



Migrant and non-migrant domestic workers in Hanoi: The segmentation of domestic service

Thi Nguyet Minh Nguyen

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Abstract

This working paper discusses the central role of rural-urban migration in the formation of the different forms of domestic work in Hanoi. These include domestic work for expatriates; live-out service; live-in service; cleaning by junk traders; and patient care in hospitals. The paper demonstrates that the domestic service sector is highly segmented with a complex placement system ranging from high-end agencies to direct recruitment through personal networks. A key factor seems to be the migration status of the mostly female workers. Whereas live-out jobs and work as maids for expatriates are predominantly taken up by Hanoi residents or migrants with family in the city, mainly rural women, either single or with a left-behind family, occupy live-in arrangements. Unlike the relatively long-term live-in workers, cleaner-com-junk traders are mostly seasonal migrants actively maintaining close ties to home. Meanwhile, hospital carers include both rural women and men who live in hospital together with the patients they care for. While a hierarchy among the different forms of service is unclear, there are differences in terms of remuneration, working and living conditions as well as personal autonomy that workers weigh against each other in their choices. This segmentation reflects, on one hand, the regional differences of the sending areas and the strength of the social networks that arise from them. On the other hand, it is a manifestation of the conscious choice that workers make to enter or leave certain forms of service and other occupations. The paper is based on primary and secondary data collected between August 2008 and August 2009 on domestic service in Hanoi. Major research methods included biographic narrative interpretive method, in-depth interviews, focus groups and ethnography with the different groups of domestic workers as well as domestic service agencies and employers in Hanoi.

Introduction

Ơi cánh đồng quê

Bây giờ ruộng đã bê-tông
 Cây đa đã cụt, dòng sông đã què
 Mái đình đã phẳng đường xe
 Còn đâu cánh võng mà nghe chuông
 chùa
 Hội làng thì đã ngày xưa
 Thôi anh đừng có tiễn đưa làm gì
 Em chào thầy mẹ em đi
 Làm ô-sin chả biết khi nào về
 Heo may thối dọc triền đê
 Nghe câu dự án mà tê tái lòng
 Người đi thì đã ngàn trùng
 Người về, đất có còn không mà về
 Giật mình nửa tỉnh nửa mê

Cánh đồng quê, cánh đồng quê, cánh
 đồng.

Trịnh Hoài Giang

My home field

The paddy field has turned into concrete
 The banyan tree is chopped, the river choked
 Roof of the communal house lies under a
 highway
 Gone are the hammocks on which we sat
 listening to pagoda bells
 Gone are the village festivals.
 Please don't send me off brother
 Taking leave from mum and dad, I am going
 To be an Ô sin, not knowing when I come back
 Autumn winds are blowing after me along the
 dike
 It pains to hear the word 'project'
 It is a thousand miles to go
 Will there be still land to come back to?

Startled like in the middle of a dream

My home field, my home field, my field.

The poignant poem uses the inner voice of a young rural woman leaving for the city to work as a domestic worker to speak about the drastic changes in Vietnam's countryside. Her movement to the city is in itself a change, one that speaks to wider transformations not only of the countryside, but also those of the Vietnamese society. It has been about 20 years since the Japanese soap opera 'Ô sin' was screened to a wide audience in Vietnam and coined the term for domestic workers, who had been virtually nonexistent before. Nowadays domestic workers are such a part of urban life that one finds newspaper articles with tips on how to cope when the 'Ô sin' is not around during the Vietnamese New Year. Rural women are coming to the city in great numbers to work in the homes of urban families. In the words of the manager of an employment agency, 'person after person, family after family now goes'¹ into domestic service, comparing to ten years ago when it was met with scorn and suspicion in rural areas. Domestic service has developed into a major business.

This paper sketches the landscape of domestic service in Hanoi as part of the labour market and discusses the central role of rural-urban migration in the structuring of a hierarchically segmented labour market for domestic service. Varied forms of domestic work include service for expatriates; live-out service; live-in service;

¹ ,người người nhà nhà'

cleaning by junk traders; and patient care in hospitals. While female migrants make up the majority of workers, urban working class women and a small number of rural men provide domestic service as well. The paper argues that although rural migrants (both men and women) are doing similar kinds of work as their urban peers, they work in jobs that are comparatively more demanding, less rewarding, grant them less autonomy and with more taxing work conditions and living arrangements. The paper also argues that for migrant workers the choice to enter a particular form of service depends on workers' networks as well as the social norms and socioeconomic conditions of their home areas. This choice is conditioned by their status in the family and society.

Making comparisons across worker groups, the paper explains why and how domestic workers made their work choices given the varied conditions and relations of work; how they make sense of their labour market experiences; as well as the institutional context under which the market operates. Since domestic work is essentially about helping others to deal with their domestic responsibilities, special attention is given to how workers deal with their own domestic responsibilities. The paper begins with a brief review of the literature on domestic service and female labour migration, and then looks at its development in Vietnam within the context of the migrant labour market in the past decade. Following a discussion on the research methods, the paper looks at the related market and state institutions. It then profiles the different kinds of service as regards who the workers are, what they have done previously and their varied work conditions and relations. This section also compares the differences between rural migrant domestic workers and urban workers. The conclusion of the paper discusses the inter-relationship between the growth of domestic service and regional and social differentiation in Vietnam.

Migration, domestic service and labour market segmentation

Around the globe, millions of women migrate across borders and from rural to urban areas to work as domestic workers in recent decades (Agrawal, 2006). The development is associated with increased social reproductive needs of the contemporary household. This in turn results from higher female participation in the workforce as well as the retreat of the state from the social sector. It is also attributed to changing norms and values in household consumption and how people relate to the domestic sphere (Glenn, 1992). Meanwhile, the domestic sphere together with its norms and values is seen as a major site for class formation (Gal and Kligman, 2000, Sen and Stivens, 1998). In fact, the involvement of migrant labourers in domestic service seems to indicate a new form of sexual division of labour in which 'women of privileged classes can replace their domestic labour with that of other women belonging to the underprivileged sections of society' (Agrawal, 2006:30).

The motivation for people to migrate for work reflects broader changes in social and economic structures as well as within the labour market. A clear example is the economic restructuring in the Philippines that left the government in debt and many unemployed, laying the ground for massive transnational movements of women into domestic service (Lindio-McGovern, 2003, Parrenas, 2001). Literature on female migration in Latin America also identifies several structural reasons underlying urban-ward female migration to work in the sector. These include the 'restructuring of rural livelihoods and commodification of agriculture' (Radcliffe, 1999:84); capital intensive industrial expansion (de Souza, 1980) and state policies such as land reform (Hojman, 1989), whereby a large number of women are marginalised and made redundant. In China, the presence of millions of migrant labourers in major cities, many of whom are domestic workers, is related to the huge inequalities between rural areas and urban centres created by the urban biased post-Mao development strategy (Hairong, 2008, Solinger, 1999).

Domestic work is often associated with unfavourable work conditions and relations, reflecting 'labour that is performed from a subject position' (Hairong, 2008:231). The work tends to be strenuous, tedious and lonely and the relationship is characterised by highly asymmetrical power balance and emotional stress resulting from its private setting (Cox, 2006, Dickey, 2000, Froystad, 2003, Gill, 1990, Radcliffe, 1990b, Romero, 1987). These are often accentuated by the lack of an institutional context in which domestic workers are supported and protected as 'real workers' (Gray, 2004, Huang and Yeoh, 1996, Silvey, 2004, Zhang, 1999). Female migrants or ethnic minority women who are frequently compelled to take up domestic work because other opportunities are limited to them due to discriminations in the labour market (Glenn, 1986, Solinger, 1999). This is further reinforced by the limited resources and opportunities of the network that they are part of, creating what Glenn (ibid.) refers to as 'professional ghettos'. Meanwhile, prevalent social norms regarding appropriate female occupations away from their parental or conjugal home also plays an important role in channeling female migrants to the sector (Radcliffe, 1990a). Summing up, the discriminating structure of the labour market interacts with social norms to create a segmentation in which migrants and lower class labourers are concentrated in domestic service. The following section shows that the case of domestic service in Vietnam in many ways corresponds to the issues discussed in the wider literature. However, it differs from the more generalised picture in key respects, especially in relation to its particular history and social structure. This makes it an insightful case to for further exploration.

Domestic service and the migrant labour market in Vietnam

The reform (*đổi mới*)² initiated in the late 1980s has brought about fundamental changes in Vietnam, including unprecedented population mobility. The 1999 census shows 4.5 million people were on the move in the previous five years, out of which 1.6 million were rural-urban migrants. Initial results of the 2009 census indicate much larger numbers. 6.6 million people had been migrating in the previous five years, a third of whom to large industrial and urban centres. Underlying this trend are the lifting of barriers to mobility and rising disparity between rural and urban areas and social groups (Taylor, 2004). The number of female migrants is similar to that of male and in several destinations much higher (Hoàng et al., 2005, UNDP, 2001). There is a gendered pattern to the participation of migrants in the urban labour market, particularly in the informal sector (Kabeer and Trần, 2006, World Bank, 2006). While men tend to take up more jobs in the construction and transport sectors, women are more active in textile, garment and service sectors (*ibid.*). Female migrants are mostly involved in factory work, street-vending, waste collection, services in shops and restaurants, portering, and domestic service (Hà and Hà, 2001, Resurreccion and Hà, 2007).

Đổi mới has also been followed by major shifts in social reproduction. Traditional gender relations are strongly influenced by the Confucian ideology which stresses social and gender hierarchies. Women are accordingly supposed to be submissive to men and focus on procreation and domestic matters. Yet, Vietnamese women have also been actively involved in trading activities, agriculture and non-agriculture production and their economic role generally recognised even before socialism (Hy 2003:209). In the state socialist time, female involvement in production and public was further emphasised as part of a socialist gender equality discourse. Meanwhile, post-reform gender relations are characterised by a more accentuated female role in both the household economy and domestic sphere. This seems to be connected to resurging patriarchal norms and a state discourse promoting women as the guardians of family well-being (Fahey, 1998, Hy, 2003, Truong, 2007). Simultaneously, the state has increasingly withdrawn from the social sectors since the start of reform, cutting significantly spending on health, education and other social services. As an example, the number of state funded nurseries dropped from 40 to 13 thousand within the first years of *đổi mới* (Truong, 1996). Fully subsidized child care, health care, and education are now things of the past while the percentage of the population needing homecare is increasing (WB, 2006). With the

² *Đổi mới* marks the transition from a centrally planned economy characterised by a subsidy system and collectivisation of agriculture to a more open economy adopting market principles. Among others, it was prompted by the disintegration of the former; the collapse of the Soviet bloc and grassroots dynamics in favour of reform that, as many argue, had been going on long before its official introduction. Vietnam, however, remains a one-party state under the Communist Party of Vietnam.

dissolution of the collective system, the household is wholly responsible for its livelihoods and maintenance, addressing its needs primarily through the market. As men continue to be marginally involved in housework and care duties (Long et al., 2000, WB, 2006), women are compelled to both earn an income and ensure family well-being at much higher costs. Whilst those with higher income could afford to address their domestic needs through market services, others are less able to do so. In many cases, it is precisely the labour of the latter that supplies the needs of the former for domestic service.

During the colonial time, it was common for urban families and the rural land-holding elite to have servants - men and women who may be bonded by debts for life. They were the designated underclass, being openly referred to in derogatory terms³. Such bonded labour was abolished after the revolution as a remnant of the feudal time and the Vietnamese society in the following decades was by and large without masters and servants⁴. Then in the early 1990s, domestic workers reappeared in the form of rural women called 'Ô sins'. This foreign originated label seems to be a contemporary invention to bridge the gap between old meanings and the socialist ideals of a classless society. The new servants – Ô sins – now not only 'work in the kitchen, but have come out into the market, offices and general society'⁵. Meanwhile, there has been an increased prevalence of status-laden behaviours in general society and master-servant notions seem to be reemerging⁶.

Domestic service is a major phenomenon in contemporary Vietnam; yet there is little research on it. Most existing research is of an applied nature focussing on child labour (ILO, 2006, Nguyễn et al., 2005). Local research on internal migration occasionally addresses domestic work as a destination job (CWS, 2007, HeathBridge and CWS, 2008). Exceptions are studies by Nguyễn on Khmer migrant domestic workers in Ho Chi Minh City (2008) and Dương with employers of domestic workers (2007). Viewing domestic work as a means to poverty reduction for workers' families, Nguyễn however presents data showing a high level of vulnerability and dependence of the mostly young workers involved. Dương's study, while providing useful demographic statistics, is limited in that it tries to understand workers' life by interviewing their employers and presents its findings as an authentic reflection of the situation of the former. Another study on domestic service has been carried out by the Ministry of Culture recently but only initial findings are available (MoC, 2009). Perhaps the only academic research on the topic so far is by Nguyễn (2007). Interviewing live-in domestic workers and their employers in Hanoi, she provides an account of the employer-employee relationship characterised by different forms

³ con sen, thàng ở, con ở, thàng hầu

⁴ Nguyen Kim Ha (2007), however, mentions that high-ranking officials in this period got state financial support to hire domestic workers.

⁵ Interview with writer Le Minh Khue on 'The Ô sin Conduct', The thao Van hoa 05/07/2005

⁶ Discussion with Nguyễn Văn Chính, 8.10.2008

of negotiations and resistance. She argues that these hark back to the notion of 'harmony' central to the Vietnamese culture. The two sides thus attempt to show 'reasonable behaviours' towards each other, albeit with different motives and statuses in a hierarchical order. Next is a brief elaboration of the methods used for this research.

Research Methods

The paper is based on data collected between August 2008 and July 2009 in Hanoi. Research methods include biographic narrative interview, in-depth interview, focus group discussion, key informant interview and participant observation. These are complemented by informal discussions with research participants and non-participants. The biographic narrative method elicits life stories as told by research participants without much researcher intervention (Wengraf 2001). The narrative is prompted by a standard narrative question and later further explored based on the information given. 17 biographic narratives were collected from five different worker groups, including workers for expatriates, live-out workers, live-in workers, cleaner-cum-junk-traders and hospital carers. This sample is slightly biased towards live-in workers on account of their greater presence. The resulting narratives are generally very rich and generate deep insights into respondent's life and work. I also conducted 25 in-depth interviews with the five worker groups and six focus groups, where group norms were explored. Key informant interviews were mainly conducted with domestic service agencies while opinions of state institutions were exacted through published documents as well as a workshop discussing results of the Ministry of Culture study (ibid). In addition, I lived for more than a year in an apartment building, which I selected to be the site for participant observation. In this place, virtually every family has a live-in domestic worker and cleaner-junk-traders are frequently called in for cleaning. Junk traders are normally seasonal migrants, predominantly female, who walk around buying recyclable junks and reselling them to depot buyers. The observations provide important background information for the research. Finally, I also reviewed actual employer discussions on domestic workers on various websites. In the following section, I sketch the institutional setting of the sector, examining both market and state institutions involved.

Institutional setting

Market institutions

A 'generation of online mothers'⁷ has emerged in Vietnam, who seek parenting information on the internet. Parenting forums with thousands of predominantly female members actively discuss various daily topics. Topics covering the 'Ô sin' are

⁷ Sài Gòn tiếp thị, weekly columns on 'online family', September 2009

among the most popular, attracting hundreds of entries⁸. Here one finds recommendations of 'good' workers and agencies as well as warnings about 'bad' ones. There is even a blacklist of workers with complete history and whereabouts. In fact, most of the well-known domestic service agencies have a website and some agencies specialising in live-out workers operate entirely online, mainly through the network of forum users. The advertisements of agencies and workers on various print newspapers are also available online. Self-advertisement by workers is becoming common, but mainly by urban workers.

A number of rural based individuals (mostly female) regularly bring rural women from their locality to Hanoi. Many used to be live-in domestic workers themselves (Nguyễn, 2007) while others accumulate contacts in the city through their small trading activities, which they carry out alongside recruiting workers. These recruiters operate independently or in connection with a domestic agency. In the first case, they rent a temporary room for themselves and the prospective workers until the latter find work. They normally charge the employers a lesser fee than the agencies and unlike agencies, do not keep the first half-month salary of the worker in case of the latter's default. In the second case, they receive a commission from the agency.

As regards 'hospital Ô sin', word of mouth and recommendations from hospital staff seem to be most common, though there are reports of 'middlemen' in the hospital taking advantage of workers and employers alike⁹. Meanwhile, expatriates can find their maids and nannies through a few housing agencies or specialised agencies like 'Maid in Vietnam'. The agencies cater more for newcomers; longer-term expats often work through individual recommendations. Diplomats can rely on the Service Department for the Diplomatic Corps which keeps a register of maids and nannies who are paid directly by their employers but pay for their social insurance through the department.

Despite the importance of personal networks, more employers are turning to the agencies, particularly when looking for live-in workers. According to Nguyen (2007), there are about 600 registered agencies in Hanoi either wholly or partly specialising in domestic service. These range from top-end agencies to home-based phone operators. The ones that seem to attract most customers are about 30 mid-range agencies with proper offices and facilities to accommodate workers in transition. This is where rural women arrive in big groups and meet with prospective employers or where they find temporary lodging between jobs. If they do not find work right away, they could stay for free in the agencies' premises until they do. This is one of the incentives to attract workers, which also include reimbursement of

⁸ see Webtretho.com for an example

⁹ Asia Foundation Briefing Notes

transport costs and free food. Demand is so high that the actual competition between agencies is to recruit workers. In the past, they sent buses to rural areas to collect those willing to go. Nowadays, it is more common to work through rural networks, including rural recruiters or local authorities, who bring the workers or point them in the right direction. Agencies thus tend to work with women coming from certain regions only, depending on the rural connections of the managers. In general, anyone with rural contacts could start this sort of business and their operations are virtually unregulated. As a result, agencies make their own rules and not a few get away with deceiving both workers and employers¹⁰.

Nguyễn (2007) argued that the way domestic service agencies operate is largely based on gender norms emphasising the ‘sacrifice virtue’ and the ‘four virtues’¹¹ of Vietnamese women and my evidence supports this conclusion. The agencies promote domestic service in rural areas as a way for women to give their children a better life. They advise the recruits to be diligent and honest as well as maintaining proper appearance and speech. Simultaneously, they seem skilful tapping in the official poverty reduction rhetoric for rural areas. Working through local mass organisations, they emphasise domestic service as a good option for employment generation. Sending official letters or holding joint workshops with local authorities, they ask the latter to encourage women to go to the city. Yet their primary interest is in recruiting as many as possible, as it is good business. For each successful placement, agencies get half a month’s salary of the worker and a medium agency places about 10 workers per day. In fact, certain mass organisations, e.g. Women Union or Youth Union, and local charities also run employment agencies and domestic service is part of their business. These organisations seem less profit-oriented but they also cash in on the service.

State institutions

The Vietnamese state has so far kept a distance from rural-urban migration and related issues; existing policies in this area are few and fragmented. Thus the news that the Ministry of Labour¹² is preparing a decree on the management of domestic service triggered much media discussion in July 2009. Though the type of work is mentioned in the Labour Code, this was the first time that the state showed an interest in the labour relations of the sector, perhaps recognising its scale of development. The policy makers seem interested in regulating it as a profession through determining working hours, wage level and management procedures. However, there was doubt as to whether this is feasible, given the spontaneity of work agreements and the non-specificity of the tasks. Above all, there was concern

¹⁰ Tuổi trẻ 4/6/2004 (Bát nháo dịch vụ môi giới Ô sin); Tuổi trẻ 26/3/2005 (Kinh doanh Ô sin)

¹¹ ‘công, dung, ngôn, hạnh’ (hard-working, decent look, proper speech, and proper behaviour)

¹² Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs

about the state's capacity to enforce the proposed legal document¹³. Until now, verbal agreements in domestic service have been the norm, and a form of contract is made when the transaction is carried out through an agency. The contract may include the worker, the agency and the employer, but may also be only between the latter two. According to an agent, hardly anything is done about breaches of contract because its value 'isn't worth much, just a couple of hundred thousands' (Key Informant Interview, Agency 1). So even where contracts are in place, they seem merely a token of good will.

Meanwhile, migrant domestic workers, like other migrants, have to deal with a range of problems commonly arising from state regulations or lack of them (Nguyễn et al., 2006). The previously heavy restrictions on population mobility have been reduced since the introduction of reform. Yet, institutional barriers still create obstacles for migrants to live and work in major cities, notably in the form of the residential registration (*hộ khẩu*). The *hộ khẩu* has been modified to allow long-term migrants to become urban residents on certain conditions. Yet it remains decisive to migrants' access to infrastructure, education and social services, making them vulnerable to poverty and exclusion (*ibid.*). Examples abound: the primary requirement for beneficiaries of a national fund for employment and a national project providing judicial counselling for migrants is that they are registered where the project is implemented (Workshop discussion). In another instance, migrant tenants are paying higher prices for utilities because business rates are applied to renting properties. As phrased by Nguyễn et al, 'their body is in the city and far from their village, but their fundamental rights and duties are at their home villages' (2006:76).

In a nutshell, the domestic service market in Vietnam remains spontaneous and self-regulating. There is a lack of proactive measures by the state to make it work better and ensure workers are protected and supported. Meanwhile, *de facto* mechanisms for policy and program implementation in relation to migration negatively affect the life of domestic workers, who are predominantly migrants. These arguably have implications on the labour market outcomes of the workers, as will be shown in the next section.

Types of domestic workers: people and work

There are four sources of labour supply for domestic service in Hanoi: seasonal or long-term rural migrants; urban working class women who are retrenched or retired

¹³ Xaluan.com 22/7/09 (Sẽ có nghị định quản lý ô sin); Vneconomy 28/7/09 (Sẽ ban hành quy định quản lý ô sin); An ninh Thủ đô 1/8/2009 (Đưa nghề giúp việc vào khuôn khổ); Gia đình Xã hội 31/7/09 (Dự thảo nghị định quản lý người giúp việc gia đình: Khó "trời" những thỏa thuận riêng)

from state-owned companies; commuters from the outlying district of central Hanoi; and urban women moving in from other services. These are people with varying family, educational and professional backgrounds. They tend to cluster in five categories of domestic workers, including workers for expatriates, live-out workers, live-in workers, cleaner-cum-junk-traders and private carers in hospitals commonly referred to as 'hospital Ô sin'. This section compares the different groups in terms of worker backgrounds as well as work conditions and relations.

Domestic workers for expatriates

Let us first consider two examples. Ms Tham is 40 years old and lives with her husband and two teenage children in their own small house in downtown Hanoi. She has been working as a maid for seven years for various expatriate employers. Her parental family has a business trading incense sticks in Ha Tay through which she met her Hanoian husband. She took up two years of vocational training at the School of Tourism where she learnt English and cooking. She went through training at the Hoa Sũa School¹⁴ for another two years. She has been attending French courses as well as cooking courses by major hotels. Ms Dat, 34, on the other hand, lives in a rented room with her husband, a factory technician, and 6 year-old child in Nhan Hoa village. Ms Dat comes from Nghe An and has been in Hanoi for 14 years. She finished high-school and came here first to work for a noodle stall, then for four years in an embroidery workshop. Then she got a job as an assistant in a fashion business, where she gained contacts with Korean business people who are customers of the business. It was through these contacts that she entered domestic service, mainly working for Koreans. Workers in this group, like Tham and Dat, are either Hanoi residents or have been in the city long enough to accumulate the contacts and qualifications needed to access the jobs. In fact, a maids-for-expatriate agency makes a point of hiring only Hanoi residents. If the worker comes from elsewhere, she needs the guarantee of a Hanoi resident to be accepted so that the company could rest assured about her identity. A few others are domestic workers returning from overseas with years of experience and language skills.

Ms Tham and Ms Dat take care of everything in the employers' house, from cleaning to cooking and dealing with repairs and deliveries. Others are more specialised in either child-minding or house-keeping. This group is characterised by relatively high education and better domestic service skills as compared with the other groups. A small number have college degrees; most have finished high-school and taken up vocational training, e.g. tourism or hotel business and many have worked in the hospitality sector. Above all, language skills distinguish this group: most workers are able to communicate work issues effectively in English or another language. The age of this group ranges between mid 20s and mid 50s. They are likely to be married and have children who are living with them in an accommodation they own or rent

¹⁴ A non-profit organisation providing training in catering and hospitality.

on a long-term basis. Some of them hire rural women to take care of their own household tasks, especially when they have a baby or intensive care duties at home.

Generally, this group has the highest pay, which ranges from three to six million dong (180-300 USD) a month. Respondents in this group appreciate the office-like working time, which allows them to take better care of their own family compared to having a time-intensive sales job:

‘Pay is higher and the time is much less restrictive. How can a sale assistant have such good working time? And then as assistant, how could you get weekends off? And holidays too. You would have to work more exactly on these days. When the employers go on summer vacation, you still get your salary for instance.’ (Focus Group, workers for expatriate).

The tasks are clear; there is often a distinct division of work between nannies and housekeepers. However, high standards of work, including punctuality, safety, house-keeping and childminding skills are required. For instance, a worker mentioned that she is asked to iron everything in the laundry, including cotton underwear of small children in the family (ID3, 43, female). Another worker had a stressful start:

‘In the beginning, he (the employer) found two centimetres of spider web left under the stairs and pointed it out to me. I came home and fretted about what I could have done wrong. I even had dreams about doing things the wrong way. I thought about quitting’ (Focus Group, workers for expatriate).

Stress is common not only because of the higher requirements but also miscommunication resulting from cultural and language misunderstandings. Above all, isolation seems a significant issue, especially for those previously doing people-oriented service work, as reflected in the following discussion:

- ‘But the disadvantage is that you are all by yourself doing this work and it is very lonely. As a sale assistant you could chat with other people. Your social contacts would be simply wider. In this job you just work all by yourself. Resigned to your fate...
- *Interviewer: How about the interaction with your employers?*
- You think they stay at home to interact with us? They have to go to work. And we go there to clean, not to interact with them (all laugh). And I ask you, what more can you say other than ‘How are you I am fine thank you’?
- And foreigners don’t like to chat. They prefer that we just do our work. They don’t hire us to have somebody to talk to. And to be honest, I would prefer to do my work and leave too.’ (Focus Group, workers for expatriate)

Nevertheless, these workers say their employers tend to treat them not as if they were of a lower status, 'not like we were Ô sins or so' (FG expatriate). In their opinions, expatriates generally observe workers' rights and benefits. Certain workers develop affective relationships to their employers, especially the nannies, who tend to grow fond of the children they take care of. Another aspect of the work they seem to value is the exposure to a new way of life, which is considered by some to be a 'civilising' factor for self-development:

'The good thing is you get to know people from a very different culture that is a lot more open and easy-going than ours. I learn a new way of cooking that I like better than my former cooking. I know of more things in life than I used to. I am no longer out-of-date as before. Without going out and meeting people, one can never learn anything.' (ID3, 43, female)

'The first employer I had was a French woman. She was very well-organised and scientific, from eating and drinking to clothing, everything, and I learnt a lot from her. A man is known by the company he keeps¹⁵. There are not many Vietnamese who have these skills because we do not have as strong a scientific foundation like they do, not as civilised.' (ID2, 40, female)

Live-out workers (sáng đi tối về)

The phrase 'sáng đi tối về' for this type of workers capture the working scheme of this group: 'leave in the morning and come back in the evening'. One instance is Ms Nga, 29, newly wed, who lives with her husband, in a rented room in a migrant living quarter. Not yet having children, Nga takes up three jobs simultaneously cleaning and cooking for different families. Her husband, a former soldier looking for a stable job, accompanies her to work and picks her up when she is finished. When they have children, Nga says, they would have to rely on the grandparents for taking care of them. Their parents still live in a village of Ha Tay, now part of the extended Hanoi, which she refers to mockingly as 'Hanoi with a big pile of rice straw'. Nga first came to Hanoi seven years ago after giving up a low-paying job in a local restaurant. She has been a live-out in the last three years after working for a professional cleaning company, which she describes as 'too exploitative'. Another live-out worker, Ms Hoa, on the other hand, is a 'true Hanoian' in her words, who recently bought a small house with her husband. She is 53 and was a worker for a state shoe company before being laid off with a small severance package. Her husband is a hotel guard and her only son graduated from a college two years ago but has been unemployed since. She has been in service now for four or five years, having worked previously as chef in a restaurant kitchen that seemed too far from her home.

¹⁵ 'Gần mực thì đen, gần đèn thì rạng'

The live-out workers comprise of three groups: urban working class women (retrenched or retired state workers); female commuters from outlying districts of Hanoi or rural women who have practically settled down in Hanoi with family or relatives in a stable rented accommodation. According to a domestic service agent:

‘Usually live-out workers are Hanoians from poorer areas like Truong Dinh or so, or if they are not, they must have a lot of confidence to move out of a live-in situation and rent a place from which they go to work.’ (Key Informant Interview, Agency 7)

Former factory workers often possess certain technical skills related to their previous work, which they seem proud of. Some have a small pension and/or support of their grown-up kids. The commuters or long-term migrants seem also to have acquired different kinds of skills having worked in restaurant service or sale for many years. They tend to be younger than urban workers but also married with school-age kids. Urban workers and rural migrants/commuters of this group differ in that the former, like workers for expatriates, could fit their work well around their own housework and care responsibilities. They tend to choose jobs not too far from home and many work half-day or just during office hours. Migrants have to rely on relatives or older children in these matters, as they cannot afford to bring their children with them. This is also the case with commuters, who have to leave very early and return late in the evening.

The pay level for this group is not as high as the first group, but higher than for the live-ins. In fact, a number of employers prefer to have a live-out worker but cannot afford it. A half-day job brings an income of about 1,2 to 1,5 million VND (70-80 USD) and a full-day one 2-2,5 millions (120-150 USD). The working time, however, varies greatly depending on mutual agreements. It either follows office hours or is between 16h and 21h for half-day jobs or 7 h to 19 h for full-day jobs. The workers are commonly asked to stay overtime, without overtime payment, during the weekend or when their employers have guests. Many rural live-outs take on two to three half-day jobs. Unlike urban workers who make a point of keeping office hours or working close to their home, migrant live-outs apparently try to maximise their earnings in order to cover higher costs. Overall, the intensity of live-out domestic work is high. An urban live-out worker said she feels like doing a whole day’s work in half-day jobs:

‘You know, when we first meet, they (employers) often say there is not much to do in my place really. But it always turns out to be the same in every family: endless numbers of nameless tasks that need doing and you have to be extremely organised to finish these in time. For it is actually the same amount of work for a whole day job or for a live-in worker.’ (ID18, 53, female).

A clear age difference could be noted between the urban and migrant live-outs, with the former tending to be much older than the latter. The pattern of interaction with their employers seem thus also very different as older urban women appear more assertive than younger migrant workers in negotiating with and demanding respect from employers. This older worker commented on an incident experienced by a younger worker and was critical of her for not standing up to the employers:

‘One day she was busy from the other job and couldn’t make it there on time. The family was out and left a daughter waiting for her. She was supposed to be there at 3 but came at 3h30. She said ‘I was so enraged I just wanted to quit’. The daughter scolded: ‘How could you do your work like that? You are supposed to be here at three and only show up now? Our time is money, worth billions, and you only show up now?’ So I told her (the colleague): ‘Only you swallow that, I myself would just tell her gently: How funny you are. If you are busy and I come a little late, you could just lock the door and let me do it some other times. Why do you have to speak to me like that? It is not ok you talk to me like that. Your billions are your business and tens of thousands are my business. Why do you have to talk to me like that?’ But she didn’t dare to speak back because she is the neighbour. No need to be that deferent, how could you let a younger person talk to you like that?’ (ID 16, 50 female)

Urban domestic workers tend to distinguish themselves from ‘countryside people’ doing the same work. This urban live-out, for instance, is sure of her comparative ‘market value’ and advantage when comparing her service to that of migrants:

‘It’s like buying fruits. If you want to eat good fruits, you have to buy the more expensive ones, right? You want to eat good ones and pay bulk price, then... You have to look at the difference between someone who knows the work, someone from Hanoi and countryside people just coming out... I am very confident because I already have one good job (half-day) and it is not absolutely necessary for me to take another one. I’ll do it if I get high pay. And I’ll do my best to make sure that the work is done well. So it is a case of ‘you get what you pay for’¹⁶.’ (ID 18, 53 female)

Migrant workers cannot always afford such confidence and assertiveness when confronted with discriminating employers:

‘Well, they would call you ‘Ô sin this’ ‘Ô sin that’ in front of other people. ‘Mày’ (derogatory term for ‘you’) have to do this and that, these ‘mày’ and ‘tao’ words. See, they have to show who the master and who the servant is...

¹⁶ đất xắt ra miếng

Scary, unbearable. I am perhaps the kind of person who could endure the biggest indignities in this life. For I thought we are miserable in the countryside, it is tough to make ends meet at home, that why we have come here. To earn our food. That's why I have to try to endure. But the way they treated me was really unbearable. How they scold you and you daren't speak anything, it is humiliating to think about it. Many times it is so enraging I have to cry. See, because I felt so humiliated. At the time I didn't have other work and this family was terrifying, but I told myself to stick it out because I do not have any other work I have to endure so that I have work to do.' (ID 14, 30, female)

The young mother notwithstanding stayed in the job for more than a year until the employers moved south, despite a wage that she was not pleased with. The urban worker above (ID 18), on the contrary, gave up after the first day of working for a family where she felt discriminated against. Yet, it is generally easier for the live-outs to leave than the live-ins when conditions are not desirable, as they have their place and more contacts. They also enjoy a greater level of autonomy at work, in many cases having personal access to the work place in the employers' absence. Living out, they keep some distance between their own life and the work place and thus also to its tensions and constant supervision of the employers.

Live-in domestic workers (ăn ở tại gia)

This remains the most common form of domestic service. The Ministry of Culture survey estimates that 80.000 out of 640.000 households in central Hanoi are hiring live-in domestic workers and 200.000 others are trying to recruit. This seems a low estimate, given their seemingly ubiquitous presence, either in modern high-rise apartment buildings belonging to the 'yuppies' of Hanoi or older buildings occupied mostly by middle income civil servants or residential quarters with private houses.

While most live-ins are from the countryside, the group has a diversified range of age, marital status and family background, including young girls, single women, single mothers, married, divorced, widowed and elderly women. However, fewer of them seem to be in their 20s and 30s. The Ministry of Culture study shows that about a fifth of live-in workers are under 18 and almost 60% are in their 40s and over. They seem more likely to have special circumstances like widowhood, singlehood or divorce than usual and have on average two children (ibid). This group seems to experience the biggest challenges in dealing with their care duties and emotional ties to home. Unlike workers in the other groups whose work is more flexible, they leave their family behind and rely on whatever support scheme the family has. Those with left-behind children very often bring up the issue that their children are deprived of motherly care at home while they are looking after other people's children somewhere else. Their annual leave only allow for short visits (4-5 days) once or

twice a year. If they are to take longer leave on account of problems at home, tension easily occurs.

This is reflected in the experiences of the three domestic workers living next door to me in Hanoi. Mai, from a fishing village in Nghe An (see Annex 1 for map of Vietnam), is 18 and has been working for three families in the last two years. She intends to work for another one or two years before going home to her widowed mother who lives on her own, worrying that she is 'sad'. Then there is 40-year-old Ms Vui, a mother of two from Thanh Hoa, who has worked in Hanoi for two years after being separated from her husband. One son has gone south to work as a rubber worker, and the other recently dropped out of school and was about to leave for the South to join his brother. Ms Vui attributes his bad school performance and troublesome behaviours to one of his friends. She expresses great worry over the child and the health status of her father, who lives by himself. Third is Ms Bai, a villager from Nam Dinh. A widow at 60, Ms Bai's three children are grown up and she has four grandchildren. Her biggest concern is that her youngest son, who has some vocational training in tourism, gets a job. She hopes that her employers will try to find him a job. Having a major debt incurred by building a house serving as the ancestor worshipping place for her husband's clan, she gets six-month advances from her employers to pay back the debts. She seems always looking forward to her short annual leaves, starting to collect presents long in their advance. In a word, these workers are different yet similar in their emotional and burdensome ties to home.

Earning 1.2-1.5 million VND (70-85 USD) a month, live-ins's salary is the lowest across the groups and they offer the cheapest domestic service option to employers. However, most could save the money as their costs are covered, unlike the live-outs. That said, it is highly unpredictable what form of accommodation, food and other amenities they can access. They may have their own room and eat with employers but sleeping on the floor and getting other food than the latter are not uncommon. They are usually expected to rise before and go to bed after the employers. Their tasks are most unclear and there seems to be an expectation for them to 'do all'. Certain tasks seem unusual, such as growing vegetables and herbs in the garden of the employers' vacation home at weekends for their home consumption. Interestingly, not only a number of live-in but also live-out workers tend to the family altar, making sure it is clean and offerings are regularly made. Whether this indicates a heightened status of certain workers or the lesser importance of ancestor worship for some employers is open to discussion. Meanwhile, it is not simply the tasks but also how they are carried out that makes the work very tiring. It is striking how frequently workers are supposed to do the laundry by hand, despite the availability of washing machines. Meals in certain families have to be prepared elaborately. In an extreme case, there must be nine different dishes for dinner everyday - all in small quantities because only four persons eat the meal. In all, the

work conditions can be very daunting, particularly in regard to the constant claim of workers' time. Whether there is a limit to this will depend on the relationship established with the employers.

The work relationship, however, seems difficult and it is common to hear about failed relationships. Employers tend to blame workers for their ignorance, carelessness and lack of proper manner. A common complaint is how much they nowadays have to be spoiled so that they do not leave, to the point that 'the master and the servant exchange their places' (chủ – tớ đổi ngôi)¹⁷. There is a particular worry among female employers about a possible relationship between their husband and the worker, which underlies the following 'Ô sin selection criteria':

'Old and ugly	<i>Vừa già vừa xấu</i>
Skilled at cooking	<i>Biết nấu ăn ngon</i>
And minding children	<i>Biết chăm trẻ con</i>
Rarely sick or ill.	<i>Ít đau ít ốm.'</i>
	(Internet discussion)

Workers, on their part, often have stories about a certain mean and unkind employer. After learning that I was researching domestic service, a middle-aged rural woman waiting for work in a domestic employment agency was keen to tell me about her negative experiences. Following is one of her examples:

'You know, they are so rich. Their house is big with several storeys, but they make us sleep on the floor. There are three of us and we had to sleep on the floor and only eat rice with vegetables while they eat meat everyday. You know the way they treat us is like landlords in the past.'

Despite the mutual 'trashing' (*nói xấu*), 'good relationship' seems to be more the norm than exception. Most employers in both surveys by Duong (2007) and MOC (2009) state they are satisfied with their current workers. The relationships that survive seem to be where a form of 'reciprocal affection' (*tình cảm*) is maintained. Employers should feel that their workers are devoted, loyal and know their place. I once participated in a discussion on the topic of domestic workers with three other female passengers on a long-distance bus. It was an informal exchange in which I sometimes asked a question for clarification. When they talked about how difficult it was to find a good domestic worker, one woman offered an example of a 'great Ô sin'. Her account seems a culmination of employers' view on the desirability of domestic workers:

¹⁷ Vietnamnet 23/02/2005

'You know, the Ô sin would take care of everything in their house and she (the employer) does not have to lift a finger, even though she has two small children, 2 and 5 years old. She just needs to go to work and come back and everything is taken care of. She (the worker) has been with them for six years since she was 16 and is now still taking care of the kids, who are such difficult kids. She (the worker) would carry the child along the street to feed it and when the porridge gets cold, she'd come back to warm it up. She would only go home for no more than half a day, saying that she would miss the kids too much. Once a close relative of hers got married and she would skip the wedding as one of the children was sick. She said: 'I can't go when the nephew is sick.' He needs me. You know and she (the employer) only pays her 800 thousand per month. It's great you see.'

Meanwhile, the worker should feel a certain degree of kindness and respect from the employer. Being paid reasonably and occasionally rewarded with gifts as well as treated 'without a master-servant discrimination' or 'as one of the family' are what makes 'good' employers. Many workers state that they would have left their work if it were not for the kindness and generosity of the employers. Ms Nga, for example, regularly feels exhausted from working for a family with two small children and misses her three-year-old son. But she says she could not bring it to her heart to leave, as the employers are very 'affective' (*tình cảm*). They regularly give her and her son gifts while showing openly that they need her. When she was halfway through Tết the year before, they called and pleaded that she come, for 'we don't know what to do without you' (Focus Group, mature live-ins).

In 'Understanding Vietnam' (1993), Jamieson notes that it is of prime importance for Vietnamese to maintain harmony within the family and with other people. The way to achieve harmony is to 'respect the superiors; be tolerant towards the inferiors'. In other words, hierarchies based on ranks, age and gender should generally be observed. Hierarchies are 'part of the intrinsic structures of the universe, a state of affairs that was both 'natural and unalterable' (ibid:16). In short, harmony is essential, but it is that of a hierarchy where people know their rank, achieved when they act what befits the rank. Likewise, the harmony in domestic service is maintained by an imbalance of power where the worker is in a weaker position. Employers may be kind and benevolent, but they are the more powerful and not a few try to exert this power. This is above all the case with live-in domestic service. Live-in workers may try to assert themselves in various ways, such as insisting on using shrimp paste for seasoning to the employers' dislike, skipping meals or threatening to quit. However, it is difficult to avoid employers' attempts to control them. For example, one worker was given a list of 36 regulations, including 'economise on gas and electricity; be polite and cheerful to guests'. What she finds most problematic is that she is not supposed to visit other workers at the neighbours. She still does it anyway, but has to make sure the employers are not present. There

are also daily and weekly time sheets that some workers are must tick. These cause frustrations, and almost every live-in tells of a number of '*bức xúc*' (frustrations) and '*ức chế*' (inhibitions) when talking about their work.

Finally, it is noteworthy that young workers under 18 are most present in this group. Though the legal working age in Vietnam is 15, studies on child domestic service identify those under 18 as child domestic workers. There is much to say about child workers, who are not the main focus of this study, but what needs emphasising is that they tend to be more vulnerable to verbal and physical abuses and are subject to greater control by employers than adult workers¹⁸. In particular, some are sent to work by their parents to pay off debts, raising questions about child exploitation. Interestingly, very young live-in domestic workers seem to come mainly from certain regions. For instance, many are from fishing villages in the central coast. A recruiter from Hau Loc, Thanh Hoa talked about a recent 'trend' in the district to send girls below 18 into domestic service in Hanoi¹⁹. This is an area where fishing is the main livelihoods and there is hardly any agricultural land. Meanwhile, fewer young girls are from districts of Nam Dinh or Thai Binh, where more diversified livelihood schemes exist, which also include local factory work.

Cleaner -cum-junk--traders (Đông nát)

Ms Mi (43), a cleaner-cum-junk-trader said: 'Even if we were to die of hunger, I would never send my daughter to work as an Ô sin.' after telling stories of sexual abuse and talking critically about the 'lack of freedom' and 'serving people' that she attributes to 'doing Ô sin'. Thousands of junk traders like her live in migrant quarters of Hanoi²⁰. Most of them are female and many are from Xuan Thuy or Xuan Truong districts of Nam Dinh. According to DiGregorio (1994), half of the junk traders and scavengers in the early 90s come from Xuan Thuy. This is rooted in the locality's historical involvement in the waste collection business dating back to the colonial period. In the early 1990s there were several thousands of them in Hanoi (ibid.), and judging by the extension of the networks, this number is likely to be higher now. Female junk traders, however, have increasingly taken on cleaning jobs on their daily routes²¹. Some have shifted almost entirely to cleaning; many still maintain a mixture of junk trading and cleaning. The current hourly rate of cleaning is 12,000-15,000 VND (0,7-0,85 USD) and earning from it may account for up to a half of their total income. In fact, cleaning provides a counterbalance to the irregular

¹⁸ See (ILO, 2006) and (SCS, 2005) for situation of child domestic workers.

¹⁹ See also Nguyen Thi Hoa's study (ibid) on Khmer domestic workers in Ho Chi Minh city.

²⁰ E.g. Phuc Xa, Hoang Cau, Hoang Mai and Thanh Cong areas

²¹ DiGregorio found that men and children are also involved in junk trading as part of the waste collection business, though men tend to be more specialised in their purchase and children more with scavenging. In my discussion with the female junk-traders from Nam Dinh, it appears that most scavengers are adults coming from particular communes in their districts. Meanwhile, their children stay home with the father or relatives rather than migrating together with the parent(s).

income from junk trading, particularly since junk price has gone down with the economic crisis. However, the spontaneous nature of access to cleaning jobs makes them easy to come by for some and less so for others. In any case, junk trader's greater involvement in this form of wage labour has in many ways changed the nature of their participation in the labour market since the early 1990s.

Ms Mi has traded junks in Hanoi since 1991, when her first son was one year old. The son is now a transport worker in Ho Chi Minh city and her 18-year-old daughter has been following in her footsteps for two years after dropping out of school. Her sister and sister-in-law, the latter's 27-year-old daughter and a dozen fellow villagers live with them in a single rented room of about 25 square metres. The cheap lodgings they rent²² tend to be located in slums or temporary grounds where amenities are nonexistent or very basic. Large numbers of men and women cram into small rooms without built in kitchens or toilets, sleeping on makeshift beds made out of wood shanks and brick piles. These lodgings, however, seem to be a locus of sociality, where they often jointly cook lunch and watch a soap opera on TV in the evening. In fact, junk traders often say their day in the city is not as hard as back home, where even evenings are occupied with certain work or duties.

Another reason cleaner-cum-junk-traders like Ms Mi are resistant to the idea of working as live-ins is that they need to make frequent trips home. Not only to be present in the upbringing of children, but also to fulfil various agriculture tasks, including paddy planting and harvesting, mulberry harvesting, and various social activities like death anniversaries²³, village festivals or weddings. Ms Mi makes a trip home every two months, staying each time for about two weeks and four weeks during the major harvests. Her cleaning work requires some degree of regularity, especially if she wants to maintain customers. However, her relatives could step in when she goes, except for harvests and the traditional New Year, when everybody is expected at home. In a way, hourly cleaning combined with junk trading fits well with the close ties to home that these women try to maintain.

The cleaning work is often performed in presence of the employers, who may simply call in a bypassing trader or make appointments for regular cleaning. In fact, junk traders do not consider themselves domestic workers; they seem to make a distinction between 'doing Ô sin' and cleaning. This seems to be an effort to avoid the implications of the former's work relations. 'Cleaning' for them represents a clear-cut single activity that resembles selling and buying something. Yet, they also do laundry by hand or other types of work for people and are sometimes confronted

²² at 200,000 VND per month or 7000 VND per night

²³ This is one of the most important rituals of filial piety in Vietnam. The death of various family members and ancestors (often of the male lineage) is annually marked by offerings and family get-together on the day the person passes away.

with demanding employers who scold them for not cleaning properly or refuse to pay. In such cases, they try to avoid these employers and advise their colleagues to avoid them. Sexual harassment represents a risk and many make a point of not entering a place when approached by a man. Employers generally mistrust the '*đông nát women*', who are said to be quick-handed. The latter, however, resent this assumption, regularly quoting the proverb 'One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel'²⁴ to defend their integrity. This group seems to experience verbal abuses from on-lookers more than other groups. These almost always refer to their rural appearances and the assumption that they are likely to steal.

Hospital carers (Ô sin bệnh viện)

Often referred to as 'hospital Ô sins', this is the only group where men are present. Several hundreds of women and men work as private carers for patients in the two hospitals I visited. Acting as patients' family members, they take such non-technical care as feeding, washing, helping the patients to toilets, etc, which are not covered in the services of most hospitals in Vietnam. Although their work is performed in the public setting of the hospital, it remains domestic because they take over the care that people have to provide for their family members. The fact that they are called 'hospital Ô sins' indicates the domestic characteristics of the work. About a third of them are men; sometimes married couples are found in the group as well. Workers in this group have different levels of education; some have completed a primary education, others have attended vocational schools and certain male carers are former professional soldiers. The carers' age ranges between 30 and 50. They come from various Northern provinces but many (40 out of 50 in one department) are from districts in Phu Tho, where local livelihood features a mixture of paddy cultivation and commercial forestry. A number of respondents say their agricultural land has been converted to other uses, such as for the creation of a new district centre. A commonality is that they are coping with major expenditures or are heavily indebted.

An example is Mr Luc from Phu Tho, who has been a carer for five years. At 45, he has two grown-up children, one working as a factory worker in Taiwan and the other looking for a job in his home district. Mr Luc recently built a house and has been paying back the debt from the construction as well as the costs of sending his daughter overseas. He has a 120 million VND (7,000 USD) loan from the local bank for the latter. At home, he has an acacia hill, which generates about 40 million VND (2300 USD) every 5-7 years, and his wife still grows rice. However, these are barely enough to service the debt, despite the preferential interest rate he gets as son of a war invalid. Another example is Ms Hoai, 43, also from Phu Tho, who has been working in the hospital for seven years. Her two school age children live at home with their father who has a chronic kidney disease. His regular treatment requires

²⁴ 'Con sâu bỏ rầu nồi canh'

regularly large sums of money. Both Mr Luc and Ms Hoai, who are under great pressure for cash income, are attracted to this work because of the seemingly high pay level. On average, they get 120,000VND (7 USD) a day and food is sometimes provided in addition. If a carer works full time everyday of the month, which many do, he or she earns up to two hundred US dollars. This is twice or three times the monthly salary of a live-in.

However, the work conditions are highly challenging. Once while waiting for a male interviewee in a hospital yard, I had a conversation with a group of 4 or 5 middle-aged male carers waiting for work on the benches. They all came from either Vinh Phuc or Phu Tho. Having heard about my upcoming interview with one of their co-workers, they were forth-coming in the conversation. Following is an excerpt from the conversation:

- 'We do this because we do not have any work.
- *What you do is also work. (Interviewer comment)*
- No, it is just life in the middle of nowhere...'

What they say captures the life and work situation of these women and men. Taking small breaks between patients, they often work continually for months, practically living side-by-side with the patient in hospital wards. Depending on the patients' health status, it may mean watching over them throughout the night and sleeping only three to four hours a day. They are required to sleep next to the patient's bed, often on the floor or even underneath the bed when the room is full. Meals are taken in the eateries outside the hospital or brought in to be eaten at bedside. When the patient sleeps and it is not a severe case, they get a little time to spend with friends on the hospital benches. During off-time, some may rent a cheap room together in a migrant lodging house, though this does not seem to be preferable. A day off work means fewer earnings and there seems to be a tendency to maximise their earnings within their time budget. Consequently, they appear to be the most overworked of all five groups.

Their work relations are similar to live-in service in that workers are ready to take up the demanding, sometimes demeaning, work conditions as long as they feel their employers' appreciation. The difference is that they do not care for the people who pay them nor do they work in a place that is under control of the latter and thus are not subject to the actual employers' supervision. However, they have to deal with a multiple work relationship, including the patients, their family and hospital staff. They need to ensure that the staff like them enough to allow them to stay and to recommend them to new patients. They have to make the patients feel that they are well taken care of and prove to the latter's family that they are worth the payment. This work is perhaps where affect is most emphasised. 'You have to consider them your own blood and flesh to do your work well, otherwise it is not possible.' or 'A

heart is needed to do this kind of work.’ are common statements from interviewees in this group. In fact, many carers develop attachment to the patients and keep visiting them or attending death anniversaries of deceased patients after their assignment. These are often presented as an indication of good work conduct. Affect is also deployed as a way to justify putting up with ‘bad’ employers:

‘Some people think we work just for money and look down on us. Sometimes the patient is grateful, but their children or their wife complains and criticises us all the time. In those cases, we just want to quit, but then we feel sorry for the patient and continue the job’ (Focus Group, hospital carers)

Two questions arise as to the presence of men in this group: a) why are they ready to take up this form of domestic service? b) What makes the difference between a male and a female carer? It appears that men only do this because of the institutional setting as well the technicality of the work. Whereas female carers often move in from live-in domestic service, men tend to have their first encounter with hospital work through caring for their own relatives. When requested to go home with the patients, men tend to decline, whereas women would consider the option if well-paid. Mr Binh for instance has been a private carer for seven years in the hospital while his wife is doing the same work for an old lady in the latter’s home. He explains why he is hesitant to care for patients in their home:

‘Working at home you cannot just focus on caring for the patient. You are in their home. How could you not do other things that you see need to be done?’ (ID 6, 46, male)

Whereas women care for both male and female patients, men only look after male patients. When asked about the difference, women often consider themselves as more gentle, talking more to patients and being more attentive to their needs. Asked the same question, men claim that they are stronger and could handle the heavy male patients better than the women. The women however disagreed, saying it is more a matter of skills than strength. Interviews with male carers reveal that the men seem more ill at ease about the work. A male respondent expresses this uneasiness explicitly:

‘It is a case of (using short-term means to serve long-term purposes). You know how it is like...being a man and doing these things. I can’t say more, because it is very...like that... you know yourself. It is embarrassing to talk about them.’ (ID 24, 22, male)

Conclusions

The findings of this paper suggest a complex pattern of labour market segmentation where migration plays a key role. Contrary to the common notion of an 'Ô sin' as a rural female, a number of urban women and rural men are also involved in domestic service. However, female rural migrants still constitute the majority of domestic workers. In a typology, migrants occupy the first three rungs of private carers, cleaner-cum-junk-traders and live-ins; make up a large part of live-outs but are hardly to be found in expatriates' service. Even though each form of service has pros and cons, it is evident that the 'better jobs' of working for expatriates and as live-outs in certain cases are taken up by urban residents. It is interesting to note that the child and male domestic workers are almost always rural. Given the high priority given to children in the contemporary Vietnamese family (Long et al 2006) and the general male reluctance to perform reproductive work, this indicates migrants' weaker position in the labour market and/or their family's lack of livelihoods alternatives.

Domestic work may not be less well paid than other informal sector work, but it seems a job that most people do only reluctantly. Both urban and rural domestic workers seem to have limited alternative opportunities in the labour market while being major income earners in their family. Urban workers may have been displaced from the socialist employment structure at an age difficult to find alternative work. Similarly, rural (or peri-urban) workers may have lost their agricultural livelihoods due to the development of new urban/industrial centres or are simply forced to migrate because agriculture has become increasingly unviable. Both find themselves in a new situation where their former work skills are no longer relevant.

However, major differences exist between them regarding personal background and labour outcomes, both in economic and reproductive terms. Urban workers seem to be better placed and gain higher returns from domestic work than the latter. Rural workers are under pressure to work harder, take up more challenging work or are subject to higher levels of control. The former seem to have greater bargaining advantage than the latter, who appear more insecure during off-time and less assertive at work. The former find a way out or better work arrangements on account of their relatively higher education level and urban experiences. The latter find themselves in an alien environment where they are by default the ones with inferior knowledge and sophistication. Both work to help employers deal with their domestic burdens but rural workers are confronted with a contradiction that their wage work leaves a gap of reproductive labour and care in their own home. This reinforces the regional inequalities that perhaps account for their movement into domestic service in the first place. The situation seems further accentuated by a patchy institutional setting lagging behind changes in both the domestic sphere and the labour market.

Migrant domestic workers, however, are not all the same and how they cluster in a particular group is related to their familial background and social networks. Yet it is clearly a conscious choice to enter a certain group, even though the choice may be 'constrained'. It is made in consideration of their ties to home as well as the perception of employer control and the stigma associated with 'serving'. The cleaner-cum-junk-traders choose to live and work the way they do as they still retain a large part of their domestic duties while earning an income. The live-ins may accept the high level of bodily and social control only in so far as the employers show certain respect and kindness in return. The live-outs are ready to pay their own bills, even though this may cost them their saving and force them to work harder, either because they want to live with their family or cannot live with the 'inhibitions' of live-in service. The hospital carers take up their exhausting work because of the seemingly high pay and the value they place on affect induced by care work.

Meanwhile, domestic service remains a status-laden occupation. Not mentioning extreme examples of control, abuse or harsh treatment, even 'good relationships' are maintained based on an increasingly spelled-out social hierarchy based on wealth and regional disparity. It may be too early to speak of a 'servant class' in contemporary Vietnam but certain re/emerging values and attitudes in relation to domestic service indicate shifts in the way different groups of people relate to each other. In this regard, rural migrants have to deal with a twofold stigma of their work: having to serve others because they are poor and because they are rural. However, the hierarchy is not taken for granted and daily struggles are ongoing in which workers challenge the power imbalances of domestic service in the quest for dignity and appreciation of their labour.

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Annex 1: Administrative map of Vietnam



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