Work without name: changing patterns of children's work in a Northern Vietnamese village

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BEYOND PATRONAGE:
CHILD WORK IN THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

Thuong con cho roi cho vot
Spare the rod and spoil the child
(Local saying)

Introduction

Recent studies on child labour generally agree that children's participation in various house tasks is rather substantial and this type of work also contributes to the household economy, in the sense that "it often frees adults to undertake directly productive tasks" (Hull 1981:66; see also Dube 1981, Cogle & Tasker 1982, Blair 1992, Nieuwenhuys 1994). However, scientific interpretations on work of this type vary considerably. There seems to be a popular trend to regard children's housework as somewhat light, unharful and thus, acceptable (Shah 1996:5; ILO 1993:6; George 1990:2-23; Myers 1989:5). Such an attitude tends to treat adolescent domestic work as a kind of service, non-productive, which helps develop the children's skills and self-confidence. In this case, helping the parents is in effect part of the process of socialization, constituting an apprenticeship in life (Luz Silva 1981:173).

In contrast to this point of view, White (1994; 1996) strongly argues that it is hard to make a distinction between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of children's work. His own observation points out that children themselves generally do not welcome unpaid labour, including housework and family farm work, but rather wish to escape from it. As he puts it: "For many children however, working in a factory or other large-scale enterprise comes high on the list of preferred kinds of work, while working at home occupies a very low place" (White 1996:5-6).

Recently, a new trend of childhood studies that regards the child as an agent of change is posing a challenge to our current knowledge of children's work. To some extent, the debate has brought about important implications for a further understanding of the position and meaning of work in children's lives. For several past decades, studies of children's work have been dominated by the idealization of childhood as a realm of innocence, considering the children's place is at school, not at work. Today, a number of researchers have begun to embark on a rethinking of childhood, calling for the recognition of the value of work performed by children as well as their right to be heard. While such an argument needs more critical examination, it opens up a new framework to study children's housework in which children's voices are at the heart of the matter.

Taking this controversial issue into consideration while examining children's house tasks in Giao village, my research adopts a child-focused approach based on the analysis of children's voices, their attitudes and perception of work. This chapter examines tasks performed by children in various aspects, based on the following assumptions: 1) House tasks performed by children represent a process of socialization or apprenticeship in which age and gender are the essential factors; 2) Their work is induced by parents to make a contribution to the maintenance of household; 3) Demand
for girl domestic workers has been increasing in recent years and the nature of their labour in this type of work is often beyond the scope of patronage relationship.

For data collecting purposes, I divide the children's domestic activities into two major categories: 1) Indoor housework, including tasks such as shopping, food processing, cooking, sweeping and tidying, washing, sewing, housekeeping, taking care of young siblings; 2) Outdoor housework such as collecting "free" goods like wild fruits, vegetables, fish, crabs and shellfish for household consumption, helping to raise livestock for domestic use, carrying water, and gardening.31

My field work examined the work performed by children from 38 households in Giao village. While focusing on children's voices, parents and adult members of the same families were also interviewed for two reasons. The first is to compare their own childhood and work habits with those of their children to underline the changes that have occurred. The second is to cross-check the children's responses with those of their parents. I also paid attention to village children who offered their labour elsewhere as household servants, those who are widely considered by the villagers as the Oshins of Vietnam.32

Children's house-task performance

While the definition of children's work is admittedly fraught with controversies, approaching their housework performance is an extremely difficult and complicated task. Generally speaking, housework goes on the whole year long and takes considerable time as compared to other activities. However, as usual, one tends to underestimate this type of work or often ignores it. The fact remains that is not easy to take into account of the wide variety of children's tasks in different settings, for instance, when they are doing what, and how to measure their task performance. Reynolds (1991) used an integrated method combining instant records, 24-hour recall and direct observation while Gill (1998) used a questionnaire structured around 144 tasks related to several major household chores to access the family division of labour and children's participation. As mentioned previously, my research puts more emphasis on qualitative aspects of children's housework. As I will elaborate further, children of Giao village usually mentioned their house tasks as "viec khong ten" (work without name), implicating that their labour is not fully recognized by adults. Given the choice, they would prefer to do heavy jobs "with name" (means "incomes") rather than staying home for such "odds".

31The gardens of households in Giao village are narrow and some households do not even have gardens. For most households, income from this source is insignificant and work of this kind is not considered as farming.

32The name Oshins is taken after the name of the main character in a Japanese TV serial. This Japanese girl migrated to the city to work as a house servant and experienced many hardships during her childhood. The serial was shown on the Vietnam Television in the early 1990s and was received warmly by local audience.
Patterns from the past

Let me first present some data on housework performed by children before economic reforms in order to give a comparative view while looking at the current practice of children’s housework. To understand children’s housework during the period of collective economy, I asked the adult members of 38 randomly selected households: at what age they had been first told to do housework, what types of work, for how long, and what they thought about it. Responses to these questions reveal that domestic work took the most time, particularly among girls, in the pre-reform, agricultural co-operative period. About 45 per cent of respondents said they carried out tasks described in group one (cited above) when they were just six or seven years old. While most female respondents reported that they did housework at this early age, 12 per cent of the males said they did not do most of the house tasks until they were 14 or 15. But it soon turned out that these boys were the only sons of their families and their parents exempted them from work. The average age was 10 for the task of tending buffaloes and other outdoor chores such as collecting “free goods”. These adults recalled that domestic work took them almost half a day after school. They mentioned the serious food shortage during the collective economy period, which compelled them to supplement their daily meals by collecting wild vegetables and catching fish and crabs. According to them, this type of children’s activity has decreased recently because children were more engaged in other “gainful work”. Because of close control of adult labour by production brigades at the time, adults often passed housework on to their children, as Mrs. Lam recalls:

... I shall never forget the day when we went to the cooperative’s field to steal some sweet potato leaves to make soup for lunch. We were found by the guard. My friends ran away but I was caught because I had to carry my sibling on my back. The guard kept me in the watch-tower until my dad came and took me home in the afternoon. He was so angry and my mother scolded me because lunch was not cooked and my parents had missed their afternoon work. That evening I was not allowed to eat as a punishment. Now remembering those days, I still wonder why we children had to suffer so much. After half a day at school, when I came home, there were tasks I had to do. Apart from taking care of my brother, it took me two to three hours each day to prepare vegetables, potatoes, cassava or maize and then mixed them with rice for the evening meal, which was precious little. The food was so bad, fit only for dogs, and if you didn’t know how to make it a little palatable, then a whipping would follow.

Life stories reveal the difference in boys’ and girls' housework. The women talked much about their past misery. As girls, they had to shoulder the bulk of housework such as cooking, washing, taking care of siblings, sweeping, and carrying water. Boys were responsible for outdoor tasks such as tending buffaloes, geese and ducks, and catching crabs and shellfish, some of which were sold to buy extra rice. Such activities continued until they reached the age of 16 when they could be accepted to work as laborers for the co-operatives, on the farm or in irrigation teams. The women however added that from generation to generation, housework is regarded as a karma which they have to bear from childhood until death.

Most life stories recalled by those people who grew up during the collective period bring back memories of starvation and pains rather than the heavy burden of work. Hardship and work were almost on the same par. Apart from this, there was no reliable data to quantify house tasks performed by children during this period. However,
one may see at least two factors influencing children's housework that often emerge from these life stories: 1) Low income from cooperative production and weak development of family economy were common causes inducing children to take part in collecting "free goods" such as wild vegetables, fish, crabs, etc. to improve their daily meals, which increased the time spent for house tasks. 2) The withdrawal of male labourers from farming to serve the armed forces and the "feminization" of agriculture caused children to be regularly involved to a large extent in housework.

A profound achievement of the collective system in the wake of the "socialist revolution" was the abolition of the practice of hiring poor children to work as household servants. Some villagers recalled that before the land reform 1956, they worked as bonded child labourers (o do), houseboys (thang hau) and maid-servants (con sen, dua o) in landlord and well-to-do households in the village and elsewhere. When the land reform came to the village, employers immediately sent them back to their parents and relatives for fear of being accused of "feudal exploitation". Life stories reveal that most of the village's poor children growing up during the colonial regime worked as dua o for somebody else. Villagers categorized the status of "dua o" in the previous period into several forms, based on the period contracted between their parents/sponsors and employers, including o mua/o vu (seasonal servant), o nam (servant based on annual basis) and o doi (servant for life). While serving their employers, these children were normally not paid, except getting daily meals and one or two sets of clothes a year. Needless to say these children had to work hard. During the period between the establishment of the collective system in 1958 and the implementation of the economic reforms in the mid-1980s, using children as house-servants was condemned as cruelty to children and was certainly forbidden. When the planned-economy built on socialist ideology collapsed and the gap between the rich and poor widened recently, the demand for child servants was revitalized. In the following section of this chapter, case studies from Giao village will provide more insights into this theme.

Boys, girls and their housework

White and Brinkerhoff (1981) report that children were encouraged to participate in household chores from an early age, as young as two years old, and their task performance made a significant contribution to the household. This observation is also supported by Cogle and Tasker (1982), Peters and Haldemen (1987), Blair (1992). Indeed, rural children are often induced to do house chores at a very early age. However, at that age, their activities should be understood as an exercise that make them gradually integrated into future working life, and they are not expected to make any concrete contribution. Generally speaking, children start to take part more regularly in housework at the age of six or seven. As found elsewhere, girls usually start to do house chores at an earlier age as compared to boys. My own observations indicate that at the age of eight, most children are already assigned to perform all tasks mentioned in "indoor housework" (group one) and part of the tasks in "outdoor housework" (group two). Such activities as taking care of young siblings, keeping and tidying the house, washing dishes and running chores are performed at an earlier age as compared to "outdoors" chores such as collecting "free goods", carrying water, cooking, washing clothes, prepa-
ring food for livestock, which often come later, between the ages of eight and ten. Even children from well-to-do families perform these tasks, usually at ten or older.

A survey conducted among a sample of 73 children under the age of 16 in 38 households indicate that from the ages between 9 and 13, girls contributed an average of 2.7 hours per day in various house tasks, which was almost equal to the contribution of female adults. Girls of age group 14 to 16 contributed a daily average of 2.4 hours to housework. Boys of age group 9 to 13 worked an average of 1.5 hours per day on housework while boys between 14 and 16 contributed only 0.4 hours.

To test survey results, a long-term observation was focused on a smaller group of 8 households to find out who were doing what in the bulk of household activities. The findings (see Table 4.1) show that the time proportion spent for domestic tasks of girls at the age group between 8 and 15 was almost equal to the proportion of adult women’s time devoted to these tasks while boys and male adults spent much lesser time for this type of work.

Table 4.1. Time spent on domestic tasks by girls and boys
(as percentage of all types of work)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender/Age</th>
<th>Time spent for house-tasks</th>
<th>Time spent for other activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own survey in Giao village 1995

While most of the house tasks are not income-generating activities, certain domestic work contributes directly to raising incomes, such as husking and pounding rice, raising livestock, and collecting "free goods". Catching wild crabs, fish, shellfish, shrimp and tiny shrimp is a typical job of poor children to improve their family daily diet but as I found out, most of the village children enjoy this activity. Products from this work are mainly used for domestic use but part of them is also for sale. Some children are in favour of this task because if the catch is good, they can sell the surplus and are allowed to keep the cash for their own use. This type of work tends to be more extensive in the period between the two harvests. Women and children take advantage of this period to catch extra crabs, fish and shrimp to prepare sauce and dried fish/shrimp for later consumption.

Husking and pounding rice for daily meals take a considerable time of children and of women too. Particularly, children from families working as rice millers (hang xao) are deeply involved in this task. Hang xao has its long history among the activities of peasants in the Red River delta (Gourou 1936, Kleinen 1999). Typically, this activity can be regarded as a kind of domestic work. Peasants buy paddy, turn it into rice and then sell the processed rice on the market. The left-overs from milling rice such as broken rice (tam) and bran (cam) to feed pigs are the main gains from this activity. Other left-overs such as rice husk (trau) is to be used as cooking fuel or serves as a kind
of fertilizer for rice land. Recently, rice-mill machines have been introduced into the village but hand-processed rice is still favoured by consumers.

Almost all village households raise pigs but the number of pigs kept may vary. Families doing hang xao or having more children usually raise more pigs. Pig raising is mainly aimed at producing the manure for rice land. Finding vegetables and cooking cam (the mixture of vegetables and bran) for pigs are often the house tasks for children to do.

It should be noticed that while most children work in one way or another, the extent of their participation in housework may differ depending on various factors such as age, gender, household composition, parents' educational background as well as agricultural cycle.

A popular feature of the Vietnamese family is that old parents prefer to reside with one of their sons, often the eldest or youngest. My own observation reveals that children living with their grandparents spend less time on domestic tasks as compared to children without grandparents. In fact, grandparents prefer to cover most of the domestic tasks instead of their grandchildren or at least, share part of these tasks.\(^3\) Households without elderly people usually pass on house tasks to their children, particularly first-born daughters. As I often heard during my stay in the village, people like to compare the girl's housework responsibility with "a good buffalo",\(^4\) which means that she can work as hard as a main household labourer. As I made my inquiry on boys' housework, they often explained that because there were no girls in the family, they had to do domestic chores, which in their view, is the tasks reserved for girls. Those parents who were interviewed on their preference for the gender of expected children often said if they can have a choice, they want both sons and daughters. It is interesting that the reason why they prefer daughters was because daughters are often more tính cam (having more sentiments) and more đam đang viel nha (responsible for house-tasks) than sons. Household size is another factor affecting children's participation in housework. My findings indicate that children from big-size households do more housework than those of smaller households. These children are usually assigned tasks such as collecting "free goods", raising livestock, tending cattle, and processing food. Family adult members often expressed the view that children should do some useful tasks. Otherwise, idleness might involve them in social evils. Parents told me they often have no time to keep an eye on their children, so housework would keep them from trouble.

In a sense, household living standards and parents' education background also affect the extent and types of children's housework. Children of well-to-do households usually start to do housework at a later stage, often after the age of 10, and they are rarely assigned to do such things as hanging around the farm or along canals to catch wild crabs and fish. Daughters of these families perform house chores such as cooking, washing, and needle work while their sons are exempted from house chores to focus on schooling or vocational training. Parents with higher education (teachers, civil servants and local administration staff) tend to emphasize the "socialization" aspects of

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\(^3\) The often quoted saying is "mot me gia bang ba con o", which means an elder mother can work as hard as three house servants.

\(^4\) As a local saying goes: "Ruong sau trau nai, khong bang con gai dau long" (A first-born daughter is worth more than a piece of fertile rice land or a good buffalo).
housework rather than the necessity of children's help.

Previously I have discussed the differentiation in house tasks between girls and boys, in terms of time allocation and type of tasks. A close observation reveals that the position of a particular child in the family has an important influence on their house task performance. Boys who are the only sons of their parents or male heirs are usually exempted from house tasks until they become 12 or older. Similarly, boys who were commended to deities' protection are also rarely assigned to do "heavy" tasks such as carrying water, washing clothes and collecting vegetables for pigs. From a religious point of view, parents believe that these boys belong to the gods, and are protected by the world of spirits, therefore any abuses to them may have an adverse effect on human affairs. These boys are not only exempted from most house tasks but also rarely scolded or punished by their parents.

Finally, the agricultural cycle also has impacts on children's housework. At the peak demand of farming period for such tasks as watering, preparing soil, planting and harvesting, etc., most children are expected to do more house tasks, freeing the adult members for productive work. During the period between the two harvests, children have more idle time because their house tasks are shared by family female adults.

While regarding children's domestic tasks as part of household labour division, it is important to take into account influential factors such as age, gender, position as well as family background and features of the production system, which are essential to analyze housework performance. Some studies on childhood tend to look at this type of work as a kind of "odds" through which children while helping their parents also serve to strengthen family bonds. Such instances are true where, for example, the mother while cooking needs her child to clean rice, vegetables or look after the young sibling. However, most of children's house tasks should not be judged as help only. They need to be examined in the entire household strategy in which parents and adult members work in productive/earning tasks leaving their children to take charge of non-production activities labeled as housework. Most of the parents I interviewed shared similar attitudes, regarding their children's house tasks as a "natural process" of household labour division. According to them, children have an obligation to fulfill these tasks.

In the following section, I will further highlight the contradictions between work and socialization with regard to children's house tasks. I will show that children are compelled to do house chores rather than doing them of their own accord.

**Housework and children's socialization**

"Chi, it's already full daylight, why are you still in bed?" her mother yelled. "Get up, quick! What a lazy piece of skirt! Then no dog would want to marry you. Hurry up! Bring food for the pigs, then come back here, then we'll go to the farm together."

But it was no need for Chi to hurry. She rubbed her eyes, got out of bed, then went down to the kitchen and squatted next to her mother who was mixing up vegetables and bran for the pigs. It was just 5 o'clock in the morning. Chi's brothers and father were still sleeping soundly. Her mother's shouting caused little surprise to her because every morning she was woken up in the same way. She even joked at her mother's shouting, calling it "singing a song". In her view, she was worthy of being a good daughter and her mother's "singing" was just a way of showing her affection to her, as people in this village call it, mang yeu (reprimanding affectionately).

This story from Giao village illustrates vividly the problem of housework and
children's socialization. The question here is why the mother wakes her little daughter in early morning to do house chores while her brothers were allowed to sleep on. Closer examination of the daily activities of the local people suggests that it is the cultural roots that shape the process of children's socialization and that, through children's housework, one can observe a female-male dichotomy in this process.

Before presenting empirical data to test this hypothesis, let me first review some controversial discussions at a societal level regarding work and socialization of children in Vietnamese society. In the mid-1980s, the well-known weekly newspaper Phu Nu Viet Nam (Vietnam Women) raised a public debate on the specific topic For the Girls of The Future. This newspaper published various opinions from all over the country, focusing on how best to educate daughters (PNVN, 11.8.1987:4). Most opinions agreed that family education of daughters should not be the same as applied to sons. The debate was dominated by the emphasis of the mother's role in the education of daughters, and by the general consent that such virtues as perseverance, household responsibility and gentleness are essential to girls. The opposition however questioned why so much is required of the girls and so little is demanded from the boys (Nguyen Mai Ha, PNVN 19.5.1987:4). Some complained that such an attitude would only increase the burden of domestic tasks on girls, which was already heavy enough (Thu Dung, PNVN 27.6.1994:8). According to them, it is necessary to get children to do housework from an early age, at 3 or 4 because this would help create a good sense of household responsibility to prepare them for their future life. But an equal education regarding housework responsibility should be compulsory for both girls and boys. Hoai Huong, for instance, suggests that boys' sloth in housework is induced by parents, not themselves (Hoai Huong, PNVN 26.12.1995:6). Similarly, Ngo Cong Hoan argued that housework plays an important role in the process of children's socialization and during this process, children partly learn by themselves but it is important for parents to guide them in a correct manner (Ngo Cong Hoan 1995:5-7).

So far the debate has brought to the fore the central concern of society: should boys need to show their good behaviour by doing domestic tasks or is such a thing only required of girls? How do the housework and children's socialization actually occur at the grass-root level? The case of Giao village will help bring to light this matter.

For the villagers, housework has a special meaning to the child. By doing house tasks, children show their obedience, good morality and fulfill filial obligations towards their parents. However boys are not expected to participate in house tasks in the same way as required of girls. Observations elsewhere also share this view (Wolf 1972; La Fontaine 1978; Schildrou 1978; Rydstrom 1998). Embedded deeply in the cultural psyche of the Vietnamese society, obedience (vang loi) and good behaviour (ngoan) are considered among the most highly valued characters of children, particularly with respect to girls. Girls are only commended as "ngoan" when they show their obedience to parents by fulfilling house chores. Otherwise, if the socially established norms applied to the girls are not followed, they would be criticized as "hu" and "mat net" (undisciplined and naughty). Parents do not seem to care much about their sons' obedience as required of daughters. Most boys at the age between 6 and 10 are not so strictly bound by discipline although parents often complain about their boys being disobedient, naughty, irresponsible, but I rarely encountered cases where punishments are meted out for bad behaviour.

The following is an example taken from my case studies of Giao village to
explain the differentiation between boys and girls in performing house tasks.

Dan is a girl of 13 and the first-born daughter of a family with 3 children. Her two young brothers are Hat, 8 years old and Cu, just 3. Their father works away from home as a woodworker, and only visits them during the Tet holidays. Their mother works on the farm and takes care of household affairs. Every morning, she assigns tasks to Dan and Hat before going out to work. Dan goes to school in the morning, so she would do the tasks of taking care of young brother Cu in the afternoon, cooking lunch and dinner and tidying up the house and the yard. In the morning Hat takes care of young brother Cu while keeping an eye on the house. Hat's mother says he is a "mischievous" boy. She wants to send him to a wood workshop for vocational training and learn how to behave in a disciplinary way but since there's nobody to take care of little Cu in the morning while she and her daughter Dan are out of the house, Hat has to do the task.

But Hat rarely stays at home to "keep an eye on the house" as he's been told. He carried his younger brother on his back to a neighbour's house, lets him join his peers while he wanders off somewhere. Very often, he plays games with other kids or climbs up the trees to pick fruits. As soon as his mother gets home from work, he immediately runs off again. His sister Dan complains to me: "My mother never scolds him. He hardly does any house chores but often runs off looking for fun. Once while looking after Cu, he left the little child alone on the ground and ran after other kids. Mother didn't reprove him for his neglect but instead scolded me, blaming me for everything that goes wrong. Mother always says to me: "You are the oldest sister, you have to show your self-denial (nhuong nhin) while dealing with your younger brothers".

A girl's involvement in household tasks is not simply a duty. It is through these tasks that she learns the skills of performing typical "female" house chores and requires good behaviour expected of her gender. I observed many instances of girls working in wood workshops who were often called back home to do chores or to work on the farm, whereas boys were not bothered at all. I also noticed that after their assigned tasks of farming or woodwork, girls went on cooking, sweeping and washing while boys were free after finishing regular work in wood carving or farming. Girls were told that housework was their natural duty, and if they envied (ghen ty) their brothers' free time while they had to do house chores, they might be reminded by parents that envy is a bad character for girls.

Self-denial is regarded a top virtue a girl needs to learn during her childhood. The mothers teach their daughters to be self-denying through practicing daily house chores and interaction among the family members, between brother and sister. Daughters are always reminded that if they do not know how to run house chores and behave correctly, they may never find a husband. Even if they get married, they may be punished by their husband. Such an attitude is locally explained in terms of "nong" and "lanh" (hot and cool) something of a dichotomy of ying and yang that are embedded in the male and female make-up. The hot element is typically attributed to the male character while cool is characteristic of the female and therefore, male anger is acceptable but it is awkward for females to lose their cool. This local concept of "hot" and "cool" dichotomy is analyzed in details by Rydstrom based on her long term research in a village of the Red River delta (1998:157):

...since "hot" and "cool" are understood as bodily poles that need one another in order to maintain "harmony" within a household. The "hot"-"cool" dichotomy, furthermore, designates morally appropriate ways of enacting what is defined as one's congenital female or male body.

While parents regard obedience, self-denial, responsibility and hard work as
desirable traits a daughter should possess, such characteristics do not seem to be 
required of a son of the same family. In the eyes of parents, boys should be strong, 
independent, ambitious, worldly and dutiful. Having a son is regarded as a source of 
security for parents in old age. Sons are expected to carry on the family’s name by 
having heirs, to carry out the worship of ancestors and to bring repute to the family. In 
this sense, the boy’s body is believed to contain in itself a certain esteem (Campbell 
1964:268), the biological continuity of lineage that should not be "demeaned" by deeply 
involving in household chores. Such an attitude is in fact rooted in the long tradition of 
oriental philosophy concerning male and female energy. According to this theory, the 
females are in their nature considered to belong to the world of yin, which correlates 
with the moon, water and cool and therefore, harmony and negativeness. The males on 
the contrary belong to the world of yang, which is in principle associated with the sun, 
fire and heat and therefore, strength and positiveness. Such a symbolic perception of 
male and female body apparently influences the process of socialization of boys and 
girls as well as the house tasks they perform (Rydstrom, 1998).

Researchers such as Khuat Thuong Hong (1991), Le Thi (1992), Ngo Cong Hoan 
(1993) and Rydstrom (1998) believe that it is self-denial and "the swallowing of 
resentment" of Vietnamese women that help keep their family atmosphere in harmony 
and peace. This is why a number of mothers in Giao village, when preaching obedience 
to their daughters, usually threaten them by saying "if you (the daughter) don’t know 
how to handle the family affairs, no dogs will give you a shit", or "if you don’t know 
how to show self-denial in dealing with your husband when you get married, he’d beat 
you to death!". These preachings have much to do with two highly regarded virtues in a 
woman: 1) to behave in an exemplary manner and 2) to manage well household affairs.

This observation coincides with the fact that the rate of girls’ school attendance 
is often lower than that of boys, particularly in higher secondary level. Mothers in Giao 
village emphasized, more so than the fathers, that their daughters need no higher 
education but should work on the farm and learn how to handle family affairs. Meanwhile, young men generally value the ability of their prospective spouses to 
manage housework more highly than their ability to earn money. In addition to this, girls 
show their respect towards their parents in the way they fulfill domestic duties while at 
home. Once they get married, these duties are transferred to their husbands or their 
families. The practice for a wife to live in her husband’s family house after marriage 
induces a number of parents to cut short their daughter’s education to help their mothers 
in housework while they still live at home. A mother explained to me her reason for 
withdrawing her daughter from school as follows:

Look, if you consider all the pains in giving birth to my little girl and raising her, you’ll know 
what I mean. When she gets older, say at 17 or 18, she’ll get married. She then works for her 
husband’s family. What do I get in the end? All for nothing! If she leaves school a couple of years 
earlier, then she may help us a bit before leaving us for good to work for her in-laws.

I noticed that while she was saying these words to me, her husband objected 
mildly, but I believed she expressed frankly her main concern.

Without a doubt, "housework was a medium through which parents, especially 
fathers, could exercise their authority and redefine behaviour expectations for their chil-
dren" (Gill, 1998:305). In a sense, the differentiation in house tasks performed by girls 
and boys is in fact a process of children’s socialization in which the gender-specific roles
are shaped for the children's future lives. Such a pattern of socialization is greatly regulated by the male-orientated structure of the family and the patriarchal order, consolidated further by Confucian ethics. Even today, public opinion as represented by the newspaper Phu Nu Vietnam (Vietnam Women) still emphasizes the four women's virtues (Tu Duc) as a guideline for a girl's education, while the school system prominently exhorts the Confucian motto "learn the rites first".\(^{35}\) It is apparent that several decades under the revolutionary regime, the communist ideology was unable to remove the traditional cultural tenets deeply rooted in Vietnamese society for many centuries.

**Housework: important but boring**

As I entered my hostess' house on a hot midday, I found her chatting with a number of middle-aged women while her daughter named Tang was cooking in the kitchen, drenched in sweat. "Look! Mrs. Dung (the hostess), you must be very happy!" I exclaimed. "You're just enjoying yourself chatting away waiting to be served by your daughter."

"How can you call it a service?" Mrs. Dung immediately countered. "Who serves whom? Everyone has his/her own tasks. Other children at her age (12 years) already earn money for their parents. Not me, but she's happy. Imagine if you already work for many hours on the farm, and when you're home, you still have to cook and run house chores, how can you continue the heavy work the next day? Children are to do housework!"

A woman next to Dung added: "Being a girl, she (referring to Tang) should learn to do more house tasks. If not, she'll be put on the shelf (e chong) in a few years' time."

Previously, I have analyzed children's housework as a process of socialization. I will now consider their contribution in maintaining the household stability and the relationship between parents and children through housework. Based on the "voices" expressed by both children and their parents on housework, I will point out that housework performed by children is on the one hand "indispensable" for their household but on the other hand, undesirable tasks from the children's point of view.

Economic researchers while analyzing children's domestic work, attempt to draw a line between economic and non-economic activities (Hull 1981:86). As a matter of fact, such a distinction is extremely difficult to make. Even the use of a time-allocation study to measure children's contribution to household tasks has also to cope with definition problems. A suggestion made by Dube (1981:179-214) is useful to look at the issue. According to this author, "it would be necessary to weigh children's work in terms of its indispensability for the household" (1981:202).

Indeed, while adults usually argue that teaching children to master their housework skills is part of upbringing, they at the same time recognize that children's help in housework provides parents with more advantages and make their lives easier. Let us listen to the way parents appreciate their children's housework:

\[\text{it doesn't matter if one stops working on the farm for a couple of days and does it later. But it is impossible to neglect house tasks for only one day. Meals must be cooked, clothes have to be washed, house should be cleaned up and livestock is waiting to be fed everyday. Without children, no way I can run the whole mess. (Quoted from an interview with a mother of three}\]

\(^{35}\) The further analysis will follow in chapter 7.
In a previous section, I have indicated that the time spent by girls at the age between 10 and 14 for housework is almost equal to that of a woman. I also found that although boys regarded housework as a feminine duty, in case of absence of girls, they had to do house chores as well. It can be said that parents expect their children to take part in most house tasks, which helps relieve their total work load. In families where the mothers spend most of their time on farming, it becomes obvious that the load of house tasks usually fall on their daughters. Gill analyzes the strategies of parents to involve children in housework as follows:

A majority of the tasks that added extra burden centred around children themselves, therefore, strategic training to involve them in housework served two purposes. Firstly, they became self-sufficient individuals and helped themselves with basic necessities and secondly, their abilities and skills became useful and an asset to their overburdened parents (Gill 1998:311).

Adults consider tasks such as taking care of younger siblings, fetching food for pigs, tending and cutting grass for buffaloes, washing clothes etc., as somewhat “natural”. In many instances, I found that if children did not do properly their assigned tasks, they would be punished by parents (or in some instances, by their elder brothers and sisters). I have pointed out elsewhere that punishment can be understood as a measure whereby adults exercise their authority over children. It occurs when adults want to force children to carry out certain tasks or impose discipline on them (well-behaved manner). To collect data for this, I recorded the cases where children were punished (by whom, nature, frequency, severity and the reasons thereof). Surprisingly, I found out that punishment was mostly related to domestic work. Particularly, punishment was often applied when children left the house to play without permission, neglected the care of young siblings, forgot to cook meals in time and did not do other house chores. Measures of punishment varied from mental abuses (scolding) to physical abuses (beating). Mothers often scolded children for their misbehaviour and neglect of house chores while fathers took stronger methods such as beating, whipping and leaving them alone for definite periods without food.

A boy named Lam (12) recalled:  
I used to be beaten by my parents when I made mistakes but some times I did not understand why I was punished. I remember that not long ago, my mother asked me to go to the field for collecting the left-overs after sweet potatoes were harvested. For the whole morning, I could gather only a few small sweet potatoes which were not enough for feeding our two pigs. When I came home, my mother suspected that I had spent the time fooling around, so I was cooped up indoors for a long time without food. Only in late afternoon when my aunt came to visit us was I allowed to go free again.

And this is a story told by Thiet , a boy of 13 years old:  
Once I carried my younger brother on my back to visit a neighbour. There seeing other kids eating sweets, my little brother also wanted some. But there were no sweets left. He started to cry. To force him to stop crying, I slapped him on the face. He screamed now. I dropped him to the ground. He staggered and fell, his face was covered with mucus. The neighbour saw this, went to my house and told my mother. My mother immediately came, scolded me and took us home. In the afternoon, my mother told my father the story when he just came home from work. He was so angry that he told me to lie down on the floor and whipped me many times with a bamboo stick.
Generally speaking, most adults I have interviewed agree that punishment of children for their misbehaviour is a necessary measure to impose discipline on them. Actually, various types of "empty" threat are often used by adults when they want to discipline a child, most popular among these are the threats of inflicting bodily harm. My own experience in Giao village supports the observation made by Rydstrom that "a senior female or male kin may threaten a child with "cutting of hands or feet", "to be beaten to death" or "to be killed". Rydstrom rightly observed that for young children, "threats of punishment occur much more often than actual punishment". (Rydstrom, 1998:147).

At an older age, when children are assigned full responsibility for certain house tasks, some types of threat are still used while punishments (physical or mental) are presumed to be taken if children show disobedience. In this sense, one can no longer see housework as a kind of socialization but rather a division of labour in which children are expected to make their full contribution to the maintenance of household activities.

In the past, state laws allowed the father to mortgage his children or force them to work for household earnings. In case children failed to fulfill their obligations to parents, the father was allowed by law to punish them physically (Dao Duy Anh, 1938:116). Villagers today still favour a local saying "gia don non rhe", which means that "to enforce discipline (on children), let's use a big stick". Local opinion does not value highly those parents who let their children neglect household obligations. It frowns on parents who spoil their children with too much indulgence. Children's laziness is often attributed to their mothers and grandmothers who do not impose enough discipline on them. 36 At the village level, social opinion plays an important role in shaping the behaviour of particular individuals and families. In the context of child work, parents of those children who work hard and behave well, are highly commended and respected. 37

The point raised from this observation is that threats and punishments meted out to children for their neglect of housework and misbehaviour are not likely the preferred measures of a particular family or parents. It could be inferred that the daily interaction between parents and children through housework has deep roots in the cultural structure and family background in which established practices and ethics are embedded. Nevertheless, the borderline between "disciplining the child" and "abusing the child" in this sense is truly thin and hard to be delineated.

Recently, the public media has launched a big campaign against violent fathers who try to educate their children by whipping and beating. An investigation by lawyer Xuan Yem indicates that 70 per cent of cases where children were seriously hurt or beaten to death were caused by their parents (Xuan Yem, PNVN 25.2.1991). Educationalists believe that such methods of teaching children as scolding and beating do not provide desirable results but on the contrary, create a cool distance in parents-children relationships and have negative effects on the development of children in a

36 This is expressed by a popular saying "con hu tai me, chau hu tai ba", meaning that the indulgence by mothers and grandmothers make their children lazy and misbehave.

37 Another local saying goes similarly: "con dai cai mang" (parents are responsible for the foolishness of their child).
long-run (Vo Nhu, PNVN 6.12.1989). The conservative attitude which emphasizes "spare the rod and spoil the child" can be seen as one of causes of physical abuse of which children are victims.

I have noticed that threats and punishments are strong measures taken by parents to discipline children and involve them in housework. To a certain extent, my observations also reveal that parents also used encouragement as a strategy to mobilize their children to do housework. Dan's mother (whom I mentioned earlier) for instance, usually left the house with a promise of reward to her: "Keep staying in the house and take good care of your brother, when I am back there will be gifts for you". What she mentioned as gifts could be a cake or sweets, simple toys, sometimes a little pocket money or some new clothes. Children from well-to-do households, particularly boys, due to their lack of motivation and interest in the house chores, often demanded rewards for doing house chores, which sometimes led to punishment. My host in Giao village once confided to me:

It's not my intention to force my son doing housework through the hard way but my wife indulges him too much. Whenever he does something, he asks for pocket-money. It's no good because she may spoil the kid. I hate to beat children but it's a necessity if they go too far. At their age, they still don't understand that housework is their responsibility.

While boys usually ask for pocket-money, girls sometimes negotiate with parents for some favours, for example to allow them to raise a few chickens or ducks together with the family livestock to make their own money. Such a scheme seems to be easily acceptable but sometimes can lead to conflict. Que, a girl of 14 years, said:

Last years, my brother gave me some money on the occasion of Tet. I invested all this money in raising chickens. The mother said I can keep the money from selling these chickens. But then, she asked me to lend her this money with the promise she would return it to me when I needed it. This was not to be the case. I know I'll never see it again. So this year I won't raise any chickens on my own. I'm so fed up.

Que's mother explained:

I agreed that she could raise chickens for earning some pocket money, but she just spent all her time taking care of her own chickens and neglected other house tasks.

While most people would regard house tasks performed by children as an important contribution to the household economy, children themselves generally do not seem to welcome this type of work. Sociological studies on domestic work generally point out that household tasks are boring, repetitive and monotonous (Oakley, 1974). In the context of child work, there is an obvious contradiction between adults and children on their perception of house tasks.

As I have pointed out, parents attempt to involve their children in house tasks so that they themselves could concentrate on earning and productive activities. In their views, housework is light, simple and suitable for young persons. Moreover, some adults see rational considerations in asking children to run house chores. They worried that leaving children loiter about without adult's control would make them the lazy when growing up. A repeated quotation I heard very often is "nhan cu vi bat thien" (idleness is the root of all evils).

However, most children I interviewed did not share the same ideas. Girls were told that housework was their natural duty but they often expressed their reluctance to do housework, seeing themselves as disadvantaged, performing tasks which were not defined as "work" compared to those doing well-defined, wage-earning work, such as
farming, trading, and particularly work in non-farm sectors. Apart from this desire to work for wages, another reason depressing them in doing housework is that their labour is not fully appreciated by their parents.

My case study of Dan, the girl of 12 mentioned earlier, brings to light the fact that she always compared her disadvantageous situation with other classmates who did paid work and got pocket money on their own. Dan said her friends with a little pocket-money often came to school with their supercilious faces. To show their "wealth", as she put it, they bought snacks for others and threw litters all over the classroom. She dreamt that one day her mother would allow her to stop doing housework, then she would take on "whatever tasks" with pay so that she could earn some money on her own.

Motivation of earning money with paid jobs is particularly strong among children aged between 12 and 15. In a sense, their wish to earn money is one way to show their working ability, through which their labour value can be recognized, and to gain self respect and independence. Most working children in the wood trade of Giao village under my study were not "bread winners" of their families. It is the boring nature of housework that often caused children to opt for paid tasks outside the home. A number of girls who were deeply involved in house tasks expressed the view that their "hanging around the house" would prevent them from making contact with the outside world, giving them no chances for future self-development.

One of the factors influencing the way rural children think negatively of their housework is the public media. As I often heard during my stay at Giao village, rural children felt themselves at a disadvantage in comparison with their peers in the cities who, in their eyes, often appeared on the TV screen with an aura of freedom, worldliness and glamour.

I wish to conclude my observations on children's housework with the following remarks. Beyond the debate on children's housework as something light, unharmful and acceptable and opposing views, my study further highlights the contradictions inherent in the relationships between parents and children as regards this type of work. Without a doubt, children's housework plays an important role in children's lives and it makes a considerable contribution to the maintenance of the family. However, while parents tend to rationalize children's housework, regarding it as a process of socialization and a "natural division of labour", children want to get away from it. In their view, housework is not recognized as "well-defined tasks", and it is also boring. This view does not alter the fact that most children still do house tasks. As I indicated previously, housework carries with it a number of functions and meaning. By performing house tasks, children show their dutifulness, obedience and obligations towards their parents. And in that sense, one can see one aspect of children's housework as "work for love" (Nieuwenhuys 1994).

**Between patronage and exploitation: stories of girl domestic workers**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it was commonplace in the past that a poor family had to hire out their children as servants or mortgage them as bonded labourers. This sad situation disappeared in northern Vietnam after the land reform of 1956. Recently, the media has increasingly talked about the revitalization and expansion of the demand for child domestic workers. Worse yet, the exploitation and physical abuses of
working children were also brought to public attention. The Phu Nu Vietnam (Vietnam Women) Newspaper for instance reported the case of a little girl named Nguyen Kim Huong who came from Lang Son province and worked as a house servant in Hanoi. She was severely tortured by her employer for being suspected of stealing. She was then expelled from the house without pay (PNVN 26.7.1989:1). Further investigations by the reporter Nguyen Dinh Chuc (PNVN 8.1.1993 & 26.9.1994) reveal that 90 per cent of the house servants working in Hanoi were females who came from rural areas. The majority of them were at the ages between 12-17 and 45-60. Nguyen surveyed 170 cases of working children who migrated from rural areas and worked in Hanoi. His analysis shows that 89 per cent of child house servants were from poor peasant families among which 21 per cent were in special situations (broken families, orphans, abandoned and children of widows, etc.). According to Nguyen, there existed a hidden network operating as broker between child workers from the countryside and employers in urban areas. His confidential sources of information reveal that such abuses as mental and physical punishments (scolding, beating) and exploitation (unpaid, underpaid) are an "everyday occurrence", (Nguyen D.C 1993:3).

Another investigation made by the reporter Giang Ha Vi on the Ha Noi Moi Newspaper (4 June 1995) gives a figure of 18,000 children making their living in Hanoi with various occupations including that of house servants. Giang reported that in the central district of Hoan Kiem alone where his survey was concentrated, he found more than 3,000 children who had to hire out their labour for a living. Other reports by Mai Thu (NTNN 17.10.1995), Uyen Chau (PNVN 12.9.1994), Duong Kieu Linh (PNVN 15.8.1994), Tho Cao (TTT 30.10.1995), Minh Thuy (GD&TD) 11.12.1995), etc., confirm the fact that a substantial number of rural children were hired to work as house servants in urban areas. According to these investigations, a great majority of house servants were girls, and the number of girls looking for domestic work has increased substantially in recent years since the economic reforms were implemented in the mid 1980s. The reports also painted an alarming picture of children who were hired to work at various subsistence levels, a number of them have become homeless, beggars, thieves and prostitutes.

Because of the limitations of field research, this study does not cover children working as domestic servants in urban areas. However, during my study in Giao village, I had some opportunities to interview several girl domestic workers. In this section I will present three case studies, or rather the stories of three girls, which may help shed some light on this new development of children's work, followed by some personal remarks.

Case 1: "I'd rather be a waged worker than an adopted child"

Trang was a girl of 11. Before being adopted, she attended the third grade at the village school. She was the third-born child in a family with 5 children. Her elder brothers, Vung (15) and Chai (13) were no longer at school and currently worked as woodworkers in the village woodworkshop. Her younger siblings were 8 and 4 respectively. Trang's father was an invalid veteran who died some time ago from lung cancer. Trang's mother tilled the 7 sao plot of rice land, which was the main source of the family income. Apart from farming, she also raised several pigs and ducks and had a fish pond. Monthly average income per head was about 67,000 VND (about 6.1 USD in 1995), somewhat lower than the village average.
After Trang's father passed away, she was sent to her aunt (bac: father's older sister) as an adopted child. Mrs. Lam (her aunt), 45 years of age, was married to a man who lived in the town of Sat, a district town 5 kilometers away from Giao village. Mrs. Lam gave birth four times but only two sons survived, now aged 16 and 13. Both of them were studying in the lower secondary school in town. Her husband was formerly a state-owned enterprise worker. He lost his job in 1987 after the government launched a retrenchment campaign. Mrs. Lam ran a small shop selling sundries in the town market, called cho Sat. At the moment, Sat was the commercial center of the Cam Binh district. Her family was considered as rather well-off, with a storeyed house filled with modern furniture, TV set. They owned a Honda motorbike.

Mrs. Lam said she was not that wealthy but her life was easier as compared to others. Everyday she worked from 10 to 12 hours in the market. She often complained that the two sons had no time to help her in the shop. According to Mrs. Lam, she adopted Trang since she wanted to share the burden with Trang's mother in bringing up her children. Moreover, since she did not have a daughter, so Trang could do some house chores at home.

Trang's mother told me in tears that she did not really want to send Trang away. But Mrs. Lam was a close relative who could be fully trusted. Living with her, Trang would have a chance to go to school and might have brighter prospects.

I was told that Trang often skipped school and returned to stay with her mother home until her aunt came and took her back. I quote below part of our conversation when we met in the village.

- Chinh: What did you do at Mrs. Lam family?
- Trang: I helped her to prepare goods for the market, tidying the house, feeding two pigs. Then I went to school. After lunch, I went to the market and helped her selling goods.
- Chinh: Then?
- Trang: Then I came back home with my aunt in the evening. She always cooked and washed clothes in the evening and I washed dishes and cleaned up the mess.
- Chinh: What did your two cousins do? If they helped you?
- Trang: Nothing at all. They studied, watched TV, listened to music and played games with friends.
- Chinh: Do you like staying in your aunt's house?
- Trang: She is kind, but I don't want to be her adopted child.
- Chinh: Tell me why?
- Trang: As an adopted child, I have only daily meals and clothes, that's all. My friend Luyen works for a family in this town, she gets paid 120,000 dong per month and gets clothes as well.
- Chinh: But she didn't go to school, did she?
- Trang: I'm not sure, but I'd rather be a house servant like her than being an adopted child. I want money to help my mother.

Case 2: "Nowhere to go"

The girl whom Trang mentioned in her story was employed as a domestic servant for a family in the same town. In the eyes of neighbours, this was a wealthy family. The husband worked as a tax inspector and his wife was a teacher. They had two children, a son of nine and a daughter of four.

Luyen, the name of the little maid, came from Giao village. According to her employers, a relative introduced Luyen to them some months ago. I was told that Luyen was hired out of compassion and the employers regarded her as their own child. Luyen had a younger brother who was 9. Their father died young and their mother remarried,
so they lived with a poor uncle who had to take care of five children of his own.

The hostess, Luyen's employer, said she wanted to have a trustworthy servant to help her with some house chores since her husband often worked away from home while teaching took most of her day time. The main task Luyen was expected to do was to look after a girl of four. Besides, she also helped clean the house and run some chores. Her monthly salary was 120,000 dong, but it went directly to her uncle who took charge of her younger brother in the village. Luyen was allowed to eat and sleep in her employers' house. According to the verbal contract with Luyen's uncle, she received two sets of clothes per year.

When I visited the house, Luyen was asked to boil water and prepare tea for me. She then went out to the yard to "play" with the little daughter. I expressed my wish to talk with Luyen, but her employer ignored it, saying that Luyen was just an innocent girl.

Back in the village, I met Luyen's uncle. He looked thin and his eyes with dark circles under them told me that he was having a hard time. He and his wife had to feed five children plus Luyen's younger brother. All lived in a house with a thatched roof, a rarity in the village today. Luyen's uncle currently worked as a wood worker and his wife tilled a plot of five sao (1,800 sq.m2) of rice land. All sources of incomes provided them an average amount of 54,000 dong per head monthly (equivalent to 5 USD). This meant that Luyen's earning of 120,000 dong per month made a considerable contribution to the household budget.

Luyen's uncle told me that when Luyen's mother decided to remarry with a man from Hai Phong, she sent her children to him, saying that she could not bring them with her. The man said:

"We are all poor. But the children are blood-related to me. I cannot leave them to their own devices. We all love them very much. We were reluctant to send Luyen away to work as a house servant, but what else could we do? Thank God, she's much sagacious than her age, so she can help a bit. If she stays with us, our situation may be even worse".

Case 3: "She is not your daughter but a waged servant"

Van, 14 years of age, recalled that two years ago, she was told by her father to leave school and follow a neighbour to the district of Kim Mon. As previously arranged by her father, Van was hired to work as a house servant for a fellow villager who was running a shop selling draft beer (bia hoi) and food. This shop was located next to the cement plant of Hoang Thach, about 40 kilometers away from Giao village. At the beginning, Van was assigned to look after the owner's boy and run house chores. A few months later, she was sent to serve in the shop. Her day started at 4.30 a.m., and ended at midnight. Her main task was to wash dishes but she sometimes doubled as a waitress.

Van told me that once she fell down and broke a pile of plates and bowls. Her employer smacked her, swearing loudly, calling her a parasite. Van repeated the employer's words: "I want to help you and your father, let you live in clover but what you do in return? Just go home if you want!". The husband asked his wife to stop scolding, but she even became angrier: "She's not your daughter, she's just a servant working for wage!". Her husband came up with an advice: "Just don't pay her wage for this month. That'll settle it. All right?"
According to Van, scolding and beating occurred any time she made a mistake. Once she dared to talk back to her employer, and she was immediately sent home, being called "ill-bred". Van's father beat her, called her a "lazy-bones" and sent Van's younger sister to work in her stead. I asked Van if she managed to save some money from her wages, she shook her head, meaning: Not at all. Her salary (150,000 dong per month, equivalent to about 13 USD at that time) was sent directly to her father in the village.

When I met Van's father, I asked why he let her daughter stop going to school, his answer was straight: "What for? It's no need for a girl to get a higher education. To be able to read and write is enough. In a few more years, she'll be someone's wife. That's it".

Since she returned home, Van took a job polishing wooden-carved objects for a workshop in the village. Van's father was in his fifties, lived with two wives, and had seven children. Van was the daughter of his first wife. He had a primary education and earned his living as a farmer.

The cases briefly presented above raise some concerns as one examines the changes taking place in children's work in the domestic context. During the colonial period, a number of children in Gia o village, both boys and girls, had to work as house servants. Villagers' life stories told us that in the past, the use of domestic help in the homes of better-off families was very common. The socialist regime had changed the fate of many poor children. The employment of maids and house boys was condemned as hideous vestiges of colonial-feudalist exploitation and therefore had to be eradicated. Some of my informants recalled that when the Land Reform Team came to their village in 1956, employers hurriedly sent off their domestic servants for fear of being denounced as exploiters of children. During the collective period, child house servants were thought to be something of a distant past. Since the economic reforms in the mid 1980s, the revitalization of demand for child domestic workers no doubt reflects the dramatic changes in labour relations. Not only the mode of children's employment has changed but the public perception of the nature of children's work and their roles in society has undergone drastic transformations. No one raises an eyebrow when the media approach this once-sensitive subject with something like this: "the fact that some children work as domestic workers is only an objective process of the natural division of labour" (Nguyen Dinh Chuc 1993:3).

Available information reveals that demand for child domestic workers has increased recently and child domestic help is now becoming more commercialized. The case studies presented above indicate that child domestic workers are mainly from very poor families. Their earnings are fraught with uncertainties and as usual, go directly to parents or sponsors. Differing from those making a living off the streets, who are thought to be "run away" kids, jobs offered to child domestic workers are always arranged by adults regardless of the child's interests. Historically, the wealthy families who hired house servants often looked down at them as destitute. The information gathered from my case studies shows whether children work as waged house servant or disguised under the form of an adopted child, the work performed by them bears the same feature: it does not suit their interests but contributes to the well-being of others,
and their labour is the outcome of a financial transaction, a traded commodity (Black 1997). Parents who send their children to work for others as house servants are ambiguously hopeful that they might get lucky and have a better life. But the reality so far as indicated by some of my findings presents a sombre picture which deserves further empirical investigation.

Conclusion

Previous studies have indicated the important contribution of children in housework, which helps sustain the productive activities of adult members of the household. My observations of the situation in the Giao village also support this. These studies enable me to look further into children's housework in the context of cultural constraints and socio-economic transformations. In the Vietnamese realities, housework is seen as a process of socialization through which parents bring discipline to the child. During childhood, obedience is emphasized as a vital preparation for the child's future adulthood, marriage and parental life. Through this process, parents induce their children to perform various house chores and expect them to make a contribution to the maintenance of the household.

There is a little doubt about the importance of children in doing housework. However, there are discrepancies between parents and their children in the way they regard housework. Most children consider house tasks as monotonous and boring duties. In their view, their labour in this type of work is not fully recognized by adults, a kind of "work without name". Most village children often express the wish to take on work "with name", i.e. well-defined tasks providing direct earnings.

An interesting development recently is the increase in demand for child domestic help, which is becoming more commercialized. While children may perform the same tasks they do at home, the nature of their work in the others' households is totally different. This has nothing to do with socialization and "upbringing" but their labour is a mere financial transaction negotiated and strictly controlled by the adults whose primary concern is their household's well-being.

Like many other authors, I find that age and gender are the essential factors affecting children's house tasks performance, bearing in mind that girls are expected to do more house chores than boys. Their labour in this area reflects not only an economic function but also the "symbolic function and the function of dressage, or discipline" (Foucault 1980:161), which are aggregated in children's daily activities. The changes in productive mechanism brought about by economic reforms do not seem to reduce girls' housework but rather intensifies it. Associating housework with females is considered an enduring trait of rural society; this lies at the root of domestication of girls who do more house chores than boys. This pattern suggests, as Reynolds (1991:187) puts it, that if the position of women need to be altered, a place to begin is with children.