant workers often do not buy food to store but buy goods on the day they plan to eat them to keep food fresh, so when the epidemic occurred, families had almost no food reserves. The following account is from one of the workers we spoke to.

My family of four, from Hai Phong, moved to Ho Chi Minh City in 2016. My husband and I work as construction workers at a construction site, so we don't go home for lunch, the children stay home and go to school and eat at school. Dinner is the main meal for the whole family, so when I come home from work, I go to the market to cook for the day, and I rarely buy frozen food. I don't have money to buy a refrigerator. My husband and I earn 300,000 VND a day, which is just enough to cover expenses and send the children to school, so we rarely stock up on food. When the pandemic broke out, going to the market to buy food was limited, so my family had to ask for vegetables and rice from the aid organisation.

This was similar for other migrant workers who had embraced an urban lifestyle, where the habit of cooking every day has decreased and there is a reliance on fast food and pre-processed food.

I am 30 years old and have been working in an office for a textile and garment company for about three years now. I rent a house in District 9 to save money, but because I work far away in District 2, I go to work all day, eat at the company, and go back to my rented house just to sleep, so I rarely buy food to keep at home. When the epidemic broke out, I was isolated at home, with no food, I mainly received instant noodles as aid to get through the day.

I have been working in Ho Chi Minh City for 12 years, a long time, but this is the first time I have witnessed food shortages. When the government issued Directive 16, my family had to quarantine at home. My wife was responsible for buying food for the family, but it became extremely difficult, every time we went out, we had to get a travel permit from the local government and our family was only allowed to go out once a week. The inability to travel forced us to restrict our diets, save money and consume more fast food such as instant noodles, frozen food and bread...

In addition, migrant workers also said that they mainly come from rural areas, so they still maintain traditional preservation habits such as drying, fermenting and pickling food while modern methods such as freezing or vacuum-sealing are less popular. Along with that, economic difficulties limit the purchase of preservation equipment (refrigerators, dehydrators) and to limit the cost of electricity, they do not use such appliances.

Financial Constraints

Financial constraints had the greatest effect on migrant workers' ability to access food. Interviews with migrant workers showed that when the government-imposed quarantine measures were enacted and factories and companies closed, migrant workers were forced to take time off and reduce working hours, ultimately leading to a decrease in income.

Specifically, of a total of 15 migrant workers interviewed, five were self-employed or ran a small business. These respondents were more affected by job loss and income decline than respondents in other types of work (i.e. employees of a company). As a result, migrant workers had difficulty accessing food due to an inability to afford food and daily expenses. The following accounts come from migrant workers we spoke to.

I've been a migrant worker for nearly six years. During this time, I've explored various job opportunities to maximize my income and support my children's education back home. When I arrived in Ho Chi Minh city, lacking a degree, I resorted to the sidewalk vending. On good days, I could earn around 150,000-250,000 VND per day. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, my sales plummeted, and I struggled to make ends meet. I attempted to save money for three months, hoping to return to work once the pandemic was under control. Unfortunately, the situation worsened, and I found myself without enough money to buy food, so I made the difficult decision to return to my hometown.

My family lives in a small alley in District 8, Binh Duong City. I rent a house there because it is cheap and convenient for going to work. My job is to transport goods at the market, working from 2-3 am until late at night; I hardly know my neighbours and only focus on earning money to support my family and my sick parents in the countryside. When the epidemic happened, I realized that I had no connection with my neighbours' and my friends all lived far away. I fell into a state of anxiety and crisis more than

ever. Finally, my family decided to return home after five days of thinking about everything, I felt overwhelmed with fear.

The interviews also showed that when respondents did not have adequate finances, they became worried and were forced to eat unsafe (i.e., not fresh) or fast food (e.g., noodles). Married migrant workers with young children who did not have enough meals for their children felt acute concern, and their health was affected. Therefore, they looked for solutions, which led to a mass return to their hometown and the spread of disease.

Positive outcomes for migrant workers' access to food

Despite the many barriers to migrant workers' access to food, there were some positive developments during the pandemic. Many new jobs have emerged for migrant workers, during the pandemic in safe areas with few restrictions on movement, including trading medical supplies and home deliveries. Some migrant workers started to grow crops (vegetables) and raise livestock (chickens) at home to increase their family's food supply. As mentioned in the previous section, some migrants had become more reliant on fast and processed foods and were not able to maintain their traditional food preservation methods. However, other migrants were able to continue these traditional food preservation methods, such as fermentation, drying, and pickling, which allowed them to store food for a long time, reduce the need for frequent shopping, and help them manage during lockdowns or supply chain disruptions.

While social chaos was noted at food distribution outlets, there were also instances of social cohesion and sharing. Many workers were willing to share the food they received from relatives and friends back home.

Some key informants expressed that Vietnamese people always uphold the spirit of mutual assistance to develop the community: "The leaves cover the torn leaves." This spirit of support is the operating principle of civil society organizations in Vietnam (i.e. women's unions, youth unions, and farmers' associations). In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, these organizations, along with religious organizations and individual volunteers, actively donated food and delivered it to areas with many migrant workers in the southern industrial zones. As a women's union staff member shared:

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. I am a staff of the women's union, so I had to participate in many local activities. I was very touched by the solidarity of everyone. People in safe areas shared food with the epidemic-affected areas, businesses supported instant noodles and rice. Women in the commune cooked rice and brought it to the homes of sick people.

However, due to the lack of information about the number of migrant workers, the distribution was ineffective, and many poor people and migrant workers did not have access to food and were disappointed with the relief programs. Therefore, these organizations need to support vulnerable populations through more efficient resource distribution, ensuring everyone has easy and adequate access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government interventions and support for food access play an important role in food security. Respondents reported that the government rolled out emergency relief programs aimed at providing “62,000 billion VND welfare support” assistance targeting unemployed migrant workers, offering them food and the means to sustain their livelihoods. In addition, interviews with local officials revealed that the government also played a pivotal role in food distribution, collaborating with local authorities, women's unions, and the military by establishing prevention control teams that transported food by bicycle to distribute to quarantine areas. Additional support from charitable organizations was also mobilized to increase finance and food. As noted earlier, not all migrants were able to access these resources.

Discussion

In the context of social distancing and a scarcity of goods due to factory production slowdowns, individuals with stable incomes were panicking and stockpiling essential goods to ensure their families had food. Migrant workers were in a difficult situation when they could not access food. The present study's findings have highlighted that financial barriers are the biggest obstacle to food access. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused job and income losses for migrant workers, thus severely affecting their financial resources and making accessing food extremely difficult. This is consistent with previous research results showing that food access barriers often stem from financial constraints, competing financial obligations, and rising food costs in

stores (Coleman-Jensen 2020; Crush and Si 2020).

The study made the noteworthy observation that the lack of residence registration among migrant workers was a significant barrier to food access. Migrant workers are less likely to register their residence with the government, which allows them to be flexible in their work and move quickly while avoiding administrative procedures from local authorities. However, when the pandemic struck, this practice left migrant workers in a precarious situation. The government could not keep track of the number of migrant workers in a given area, making it difficult to distribute food to them. Many migrant workers who sought food assistance were in trouble because they did not have temporary residence registration in their locality. This predicament forced them to seek help from relatives, contributing to a growing wave of migrants returning to their hometowns. This study's findings share similarities with those in China, where residents with a household registration can easily access food assistance and priority shopping, while migrant workers are excluded due to their lack of a local household registration (Xu, Crush, and Zhong 2023; Zhang et al. 2021). The situation escalated into conflicts and disputes at supermarkets and food distribution points.

Networking among migrant workers is crucial for their economic opportunities and social support. Participation in diverse networks or membership in various social organizations, such as origin associations (groups for people from the same place), classmates, or living communities (e.g., roommates or colleagues), enables workers to access more job opportunities, build reciprocal relationships, and provide mutual assistance. However, our interviews revealed that workers are often not connected to social groups in their workplaces. Respondents did not have the time to participate in or knowledge about these groups before the pandemic. Their focus was on finding alternative income sources and working extra hours to send money home, which initially prevented them from participating in these groups. These findings corroborate previous research showing that a lack of networks partly hampers access to information and community assistance (Sen et al. 2023).

The study uncovered notable insights into cultural and behavioral shifts regarding food consumption that had not been highlighted in previous research. Vietnamese consumer culture traditionally values fresh food, with people frequently visiting markets, cooking daily, and minimizing the storage of frozen foods (Hiến 2022; Anh 2015). However, the study found that migrant workers, due to the nature of their work and financial constraints,

rarely stock up on food or eat throughout the day. This practice significantly impacted their food access during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, when the government-imposed lockdowns, these workers had no food reserves, leading to a reliance on frozen and convenient foods and sometimes even unsafe food options. This shift contrasts with findings from some European countries, where research by Reyes Olavarría et al. (2020) and Sarda et al. (2022) observed that people increased home cooking and made healthier food choices during the pandemic.

Despite the challenges, the pandemic highlighted the strong culture of mutual aid and sharing among Vietnamese people. Charities, community-based organizations, and civil society groups, including women's and youth unions and religious organizations, played a crucial role in supporting food access and security. This communal spirit of solidarity was instrumental in navigating the food shortages brought on by the pandemic. The study's findings reflect this culture of sharing and mutual support, consistent with other research on community solidarity during crises (Börner 2021). Nevertheless, some limitations were noted. Concerns about food shortages led to competitive behaviors, with individuals prioritizing their own families, sometimes resulting in chaotic scenes at food stores. This competitive mentality highlights ongoing challenges in food distribution and access during emergencies.

The study also emphasized the critical role of community networks in fostering solidarity during crises. Migrant workers, who often lack social connections in their new locations, experienced heightened anxiety and difficulty accessing food. Those who had relationships with neighbors and fellow compatriots received both food and emotional support, reinforcing the importance of social networks. This aligns with existing research indicating that limited participation in social groups leads to a lack of information, fewer job opportunities, and increased anxiety in the absence of support (Hanh 2022; Sen et al. 2022). Therefore, barriers to food access and information are closely linked to inadequate social network participation. To address these issues, it is crucial for governments to implement programs that enhance social inclusion and build resilience among migrant workers. Strengthening community connections and promoting active participation in social networks can mitigate the impacts of future crises and support more equitable access to resources.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers in Vietnam, particularly focusing on the barriers they faced in accessing food. It highlights several critical issues and offers valuable lessons for future crisis management. The research underscores that the primary barrier to food access for migrant workers during the pandemic was their precarious economic situation. Many lost their jobs, resulting in financial instability that severely limited their ability to purchase food. The study also identifies significant shortcomings in the management of migrant workers and food distribution. The lack of residence registration among migrant workers created challenges in managing food aid, overburdening hotlines and straining resources. Cultural practices and habits both hindered and facilitated food access and consumption for migrant workers.

Considering these findings, the research offers several lessons for addressing future crises: First, migrant workers should prioritize income security, savings, and a more accumulative lifestyle. They should take responsibility for declaring their place of residence, which can grant them various benefits. Increased participation in social networks can help them access information and support. Joining social insurance programs is also advisable. Second, the government should have greater oversight of the movement of migrant workers and establish a digital management program for this purpose. Finally, there is a need for a dedicated food assistance hotline and the creation of social networks for migrant worker communities. Building a food bank and improving transportation systems will enable a timelier response to unexpected situations and prevent food shortages. These suggestions should not be limited to migrant workers but should extend to society, creating a unified front to overcome future challenges. In the future, it will be necessary to raise awareness to change the food consumption habits of migrant workers. For example, through accessing technology, buying goods online, and paying electronically to improve food access.

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