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Child domestic servants in Hanoi
Who are they and how do they fare?

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Introduction

Child labour has been receiving much attention and the opinions of what is "the best interest of the child" and what is possible to achieve go wide apart. Children themselves and organizations working with them have very different views on the causes for and consequences of child work and what should be done about it (Woodhead, 1999).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) prohibits economic exploitation of children and their involvement in work that could be harmful or that interferes with their education. It also requires States Parties to regulate ages for admission to and conditions for employment. The Labour Code of Vietnam from 1994 states: "A labourer must be at least 15 years old . . ." but it also provides for a number of occupations, which are accepted for children and not considered harmful.

Domestic service is a common occupation of teenage girls all around the world (Black, 1997). For girls, for whom education is not a realistic option, it is one of few opportunities available to earn a well-needed income. In the debate it has been highlighted as a form of invisible child labour with great risks of being harmful (Blagbrough, 1999; UNICEF, 1999). The girls spend most, if not all their time, confined within the walls of the employer's house with few opportunities to meet others (Black, 1997). In some countries they may be very young and with little or no contact with their families (Blanchet, 1996; Janak, 2000). The risks for physical, sexual and psychological abuse and exploitation are obvious, since the girls are left to the mercy of their employer's families. At the same time domestic service is widely accepted. In many western countries a system of "au pair" has been developed, in which young people can combine language studies abroad with domestic

service for a year. The term "domestic servant" was chosen, since it is an accepted terminology in the child rights debate. It describes the role and also the subordinate position of the girls. Other terms used are housemaids, childminders or domestic workers.

During 1998 a study was conducted in Hanoi to investigate how the domestic servants under the age of 18 years themselves describe their work. The aim of the study was to contribute to the understanding of the situation and conditions for child domestic servants. The study focuses on:

- the reasons why children work as domestic servants in urban households;
- their social network;
- their working and living conditions;
- their wishes, attitudes and needs;
- their experiences of illness and of the health services;

The Vietnamese Setting

Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and instituted the Committee on the Protection and Care of Children (transformed into the Committee for Population, Family and Children – CPFC in 2002) to be responsible for its implementation in the country. Many actions have been taken by the government to harmonize national law with the requirements in the Convention and the two first reports have been submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The implementation of the CRC questions values and norms, which characterize the concept of childhood in Vietnam. In Vietnam a discussion on child rights will always also include a discussion on the duties of the child and the responsibilities of the family (National Assembly in Vietnam, 1991). The very strong emphasis on the family and the community, and the interdependence of all its members is important for the interpretation of rights and obligations of children in the Vietnamese society.

The Concept of Childhood

A traditional concept of childhood in which children are seen as self-evident, necessary members of the family, as contributing parts to the whole (Cunningham, 1995) prevails in rural Vietnam, from where all the girls in the study come.

Basic in Vietnamese child rearing (Bich, 1997) is the duty of the child to be obedient and respectful towards her/his parents, relatives and older people and to understand and fulfil the responsibilities towards parents and relatives.

Children are raised as social beings with duties towards their parents and society rather than with rights of their own. The Vietnamese family has traditionally been very closely knit. It is hierarchical and patrilineal with a clear differentiation between male and female roles. The interests of the family as a community prevail over the interests of the individual family members, especially of the children. The son's responsibility for honouring the ancestors and preserving the family line is very important, and leads to a differentiation between how boys and girls are brought up (Rydström, 1998). Daughters are brought up to be submissive and obedient to their parents and later their husbands, to uphold the honour and morality of the family and to be responsible for the care and nourishing of the children (Rydström, 1998; Le Thi, 1999).

With modernization and globalization new concepts of childhood develop parallel to the traditional. The school-system is the most important factor propagating another concept of childhood, where children's lives no longer are part of everyday adult activity (Boyden, 1997; Woodhead, 1997). Their role and responsibility in the production for the family is diminished, instead they spend their time learning for the future in environments separated from adult society (Alaimo & Klug, 2002). Their contribution to society is postponed to the future and their role is to prepare for that. Their rights as individuals are strengthened and new possibilities for a future different from that of their parents open up. Teenagers in Vietnam have to accommodate both concepts, where parents and the rural communities normally stand for the traditional concepts and school and urban communities for the new, supported by influences through the media and legislation around child rights.

The Concept of Work

Work in the rural traditional society is not related to age or adulthood, but rather to capability, time and need (Thi, 1998; Boyden *et al.*, 1998; Alaimo & Klug, 2002). Children do not always see this as "work", but rather as "doing their share", as a duty affirming their family membership. This makes the tasks meaningful, confirming the belonging and strengthening the identity of the children. In this context regular working hours and free-time are unknown entities. Work is done when needed, and rest and recreation taken when possible. For children this means that they, just as everybody else, share in the work for the family. They are from young age given tasks deemed suitable for their ability and maturity, and related to what they are expected to know as adults. Girls are more often kept busy in the home with the mother acting as a role-model and the boys outside with the father.

With the globalization of the market, an open economy and an influx of new consumer goods follows an increased need for cash money and openings for

new types of employment and professions, including a changing concept of work and employment (White, 1996; Thi, 1998). Small family enterprises find new possibilities and continue to function in much the same way as the family farm, but many jobs will be regulated with fixed salaries and working hours. With these different employment forms come a clearer definition of role, tasks and responsibilities and sometimes more freedom.

In 1986 a renovation of the economy within the socialist framework was introduced in Vietnam. Agricultural co-operatives were broken up and land was distributed for private production. Families and private entrepreneurs were allowed to start local production of consumer goods and the country was opened for import and foreign investments. With the opening up for market economy cut backs in public spending also followed. Access to cash became important to pay for services and welfare and to afford the increasing choice of goods on the market (Thi, 1998). Today more and more children are involved in income earning activities and also leave the countryside to look for better opportunities in the towns (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1999). In the streets of Hanoi they can be seen polishing shoes, selling postcards, washing motorbikes or serving in restaurants just as in so many cities in the developing world. A group not as easily detected is the domestic servants.

Methods

The study was planned and conducted by two of the authors, a Vietnamese sociologist (TVA) and a Swedish public health scientist with a child rights background (BR), which meant that within the team we had different research disciplines, cultural backgrounds and language knowledge. For the study we chose a qualitative design with unstructured interviews (Kvale, 1996) to explore the background and work of the child domestic servants, and to elucidate the mechanisms and relationships influencing their lives and directing their choices and decisions.

When analyzing the interviews we used latent content analysis, which as described by Morse and Field (1995, p. 136) entails [reviewing] "the passages and paragraphs [. . .] in the context of the entire interview to identify and code the thrust or intent of the section or the significant meaning within the passages." Important topics in the interviews, describing and explaining the lives of the domestic servants, were identified and used as primary categories, when coding and organizing the data. Within each primary category, or topic, subcategories were developed helping to clarify the differences in how the domestic servants described and explained their situation. The interviews were then reread to look for the relationship between the sub-categories in the different interviews. Berg (2001) describes the analyzing process in latent content

analysis as a dialectical movement between the whole and the parts and between understanding and explanation.

Recognizing that children themselves are most knowledgeable about their own situation, the informants in the study were the children themselves (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Four of the employers agreed to participate and were interviewed, which gave us a possibility to verify some of the information given by the domestic servants.

Selection of participants

For the study 15 girls were purposively selected among 198 young domestic servants, who had participated in a questionnaire study conducted by Save the Children/Sweden in Vietnam (Save the Children/Sweden, 2000). They were selected to include girls representing different experiences according to the following criteria: age, relation to employer, contact with home/family, health status, type of work. At the time of the interviews two of the girls had returned home. In table 1 below we present the basic characteristics of the 13 girls included in the study.

Table 1. List of children interviewed. (names are fictive)

Name	Age	Work	Education	Home situation	Employer relationship	Health condition
1. Lan daughter	13	1 year	7th grade in school	3 siblings + parents Poor conditions	Relatives, wanting to support girl	Good, better leaving home
2. Suu employee	14	1 year	8th grade	4 sisters + single mother, father dead	Strangers, friends of neighbours	Anxious, physically OK
3. Van daughter	14	5 years	3rd grade,	8 siblings + parents	Relatives, adopted grandmother	Mild disease, help by employer
4. Duyen employee	14	18 month	3rd grade	4 siblings + parents	Strangers, through sister, restaurant	
5. Trang daughter	14	3 years	6th grade,	4 siblings + parents	Relatives, grandmother	Taken to hospital twice by employer
6. Hanh daughter		1 year	6th grade,	4 siblings + parents	Relatives, paralysed needing help	Not been ill
7. Dung employee	15	3 years	6th grade	2 siblings + parents farmer, war invalid	Indirect relation through aunt	Once treated with acupuncture
8. Thanh employee	16	1 year	3rd grade	5 siblings + parents	Strangers, arranged by neighbour	OK, sad
9. Huong employee	16	3 years	4th grade	9 siblings + parents farmers, very poor	Strangers, Friends of an uncle	Mild disease, help by employer

table 1 (*cont.*)

Name	Age	Work	Education	Home situation	Employer relationship	Health condition
10. Hong employee	16	14 months	7th grade	5 siblings + parents	Native fellow people Restaurant	In bed for two days, help by employer
11. Mei employee	16	2 years	5th grade	4 sisters, parents divorced	Strangers, through friend, restaurant	Not been ill for years, unhappy
12. Lien employee	16	1 week	9th grade	4 siblings + parents	Relatives, father arranged it	Healthy, homesick
13. Thuy daughter	16	7 months	9th grade	8 siblings + parents, siblings married	Strangers, distant relatives	Never been ill

Data collection

For the interviews we prepared a guideline covering the topics to be included during the interview (family background, education, working conditions, health, relation with employer and hopes for the future). All interviews were taped with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed directly after the interviews and later translated to English. Six of the interviews were randomly selected to be translated by a second translator, who confirmed the first translation. Most interviews went on well without interruptions or difficulties. In two cases members of the employer's family were present interfering with the discussion, causing disturbance and some hesitation to answer the questions. On the whole, though, we met no difficulties in contacting the domestic servants and getting their and their employers' consent to the girls' participation in the study. The employers of the two girls who had returned home agreed to be interviewed, giving their views on the situation and conditions of domestic servants. Also two other employers were interviewed following the interview with their employees. During the interview period the interviewers met with the Vietnamese investigator regularly to discuss their experiences, how to solve problems they came across and which areas to focus on and probe further.

Training of interviewers

A group of five third year students from the Department of Psychology at the University of Social Sciences in Hanoi were engaged to do the interviewing. They had a five-day course on the aims of the study, the study design and interview methodology especially as it related to children. The course was led by

two of the authors (TVA, BR). The role of the domestic servant and attitudes to domestic work, as well as child work were discussed. Role-play was used to prepare the students for different situations that might arise, and also the students were asked to interview children in their neighbourhood to get accustomed to talking to children. Their experiences from interviewing children were discussed at an extra session and the methodological issues further analyzed.

Analysis

The 13 interviews with the domestic servants were read and reread in both Vietnamese and English looking for common themes and patterns. Using both languages during the process of analyzing contributed to a better and deeper understanding of the data. The two languages are very different in structure and linguistic culture and the word-by-word translation did not always convey the full meaning. While reading all interviews several important topics were identified, which later became the primary categories in the analysis.

The interviews were coded in Vietnamese and English separately by the two investigators. *Codes* were freely and broadly assigned to the texts (e.g. too young, too old, poverty, drop-out, suitable job, humiliated, long days, insecure, fatter, healthier, school) and organized into the primary categories. Within the *primary categories* sub-categories were developed to enhance the overview and understanding of the data. The categories and codes were compared with each other and studied in relation to the full interviews to find linkages and patterns describing and explaining the situation and behaviour of the domestic servants (Morse & Field, 1995). During the process the researchers discussed and compared the coding and categorization to agree on how they understood and interpreted the data. Also the interviews with the four employers were read and the material used to verify information from the domestic servants. Using the two languages during the initial phases of the analysis contributed to better reliability of the analysis. When reading the interviews and comparing and analyzing the variations within the categories an overarching theme – transition – stood out, characterizing this period in the life of the domestic servants.

Ethical Clearance

The study was approved by the Ministry of Health and the Hanoi Medical University, as well as by the ethical committee of the Karolinska Institute. The domestic servants were informed about the aims of the study, that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the process, and that their identities would not be revealed. Also their employers were informed about the study.

Results

All the results are based on the perceptions and experiences of the girls interviewed. The theme apparent in all the interviews, characterizing the life of the domestic servants was transition: the transition from childhood to womanhood, as well as the transition from the rural traditional to the modern, urban society. The girls spoke of it in terms of being either "too young and inexperienced for adulthood" or "too grown-up and responsible for childhood".

When reading and rereading the interviews we identified several important topics, which were used as the primary categories for the analysis. These were *relationships, education, employment* and *health* into which the different codes where sorted.

Table 2. Primary Categories and Sub-categories

Primary Categories	Sub-categories
Relationships	Family
	Employers
	Community
Education	Level of education
	Access to education while employed
	Attitude to education for girls
	Attitude to vocational training
Employment	Reasons for employment
	Attitude to domestic service
	Role in domestic service
	Duties in domestic service
Health	Level of well-being
	Type of ill-health
	Access to care and type of care given
	Cost of care and form of financing

Relationships

The very strong family ties in Vietnamese culture were obvious in all the interviews. The girls saw themselves first of all as family members with responsibilities towards parents and siblings. Their own interests and wishes were secondary, if at all considered.

"Daughter" or employee

In the interviews the role as a domestic servant was unclear, as it often included an element of "*being like a daughter*" in the employer's house. The employers to some extent took over the role of the parents in the upbringing and control of the girls. Employers, who saw the girls as family members, would take

them on holidays and include them in celebrations, but would expect them to help out with all the chores at the expense of real free time. This allowed for more freedom on one hand, but also for less regulated working hours and working conditions on the other. Being a "daughter" in the house did not seem to be related to the age of the domestic servant, but rather to the relationship between parents and employers, and to the type of work she was employed for. For the employers having "a daughter in the house", included an element of helping her family financially, at the same time as having somebody helping out in the house.

For the girls with a employer – employee relationship the working hours and tasks were more clearly defined. Here the employer's relationship with the parents or the village was not as close and the reasons for the employer to have a servant were more work-related than help-related. In addition to their household chores the servants were working in small cafés, restaurants or food-stalls run in connection to the employer's house. Working hours could be very long and the tasks more demanding, but free time was free and they were not included in the family life of the employer in the same way as the "daughters" were. They were more independent, but also less protected and had to take greater responsibility for their own lives.

The better the contact between the parents and the daughter on one hand, and the parents and the employer on the other, the more satisfied were the girls with the employment. The girls with difficulties in the relationship with their employers tended to come from homes, where the relationship between parents and children was also strained, where for example parents were divorced or one parent had died.

> – Mum does not like that I stay at home. Looking back and forth, I could see nothing but the kitchen and the house. I had nothing to do there, therefore I wanted to go and earn money. Mum does not take care of me, she doesn't take care of anyone. All of us have to take care of ourselves.
> – My father left home when I was only one year old. I only knew him five years later. He doesn't take care of anyone in my family. (interview with Mei)

Trusting or fearing

For girls whose parents had a close relationship with the employer, mainly through kinship, this entailed a feeling of security and trust. As "daughters" they had good contact with the employer's family, whom they trusted and could confide in. The girls with a more professional relationship and less contact home were less trusting and more insecure and unhappy. They did not discuss personal matters with their employers and often did not have any other contacts close by.

Just as at home by their parents, the "daughters" were being advised by their employers, when not understanding what to do and scolded when making

mistakes, but they did not express the same feeling of humiliation and fear as those with an employee relationship. Being advised and scolded by the employers seemed to be part of life for all the girls, but the way they accepted it varied depending on what kind of relationship there was to the employer. Girls who had a more professional relationship were more disturbed by the scolding, which was described as more unfair and unpredictable.

> – When I do something wrong they scold me, but also when I did nothing wrong she scolds me. . . . I feel very humiliated. . . . I think the work is very hard. (interview with Suu)

The servants working in restaurants and cafés also had to cope with the customers and their demands. They complained of feeling uneasy and disturbed by young men who were teasing them, used bad language and were obtrusive. If the restaurant was at some distance from the house, they worried about coming home at night.

> – After my grandma's death anniversary I will not come back here. I think life is too complicated, I cannot mix with this new life. Some [people] passing the house rudely ask me to go out with them. It happens every day and makes me feel uncomfortable.
> – In my village, people are friendly, while here people tease me. I am worried and afraid that the son's friends are not good. They may do something harmful to me. (interview with Lien)
> – I have some friends who do the same kind of work as I do. They say that their jobs are not hard at all. But I think some of them have no good jobs. They work in the food shops, where it is complicated and dirty. . . . The customers come and go, and the way they speak is not very nice. . . . I don't know what to say, but it is very complicated, for example customers (hesitating) tease flirtatiously. . . . I told them to quit the job and find another one, with which they could feel more comfortable. After all we are girls. (interview with Hahn)

Education

The interviews confirmed that education beyond the compulsory five years of primary school is neither affordable nor an obvious choice for girls in rural Vietnam. With the new economic system followed the introduction of fees for education (UNICEF, 2000), which made it more difficult for the families to keep their children in school. For some the distances were also prohibiting.

Education – for what?

Education did not appear to be a priority for the girls and their families, nor their employers. The educational level of the girls varied from three years of primary school to one girl having finished ninth grade. Lack of funds for school fees was the main reason given for not continuing in school, but common was also the attitude that:

– In my hometown old people say that girls do not need to learn a lot, they only need a few classes and then they can stay at home. (interview with Hanh)
– Education is for nothing – as a girl there is no need to learn – I thought then. And everybody thought so. (interview with Trang)

For some of the girls this negative attitude to girls' education reinforced a feeling, that they were too dumb to learn anything anyhow.

– I am a dunce. I'm very stupid, I know nothing, I cannot do calculations. (interview with Hong)

Even if the girls realized that more education would improve their chances in the future, they did not consider it a possibility for themselves. Poverty, attitudes among friends and family, and a feeling of being unable to learn had caused the girls to leave school after a few years. And once they had left school a return was not considered a realistic option for them. They did not think they would manage it, and they also considered themselves too grown-up. The two girls, who had the opportunity to combine studying with work in Hanoi, were staying with relatives, who were positive, or had even brought them to Hanoi, to give them an opportunity to continue studying.

– Yes, I will repeat the 7th grade. . . . I am reluctant to do so, but I must try. I want to and my aunt also wants to provide the condition. I think that is very good. She says that, if stay here and help her with her housework, then I can go to school in the morning and help her in the afternoon. (interview with Trang)
– My uncle told me clearly, that I would go to school half day and half day I would take care of the child. If I went to school in the morning, I had to take care of the child in the afternoon and vice versa. And my grandparents and others would help. (interview with Lan)

Being a hairdresser or tailor were seen as possible occupations, when leaving domestic service, even if farming and motherhood at home in the village was the most obvious expectations for the future.

– When I grow up I will return home, I will not work here for long. Now I am still small so I can do the job, but when I grow up I will give it up. I think anyone would do the same in my situation. If you are grown up, you will have to get married. (interview with Mei)

Employment

For all the girls to be working was the obvious occupation and meaning in life. Either they went away to work or they would work at home. Of course they all liked having time to play and enjoy, but having to work was never questioned.

Push or pull

The domestic servants came from poor families in need of an extra income, which was the main reason for the girls to move to Hanoi and work. According to one girl she earned more as a domestic servant, excluding food, board and clothing, than her father received as government pension. Generally the girls were satisfied with their salary, realizing that if they wanted more, they would have to work harder. As domestic servants they also had a more stable income, including food, board and some clothing, compared to selling farm products on the market at home or food items in the streets of Hanoi.

The pull factors to go to Hanoi were also mentioned by many girls and seemed to be nearly as important. Often relatives had taken the initiative to ask the girl to come, because they felt a pity for the difficult situation of the family, combined with a need for help in the house. Some of the girls explained that their main reason for taking the opportunity to move was that they had nothing to do at home, life was dull and non-challenging. Also, friends had been telling about Hanoi and the possibilities to earn money there.

Working while waiting

Domestic service was considered "right" for teenage girls both by themselves, their parents and their employers. Few had started before reaching their teens and before having finished primary school. To work as a domestic servant was not considered to be a very hard job, even if it left the girls with little free time. Most tasks were simple and well known to the girls from home. They might be dull and uninteresting, but not as strenuous as the farm-work at home.

Working days could be very long, even if they included time for rest during the day, but not more so, than household chores and farm work at home in the village. When describing their work the girls explained that it was something they did for some years, while still too young for other occupations. It was not very hard or demanding, but it left them little independence. As such it was thought suitable and secure until they were grown-up. Even if the girls saw domestic service as a safe and healthy occupation, they were homesick and to some it was psychologically stressful not to be at home.

Health

Adolescence is for most children a healthy period of life, so also for the girls in our study.

Better nutrition and access to health service

Few girls in the study reported about health problems while working as domestic servants. Being a domestic servant for many of the girls seemed to be an opportunity to eat and live better. After a few months in Hanoi they claimed that they had gained weight and looked healthier.

– I feel alright, better than at home. I have to work at home too, but there is never enough to eat. (interview with Duyen)

At the same time as they were content with their physical well-being, many complained about feeling lonely. For the "daughters", who underlined how well they felt and were treated, loneliness seemed mainly to express home-sickness and a longing for parents and siblings, while for the others it was rather an expression of feeling unconnected and alone. None of the girls reported any serious illness or accident during their life as domestic servants. They had been ill with a headache, fever or stomach-ache for a day or two, or had a minor cut or burn while working in the kitchen. Their employers had taken them to hospital or given them medicine (from a pharmacy or from their own supply), when needed.

– Once I had a sty in an eye, so my uncle brought me to the hospital to have it lanced, and one time my grandmother brought me there for re-examination. (interview with Trang)
– Once I was ill for 2 days. She gave me medicine and I did not have to work until I was well again. (interview with Hong)
None of the girls complained about the care or treatment they had received from their employers and none had had to pay for it.

Interpretation and Discussion

For the girls with a supportive relationship with their parents, the years in Hanoi were mainly a positive experience. They felt they were safe and secure and ". . . became wiser and much more mature . . . " with Lan's words. Being able to help their family economically was important to them and gave them self-esteem. Just as for children in rural Tanzania (Hollos, 2002), it was self-evident for the girls in the study, that it was their duty was to participate in the support of the family when needed. The Tanzanian children in Hollos' study did not consider work to be the adults' domain, where children "help in", but rather as something everybody does for the mutual benefit of the family,

As has been found also in other studies, the fact that they saw their work as a normal duty for the family and knew that they had the support of their parents, contributed to it being a positive and constructive experience (Boyden *et al.*, 1998; Tolfree, 1998; Woodhead, 1999). Similarly to the situation in the Philippines (Camacho, 1999), the girls had taken the decision to migrate for work themselves, but with the consent of their parents. As different from other studies of domestic servants (Janak, (2001) few of the girls in our study expressed any negative attitudes to domestic work. Being a "daughter" and continuing more or less as at home, is how many described their work and the

relationship to the employers, which also entailed some degree of social control, that the girls were not abused and exploited.

For the girls with a less supportive relationship to the family, which coincided with a more professional relationship to the employers, the years in Hanoi were more difficult. The girls had to take greater responsibility for themselves, and more often complained of humiliating treatment by their employers. Their duties included unfamiliar tasks in more uncomfortable environments and their work was not so much a share in a mutual responsibility, as a necessity for their own survival, for which they had to take the full responsibility. Their transition to adulthood in a way took place already when coming to Hanoi and was more abrupt and demanding. In Hanoi they met modernization in many ways, but they mainly expressed fear, disassociation and sometimes lack of understanding, as it was still too different from their old reality.

Our study shows that a less relational and more professional relationship could mean a greater risk for abuse and exploitation. The girls who had more of an employer – employee relationship had greater difficulties adapting to the new role and also complained more about their situation. They did not experience the same feeling of security and control from home, and they felt very lonely. In our study none of the girls admitted to any severe abuse or sexual exploitation, while working and living with their employers, which does not mean that it could not have been the case for some of them. Especially sexual abuse is such a sensitive topic and so stigmatizing, that children would not tell about it, except in very trusting and confidential counselling situations (Svedin & Back, 1996).

The attitude the girls in the study had to education should be seen in the light of their views on working and on family responsibility. Their role-models in the community had little formal education and it was difficult for them to see the value of more than a few years of schooling. The girls had left school for different reasons, but for all the need for an income was an essential factor for the decision, combined with attitudes to girls' continued education. Almost all the girls had finished compulsory primary education and for many continued education at home was not an option, as it was not available. In Hanoi, when meeting modernization and more people with education, they were influenced by new norms and realized that more schooling could be an asset, had it been a possibility. Only two of the girls had the opportunity to continue their education, which was partly why they were taken to Hanoi and few expressed any wish to go back to formal education, while many hoped for a possibility to learn a trade – and were saving money for it. Working as domestic servants, while too young for other employment, gave them a possibility to save some money for the future, and in that way make positive use of the "years in transition".

For the girls working in Hanoi, it meant better living conditions and access to more and better food than at home. Also access to health services was better in the city than in the rural areas, and their employers took good care of their needs. The girls in the study were rarely ill, and it can be assumed that only healthy girls would be accepted by the employers, and probably also sent by their parents. We did not investigate what happened to girls who became seriously ill or injured, so that they could not continue their work within a few days. Most probably they had to return home, where access to treatment would depend on their parents possibilities to support them. Nothing in our study indicated that being a domestic servant in Hanoi was detrimental to the health of the girls or meant any greater risks to their health than being at home. Many also claimed that their work in Hanoi was less strenuous and tiring than agricultural work at home.

While the traditional norms for childrearing and the concept of childhood still prevail in rural Vietnam, the concept of womanhood has been under change. With communism the ideals of equality between men and women were introduced into society. Laws relating to inheritance, marriage and education were changed to give women the same opportunities as men (Huang *et al.*, 2002). The minimum age of marriage for girls is now 18 years. This means that Vietnamese women, especially in the urban areas, are expected to show a degree of independence and self-sufficiency, for which their childhood did not always prepare them. For the domestic servants their hopes for the future were formed by their upbringing and the ideals they met at home, while they were at the same time confronted with new norms and attitudes when coming to Hanoi. Their time in Hanoi was not only a period of transition in their own development from child to adult, but also a participation in the societal transition from a traditional rural society to a modern urban society. The need for more formal education was obvious to some of them, even if they did not see it as a viable option for themselves – but they willingly worked to contribute to the schooling of younger siblings. They also realized that farming might not generate enough income for their future, but that they would need to find alternative sources of income such as tailoring, hair-dressing or trading.

Conclusion

For many teenage girls in rural Vietnam more than a few years education is not the obvious option, the main reasons being poverty, lack of motivation or lack of opportunity. Marriage and a family of their own are not options either until they are at least 18 years, as different from in society, in which the norms and attitudes were formed, that still characterize many Vietnamese girls'

socialization into womanhood. For these girls their teens become a period of waiting, where domestic service in a relational employment gives them security and practice for a future in the village. They recognize the setting and gain some independence and self-sufficiency within traditional norms. But domestic service does not prepare them for a life in the modern society requiring education, professional know-how and independence, unless their relatives/ employers support their further education and help them to understand and enter into new contexts.

For the girls in more professional employment, who also mostly had less supportive relations with their families, the years in Hanoi were more challenging. A return to the village was not so obvious and therefore the need to adapt to urban life was more crucial. The transition period as domestic servants with duties also as restaurant waitresses and kitchen maids, opened new views for them and the lack of parental support forced them to be more independent. For some it became an impetus for planning for further training and saving of money, while for others it was mainly a negative and stressful experience.

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