



## Toward Post-Pandemic Sustainable FDI Workforce: An Examination of Factors Affecting the Well-Being of Migrant Workers in Ho Chi Minh City\*,\*\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Globalization and the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the post-pandemic context continue to play a critical role in shaping the workforce of emerging countries. In Vietnam, evidence obtained during the pandemic revealed that the well-being of employees, especially migrant workers, was extremely poor due to both work and non-work factors. This paper examines the most significant factors that impact the well-being of workers employed by various FDI companies in two Vietnamese industrial parks. The survey evidence (n=200) shows that worker well-being is influenced by seven

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\* Acknowledgments: We are grateful for the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City Grant and for the logistic support from the Center for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Studies (CVSEAS). We would like to thank Chau My Hang, Nguyen Huynh Duy Khang and six anthropologists for participating in collaborative research and for their critiques of this article. Helpful comments by anonymous reviewers are also gratefully acknowledged.

\*\* Funding: This work was supported by the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNUHCM) under grant number C2021-18b-09

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key factors categorized in three dimensions, namely material stressors, social stressors, and human stressors. A further qualitative analysis of 60 participants provides an understanding of the ways in which each factor affects workers' well-being and how elements of well-being in the Vietnamese context are different compared with other countries. Low salaries, lack of social support, work-life imbalance due to job demands, and the interplay between these three determinants significantly affect the overall well-being of workers. In the current business climate, it is important to have well-targeted policies that encourage high-tech investments as well as persuade domestic firms to address low salaries and economic migration. To manage valuable human resources and keep competitive advantages, foreign firms need to authentically implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives focusing on workers' benefits, especially providing workforce housing. This will bring about win-win outcomes of improved employee well-being and business sustainability.

**Keywords:** sustainable workforce, FDI flows, well-being, migrant workers, Vietnam

## **I . Introduction**

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, developed nations have revised their global strategies (Simsek and Meciar 2021) to address mobility disruptions, especially logistics. Changes to post-pandemic logistics and manufacturing are not only implemented based on efficiencies but also security. Consequently, capital flows and labor forces have changed, which lead to the relocation of thousands of firms and manufacturing facilities. In Asia, there are signs of change in foreign direct investment (FDI) flows. China—the largest export-processing country—started to experience the initial impacts of the relocations as firms left, while emerging countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia which have advantages of cheap labor became new recipients of international investments (Nguyen and Pham 2020). In Vietnam, this trend has resulted in an increased demand for low-cost labor, especially in the country's largest economic hubs like Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong. In terms of

demand, there seems to be an increased need for migrant labor to accommodate new flows of investment.

From a supply perspective, the picture is rather unpromising. Non-pharmaceutical measures coupled with intermittent periods of manufacturing suspension during the pandemic caused severe negative impacts on the workforce. In Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), strict lockdown measures forced numerous factories to close. Only a relatively small number of foreign firms managed to keep their manufacturing in operation without interruption (VietnamPlus 2021). And those that were able to do so at the expense of workers' health. In large cities, long-term social distancing policies significantly reduced migrant workers' income and living conditions. During the most acute phase of the crisis, it was not uncommon to find workers crammed in small, rented rooms without food or basic necessities. Facing these challenging conditions, understandably, thousands of migrants chose to return to their hometowns once the lockdown restrictions were relaxed. This led to a severe shortage of labor when the economy returned to normal conditions. Without a reliable labor supply, international firms have faced difficulties in re-starting their businesses and devising long-term plans. In the aftermath of the pandemic, improving workers' mental health and well-being is critical to keeping individuals in the workforce.

As previous research has shown, workers' mental health and well-being are key determinants of labor sustainability (Kossek, Valcour and Lirio 2014). Psychological well-being may affect employee turnover, absences, and job commitment. In stressful work environments, the increase in workers' productivity is mainly attributed to social well-being (Mylek and Schirmer 2015). Covid-19 brought about a wide range of stresses and risks to workers and it is important to identify factors associated with well-being. However, in developing countries, studies examining worker well-being are limited. Much research has focused on analyzing migrant flows or working conditions (Kugler et al. 2023), but very few studies have explored the vulnerability of migrant workers during the pandemic or worker well-being. As none of the existing studies examine the well-being of workers employed in FDI firms, this paper aims to fill in the gap. Using the post-pandemic setting as a unique context, the

study assesses mental health statuses, factors affecting well-being, and everyday problems encountered by migrant workers. Findings of the study are rather timely since they may contribute to the formation of new strategies and policies responding to the labor crisis, especially in the emerging economies of Southeast Asia.

## **II . Literature Review**

### **2.1. Sustainable Workforce and Workers' Well-being in the Post-Pandemic Era**

Staying competitive in the post-pandemic context seems to be the greatest concern of business organizations across the globe. Studies show that to adapt to new business dynamics, global firms must develop appropriate strategies for supply chains, logistics, and most especially, labor force investments. Social distancing measures implemented in other countries have proved that production targets could not be met or sustained without a reliable and sustainable workforce. Yet, prior to the pandemic, during the 2000s, economic turbulence coupled with neoliberal policies have made working conditions more dangerous for workers in developed and developing countries. Longer working hours, job insecurities, and low wages have threatened employees' health and well-being and caused various labor issues (Baram 2009). Along with ongoing concerns about environmental sustainability, there are an increasing number of voices calling for the promotion of sustainable workforces that should be understood as a critical asset to every nation (Calvard and Sang 2017). Beyond a balance between labor demands and supply, a sustainable workforce requires working environments that support and care for worker well-being. A firm with sustainable resources is one whose employees have positive energy and capacities to cope with current and future demands (Kosseck et al. 2014). Against the backdrop of global competition and changing dynamics, especially in the uncertain time after the pandemic, building a sustainable workforce is the backbone of a firm's competitive advantage.

Regarding literature on human resource development, early studies (Stiglitz 2002; Sparks, Faragher and Cooper 2001; Cai 2010)

showed that workers' well-being greatly contributes to job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation which plays a critical role in forming workforce sustainability. As well-being not only influences workers' performance but also impacts a firm's productivity, the concept of employee well-being has been widely examined (Kowalski and Loretto 2017). Despite a rather long history of research, there still lacks a singular definition of well-being. In fact, each field tends to adopt a different set of constructs capturing different aspects of well-being. Defining and measuring well-being, therefore, mainly depends on research disciplines and methodological approaches. Two common distinctions are hedonic well-being—"feeling well" and eudaimonic well-being—"feeling good" (Huppert 2009). The former approach measures quality of life exhibited by outcomes and is classified as subjective well-being. This concept focuses on personal resources and capacities on which an individual draws to pursue pleasure and happiness (Diener 2006). In contrast, the latter approach is often defined as psychological well-being, which incorporates an individual's life satisfaction and self-realization (Ryff and Singer 2008).

The differences in definitions of well-being reflect the fact that employee well-being and its determinants are varied and complex. Empirical evidence shows that reaching a consensus on workers' well-being is not an easy task. Time spent in work domains or engaged in job-related tasks accounts for a large proportion of human life and therefore, work-related factors such as work environment, job characteristics, and work-specific personal factors are determinants of overall job satisfaction that indirectly affect employing well-being. In modern society, employment not only generates incomes and indirectly ensures a standard of living, but also brings about a sense of purpose and working pleasures. Basically, a decent job and its material outcomes have a close connection with status and recognition. Beyond the workplace, worker well-being is affected by a wide range of individual and social factors in employees' broader life experiences. Physical health and family relationships, for instance, might cause everyday life stresses, which in turn negatively affects overall well-being. During a time of crisis, a network of support is essential to provide

resources on which an individual can rely to ensure personal well-being. Since there is an imbalance in employee well-being research, which up until now tends to focus on at-work well-being and job satisfaction, and considering the current climate of increasing job flexibility, it is time to pay more attention to well-being in nonwork domains.

## **2.2. Foreign Investments and Worker's Well-being in the Contexts of HCMC**

Labor resources have been a key determinant of FDI flows in developing countries. During the 2000s, low-income countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam successfully leveraged their young demographics to attract international investments (Noorbakhsh, Paloni and Youssef 2001). In Vietnam, FDI flows grew significantly from an initial figure of \$40,000 in 1986 to a high of \$16 billion in 2019 (WB 2021). In Ho Chi Minh City, most of these investments were realized in manufacturing sectors, leading to the formation of 19 industrial zones with an overall area of 4,532 hectares in the periphery of the city (DautuOnline 2022). These industrial parks employ nearly 200,000 workers, most of whom live in rental houses near their workplaces.

In the past, the abundance of migrant workers coupled with a lack of employment opportunities in the domestic sector provided a sustainable supply of cheap labor for the FDI sector. However, in recent years, as the population passed its golden point and the service sector which accounts for 39% of the total workforce has developed, the employment market for the FDI sector began to see early signs of labor shortage. Attracting and retaining sufficient workers has become an increasing concern for FDI businesses (VietnamPlus 2022). In fact, sick-absences and turnover rates in the workforce have been increasing over the years, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Within this context, well-being, which is closely connected to workforce sustainability, has become a significant issue for business owners. In terms of business climate, fierce competition associated with the changes brought about by globalization has forced FDI firms to adapt and strengthen their competitive advantages. Given the fact that well-being is closely

related to organizational outcomes such as productivity and human resource advantages, it is imperative for FDI firms to improve workers' well-being.

### **2.3 Significance of Study and Research Questions**

Employee well-being, particularly migrant worker well-being, has been studied broadly before and during the pandemic. Different aspects and dimensions of well-being have been examined, including determinants (Alessandri et al. 2023; Ewers et al. 2020), stressors, and coping strategies (Bhandari et al. 2021; Young, Pakenham and Norwood 2018). However, in Vietnam, studies on worker well-being remain at a nascent stage which requires further development. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies on well-being that closely look at the FDI labor force, nor research that explores key vulnerability factors that affect workers' well-being after the Covid-19 crisis. Other Vietnamese authors focused on cumulative risk (Bui et al. 2021) or exclusively on living conditions (Nguyen et al. 2016). Worker well-being in these studies is indirectly measured by socio-economic figures or proxies such as income satisfaction, which provides a rather incomplete picture of worker well-being.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature on well-being by identifying the most significant factors that determine the well-being of workers employed by various FDI firms in HCMC. Empirical findings of the research allow for a better understanding of which factors most shape workers' well-being and how elements of well-being in the Vietnamese context are different from those in other countries. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has the Covid-19 crisis impacted the well-being of workers employed in FDI firms?
2. Beyond the work domain, what are major stress factors which impact worker well-being? Particularly, in which ways do they influence the workers' welfare and health?
3. What role do overtime practices and income constraints play in shaping workers' social and private lives? How can a better understanding assist in improving worker well-being and contribute to workforce sustainability?

In the current business climate characterized by highly competitive markets and uncertain supply chains, it is critical that global firms have strategic plans to manage their valuable human resources. Thus, these research findings might help in devising better strategies to promote employee well-being, productivity, and sustainable workforces, which are critical for a firm's long-term success and sustained competitiveness.

### **III. Methods**

#### **3.1. Study Design and Data Collection**

This study employed a mixed approach to understand everyday activities and perceptions of FDI workers offered through their own perspectives, which are embedded in larger physical and social environments. Reliant on both interviews and questionnaire surveys, mixed strategies can improve the validity and reliability of results (Creswell 2009). The data collection was carried out in two phases, which complied with Covid-19 social distancing requirements in Vietnam. In phase 1, at the height of the pandemic, the authors employed remote methods to collect the preliminary data. During this time, first-hand experiences and perceptions of workers were examined against other secondary resources and literature reviews to obtain an initial understanding of factors affecting employee well-being. The insights obtained also helped to design and fine-tune questionnaires. In the survey, workers' life satisfaction and mental health statuses were used to measure subjects' well-being. Also, there were questions related to employee characteristics, working conditions, income, living conditions, social networks and other factors related to a workers' private lives.

In phase 2 of the research, performed from February to April 2022, digital and paper versions of questionnaires were sent to workers employed in two industrial parks in HCMC, namely Linh Trung Export Processing Zone (EPZ) and Saigon High-Tech Park (SHTP). These parks house the largest FDI firms in Vietnam, represent old and new models of foreign investment and employ many migrant workers. Companies located in Linh Trung EPZ focus



on manufacturing products while SHTP hosts high-tech firms. After analyzing initial results of the survey (n=200), qualitative data was collected in the next step through a combination of semi-structured interviews and field observations (n=60). A group of six well-trained assistants, young anthropologists actually, and the authors went to workers' rental homes and conducted interviews after obtaining consent from the owners. The interviews aimed to clarify unclear points in the surveys as well as provide supplemental information. Moreover, the triangulated practice helped in providing satisfying answers for the research questions. The participants were recruited based on two criteria: working at an FDI firm and living in HCMC as temporary residents (*tạm trú*). Samples for both the survey and the interviews were recruited using non-probability and snowball techniques which utilized the researchers' networks.

While limiting the scope of the research to rural-to-urban migrants working in the FDI sector, the study underlines the fact that many FDI companies kept operating at the height of the pandemic. The reasons why these foreign companies could avoid disruption of production whereas most domestic firms had to suspend operation are beyond the scope of this paper. However, the continuation of FDI companies amid strict lockdown periods has important implications for workers' well-being which are elaborated in the following sections. This focal theme of foreign companies also enables us to deeply understand the extent to which FDI firms were concerned for Vietnamese workers' well-being. Although data was collected at two industrial parks with distinct FDI characteristics, processing and manufacturing in EPZ compared with hi-tech in SHTP, the study was not designed to compare operations and working practices of these two FDI types. Surveys and interview data were examined as a whole since most foreign firms followed the same safety procedures during the pandemic. Similarly, living conditions and the well-being of two groups of FDI workers were not examined separately since field observations revealed differences among the groups were insignificant. Monthly incomes of FDI employees, however, were compared with workers employed in other sectors namely, state-owned and domestic firms, by utilizing governmental data and official reports.

### **3.2. Data Analysis**

Data from the survey were translated into frequency tables <Tables 1 and 2> and diagrams <Figures 1 and 2>, providing a basis for thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese and processed using a six-step thematic analysis (Terry et al. 2017). During the first three steps, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, identified initial patterns, and searched for common themes. After being grounded in the theoretical lens of well-being, themes were compared and discussed. Disagreements among the authors were reviewed until consensus was reached. Final themes and key quotes were translated into English and reported in the last step. During transcription, the names and identifying information of participants were replaced by ID numbers. To increase reliability, interview transcripts were examined independently in preliminary steps and the results were presented to two external experts to check for validity.

## **IV. Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1. Characteristics of Study Participants**

Of the total 200 participants, 50% were migrants from the Mekong Delta, 26.5% from the Southeast Region, 15.5% from the Central Regions, and 8% from the North of Vietnam. Most workers (74.5%) were below 35 years old, and the proportion of female workers (55%) was higher than the figure for male (45%). About 56% of participants had high school education and 20% had a higher level education, while less than a quarter of workers only graduated from secondary school. Nearly three fourths of participants or 72.5% were single, 17.5% were married, and 10% were divorced. Majority of the participants (57.5%) had 3-5 years of working experience, most of them (80%) having worked as laborers. Over one fourth of workers or 27.5% have worked more than five years, while the newcomers, those who have worked less than three years were at 15%. A small proportion or 5.5% worked as supervisors and 14.5% as group leaders (Table 1).

<Table 1> Demographic Information of Migrant Workers Collected in the Survey

<b>Background Characteristics</b>	<b>Number (n=200)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
<i>Males</i>	90	45.0
<i>Females</i>	110	55.0
<b>Age range</b>		
<i>18-25</i>	83	41.5
<i>26-35</i>	66	33.0
<i>&gt; 35</i>	51	25.5
<b>Education levels</b>		
<i>Secondary school</i>	47	23.5
<i>Post-secondary</i>	113	55.5
<i>Vocational education</i>	29	14.5
<i>College/University</i>	11	5.5
<b>Marital status</b>		
<i>Single</i>	145	72.5
<i>Divorced</i>	20	10.0
<i>Married</i>	35	17.5
<b>Job tenure</b>		
<i>Less than 3 years</i>	30	15.0
<i>3 - 5 year</i>	115	57.5
<i>More than 5 years</i>	55	27.5
<b>Position</b>		
<i>Supervisor</i>	11	5.5
<i>Group leader</i>	29	14.5
<i>Laborer</i>	160	80.0

#### **4.2. Impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis on the Workplace and the “Three On-site” Initiatives.**

In early 2021, with the advent of new Covid-19 variants, new confirmed cases increased rapidly across Vietnam’s industrial parks and many companies had to close due to Covid-19 infections (WHO 2021). Beginning July 9, 2021, Ho Chi Minh City implemented a wide range of lockdown measures that disrupted mobility and non-essential activities. Since many of the migrant workers lived

outside the factory sites and could not commute to work, most labor-intensive firms including foreign-based companies had no choice but to suspend their operations (VietnamPlus 2021). However, several FDI firms, especially high-tech companies at SHTP, continued to operate thanks to the “three on-site” (*3 tại chỗ*) model. The phrase “three on-site” literally means that three activities of working, eating, and resting were arranged inside the factory. Hence, to fulfill the City’s strict conditions, employers had to provide safe accommodations for workers inside or near their firms. On the other hand, workers were required to work, eat, and rest at their workplaces. The model resembles the dormitory labor regime implemented in Chinese factories (Pun and Yu, 2008), except for the fact that workers’ sleeping spaces were patchy and temporary, as a male worker recalled:

Each of us worked on 12-hour shifts, night-shifts for one or two weeks, and then turned into day-shifts, depending on the companies. Each worker had a tent to sleep in. Sleeping areas, though not fancy, were not too hot or too cold. We managed to sleep well and keep working.

ID #46

Beyond taking regular tests for Covid-19 infection, on-site workers were provided quality meals and spaces for exercise. Yet, the most attractive feature of this model was extra payments workers could earn during four months of the lockdown. This also explains why the “three on-site” model, although being criticized in terms of infection risks and psychological effects, was supported by most of the participants. As migrant workers often want to maximize income during short periods working in the city, dwelling in the factory site well aligned with their desire to earn:

Working 12 hours per day, my salary rose sharply in those months, from 9 million to 13-14 million Dong; some got 15 million Dong. Workers got more money, everyone liked the model. They forgot the hardship. No one made a complaint! Compare that to those who live outside, doing nothing during the lockdown. We are migrants, if we just stay put without working, without incomes, how can we survive? The three on-site model made us feel secure.

ID #39

Further, compared with rather chaotic situation outside the industrial zones, staying inside the “green zone” of the factory seemed to be a better choice:

Living conditions and mental care were not sufficient but I didn’t feel bored. Maybe because people were back in the rental rooms, those who lived outside the hi-tech park couldn’t find food, deaths rose day by day. Inside, we were tested every three days. The company has its own quarantine area, as well as a medical team to assist workers.

*ID #36*

To some extent, the pandemic’s threats overwhelmed migrant workers’ concerns. In fact, while many laborers in HCMC had to stay at home and lose their jobs, a number of FDI workers enjoyed a relatively safe environment with stable incomes. This came at the expense of employers, yet months of three on-site models provided an alternative of living and working conditions from which workers could benefit. These short-term experiments were of course not without pitfalls yet they provided a glimpse of an alternative housing model where shelter security is provided by employers. In fact, what mattered for workers’ well-being is not the working conditions during the lockdown period but its immediate consequences.

#### **4.3. Workers’ Employment Status, Income, and Expense After the Pandemic**

Data from the survey shows that many workers experienced job difficulties after the lockdown, varying from job changes to overtime work. While 22% of workers reported that there were no changes in their jobs, over 68% workers had to work longer hours. A small number of workers (at 4%) had to find a new job, and 5.5% experienced a reduction in workload <Table 2>.

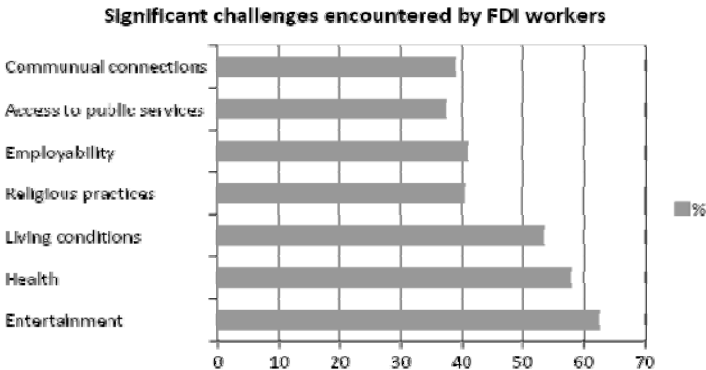
<Table 2> Employment Status after the Lockdowns

<b>Employment Status</b> (n=200)	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Remained the same	44	22.0
Change	8	4.0
Smaller workloads	11	5.5
Longer working hours	137	68.5

The pandemic, particularly the stringent lockdown period, had mixed impact on the workers' financial status. Many workers reported significant changes in salary and spending. Increases in monthly expenses were noted by a large proportion of participants at 89.0%, while only 5.5% workers said their spending was unchanged. Interestingly, nearly 70% of the study participants reported a rise in income after the lockdown, obviously a result of overtime hours. It should be noted that the survey was conducted in the first three months of 2022, when the surplus of contracts coupled with the shortage of workers resulted in long hours and night shifts. However, from April 2022, the number of contracts started to fall and workers no longer had to work overtime.

#### 4.4. The Most Pressing Issues and Concerns and Subjective Well-being

Data analysis revealed seven significant challenges faced by FDI workers in various aspects of their lives. Three of the most prominent issues were personal health (58.0%), leisure and entertainment (62.5%), and living conditions (53.5%). Similarly, religious practices, employability, and connecting with communities constituted a high level of concern <Figure 1>. In terms of overall well-being, data suggests that the pandemic and its related stressors adversely affected workers' life satisfaction. There was a significant reduction of subjective well-being for all age groups. Over 45% of participants experienced constant pressure while 45% reported their well-being was stable. Out of 200 workers, only one tenth or 9.5% were satisfied with their lives.



<Figure 1> The Most Pressing Concerns and Issues by Migrant Workers after the Lockdowns

#### 4.5. Key Stressors and Worker Well-being

In line with the survey’s results, thematic analysis based on interview results suggested seven factors that affected workers’ well-being. These factors can be categorized into three groups: material stressors, social stressors, and individual stressors (see <Table 3>).

<Table 3> Themes and Sub-themes of Stressors

Themes/Factors	Sub-themes
<b>Material stressors</b>	
	- Work-related demands
	- Low salary and financial burdens
	- Housing and living environment
<b>Social stressors</b>	
	- Networks of support and obligation
	- Access to public services and amenities
<b>Individual stressors</b>	
	- Leisure and everyday social life
	- Personal relationships

Due to intrinsic features, each stressor had a distinct way of impacting workers' living environments, which in turn affected their overall well-being. In the following sections, each factor is elaborated with quantitative data from the survey, as well as quotations from the interview transcripts.

##### 4.5.1. Material stressors

###### *Work-Related Requirements and Stressors*

Both job access and conditions were frequently mentioned during the interviews. Workers commonly reported that access to jobs was easy and convenient because there were year-round vacancies. Information regarding employment or vacant positions is sufficient on social media as well as other channels. However, in contrast with the recruitment process, working conditions in FDI factories were strict and unreasonable. Most firms expected their employees to dedicate themselves fully to the factory. Internal regulations applied during working hours were extremely rigid as described by a young female:

The supervisor watched you all the time via CCTV and in person as well. We barely have enough time to go to the toilet, around 10 minutes per time, and only three times per day on specific hours: 08.30 to 8.40, 12:00 to 12:10, 2:30 to 2.40. During night shifts, from 18:15 to 6:25, we only have three times for personal needs. Each time lasts around 10 minutes. Time for lunch is only 30 minutes.

ID #10

Physical environments in the workplaces were modern and acceptable but the labor itself was hard. Most tasks were related to highly exact procedures dealing with small objects, so the working environment was dangerous and sometimes hazardous. Workers had to wear face masks and focus closely on their tasks. Employees reported that their tasks were without end during the shifts and there was no time for relaxing.

I was so tired that I just wanted to go to bed when I came home [in the rental room]. I didn't have any energy left for other tasks. Sometimes, for weeks I didn't call my parents via Zalo.

ID #11

When I was accepted to work for the company I also gave up my temptation for coffee and smoking. The task was so rigid that you didn't have enough time to speak with the person standing next to you. How could you have time for a cup of coffee or a cigarette? One can only do that at home.

ID #15

To discipline their employees, firms' managers often employed a mixed approach of piece-rates, minimum wage, overtime payment, and a bonus structure which was based on workers' attendance. This was to prevent labor absenteeism and to maintain discipline in the factory. In fact, the overall income of a given worker was divided into small parts which were subject to deductions if the person breached internal regulations. For example, one female worker stated:

I had an important event, the wedding of my sister. Normally, attendance was a must. But I dared not to have a day-off because the fine was too high. I would have lost a million VND, one fifth



of my income if I were absent for just a single shift.

ID #10

To ensure high productivity, age requirements that typically required workers to be under the age of 40 resulted in practices of age discrimination.

I'm 40 years old. I am not that old, but I feel drained. I just want to return to my hometown, find another job. But I know that it would be difficult to earn a living back home.

ID #19

Most jobs had 12-hour shifts and the similar systems among FDI firms provided fewer choices for workers. Technically, the basic income was barely enough to keep up with living standards, so workers had to accept overtime. In theory, working longer hours was voluntary, but in practice, owing to uneven power relations between the company and its employees, workers were forced to take overtime. Analyzing qualitative data shows that the word “overtime” (*tăng ca*) had a high rate of occurrence, which reflects the issues related to long working hours and a lack of individual autonomy. During the interviews, workers stated that they often faced stress and mental disorders due to overtime and strict regulations at work. The common symptoms expressed by participants were fatigue, nervousness, and depression. For example, a 32-year-old female shared:

When I started to work here, I began lacking sleep. Whenever I left the factory, I just wanted to go to bed, so that I could regain my strength for the continuous tasks tomorrow. Sleeping is the best medicine for us, workers; helping our body and mind to recharge, to fulfill the next day's tasks.

ID #5

### ***Insufficient Incomes and Financial Burdens***

The survey results show that although the working hours in FDI factories were longer in comparison with firms in other sectors, the overall income workers received was well below market levels. <Table 4> gives a glimpse of workers' income and expenses.

<Table 4> Average Earnings and Expenditures of a Typical Worker (over 3 years of experience) with 9-12 hours per day, 26 days per month

Payment	Single worker/month (VND)	Two working parents with 1 child/month (VND)
<b>Income</b>	<b>9,000,000</b>	<b>16,700,000</b>
<i>Basic wage</i>	5,000,000	10,500,000
<i>Shift and overtime hours</i>	4,000,000	6,200,000
<b>Expense</b>	<b>7,600,000</b>	<b>15,700,000</b>
<i>Rental cost including utilities</i>	1,700,000	2,500,000
<i>Food and basic needs</i>	2,600,000	6,400,000
<i>Spending for social relationships</i>	800,000	1,000,000
<i>Remittances (to family in hometown)</i>	2,000,000	-
<i>Child care</i>	-	5,000,000
<i>Others</i>	500,000	800,000
<b>Possible savings per month</b>	<b>~ 1,400,000</b>	<b>~ 1,000,000</b>

In comparison with national levels, average monthly wages at FDI firms were not competitive than laborers in other sectors. In 2020, for instance, monthly income of FDI workers was 10.5 million Dong while the figure for those in state-owned and domestic enterprises were 15.3 and 8.3 million Dong respectively (MPI 2022). If overtime earnings are excluded, FDI employees’ incomes are just above the 2022 national level of 4.6 million Dong (GSO 2022). Considering the high cost of living in HCMC, the biggest economic hub of Vietnam, incomes could barely cover survival needs. Owing to inflation after the pandemic, many workers experienced difficulties in balancing their monthly budgets. When asked about his budget plan, a young participant shared:

Yes, my friend. I think everyone faced a big change in living costs, it was more or less insufficient.

ID #25

Financial hardships also occurred during the lockdown period from June to September 2021, when workers had to stay at home without pay. Although some received support from local authorities,

many workers had to borrow money from friends and relatives in order to survive. After the lockdowns, paying back the loans turned out to be a heavy burden. Previously, savings could only be realized at the expense of other basic needs such as leisure activities, high quality food, or clothing. With the loan burden, there was little ability to amass savings. Most workers or 70% shared a room with friends and nearly 80% avoided entertainment venues during their free time. This underscores the fact that savings can only be sustained if the workers choose to reduce their living spaces or give up the enjoyment of social activities.

In terms of remittances, the pressure for monthly provision sent to families back in hometowns seemed to be an onerous issue for FDI workers, especially those who are migrants from less-advantaged provinces. Since FDI workers were the healthiest and most skilled laborers in their households, they had to fulfill expectations for family members back home. They were expected to be responsible for the education of younger siblings and/or health expenses of parents. Remittance was expected to be used for the family's expenses, social relationships, and even housing upgrades. If their children lived with grandparents, workers had to send money to raise their offspring. For example, a young mother explained her savings plan:

I had to be wise when eating and drinking. I bought afternoon groceries from the street vendors because it is cheap. I had to save a little money in case of illness, pay in installments, or send money for grandma back home to buy milk for my child.

ID #2

Financial hardships were also impacted by regular trips back to hometowns, which most workers did at least once per year, typically during the Tet Festival (Lunar New Year). Expenditures during such trips were relatively excessive, particularly for those who live far in the north. These hometown visits greatly affected the savings of migrant workers. In the best scenario, a hardworking employee could save up to 15 million VND (~\$600) per year. However, these savings were mostly spent on return trips and large family events. Therefore, hardly any savings remained. The

situations would be worse if their children lived with grandparents or their offspring accompanied them on the trips. These financial responsibilities seemed to adversely affect workers' budgets. In fact, data analysis showed that the word "insufficient" (*thiếu*) was consistently repeated by the participants. This suggests that workers were obsessed with the current and previous shortages which popped up in their stories, as a young migrant from Dong Nai described:

When I was young, I thought when I grew up, traveled to Sai Gon, worked in a company, I would have lots of money. Living here, I experienced the pressure and chaos of everything, unlike in the countryside. Joining the company, working means living; when I stop working, I'll starve right away.

ID #15

In such a fierce competitive environment as HCMC, workers often calculated the number of years living in the city against their overall savings to gauge their success. Hence, the lack of savings or no savings at all due to financial burdens might generate mental stress which threatens their well-being. Furthermore, the connections with relatives back in their hometowns often went hand in hand with loans and unexpected expenses such as hospital costs or wedding events. The unplanned expenses cause permanent stress that affects workers' well-being. Some even planned to return permanently to their hometowns in the future:

I have been working for more than 12 years in the company, feeling old but haven't had any accumulations. A given year's income was just enough for that year. I might have to stay in rental rooms all my life if I don't change my jobs. I want to withdraw my social insurance so that I would have savings to start up my own shop.

ID #29

### ***Poor Housing and Living Environments***

Current salary conditions for FDI workers are not sufficient to maintain an adequate living space. As of June 2022, the average rental of a one-bedroom apartment near SHTP was 6,000,000 VND (~ \$ 250), which means they were beyond the budgets of most of

the workers at nearly 70% of their overall income (see <Table 4>). Hence, living in crowded rental rooms in self-built houses was the only realistic option. In fact, the survey showed that many workers (80%) lived in rental rooms near their workplace. Sharing a room with one or two colleagues was commonplace <Table 5>.

<Table 5> Housing Status of Workers

Housing status (n=200)	Number	%
<i>Renting, living alone</i>	60	30.0
<i>Renting, living with colleagues</i>	75	37.5
<i>Renting, living with family</i>	28	14.0
<i>Renting, living with friends</i>	37	18.5

Field observations and interviews further explained workers' housing choices and deteriorating living conditions:

Rentals keep increasing, a newly built room costs nearly two million. I had to live with others to share the rent. I accepted this complicated situation because the block was crowded, and I had to put up with those whose habits were different from mine. Even our sleeping times were different.

ID #39

Living conditions were rather harsh because small rooms were without auxiliary spaces for basic needs or private activities. An elderly worker recounted his room's conditions:

Rooms in this block vary, some are old, some, new. Old rooms are cheaper but the quality is low, electricity and water are adequate but I am afraid people will see you naked or something like that. This room and that room aren't soundproof. Whatever a person in that room says or does, I can hear them all.

ID #12

Due to budget restrictions, most workers chose to live in the lowest sector of rental housing and rental choices mostly depended on marital status and number of children. Interview data reveals many technical and safety issues in the rental blocks, in which

lighting and noise were the two most serious problems.

This rental block consists of three floors consisting of 75 rooms. My room is in the middle, so the wifi signal is weak. I have to go out when I want to make a call. The air is a bit stuffy and it always smells of food.

ID #21

Two blocks of rooms face each other, the corridor in the middle is for parking and clothes are hanging above us. There is no sunlight, and inside the room, lights must be turned on. Every time a renter moves out, they leave tons of rubbish in the corridor.

ID #26

Participants echoed the views of many which compared their sleeping and living space to a bunker. In other words, workers felt uncomfortable in their own places. Fieldwork conducted in various rental blocks confirmed that a 12-square-meter room for two persons was rather like a cell stuffed with everyday objects, from cooking equipment to motorcycle parts to household gadgets and bedding sets. Due to the economical practice of maximizing rooms on a plot of land, there were neither places for social needs such as hosting friends or meeting relatives, nor spaces for religious practices which greatly affected workers' well-being. These harsh living conditions might partly explain why workers wanted to work overtime since the conditions in the factory were significantly better than those in their rental rooms.

#### **4.5.2. Social Stressors**

##### ***Networks of support and safety***

Data shows that the relations between landlords and the renters were rather limited. During the pandemic, tenants rarely saw the owners in person. Most necessary transactions were made via online platforms. Hence, workers felt unsafe and confused when there were problems in the rental block. This led to many stressful issues such as lack of trust, neighbor conflicts, and little social interaction. A typical rental block with 20 rooms might house over 30 renters who do not know one another. The weak relations among neighbors resulted in a low level of social interactions. Workers seemed to talk

to their neighbors only when they faced a health problem. In other cases, the data <Table 6> suggested that connections were not a concern for the majority of respondents.

<Table 6> Workers’ Social Networks and Their Concerns

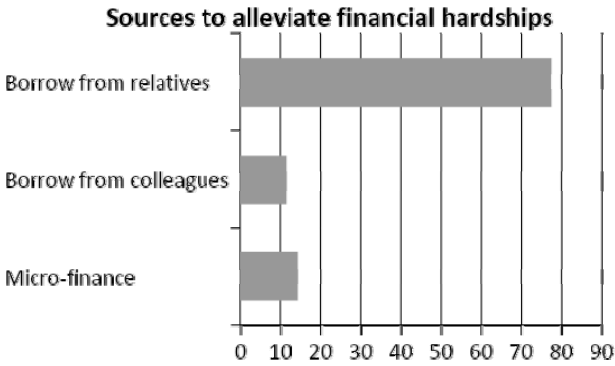
Type of Connections	Number	%
<b>Finding health information</b>		
<i>Talk to neighbors</i>	103	51.5
<i>Talk to friends and colleagues</i>	89	44.5
<b>Concerns about neighbor relationships</b>		
<i>Worries about lacked connections</i>	30	15.0
<i>No worries about connections in the rental blocks</i>	67	33.5
<i>Haven’t had concerns about these connections</i>	103	51.5

A young husband stated his family’s views of the rental neighborhood:

We don’t want to make an assumption but this is a working block, sometimes it is also complicated. We work all day and just come back to sleep, so we rarely interact with others. It seems each household on its own minds its own business.

ID #24

In some cases, workers tried to reduce these kinds of connections to prevent financial troubles. Earnings and savings were sensitive topics in the rental blocks since borrowing between neighbors might lead to loss of friendships and even conflicts. In a few extreme examples, a neighbor borrowed money and never returned it, resulting in severe mistrust. This shortage of communal relationships promoted independence but had adverse implications when workers faced emergency situations or health problems. This dilemma of social networks influenced the long-term well-being of the workers. As a result, workers relied on relatives rather than neighbors when they had problems. <Figure 2> shows that when workers had financial difficulties, borrowing from relatives was the primary way to balance deficits.



<Figure 2> Main Sources of Borrowed Money When FDI Workers Face Financial Difficulties

Conflicts between renters and living conditions affected mental health. Without other means of entertainment, workers tended to rely on cheap types of leisure such as drinking and karaoke, which greatly affected worker’s well-being. One single participant complained:

Apart from fear of robbery, everything is fine. The neighbors are friendly, but there are drunkards gathering at the end of the alley which makes me feel uncomfortable. They often sing on a karaoke so I cannot sleep. I’m really annoyed but I dare not to complain.  
ID #28

His views were supported by a young worker:

Because most people living here are workers, everyone has to work overtime to earn one or two bucks more, so we hardly see each other. I also work all day, then sleep during the night so I don’t talk to the others that often. But there were times the neighbors got drunk and then had arguments, sometimes it was a bit disorganized.  
ID #23

Arguments between young couples were rather common in the rental blocks. Security was a serious issue since many workers were concerned about motorcycle thefts or had their clothes stolen. As a result, everything was kept inside the rooms, which significantly reduced the size and state of their living spaces.



Ah, one more thing, the security is not that stable. Sometimes there were thefts and burglaries nearby, mostly motorcycle or mobile phone thefts.

ID #29

### ***Access to Public Services***

Data reveals that a large portion of these workers were migrants from various regions, especially from the Mekong Delta. Due to the residential registration system (*hộ khẩu*) and other prevailing cultural norms, migrant workers faced a wide range of difficulties and hardships, especially matters of institutional exclusion. In fact, most public services were closed to the migrants because of their temporary residence statuses. Thus, to obtain necessary paperwork, workers had to rely on their landlords. When their children started school, for instance, workers had to rely on their landlords to obtain residence statuses. This was a one-way relationship and in some cases the workers could not claim their rights due to conflicts with the owners. An old worker recalled the hardships during lockdown periods when support policies privileged the permanent residents and ignored temporary dwellers:

On one occasion, the government had policies to support residents with money, but workers like us were not supported. Only when the policy stated that each household, regardless of permanent or temporary status, old or young, gets the support did we feel that the support was guaranteed.

ID #21

In terms of education, workers living with children faced difficulties in finding appropriate schools for their children. Apart from paperwork requirements, high costs were significant barriers to education access. One young mother explained her choice:

Education here is very expensive, almost twice as much as in the countryside. In addition, there aren't any spaces for the kids to play and run, so I left my kid back in my hometown and had my mother look after him/her.

ID #58

Her solution was not uncommon as a large proportion of migrant workers sent their offspring to be raised in the countryside. Although monthly remittances were sent to grandparents, being separated came with the cost of reduced well-being. Relationships between parents and their children might have been strained, and most importantly, separations resulted in sadness and loneliness for both parents and children.

#### **4.5.3. Individual Stressors**

##### ***Leisure and Everyday Social Life***

Data shows that a relatively high proportion of workers preferred to stay inside after work, which can be explained by their unique working schedules. Typically, workers only had one or two days off per month due to overtime practices. Most days of the month, they had to start early in the morning and return to their rental rooms after ten o'clock in the evening with no energy left for other daily tasks. Hence, these precious out-of-factory hours were often utilized for chores or simply sleeping. Unsurprisingly, most migrant workers had poor social life or fell into solitary habits. Some participants expressed initial expectations for having a vigorous life in the cities, but overtime work and financial pressure limited their social activities.

At first, the job was good and the salary was OK because I didn't need to buy anything. At that time, due to my young age and good health, I felt happy to go to work. Every time I worked overtime, I was delighted because I would earn more money and I would be able to make a living for both my mother and daughter. I also saved a bit to buy gold and dared not to eat or drink anything. In recent years, my health has gradually deteriorated. I often have pain in my back, I ached, and felt tired with work. I was no longer as enthusiastic. Later, I noticed a shortage of goods. I needed to buy more stuff but the salary was inadequate, wholly insufficient.

ID #31

This situation might partly explain the reason social media was the most common means of entertainment for the workers. Thanks to the popularity of cheap smartphones and internet services, most

workers owned at least one smart device and used it as their main source of entertainment. Apart from chatting and video calls with family members, the handy gadgets provided different kinds of games. A participant depicted his evening time:

When coming back to the room, the first thing everyone does is take turns to have a shower. Those who finish first will go out with their smartphones and entertain themselves. Sometimes, when eating, people still look at their phones and chat with each other.

ID #47

Family chatting via social media seemed to be important to workers' social lives and entertainment. The interview data suggests relatives' visits and meetings were the greatest support for workers. However, workers experienced many difficulties in hosting their family members or relatives due to the small spaces inside the rental blocks. Hence, when guests arrived, workers had no choice but to meet them in a café or a public place nearby. Inconveniences adversely affect workers' social lives, which in the long term causes mental stress and further strengthens solitary practices.

### ***Personal Relationships***

The quantitative data shows a rather distinct feature of workers' relationships with nearly three quarters of participants being single, at 72.5%. In cross-checking with the age groups, being single in their early twenties suggests that most workers had trouble finding a partner. The qualitative analysis reveals that job characteristics, lack of opportunities, and financial constraints were the three key reasons for the low rate of marriages. A young man explained how daily tasks affected his opportunities:

The team leader often criticized and scolded us. Tasks in the factory were mostly irrelevant because each team works in different areas. My department is separated from the others, so I hardly talk to them, I don't know anything about other departments.

ID #15

As mentioned in previous sections, overtime work occupied most of workers' free time. In fact, irregular shifts coupled with high

concentration demands exhausted workers. This depletion of energy further reduced opportunities to find suitable partners. A worker explained his constraints:

Whenever we had money, we would go to a café and drink with friends, otherwise I would sit outside and chat with neighbors. But most of the working days, I would feel exhausted, so I would have a quick shower, eat dinner, and then go to bed.

ID #19

The hours after work shifts were often used for group meetings. Workers had the habit of eating in groups to share the food costs. In theory, these occasions should have increased chances of meeting a partner. Yet, in practice, such outcomes were rare due to financial constraints and the fact that workers tended not to date those who worked in the same company. Low incomes and remittance responsibilities tended to limit workers' spending on parties and gathering. Further, workers often found colleagues who had the same working routines and incomes were unpromising partners. As a result, social occasions with colleagues were not successful in facilitating personal relationships. Young people who lived in the same rental blocks were also considered inappropriate partners due to safety reasons. A female workers expressed her feelings:

I have stayed alone since then. I don't even think about sharing the room. People said that when sharing, they were afraid their roommates would steal their valuables, then some were dirty. I prefer living alone.

ID #22

To those who were lucky enough to find a partner, balancing work, life, and savings for the future could become a daily burden. As landlords often relaxed restrictions on the number of persons allowed in a single room, workers who had a lover tended to share a room to reduce rental costs. However, that does not guarantee that there will not be any problems. A young male voiced his concerns:

I feel living alone is more comfortable. If you have your friends, a lover, or a girlfriend come over, and then you have an argument, it would be troubling.

ID #36

Due to proximity and low-quality rental room structures, problems of a shared room for young couples might greatly affect the neighbors' mental health. Under the constraints of narrow spaces in rental blocks and strict time controls during working hours, it seems there was no place for workers' private relationships.

## **V. Discussion**

In Southeast Asia, FDI inflows have often been attributed to the low cost of labor and the potential of local markets. In the last 20 years, as foreign investments shifted toward technology-intensive manufacturing, the role of human capital and skilled workforces have been brought into the spotlight (Noorbaksh et al. 2001). Indeed, human capital is one of the most important determinants of FDI attractions. However, the findings in this study suggest that foreign firms in Vietnam seem to neglect this precious resource. This study, although it has limitations in terms of sampling sizes and approach, partly addresses the gap by identifying its significance and detailing how different factors shape workers' well-being, which has important implications for workforce sustainability.

### **5.1. Insufficient Resources and the Vicious Cycle of Stress and Poor Well-being**

The results in previous sections highlight the fact that workers' resources, both in terms of financial and social resources, are significantly low which led to negative loops of permanent stress and vulnerability. Most workers start to work for an FDI firm as soon as they leave high school at the age of 18 and due to age discrimination, they have around twenty years to obtain necessary capital. Before the pandemic, migrant workers would plan to use this accumulated sum for either settling down in the city or returning to their hometowns at an older age. The pandemic has

changed their perceptions and attitudes and consequently altered their thinking. In fact, qualitative data shows that participants shared two distinct viewpoints. In the first group, the pandemic and its related shocks have sped up their return processes. Due to poor welfare policies implemented by FDI firms (Tho and Tri 2022), there are no incentives to attract workers, especially those with children, to come back. This partly explains the prevalence of labor shortage across industrial zones in HCMC. In addition, the combination of strict regulations in the factories, hardships, and poor living conditions lead to a strong desire to have more autonomy and peaceful environments, which include owning a small shop or continuing farming activities back home. This phenomenon seems to counter current urbanization strategies because workers refuse to become permanent residents in the city. Their children who gain little resources back home will likely repeat the same vicious cycle of migration and impoverishment.

Concerning the group who choose to stay in HCMC, the pandemic has severely affected their long-term plans. Because of the excessive price of housing, their savings are too small to make their dream of living comfortably in the city realistic. Understandably, without a concrete life purpose, some might adopt a negative lifestyle or lack commitment to work. For those who are over 40 years old, due to low levels of education and skills, livelihood changes are very difficult. Hence, elderly workers will pledge to stay in the city and must resort to illegitimate means to make a living. On the one hand, they might help to solve the labor shortages for low-skilled jobs in urban areas but on the other hand, this poses a threat to the sustainable process of both urbanization and industrialization.

In both scenarios, resources play a critical role in shaping the workers' lives (Tung 2022; Bui et al. 2021). However, the amount earned by FDI workers was rather inelastic, which is attributed to many factors, including quality of foreign investments which currently are labor-intensive. In other words, the race-to-the-bottom among FDI companies coupled with productivity in the sector has resulted in vicious cycles of low-paid jobs and inadequate incomes. To eliminate these downward loops, there is a need to attract

up-value FDI flows as well as support the domestic sector to boost productivity and increase workers' salaries. Further, national private firms can leverage their intrinsic advantages, linkages, and spill-over effects (Ha, Holmes and Tran 2022) to compete with international corporations in terms of working conditions and incomes. The success of place-based approaches with small-firm networks in Europe (Boix and Vaillant 2010) and other OECD countries suggests that regional authorities can provide better environments for domestic firms and make rural areas more competitive. This in turn will help utilize the local workforce, especially those who return from the cities.

## **5.2. Influence of Overtime Work on Work-Life Balance and Workers' Well-being**

In line with early studies of workplace well-being (Diego-Rosell Tortora and Bird 2018; Alessandri et al. 2023), findings of this study confirm that both work and non-work factors are critical to the health and wellness of workers. However, in the Vietnamese contexts, overtime expectations and lack of social relationships are the most significant factors affecting workers' well-being. Consistent with previous studies, working overtime to earn extra money and attendance bonuses (*tiền chuyên cần*) were common practices in FDI firms. This point echoes previous findings of Tran (2011), which highlight the fact that workers faced the dilemma of being exhausted with working extra hours for survival. Working long hours not only resulted in physical and mental health problems but also negatively affected workers' private lives. The findings reveal that most participants faced difficulties in finding a suitable partner and having sufficient time to maintain sound relationships. Due to financial constraints, some chose a lonely lifestyle, sacrificing their youth to support their families back home. These practices go against natural processes and social norms and come with a cost of chronic stress and dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, workers experienced a lack of private space and means for social interactions such as relative visits or religious practices. Obviously, the absence of social connections from immediate communities and private lives led to loneliness and

exclusion. In line with past research on work-life balance (Kossek et al. 2014; Wong et al. 2021), the findings suggest that in the context of Vietnam, work-life balance in FDI firms is an extremely serious issue, which has deteriorated the psychological well-being of migrant workers. These work-life imbalances might be partly explained by the prevailing power asymmetry between FDI workers and their employers, foreign corporations. Previously, owing to the abundance of labor supplies, FDI employers often had higher ground in the recruitment process, and workers' well-being was the last thing they were concerned with. In managerial practices, inferior positions had no right to negotiate. Now, in the current climate of labor shortages, local authorities have strengthened their mediation roles to level the uneven relationships between workers and FDI owners. Well-targeted policies that consolidate employee rights will help migrant workers to have a say in critical issues related to working environments, incomes, and benefits.

To some extent, Vietnam's welfare system reflects the "productivist regime" that operates in East Asia countries (Holliday 2000). Within this framework, the states tend to sacrifice residents' well-being for economic growth objectives. Considering urban facilities, FDI workers seemed to face a wide range of difficulties in access to public services. The Vietnamese residential registration system, although less strict than the Chinese system (Siu and Unger 2020), continued to be a barrier for workers to integrate into urban settings. In fact, Vietnamese migrant workers, who have a very low priority in the State's caring system, cannot have meaningful approaches to improve their status. Nevertheless, interview data shows that migrants found their own ways to mitigate inequalities induced by markets and the state. Participants' solitary lifestyles, for example, might not be their first choice but harsh conditions in the city forced them to eschew social interactions. Similarly, neither sending their children back to the country nor accepting split-family is an easy decision but most workers chose that solution to make ends meet. Having fewer children or marriages without children are increasingly common in migrant communities. These phenomena echo the Polanyi's (2001) implicit resistances on which marginalized groups rely to withstand rising inequality.



### **5.3. Releasing Housing Burdens and Enhancing Corporate Social Responsibility**

One feature that distinguishes Vietnam's workers from those in other developing countries is the absence of dormitory labor regime. This is reflected in the cases of two industrial parks in this study, EPZ and SHTP, whose laborers are mainly housed by private rental housing. Compared to China, where up to 38% of workers' accommodation were provided by employers (Li, Duda, and An 2009), very few companies in Vietnam built dormitories for workers. Likewise, social housing or rent subsidies are also popular alternatives for low-income laborers in the Global South, whereas equivalent options are virtually absent in the Vietnamese housing market. Broadly speaking, in terms of housing choice, rural-to-urban workers in HCMC have no option but to live in sub-standard rooms provided by private landlords. As shown in previous sections, housing costs account for the largest expense of an employee's budget and housing security is one of the key factors that determine workers' well-being. Hence, mitigating housing burdens should be the priority of the State in the aftermath of the pandemic. Likewise, as workforce housing has been neglected, employers are required to take responsibility for housing security. Given exorbitant land prices in HCMC and low profit margin among FDI firms, there are limits to what foreign corporations can provide. However, with the State's power and successes of land-based financing instruments proven in Asia (Abiad et al. 2019) elsewhere (Blanco et al. 2017), improvement in workers' housing can be achieved.

In Southeast Vietnam economic hubs, the largest concerns for FDI firms are productivity and profits. Fierce global competition forces manufacturing firms to drive down costs to win contracts. Eventually, the cost burdens result in low salaries and reduced accommodation benefits. Due to insufficient incomes, workers must work long hours to make a living, not only for themselves but also for their families. As noted earlier, the daily routines of workers are rather tedious and repetitive, without any chances for social interactions. Technically, a young employee can cope with these loops to earn money but an older worker might find them unbearable. In terms of housing, living conditions in rental blocks

are too harsh for workers. Similar to the notions of Nguyen et al. (2016), the findings in this study show that most rental rooms were inadequate, which induced various kinds of stress and anxiety. Mature workers tend not to cope with these working and housing conditions, so they voluntarily left the factory. Unintentionally, these early-retirement practices align well with the investors' interests, because FDI firms always want to hire young laborers who will accept low payment and high-demand tasks. This practice might bring about advantages in the short-term, but it has an adverse effect on workers' mental health, and consequently their well-being.

In light of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices which have been broadly implemented in developing countries (Zhang, Shang and Liu 2018), and considering the poor well-being of migrant workers in Vietnam, it is imperative for FDI firms to review CSR frameworks and further integrate social concerns into their operations. Contractual stakeholders (Albareda, Lozano and Ysa 2007) should bring workers to the forefront and consider employees' well-being as an important indicator of social contribution. Past studies also highlight the fact that CSR activities might help a FDI firm to realize win-win outcomes in which performances and competitive advantages of the company can be increased at the same time as the well-being of its workers (Lins, Servaes and Tamayo 2017). In recent years, CSR activities carried out by foreign firms in Vietnam were classified as marketing elements (Vu and Buranatrakul 2018) which means their outcomes were aimed at serving the employers only. Evidence elaborated in previous sections suggests that salaries, housing burdens, and work-life balance are the most significant areas that impact worker well-being. An integration of these into the CSR framework can help to improve workers' well-being as well as ensure the adaptation of FDI firms to the post-pandemic world.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The study of employee well-being has been in the spotlight of developed countries for the last several decades. This rapid

expansion of well-being literature is not only because workers' welfare and health are important determinants of a given firm's competitiveness and success but also due to a growing interest in improving quality of life (Ilies, Aw and Pluut 2015). However, in developing nations, owing to many factors, particularly the influence of cheap labor strategies, studies on workers' well-being have been neglected. This led to many serious issues for workforce sustainability in FDI sectors, including high turnover rates and low productivity. The pandemic and the adjustments from globalization have made these labor issues worse. Hence, it is imperative for large organizations to consider their strategic plans regarding human resources, especially policies related to workers' well-being. Yet, improving workers' well-being is not a simple task because it is neither the sole duty of firms nor the responsibility of government systems alone. In fact, beyond the workplace, workers' well-being might be positively or negatively shaped by other factors, which are not fully understood. This research contributing to well-being literature should be joined by a close examination of well-being determinants in non-work domains.

This study reveals that the well-being of laborers employed by FDI firms in Vietnam, particularly in HCMC, was rather poor in the aftermath of the pandemic. Various factors are considered significant in shaping their overall well-being. Three main dimensions of stressors can be identified, including material stressors, social stressors, and individual stressors. For the first category, insufficient income is the most critical factor which leads to other financial burdens and poor housing conditions. The survey evidence shows that indebtedness due to the lockdown and remittent responsibilities caused permanent stress and concern, resulting in low levels of subjective well-being. In terms of social relationships, access to public services and relationships with landlords were among the most common concerns of migrant workers. Weak social networks in the rental blocks resulted in insecure and unsafe feelings, which in turn had negative impacts on mental health. In the last category, job demands and lack of free time left workers with no space to find balance in their private lives. In addition, financial constraints limited entertainment choices and opportunities to find suitable

partners, eventually resulting in loneliness and sadness. In fact, all these factors woven together had a collective impact on workers' overall well-being.

The findings also point out broad social consequences of unjust practices currently employed by FDI firms across the two industrial zones. The poor well-being of migrants in juxtaposition with the continuous growth of FDI factories reveals uneven power relationships in which employers hold absolute authorization. This unequal situation is currently supported by a cheap labor approach and the abundance of migrant laborers. As FDI inflows evolve to a technology-intensive approach, it is important for all stakeholders to make necessary adjustments which emphasize the workers' well-being. Place-based approaches and supporting mechanisms for domestic companies are necessary to create competition between sectors, which will increase workers' income as well as firms' productivity. Further, policies that specifically target migrant workers' housing needs play a central role in liberating workers from housing stress, leading to well-being improvement. As evidenced in past studies on CRS (Lins et al. 2017), an alignment between firms' social responsibility and workers' needs, especially workforce housing, might bring about win-win outcomes, in which the target of sustainable development can be achieved together with the flourishing of employee well-being.

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Received: September 26, 2022; Reviewed: December 17, 2023; Accepted: January 10, 2024