

Women's Economic Contribution through their Unpaid Work in Vietnam

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Summary

In a time of rapid changes, Vietnam reveals both new and old ideas uncomfortably co-existing in terms of the acceptable roles of men and women in the workplace and the home. The situation, while better than in South Asia, remains far from egalitarian. For instance, while men and women share in decision-making, the opinions of men carry more weight and women tend to dominate only in such perceived “minor” matters as daily household expenses.

While people say that both sexes should share housework, men do less of it than women: a reported average of less than two hours per day as compared to women’s over five hours. Meanwhile, case studies suggest that the actual time women spend on housework may be more than is realized. People are unclear as to whether or not household work has economic importance, but the delegation of it mainly to women and the way in which people discuss its contribution suggests that it is accorded little value

Various methods were used to attempt to calculate a “wage” for the household work performed by women in typical urban and rural areas. Two methods were used: opportunity cost, and wage for the tasks actually performed. The opportunity cost method reveals more about the problems of the method than about the value of the work, with men and urban dwellers, though working less, having higher opportunity costs due to higher wages.

A method using the cost of paying someone to perform the work usually done by women without pay results in a national estimate of almost 820 trillion VND or about \$46.1 billion per year, or 51.3% of the GDP for Vietnam in 2008. That is, if women’s unpaid household work were included, then GDP

would rise from \$89.8 to an estimated \$135.9 billion, for an increase of 66%.

The research suggests various possibilities for interventions to highlight the importance of women’s work and to encourage men to contribute more to the household. The main impetus for this work is that what is not valued monetarily tends to not be valued, and by applying a monetary value to the contribution of women’s unpaid work, the perceived value of their contributions to society will be increased and taken into consideration in national policies.

Background

In Vietnam, considerable economic changes since 1986 in the climate of *Doi moi* (renovation) and openness have brought about tremendous changes in gender and family relations. The diversification, industrialization and privatization of the economy ushered in by *Doi Moi* have created numerous opportunities for individuals, especially women, to organize and/or participate in income-increasing activities.

However, a much improved economic position does not necessarily mean that the socially-sanctioned responsibilities of women within the household have been lightened. Numerous researchers on household relations and the division of labour have noted that in comparison with men, women continue to shoulder more of the obligations within the household, particularly in terms of caretaking and domestic work, especially when the related state services have been cut-back, commercialised and partially privatised as part of *Doi moi* policies (Tran and Le, 1997; Long et al., 2000).

This reality has given rise to a number of research questions regarding the real pattern of domestic work in rapidly-changing Vietnam today, how domestic work is perceived by men and women, what are its costs, how to quantify the costs and whether this kind of labour contributes to the wider national economy. Research findings on this issue will raise public attention to domestic work and will help policy makers in formulating appropriate policies concerning socio-economic development and training with respect to labourers' interests and gender equality.

It is in that context that this study was carried out. This study aims at providing evidence on the role of women in domestic

work, the value of this multi-faceted work, and its contribution to the national economy. The ultimate goal of the study is to raise public awareness and to attract government's attention to the importance of gender equality and to contribute further towards formulating national policy on women, employment, care of children and the elderly, and other related issues.

Methodology

The research objectives of this study were:

- To examine the current situation of involvement in domestic work amongst married men and women of reproductive age in the study site.
- To describe the perceptions and attitudes of those married men and women regarding domestic work.
- To quantify the amount of time occupying women and men in domestic labour and to calculate the monetary value of such work.

Research design

This study combined quantitative and qualitative methods, including a thorough desk review and field research. A set of research tools was developed, including guidelines for both in-depth interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with different community members. A questionnaire was initially used to quantify the amount of time which women spend on housework and to serve as a basis for calculating the monetary value of this labour. A number of detailed case studies, generated through participatory forms of observational research, also provided further information

about the amount of time used by women for completing housework. In-depth interviews helped reveal the perceptions and attitudes held by people regarding housework and women's contribution.

Desk work included compilation and review of accessible documents, published studies, service statistics, government surveys, and other documents at the local, national and international levels regarding unpaid labour within the household, along with all available policy interventions. This review also helped guide the field research and generated data for further analysis in the later stages. The reviewed materials include the Ordinance of Population, the Law of Gender Equality, the Labour Code, the Marriage and Family Law, General Statistics Office (GSO) statistics, Vietnam Living Standard Survey (VLSS) data, the general reports of two selected commune and district People's Committees and Committees of Population, Families and Children, and a number of published studies on household labour and unpaid work conducted by both Vietnamese and international scholars.

In addition, the team tracked relevant coverage and debates on the socioeconomic situation in Vietnam and changes in relevant official policies in both printed and online newspapers and magazines.

Field data was collected over a one-week period starting in late October 2007. The province selected for study was Ha Tay. Ha Dong city and Thach That district in Ha Tay were randomly selected to represent both urban and rural settings. Ha Tay, located to the southwest of Ha Noi, was selected based on its varied socioeconomic development. The provincial town of Ha Dong and surrounding areas in this province, which are closer to Ha Noi, are in a process of rapid urbanization whereas other

areas of this province are more rural and agriculturally dominated. In each district/city, one *phuong* (ward) and/or one *xa* (rural commune) respectively was randomly selected from the list of all *phuong* and *xa* of the district/city. In the selected *phuong* of Ha Dong, 150 households were then randomly selected from a list of all eligible households in that *phuong*. A similar strategy was used to acquire a study sample for a *xa* of Thach That.

Eligible households included families comprising two parents and at least one child and where the age of the wife ranged from 20 to 49 years old. 150 households were selected from each site.

Given the complexity of the topic, we planned to conduct participatory observation in two households in each site in order to generate several case studies. It was planned that to understand better the diversity of housework in each site, one household with two generations and one with three generations would be selected. The researcher would ask for permission to stay with these households, follow them and carefully report all activities and events happening during at least 24 consecutive hours during the period of study. A time use table was used for this purpose. However, we only conducted one observation in Dai Dong commune because many households, especially in Nguyen Trai urban ward, refused to participate.

In each locality, at district and commune levels, the team conducted four in-depth interviews with two men and two women respectively of different extended families, for a total of four men and four women from eight households, for at least sixty minutes each. All the IDIs, as well as the following stated FGDs were recorded using digital recorders with the full verbal consent of the participants.

In each province the team also organized two focus group discussions, one with men and one with women, living in families with at least one child. In total, four FGDs were carried out, involving 24 participants. Themes discussed varied with the different stakeholders and participants but mainly included the family-building process, respondents' time use on a daily basis, division of work in the households, participants' attitude and perception regarding housework, and the economic or monetary value of housework.

SPSS was used for data processing and analysis. Information collected with these instruments was entered and processed using Access and was used for analysis together with other qualitative and quantitative information. The recorded materials of IDIs and FGDs were transcribed *verbatim*, analysed and collated by the team.

Limitations of the study

The key limitation of this study lies in its relatively small scale. Only two communes or wards in Ha Tay province were selected for investigation. Therefore not much claim can be made regarding the representativeness of those studied or the possibility of generalising this information across the wider population. This said, quantitative and qualitative data have been used in order to capture a more in-depth portrait of the studied communities. Since common perceptions and opinions do tend to exist across different districts, the findings can provide insights into the actual situation regarding unpaid work within households in Vietnam.

Research on gender, household labour and monetisation of household production in Vietnam

As in many other developing countries, Vietnam is now experiencing far-reaching changes and demographic transitions associated with continued rapid economic and social development. In the case of Vietnam, these have accelerated as an ongoing outcome of the renovation (*Doi moi*) policies instigated since the latter half of the 1980s. These changes have in turn led to changes in gender roles, wherein women have gained better access to offices and positions of power in society (Goodkind 1995; Le 1996; Fahey 1998).

Despite the much improved economic position, women continue to face disadvantages in the reform process, as seen in gender segregation in the labour market as well as by persistent gender inequality in wage and job mobility (Liu 1995; Le 1996; Le 1998). In addition, it has been argued that the emphasis on each individual household as an autonomous economic unit as the primary focus of *Doi moi* restructuring has reinforced the Confucian belief and practices regarding the rightful place of men and women in the household and in the wider society (Khuat 1998; Tran and Le 1997).

Among those researchers showing a particular concern with household relations and the subsequent division of labour, a number have noted that in comparison with men, women continue to shoulder more of the obligations within the household. This has been especially true in terms of their traditional tasks, such as caring for others and domestic work, at a time when the attendant state services have either been cut back, commercialised or partially privatised (Tran and Le 1997; Long et al 2000). Moreover, it does not necessarily follow that increased economic participation means that women's decision-making power increases in comparison with men.

Studies have revealed that although women are mainly responsible for decisions surrounding the management of the household, they still have to consult their husbands prior to any financial expenditure (Population Council 1998).

As a reaction to changes in social and cultural norms, which are perceived to have been brought about as a result of *Doi moi*, and in a state-driven attempt to control the spread of AIDS, the government and the media have sought to preserve traditional gender roles, considering women's roles as mother and wife to be critical to the nation's social and political stability, whilst continuing to enshrine the notion of gender equality in contemporary legislation (Gammeltoft 1999; Long et al. 2000; UNFPA 2003; Le Thi 2004; Pham et al. 2005).

More recently, Bui Huong (2006) argued that a number of current nationwide movements initiated by the government-supported Vietnam Women's Union have been mobilised as part of an official broader discursive agenda aimed at reinvigorating and preserving "fine traditions" in modern Vietnamese families. Accordingly, "women today" have a vastly expanded role to play in contemporary Vietnamese society. They are expected to participate fully in economic, social and political activities alongside men, but are still expected to continue their traditional role of maintaining harmony in the family (see Hoang and Schuler 2004).

Thus, the structuring of state policies surrounding the place of women continues in practice to reinforce gender inequality, by placing a traditionally inflected emphasis on the patriarchal framework that views women as closely tied to the domestic sphere, regardless of how high on the income ladder women may actually rise. For this reason, if for no other, a thorough investigation is required into how unpaid labour in the home is continuing to represent an unequal burden for women in

striving to meet the twin demands of economic renewal alongside the preservation of the traditional structure of the Vietnamese family.

Research findings

General information

The survey consisted of 299 households in which both husband and wife were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire, resulting in 589 individual interviews (half male and half female), with half the households being in the urban ward of Nguyen Trai and the other half in the rural commune of Dai Dong. Direct observation was also carried out in one household.

The level of education of the respondents is quite high, with 60.7% having finished high school and above and only 1% (six people) not having finished primary school. A further 21.7% have finished college/university and higher.

The number of men and women having completed each educational level is within a couple percentage points and is unlikely to be statistically different.

Only 5.6% of the respondents say they have no paid work (a category including housewives and pensioners), while the remaining 94.4% reported participating in different kinds of income-generating employment. The three most common jobs are small business/service (22.2%), public servant (20.7%) and farmers (20.1%). The main reported occupational category of the female respondents is farmers (28.8% vs. 11.4% for men) while for men it is public servants (21.7% of men vs. 19.7% of women). Small business and services are the second most prevalent job among both sexes, at 21.4% and 23.1%

respectively. Unsurprisingly, in the rural areas more of the respondents are farmers and manual workers, while in the urban sites more people are public servants or occupied in small business/service.

In this study, dependents are defined as those aged below six and/or above sixty. It is presumed that households which have members aged below six or above sixty or both will be different from households which do not have those kinds of people in terms of the support the households have to give or may get from them. Bearing this in mind, we categorized all the households into four sub-groups based on this criterion. Nearly two-thirds (65.6%) of the total households have members of these age groups, of which 70% have members aged under six. Percentages of the households meeting this criterion are quite similar in the two study sites, with a smaller percentage having both members under six and above sixty years of age in Nguyen Trai (16%) and Dai Dong (12.8%).

More than half of the participant households (56.5%) have three or four members. One-third (37.2%) of the households have five to six members. There are only 19 households (6.3%) having more than seven members. More than two-thirds (71.6%) of households have two generations (husband/wife and children). Households having three generations account for 28.4% of households.

Over a third (36.1%) of households in both sites fell into an annual income group that ranged from 500 thousand (US\$28¹) to two million (\$112). Almost half (48.8%) are in the group of two million to five million VND (\$281)². The percentage of households that have an income of more than ten million

¹ All dollar figures in this report are US dollars.

² Using an exchange rate of the time of 17,800 VND to the US dollar.

(\$562) is not substantial, accounting for only 1%, while that of below 500 thousand VND accounts for 3% of the sample. There are more households whose income is more than two million VND in Nguyen Trai than in Dai Dong. On the contrary, there are more households whose income is less than two million VND in Dai Dong than in Nguyen Trai.

Decision-making power in households

In order to gain a better understanding of household decision-making authority, fourteen major household issues were listed and an analysis made of the attitudes of husbands and wives in each household as to who actually participates in the related decision making (See Table 1).

TABLE 1: Respondents indicating who contributes to decision-making in the household (%)

Issues	Male Respondents			Female Respondents		
	H	W	B	H	W	B
Giving birth	6.7	3.0	90.3	4.0	4.0	91.6
Children's schooling	9.1	6.7	82.5	8.8	5.4	83.5
Career guidance	13.0	1.7	79.8	8.6	1.0	85.5
Children's wedding	6.8	0.7	87.0	5.2	1.0	89.6
Means of production	13.8	15.5	70.0	12.0	14.0	73.3
Use of production capital	16.6	12.4	70.3	13.3	14.3	72.4
Use of land	26.6	5.9	57.2	29.0	4.5	56.3
Daily expenses	1.1	73.2	23.7	1.0	74.4	22.2
Property purchase	26.1	4.0	69.6	21.8	2.0	75.5
House repair	30.1	0.7	64.2	27.0	0.7	66.6
Signed land and house ownership documents	53.7	7.5	21.8	56.7	4.7	19.3
Signed vehicle documents	63.1	7.8	25.4	66.6	7.2	23.5
Signed savings book	35.6	23	38.9	41.9	19.9	36.6
Relatives and neighbours' business	13.5	6.4	75.0	11.5	9.8	72.9

As seen in Table 1 above, in 77% of the issues, more than 50% of the respondents of both sexes report that both husband and wife share the decision-making responsibility. A great majority of male and female respondents (90.3% and 91.6% respectively) answer that both husband and wife decide on issues organized around giving birth. Other issues such as children's wedding, children's schooling, , and career guidance are also decided by both husband and wife in the respondents' opinion (accounting for 87%, 82.5% and 79.8% of men and 89.6%, 83.5% and 85.5% of women respectively).

Many respondents (73.2% male and 74.4% female) think that the issue for which women are more often than not responsible is daily expenses, while only 1% of men and 1% of women think men are the ones who decide. Men are reported to have decision-making roles in such issues as vehicle document and house and land documents.

Other people currently living in the household (usually parents) also have decision-making roles, especially in such issues as signing household documents (reported by 17% of men and 19.3% of women) and land use (just over 10% of both men and women). Remarkably, no male respondents think that "other people" other people have a decision-making role around having children, while no female respondents say that others can decide "use of production capital."

Despite this apparent egalitarian decision making, it is clear from the table that men still retain the primary role in almost all household decision making.

Gendered division of labour

Perception of housework

Table 2 indicates that men and women have different, and to some extent contradictory, stories to tell regarding housework. Interestingly, the stories not only lack consistency between couples, but respondents also make self-contradictory statements. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of female respondent compared with approximately sixty percent (58.5%) of male respondent agree that "it is women's proclivity to do housework". At the same time, a strong majority of men (94%) and women (98%) agree that "anyone can do the domestic work regardless of his/her sex". A slightly smaller proportion of men (81.6%) and women (83.6%) agree that "housework should be equally shared between husband and wife".

Regarding the statement, "Men are those who decide the important business in the family" more men (64.9%) agree than women (58.2%). A similar difference can be seen in the statement of "Men often cook when they feel like it while women have to do so regardless of the fact that they like it or not", with which 54.7% of men and 66.6% of women agree.

In summary, two different perceptions³ of housework appear to co-exist. A more "modern" or new perception regarding household work highlights sharing of responsibility, acknowledgement of women's contribution through housework, and the reasonableness of men's involvement in housework. But as illustrated above, beliefs also continue that

³ It is perhaps unnecessary to mention that stated agreement or disagreement with such statements may reveal more about what participants believe they *should* say than about what they actually believe or practice.

housework is performed by women and perceived as one of the criteria of “an ideal wife”.

TABLE 2: Perceptions about housework (%)

Statement	Female Respondents		Male Respondents	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
It is women’s proclivity to do housework.	68.0	32.0	58.5	41.5
Men are responsible for the “important” work while women are responsible for “trivial” work.	55.2	44.8	50.5	49.5
Men decide the “important” business in the family.	58.2	41.8	64.9	35.1
Housework should be equally shared between husband and wife.	83.6	16.4	81.6	18.4
In the family, wives often work more than their husbands.	87.3	12.7	85.3	14.7
Men often cook when they feel like it while women have to do so regardless of whether they like it or not.	66.6	33.4	54.7	45.3
Anyone can do the domestic work regardless of sex.	98.0	2.0	94.0	6.0
An ideal wife is the one who can earn much money and be good at the housework.	60.2	39.8	58.7	41.3

Amount of time spent doing housework everyday

In this research, a list of 42 different domestic (household) tasks was outlined. These tasks can be regrouped into seven larger categories in accordance with important household outputs, which include but are not limited to (1) nutrition, (2) clean and sanitary accommodation, (3) clean clothes, (4) care

for family members, (5) travel and transport activities (see more in Dulaney et al, 1992), and other visible family roles and functions such as (6) community participation and (7) repair. This paper only discusses the first five categories of housework, which are usually performed on a daily basis by the various household members (see Table 3).

TABLE 3: Average amount of time spent doing domestic tasks of husband and wife (minutes)

Daily domestic tasks		Male respondents		Female respondents	
		Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband
Nutrition care	Mean	89	13	93	10
	Median	90	0	95	0
Accommodation/ house care	Mean	39	16	40	12
	Median	33	5	30	0
Care for clothes	Mean	40	6	37	6
	Median	40	0	40	0
Care for family members	Mean	115	69	122	59
	Median	95	30	95	20
Travel and transportation	Mean	35	8	34	7
	Median	30	0	30	0
<i>Total</i>		<i>318</i>	<i>112</i>	<i>326</i>	<i>94</i>

Given that these are self-reported figures for work, there may be significant bias in the responses, as people tend to underestimate the amount they spend on household tasks. To arrive at more accurate estimates of the time men and women spend on household work, various methods could be used, including asking them to keep a household diary; having someone observe their work each day and note the amount of time spent; asking them to list all the tasks they do in a day and estimate the amount of time spent on each task; asking them the number of waking hours in the day and subtracting time

for all non-household related activities; and so on. All would have their related biases.

Table 3 shows that both husband and wife participate in housework, albeit to different degrees. According to the male respondents, women spend 318 minutes (5.3 hours/day) on household tasks while men spend 112 minutes (1.9 hours/day), or 35% of the amount of time spent by women. Female respondents reported that women spend 326 minutes (5.4 hours) and men only 94 minutes (1.6 hours) for those tasks, or 29% of the time spent by women.

Those tasks that men participate in the most are “care for family members” (69 minutes per day) and “Accommodation/house care” (16 minutes per day). Even in these tasks, women still spend two to six times more time than men. There are some differences in the time spent by women on various tasks between the study sites and in the total time spent by men on housework. Men in urban Nguyen Trai tend to spend more time on housework (2 hours/day) than those in Dai Dong (about 1.5 hours/day), possibly due to better awareness concerning gender equality and responsibility sharing thanks to more accessibility to IEC messages on these topics, or to the fact that the proportion of both husband and wife working as civil servants is the highest in Nguyen Trai compared to other areas. In such cases, where office hours are regular, couples may be more likely to share household work.

Women in all household types spend more time than men on domestic work. The findings show that women in households having members aged below six have to spend the most time (6.13 hours/day) compared to women of other household types. However, women in households having members aged above sixty spend the least time (4.17 hours/ day), nearly two hours less than that of women in households having members

aged below six and thirty minutes less than those having neither age extreme. Even men in these households spend the least time on household tasks (less than one hour/day), less than half of the time a man in the household having a member aged below six spends on the same tasks. We can thus infer that household members over the age of sixty contribute significantly to housework.

The observational approach used in this study provides further details. Consider the observation of a family in which both husband and wife are in their early 30s, with two children: a boy of the 7th form and a daughter of the 4th form. The wife is six months pregnant. The husband is a carpenter and the wife is a seller of sticky-rice. As observed, her day starts at 3.40 a.m. and finishes at 10.00 p.m., which means her day extends for over 18 hours, indicating that observational research might reveal longer days than is indicated in Table 3 above. During that time, “the wife does not grant herself a respite”.

The photo below (Observation conducted in a family in Dai Dong) partly illustrates her day. This photo was taken at 11:30 a.m. on 28 October 2007. The wife is cooking and her daughter is helping her while her husband is receiving a guest in the sitting room and her son is watching a television programme. According to the observation report, at about 10:20 a.m. the wife started to prepare to cook lunch. She was cooking from 10:30 to 11:50. While she was cooking, the electric-fee collector came and she stopped to pay him. Her husband, Hoa, came home and sat talking with the collector.



Photo: Observation conducted in one family in Dai Dong

A similar reality is reflected in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted in both sites. Housework consumes significant portions of women's time as well as physical and mental strength, in both rural and urban contexts. Women have little time to relax. The story below is drawn from an in-depth interview. Like many other women, Ms. Hai (not her real name) not only participates in activities to generate income for the household but is also involved in other domestic work such as cooking, washing, tutoring, and caring for other family members including her husband's mother and siblings.

Case Study: The life of a rural woman

Ms. Vu. T. Hai was born in 1961 and lives in Dai Dong. She is a farmer. In addition to looking after her family's land, she sometimes works on other households' farms in the locality in order to earn more money.

She got married in 1979. Her husband is from the same commune and is an electrical worker in Thai Nguyen province. They have four daughters. Her husband is often absent from home and therefore she has to take care of all matters in the household, ranging from the small to large.

After marriage, she moved in with her husband's family, consisting of his mother and younger brother and sister. Hai's sister-in-law recently got married and moved out. Her mother-in-law is in poor health, so she hardly helps Hai with the work. When her mother-in-law is unwell, Hai has to give up other work to take her to the hospital and to look after her.

Hai rises at 5 a.m. to prepare breakfast for the family. After feeding the pigs and chickens, she goes to the field. At lunchtime she will visit the market on the way home to buy food to cook lunch and dinner. If it is harvesting time, she cannot get home until 8 p.m., and continues to work until 9-10 p.m.

After dinner she feeds the pigs and chickens, has a shower, and reminds her children to study. She disclosed that she cannot teach them because of her own limited education and time. Although she had to take a loan, work for somebody, and contract more fields in order to pay off two million VND (\$112) of schooling expenses every month, she still wants her children to continue their studies.

Her husband can only help her by sending home about one million VND monthly, one half of his salary. He is not very well either, and thus cannot do hard work. That is why he rarely comes home at harvesting time. She wants her husband to share the domestic work; however, she herself believes "that kind of work is what I can do and it is not heavy work" and affirms that "it is impossible for us, women, to sit relaxing and watching our husbands working but it is possible for the husbands to do so, and it is the same in every family.

Other women and men in this study share the view that women are always strongly "attached" to housework and it has thus become the norm for women. However, in our conversational interviews, women often expressed their expectation to receive support and acknowledgement of the importance of domestic labour from their husbands and other family members. When being questioned about this issue, men themselves have also shared a "modern" view regarding

housework and informed us that they would be willing to help their wife “whenever possible”.

Despite such enlightened words, both men and women make contradictory statements when exerting themselves to prove their more “equal” division of household work. On the one hand, the fact that they say that they share the work reflects to some extent radical changes in their awareness. On the other hand, many respondents, especially in the focus group discussions, affirmed that although both men and women can be good at housework, there are some tasks “designed” for women that women can do better, and there are other tasks for men which women cannot perform even if they so desire.

Farmers are very busy at the cultivating and harvesting seasons. At those times wives have to work very hard and men should participate as well. Other than that, women stay at home and do some odd jobs which do not bring in income so that their husbands can go out to work. There are tasks that cannot be done by either wives or children, such as mending household equipment and appliances, which men can easily do. Therefore, it is not correct to say that men let their wives do all the non-monetary odd jobs. (FGD with married men, Dai Dong)

At present, our parents allow us to live on our own. Thus, if my wife is busy, I will have to do all the tasks such as cooking and so on. ... It takes the whole day just to do odd jobs around the house. Men are clumsy, not as skilful as women, so it takes longer to do such jobs. (FGD with married men, Dai Dong)

Some women think that sharing is ideal but only to some extent, for if men have to do the “meticulous” tasks involved in housework, they would have to change their personality:

I do not like it as well because I think that it is not advisable for men to do too much of such work because the work is very specific and meticulous. In so doing they will become very strict and more demanding. On the contrary, if women do not have to do such work and become the breadwinner of the family it will not be good either because they will not have time to look after their kids. Besides, it will be very exhausting and complicated. In my opinion, it is necessary to share the housework, whoever can do better will do it and it should not be loaded on one person. (Woman aged 31 with 2 children, Ha Dong)

Difficulties in doing housework

We used a pre-defined list, in no particular order of priority, to facilitate the answers of respondents to the question about the difficulties that they faced when doing housework. The list consists of lack of time, lack of facilities/amenities, lack of knowledge and/or skills, lack of health, lack of support from others, and “other.”

The findings reveal that men and women respond differently about the difficulties in doing housework. In the list of difficulties, the two most selected by men are “Lack of facilities/amenities” (39.1%) and “Lack of knowledge and/or skills” (38.5%). Those responses may reflect an effort on the part of men to rationalize their modest participation in domestic work. In the process, they have underlined the fact that they have not performed those tasks enough to learn the necessary skills, thus implicitly stating that household work does indeed involve a skill set that requires time and effort to build. Women, meanwhile, are most likely to specify “Lack of time” (42.5%) and “Lack of facilities” (42.1%) as the greatest difficulty. “Lack of support from others” was mentioned by only 7.4% of men and 13.4% of women.

Male respondents wrote down other difficulties which can be classified into two sub-groups. First, they are extremely busy and stressed with their office work. Some said that they were “stressed, tired in the office already and [they] thus just want to relax and not do much housework”. Second, they are under the pressure of the socio-cultural conceptions relating to housework. Some said that they “hesitate to do housework” because of “the patriarchal viewpoint” or they would be considered as “lacking self-motivation” if they have to do housework. Conversely, women’s supplementary comments further specify their difficulty with “lack in time”; for instance, they said “the child snivels and demands my sole attention”, “I have too many children to watch” and so on. “Lack of money” is also perceived by some male and female respondents as another difficulty that households have to cope with in doing housework consistently and well.

Amount of time for sleeping, relaxing and entertaining

As mentioned elsewhere, although there have been some radical changes in the respondents’ awareness and attitudes to domestic work, women still have to work more and longer hours than men in the house. Even now, women sometimes do not have time to go out for pleasure or do not have any spare time to perform other community roles. Men in one focus group explained, “when someone is sick, [my wife] has to delegate, or find the time at noon or in the evening to go visit them” (FGD with married men, Dai Dong).

In Dai Dong, nearly half of women (48.3%) and over a third of men (35.6%) do not have a siesta. Both men and women in Nguyen Trai are more likely to have a siesta than those in Dai Dong (only 26.7% of women and 22.0% of men in Nguyen Trai reporting that they do not have time for one). In both sites,

fewer women than men take a siesta.

The study found little difference in the reported time husband and wife sleep at night. Over 70% of both male and female respondents in both sites sleep for at least seven hours a night. Those in Nguyen Trai are more likely to sleep for less than six hours, while those in Dai Dong are more likely to sleep for more than eight hours. A possible explanation is that urban people have a tendency to stay up later watching television.

Women in both sites spend less time sleeping at noon and at night than men.

Case Study: The life of a woman in the city

Bui T. Lien is 31 years old. She is a lecturer in a vocational school in Ha Tay.

She got married in 1999. Her husband is an engineer in a distant electric power company. He often leaves home for work at six in the morning and never comes back before 6:30 in the evening. They have two children, a daughter aged six and a son aged 8.5 months. They live in their own house which is very near to her parents in Ha Dong city, so her parents often come to help.

Lien regularly gets up at 6 a.m. She feeds their daughter and takes her to school. On the way back she goes to the market to buy food for the family. Before leaving for work at 8 a.m., she cooks and grinds food for her small son’s midday meal. Her mother comes and looks after the boy when she is at work. Her mother often stays there the whole day and just has a quick visit home when Lien is back at lunch time. Her mother often bathes the boy in the afternoon and helps with cleaning the house when he is sleeping.

Lien comes home at 11 a.m. to feed the baby and lull him to sleep. She goes back to work at about 1.30 or 2 p.m. She finishes work at 4 p.m. and goes to pick up her daughter. After giving her some milk to drink, she bathes her and prepares for dinner. When she finishes cooking, she feeds the boy, then the family sits down for dinner. After dinner, Lien

puts the dirty clothes in the washing machine before having a shower. Her husband or her mother will hang the clothes out to dry. After the shower, she has a short rest and tutors the girl. At 9 p.m., she will feed the baby boy again before taking him to bed. Everything will be done by about 10 p.m. and then everyone goes to bed.

When she had just given birth to the boy, the family paid 500,000 VND (\$28) to hire a maid. This woman did “everything” so that Lien only had to look after the boy and remind her daughter to study. But two months ago, the maid returned to the countryside due to family reasons. Since then, Lien and her husband have to divide the tasks. He has to do the washing-up in the evening, tutor the daughter and put the dirty clothes into the washing machine and hang the clothes out to dry. Nonetheless, he sometimes uses work commitments as an excuse to avoid doing household tasks.

Lien comments, “Once I am home I cannot step out of the bed⁴, so I do not have time to read. I am faced with many difficulties in my wish to raise my level of ability ... just because I don’t have enough time.” Besides, she often feels tired and stressed. Due to overwork and poor health, she has had to miss many opportunities to be promoted and to raise her income.

She thought that the domestic tasks that she was doing were the means through which she contributed economically to the family, saying that “If I don’t do it myself, we will have to spend a sum of money each month to hire somebody to do so. We will save that amount if we do it ourselves.” However, she also affirmed that not all of the domestic tasks can be given an economic value. For instance, as far as care for her children is concerned, it is not possible to hire somebody to look after and care for them with the same responsibility and affection as they will get from their parents.

⁴ To look after her boy aged eight and a half months.

Perception of contribution of domestic labour

When asked about the contribution of domestic labour (Table 4), virtually all male and female respondents responded that “Housework helps stabilize psychology and feelings” and “Housework educates and develops people”. However, two-thirds of the respondents of both sexes think that “Housework is invisible and time-consuming” and a similar proportion of respondents say that “Housework has no economic value”. Yet nearly three-fourths of both men and women agree that “Housework can enhance socio-economic growth”, which contradicts the above perception regarding the economic value of domestic labour.

TABLE 4: Perception of contributions to domestic work (%)

Statement	Male		Female	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Housework is invisible and time-consuming.	67.9	32.1	71.6	28.4
Housework has no economic value.	64.5	35.5	65.9	34.1
Housework helps stabilize psychology and feelings.	97.3	2.7	98.0	2.0
Housework educates and develops people.	96.7	3.3	98.7	1.3
Housework contributes to producing material goods for the family.	67.2	32.8	72.9	27.1
Housework can enhance socio-economic growth.	71.9	28.1	73.6	26.4

Calculating the economic value of household work

Different methodological models can be used in measuring the value of domestic labour. In this study, based on the collected data, the researchers estimate the monetary value of domestic work based on the models of opportunity cost (the household's average income) and market replacement cost (the housekeeper cost method).

Opportunity cost (Utilising household income for measurement)

This model is based on the premise that when an individual engages in unpaid work, he or she has to give up activities that could be done instead, along with all associated monetary and non-monetary benefits (Hamdad 2003). Within this model, the actual incomes that the households in the study sites provided and the average income per capita in Ha Tay, as released by the General Statistics Office's VLSS in 2004, are utilised. From this, a calculation is made of the hourly income for each individual, assuming that an individual will work for 240 hours each month (30 days x 8 hours/day). One problem with this method is that the use of an opportunity cost wage implies that different people performing the same household task can be paid vastly different rates, simply because each individual has a different job and therefore different wage rates.

There is a difference in the average incomes of households in Nguyen Trai and Dai Dong. This is partly affected by the high income of some households in each site. However, because these wealthy households were randomly selected, they are perceived as representative of other households of the same

income groups in the study sites. Below we present the value of domestic labour on the basis of the average income of husbands and wives in each site and in each income group.

TABLE 5: Measurement of domestic labour value

Study sites		Hours / day	Income / hour	Income / day	Income / month
Nguyen Trai	Wife	5.66	7,033	39,806	1,194,185 (\$67.09)
	Husband	2.04	8,290	16,912	507,355 (\$28.50)
Dai Dong	Wife	5.09	3,470	17,663	529,894 (\$29.77)
	Husband	1.38	5,119	7,064	211,930 (\$11.91)

Figures based on average income of the husband and wife in the study sites (VNĐ)

Table 5 shows that if a wife in Nguyen Trai spends about six hours on housework she will earn about 40,000 VND a day (\$2.24) and nearly 1.2 million (\$67) a month. Similarly, a wife in Dai Dong can earn nearly 530,000 VND (\$30) per month. However, the table also reflects that hourly average income of a husband in Nguyen Trai is nearly 2.5 times as much as that of a wife in Dai Dong. Therefore, his income per month by doing housework is nearly as much as her even though he spends only 2 hours per day, two-fifth of the time she spends on such tasks. Similarly, compared with a woman in Dai Dong, a woman in Nguyen Trai only spends 34 minutes more on domestic work but her income per month by doing housework is twice that of the woman in Dai Dong.

If the hourly wages are derived from the household's income groups, different results will emerge. As mentioned above, the same household tasks can be paid at different wage rates if

done by different individuals from different income groups. As illustrated by Table 6, the hourly wage of a woman in the lowest income group (less than 500,000 VND/month) is about 396 VND (\$0.02). Her time spent on housework per month will thus be priced about 59,000 VND (\$3.31). At the same time, a woman in the second income group (from 501,000-2,000,000) can earn about 422,000 VND (\$23.71) from about five hours of domestic labour at the hourly wage rate of more than 2,600 VND (\$0.15). In the same way, a woman in the higher income group will have a higher hourly wage and the value of her time spent on housework will be greater.

The difficulty with this method is that a man in the higher income groups can contribute more than a woman in the lower income groups even though he spends less time than her on housework. For instance, in spite of the fact that a man in the third income group (more than two million to five million) spends about two hours doing domestic tasks, equalling one-third of the time a woman of the low income group (below 500,000 VND) spends on the same tasks, his contribution through housework would be six times as much as her using this method.

TABLE 6: Measurement of domestic labour value based on income groups (VND)

Income groups	Below 500.000 (\$28)	501.000-2.000.000 (\$28-\$112)	2.001.000-5.000.000 (\$112-\$281)	5.001.000-10.000.000 (\$281-\$562)	Above 10.000.000 (\$562)
Wife					
Monthly av. income	95,140	641,352	1,403,183	2,402,879	7,633,333
Hourly av. income	396	2,672	5,847	10,012	31,806
Time spent on HW (day/mins)	297.11	316.3	332.36	312.3	273.5
Time spent on HW (day/hours)	4.95	5.3	5.5	5.2	4.6
Value of HW / day	1,960	14,083	32,390	52,162	145,033
Value of HW / month	58,806	422,491	971,704	1,564,875	4,351,000
Husband					
Monthly av. income	161,460	775,182	1,788,036	2,970,152	12,366,667
Hourly av. income	673	3,230	7,450	12,376	51,528
Time spent on HW (day/mins)	105.5	106.9	102.8	92.7	74.2
Time spent on HW (day/hours)	1.76	1.78	1.71	1.54	1.24
Value of HW / day	1,184	5,749	12,740	19,058	63,894
Value of HW / month	35,534 (\$2.00)	172,478 (\$9.69)	382,193 (\$21.47)	571,754 (\$32.12)	1,916,833 (\$107.69)

As these figures should make clear, this method tells little about the value of the household work itself, and far more about discrepancies in earning ability between men and women, and between residents of urban and rural areas. Taken literally, the information in the table could be used to argue that men, and particularly those earning high salaries, should do no housework as the opportunity cost is so high. A similar argument would be that it is more important to provide quality medical care to the rich than the poor as their lives have more value.⁵ It is just as important to a low-income family as to a high-income one that there be food on the table, clean clothes to wear, and that the children are looked after. In fact the opportunity cost to poor families of spending many hours on household work could be considered to be higher than for wealthier families, as they are in more need of extra wages.

In any event, the figures in Table 6 above are offered more as a demonstration of the problems of the opportunity cost method than as a suggestion of how to calculate the value of household work.

Another method utilises an approximate (if very low) value for household work, and assigns the same price to all those performing that work, regardless of sex or income, as shown in Table 7. According to the most recent Vietnam Living Standard Survey (VLSS) produced by the General Statistics' Office (GSO), the average income per capita in Ha Tay is 415,400 VND/month (\$23.34) (GSO 2004).

⁵ This is of course what happens in practice, but would usually not be defended as an ideal situation.

TABLE 7: Measurement of domestic labour value

Study sites		Hours spent on housework per day	Value of housework per hour	Value of housework per day	Value of housework per month
Nguyen Trai	Wife	5.66	1,730	9,796	293,894 (\$16.51)
	Husband	2.04	1,730	3,530	105,926 (\$5.95)
Dai Dong	Wife	5.09	1,730	8,809	264,297 (\$14.85)
	Husband	1.38	1,730	2,388	71,656 (\$4.03)

Based on Ha Tay's monthly income per capita according to the VLSS 2004 (VND)

The calculated hourly wage rate for both Nguyen Trai and Dai Dong is 1,730 VND (about \$0.10). Using this figure, a woman in Nguyen Trai contributes about 295,000 VND (\$16.51) to the family income through her housework, while a woman in Dai Dong contributes about 264,000 VND (\$14.85) every month. That is, by utilising a single (if very low) figure as the national wage for household work, the discrepancies between rural and urban salaries is overcome, though again the wage rate has little to do with the importance of the work it attempts to measure.

Market replacement cost

Another model of valuation of domestic labour is market replacement cost. Users of this method presuppose that the time a household member spends on unpaid activities can be valued at the earnings level of other people who are engaged in similar activities in the market sector. In this model, it is assumed that household members and their "replacements" are equally productive and responsible.

Another premise behind this approach is that households save money by performing the activity themselves. The amount they save, and hence the value added to the household's income by doing the work, is the cost of purchasing the same services in the market, or hiring someone else to perform the tasks (Hamdad 2003).

This approach is divided into two other variants of (1) replacement cost specialist which imputes the unpaid work on the basis of hourly earnings of people employed in matched occupations and (2) housekeeper cost method which employs the wage rates of a general housekeeper in this respect. It is advisable to remember that it is unlikely that market replacements exist for all household activities, and there are normally a wide range of wage rates for the same task being undertaken by different people in the market. Meanwhile, housekeepers are likely to be paid far less than many specialists. In addition, there will still be a number of household productive tasks that a housekeeper would be unlikely to carry out and applying the single wage rate could lead to inappropriate valuations (Hamdad 2003). All these factors make choosing a calculation method difficult.

This study makes use of the housekeeper cost method in valuing domestic labour on the basis of the available data. What this method gains in simplicity it loses in reasonable valuation of tasks, as many of the works performed by women in their own homes is not farmed out to household servants and would garner a higher wage rate on the market than what is paid to a monthly servant.

The findings show that only 33 of the 299 households (11%) have somebody come in to help with the housework, and their earnings are very different. In order to simplify data analysis, an estimate of the average wage of housekeepers is used to

calculate women's contribution through those tasks. Additionally, the average wage of a housekeeper in the market at the time of study in the study sites is used. This yields a wage in Nguyen Trai of 600,000 VND (\$33.71) and in Dai Dong of 400,000 VND (\$22.47).

TABLE 8: Average wages paid to housekeepers in study sites

Study sites	Monthly wage (VNĐ)	Hourly wage (VNĐ)
Nguyen Trai	390,960 (\$21.96)	1,629 (\$0.09)
Dai Dong	251,000 (\$14.10)	1,046 (\$0.06)

As previously mentioned, there are only 33 households (11%) who hire someone to perform domestic tasks. On average, a household has to pay 391,000 VND (\$22) per month, while one household in Dai Dong pays only 251,000 VND (\$14) for this purpose. Accordingly, the hourly wage rates in Nguyen Trai and Dai Dong are 1,629 VND/hour (9 cents) and 1,046 VND/hour (6 cents) respectively, assuming the household servant works eight hours a day, every day of the month with no vacations (see Table 8).

TABLE 9: Measurement of value of domestic labour

Study sites		Hours spent on housework / day	Value of housework per hour	Value of housework per day	Value of housework per month
Nguyen Trai	Wife	5.66	1,629	9,220	276,604 (\$15.54)
	Husband	2.04	1,629	3,323	99,694 (\$5.60)
Dai Dong	Wife	5.09	1,046	5,324	159,724 (\$8.97)
	Husband	1.38	1,046	1,443	43,304 (\$2.43)

Based on the average wage rate paid to housekeepers (VNĐ)

If these hourly wage rates are used, a wife in Nguyen Trai will earn 276,000 VND (\$16) and a wife in Dai Dong will earn 160,000 VND (\$9) for their time spent on housework (Table 9).

Table 10 shows that, using this method, a woman in Nguyen Trai would have a wage of over 400,000 VND (\$24) and a woman in Dai Dong 250,000 VND (\$14) from housework. As discussed above, this is merely an estimate, as it is not accurate to use the wage rate of the general housekeeper to calculate the value of the time household members spend on housework. Clearly, the working conditions, productivity and responsibilities of the replacements are qualitatively different in nature. This is clearly illustrated in Lien’s words from the case study, as quoted above: “It is not possible to place an economic value on all the domestic tasks. For instance, as far as care for her children is concerned, it is not possible to hire somebody to look after and care for them with the same responsibility and affection as their parents.”

TABLE 10: Measurement of the value of domestic labour

Study sites		Hours spent on housework per day	Value of housework per hour	Value of housework per day	Value of housework per month
Nguyen Trai	Wife	5.66	2,500	14,150	424,500 (\$23.85)
	Husband	2.04	2,500	5,100	153,000 (\$8.60)
Dai Dong	Wife	5.09	1,667	8,485	254,550 (\$14.30)
	Husband	1.38	1,667	2,300	69,013 (\$3.88)

Based on the average wage rate for general housekeepers in the study sites (VNĐ)

In summary, this study has attempted an approximate measure of the monetary value of household labour using two methodological approaches: opportunity cost and market replacement cost. Both methods have their problems; thus the imputed results are not to be read as more than rough estimations. The findings show that a woman in Nguyen Trai will contribute between 277,000 (\$16) and 1.2 million VND (\$67) per month (0.6 to 3 times as much as the average income per capita of Ha Tay) and a woman in Dai Dong between 160,000 (\$9) and 530,000 VND (\$30) per month (0.3 to 1.3 times as much as the average income per capita of Ha Tay). According to income groups, a woman in the study sites will contribute between 59,000 VND (\$3.31) to 4.35 million VND (\$244.38) (about 0.1 to 10 times as much as the average income per capita of Ha Tay in 2004). Thus, the value of domestic labour varies according to income group and location.

The variations in estimates raise an important issue: is it more important to prepare food for wealthy children than poor ones? Does a clean home for a wealthy person have more value than a clean home for a poor one? It is impossible to avoid biases and estimates in calculating that which has no definite economic value, and attempts to do so involve necessary limitations. However, this should not prevent the attempt. As has been noted repeatedly elsewhere, the failure to assign economic value to the household work performed daily without pay by women makes that work “invisible” and leads to full-time housewives being labelled as “parasites”. Since there is no measure that is free of bias, the only solution is to assign a reasonable measure and understand that it is an approximation of something that cannot be arrived at with accuracy. As such, a calculation for the entire country is possible, allowing for a reasonable range of the value of women’s unpaid work.

The various methods used above to estimate a wage for women’s household work were affected by inequities in salary between rural and urban areas, between men and women, and for the extremely low rates paid for household work given its (ironic) perceived lack of importance. As mentioned, a higher wage would be calculated if the market replacement value by task, as opposed to paying a household worker, were used. The next method uses a shortcut to approximate a market replacement wage using tasks rather than a single household worker value.

In Table 11 below, five tasks, representing a range of different average payments, are used to calculate an average wage for household work (based also on an average of 5.38 hours of work daily). The five tasks used are cooking, cleaning, tutoring children, nursing the sick and washing clothes. The average monthly salaries range from a low of 1.2 million VND (\$67.42) for washing clothes to 3 million VND (\$168.54) a month for tutoring children. These figures, based on what is actually paid for the main tasks carried out by most women, resulting in an average monthly “wage” of 2.04 million VND (\$114.61), represent a more reasonable figure than those given in the previous section.

TABLE 11: National estimate of the value of women’s household work

Average monthly salary for different tasks	VND
Cooking	2,000,000 (\$112.36)
Cleaning	1,500,000 (\$84.27)
Tutoring children	3,000,000 (\$168.54)
Nursing the sick	2,500,000 (\$140.45)
Washing clothes	1,200,000 (\$67.42)
<i>Total</i>	<i>10,200,000 (\$573.03)</i>
<i>Average</i>	<i>2,040,000 (\$114.61)</i>

A rough estimate for the national contribution by women

The average monthly wage calculated above of 2.04 million VND can be used to approximate a figure for the entire country. As shown in Table 12, the Vietnam population in 2008 was 86.16 million, including 33.47 million women age 15 and above. (Although other countries in this research series used the age of 64 as a cut-off in calculating women making significant contributions through household work, the fact that women in households containing older women did less work than those which did not have an older woman suggests that women over aged 64 continue to perform a significant quantity of household work and thus should not be left out of the estimations.

TABLE 12: Population figures for Vietnam

Total population 2008: 86,160,000 ⁶		
- Male	49.14%	42,339,024
- Female	50.86%	43,820,976
Female: 15+ (2008)	76.40%	33,479,226

Table 13 utilises the number of women aged 15 and above and the average monthly “wage” for women to calculate a national figure, which results in almost 820 trillion VND or about \$46.1 billion, or 51.3% of the GDP for Vietnam in 2008 of \$89.8 billion. Put in different terms, if women’s unpaid household work were included then GDP would be an estimated \$135.9 billion, for an increase of 66%.

⁶ <http://vneconomy.vn/2009040210345706P5C11/dan-so-viet-nam-qua-cac-thoi-ky.htm>

TABLE 13: National estimate of the value of women’s household work

Number of women aged 15+ (rural + urban) in 2008: 33,479,2268
Average monthly “wage” for women: 2,040,000 (\$114.61)
Average annual contribution for all women across country: 819,571,444,254,720 VND or 46,043,339,565 (\$46.04 billion) USD
GDP Vietnam 2008 ⁷ : \$89.8 billion
Women’s contribution as proportion of GDP: 51.3%

Discussion

A gender-based division of labour, which is both socially constructed and culturally based, determines to a large degree the roles, functions and tasks that men and women each undertake within the household and in the wider society. The arrangement originates in the biological difference between men and women, particularly in women’s role as child-bearers, and is strongly supported, enhanced and therefore perpetuated by patriarchal teaching and an imbalance of power in which men control most income. As a consequence, society in general and women in particular continue to believe that due to the fact that women are born in “soft and weak” bodies, they will therefore be more “suited” to work that requires patience, skill, and the meticulousness associated with “nimble fingers”.

An illustration of this is revealed in the course of the research conducted in the two localities of Nguyen Trai urban ward and Dai Dong rural commune in Ha Tay province, Vietnam. The findings show that virtually all respondents, both male and

⁷http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danh_s%C3%A1ch_qu%E1%BB%91c_gi%C3%A0_theo_GDP_danh_ngh%C4%A9a_n%C4%83m_2008

female, claim that both women and men can do housework regardless of their sex and tasks should be shared equally between spouses. However, whether in rural or urban contexts, wives invariably tend to be those who spend more time doing housework compared to their husbands.

As far as locality is concerned, a wife in Nguyen Trai ward spends a self-reported average of 5.66 hours per day doing tasks including cooking, cleaning, washing, mending clothes, and taking care of the family members, while a wife in Dai Dong commune spends 5.09 hours carrying out similar duties.

The husbands portrayed in this research also participate in housework, though rather modestly and much less frequently than their marriage partner. A man in Nguyen Trai household for instance, normally spends 2.04 hours on domestic work, while a husband in Dai Dong only spends 1.38 hours on such tasks, amounting to 36% and 27%, respectively, of the hours that their wives work.

It is one of the main findings of this study that “Taking care of family members” is a category of housework that respondents of both sexes assume men prefer doing, and in fact do participate in the most, accounting for 62% of men’s household time (75 minutes) in Nguyen Trai ward and 63% (52 minutes) in Dai Dong commune.

Significant variations in time spent on housework emerged in the study. Households having members under the age of six and those having members both under age six and above 60 spend more time on housework (an average of 5.09-6.13 hours/day for the wife and 1.65-2.26 hours/day for the husband). Meanwhile, households which have members over 60 years of age spend the least time doing domestic tasks (4.17 hours/day for the wife and 0.83 hours/day for the husband).

This suggests that elderly people in these households also take part in housework and therefore lessen the burden on both women and men. This is similar to what the literature describes regarding the bases of the allocation of labour within households. Research has for some time now shown that not only women, but also certain age groups, especially those in the older age range, have to help shoulder the unequal burden of domestic work, and this is probably more so among those with little or no income (Mahalingam et al 2003; CWS 2006).

The findings of this study indicate that housework continues to be mainly undertaken by women, and that other family members, especially men, fulfil only a “helper” role. The in-depth interviews show that those husbands who do carry out housework with some willingness are younger, possessing a more modern perception of housework. If they are older, they do not have to go to work and thus have more free time than their wives.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile repeating Ann Oakley’s (1987) argument regarding the sharing of housework. She said that there still exists a differentiation between men and women as far as this type of work is concerned: as long as the husband thinks that he has “helped” his wife with the domestic tasks, it is not difficult to envision who is viewed as responsible for housework. Oakley concludes that, “As long as women are blamed for an empty fridge and a dirty floor, it is not significant to speak about the meaning of integration in marriage [...] symmetry is just a myth” (cited by Tony Bilton et al. 1987).

Both sexes rationalise the unequal division of labour within the household by underscoring dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. As mentioned above, when asked about their perception of housework, respondents of both

sexes agree that sex *in general* cannot determine who should be responsible for the housework, nor how much each partner does. Nevertheless, in our interviews the male respondents thought that their wives often did the most housework because they are more skilled in this area. Additionally, some men assume that this work is more appropriate for women because they are unable to perform what men can do. In the same spirit, the female respondents worry that their men’s sense of their own masculinity would be endangered if they have to do supposedly “feminine” housework. In response to this perception, Oakley (1979) concluded that this can explain why men either do not get involved in any kind of domestic work or do little more than “help” in order that “his masculinity will survive”.

This study also reveals that the division of domestic labour is consistent with the division of control in decision-making processes. Both male and female respondents share the view that women have most control of daily expenses while men, and occasionally their parents, are primarily responsible for less frequent but larger decisions such as purchasing important assets or vehicles. Remarkably, participants state that all issues other than the above-mentioned ones are decided by both husbands and wives. However, it would appear that husbands have the last word in decision-making, as disclosed by some respondents in the in-depth interviews.

Several reasons may be posited to explain why women continue to do more domestic labour even if they have paid employment outside the home. First of all, under the influence of the new economic policy and market economy development since the mid-1980s, rural households have become autonomous economic units in agricultural production and business. As a result, each household has to reorganize their

production activities and redistribute the labour among individual members of the family, especially between husband and wife, in order to fulfill the functions of the family in the new economic situation. It is obvious that this reorganisation and reallocation of household labour has served to, and/or partly enhanced, the traditional culture of masculinity which institutionalizes the role of women as dependent on their husbands and their in-laws. This gendered relationship governs other social relations as well as other aspects of life among family members.

This open-door policy not only brings about opportunities for economic development but also for cultural exchanges with other countries. Consumerism and individualism, which have been introduced in Vietnam as part of radical social changes, have seemingly not affected to any great degree the stubborn notion of male authority in Vietnam but may have increased the perceived need for income, putting more pressure on women to earn money as opposed to engaging in family-based activities. The rapid feminisation of the labour force has been recorded by the state's official data, but this fact is not likely to be accompanied by any greater equity or sharing of labour within individual families.

On the contrary, in Vietnam the intense focus on the household unit as the driver of economic growth means that women are even more likely to experience the double burden of acquiring paid employment while having to maintain their existing roles as domestic providers and labourers. These "womanly roles" are even applauded by the organisations claiming to respect women's interests and benefits as a means to protect the intactness of families in the whirlwind of burgeoning development (Bui, 2006).

To make the situation even worse, mass media enshrines

gender inequality imposed by the feudal regime of past generations by conveying traditional messages regarding gender roles. Dinh Doan, a media commentator, has emphasised the socially-sanctioned roles of men and women and especially their decisive characteristics of role fulfillment in correlation with ideas surrounding family well-being (2007). In his words,

A husband and his wife should be a "magical alliance", but not "a mutual help group" or "a collective". That may explain why counting the benefits and losses does not have any position/standing in a happy family. A clearly-cut labour division timetable, which says what tasks a husband and a wife should do in the family is an unhealthy proof of a conjugal life... Doing household chores is not always enjoyable. However, it is said that "Men make house, women make home". Women therefore should "keep the fire in the family". You, women should remember that the possibility of taking care of husband and children is one of the greatest sources of happiness that many other women long for. Do not forget that the emotional fire that you light will both "keep yourself warm and others warm as well" (Dinh Doan, Newspaper of Science and Life, 3 September 2007).

Of course one need not look too far for reasons why women in Vietnam continue to bear the major burden of household work, as this is far from a unique position in the world. What would be interesting is to learn where and why the situation is different. Each country offers its own cultural explanations for the lower status of women, but given the near-universal nature of that lower status, there is obviously more at work than the culture of any individual country.

One objective of this study was to calculate the economic value of household labour in order to have a fuller insight and evaluation of the contribution of unpaid work. Towards this aim, two methodologies were used: opportunity cost (mainly based on average income) and market replacement cost (based

on paying a maid to do the same tasks and a market replacement value using a wage for five key tasks performed by women). Although the two methodological approaches may have questionable validity, each one does at least provide an indication of the monetary value that domestic labour could be attributed. The results are limited in reliability due to the self-reporting bias of time spent on housework, as well as the limitations of assigning a “precise” value to something for which many values exists.

Despite these limitations, it is important to recognise that these models are instrumental in proving that housework is a real, visible, and economically significant form of work and that the status of those performing such tasks should be recognized. As illustrated, different methods result in very different estimates. The estimated monthly contribution of a woman through household work in Nguyen Trai and Dai Dong fluctuates within the range of 59,000 to 4.35 million VND (\$3.31 to \$244.38). Even when undervalued, a woman’s monthly unpaid work is worth at least 30% of the total income per capital in Ha Tay (VLSS, 2004). A calculation using the market value of certain tasks performed yields a figure of 2.04 million VND (\$114.61), which results in a national figure of almost 820 trillion VND or US\$46.1 billion, amounting to 51.3% of GDP.

Recommendations

- a. *Increase societal awareness of the economic value of domestic labour and women’s contribution to that value through household tasks over and above their contribution through paid activities.*

In order to reduce the load of domestic labour on women and encourage other family members to participate and share

responsibility for this kind of work, it is desirable to carry out a more comprehensive set of awareness and behaviour change communication activities than have been conducted to date. The primary goal of such a campaign would be to enhance societal awareness of improvements that have been made in women’s status and gender equality and specifically focus on the economic and emotional contribution of the domestic tasks to the well-being of each individual, his/her family, and society as a whole. Such a campaign would also aim to highlight the compounded burden that women have to shoulder: working to generate income while concurrently performing the roles of reproducers and carers for other members of the household.

More significantly, such a campaign should point out that the monetary value of women’s contribution through housework is impossible to quantify fully, precisely because any such measure fails to embrace the “emotional labour” involved in women’s love and feelings, which cannot be calculated by any formula. Additionally, it is necessary to communicate with the public about the concept of the steep opportunity costs that women pay when they spend so much of their time and energy on housework.

- b. *Changing existing messages: Rewriting the story of domestic labour*

The existence of a normative social expectation that women have to work to generate income and to take care of the domestic work, while there has been no mechanism to encourage men to share in household tasks, has made the objective of gender equality hard to realise. Slogans like “Women should be good at office work and capable of housework, striving for the objectives of gender equality” should be replaced so as to make both men and women see

their responsibilities in implementing these objectives.

It is important to inform the public of the successful examples of women in various fields, especially those which have been hitherto dominated by men (such as politics and economics). Such examples could be complemented by images of men cheerfully engaged in various household tasks, in order to show that neither the professional nor the domestic role is the unique sphere of either sex.

No less important, it is advisable to raise the awareness of policy makers and leaders regarding the roles and contribution of both men and women to the national economy in order to involve them in disseminating gender-equality messages. In so doing, the biased Confucian thinking of “respecting men and belittling women” will, one hopes, be supplanted by a substantive or corrective model of equality, which on the one hand respects equality between women and men, and on the other hand takes cognizance of the biological and social differences between them (IWRAP Asia Pacific 2006).

Recognition of the double burden on women could also lead to the development of a high-quality system of medical and child care which is partly subsidized by the State in order to reduce the household’s burden of domestic chores. Many European countries have models of social policy that could be studied in this regard.

More emphasis needs to be placed on the recognition of domestic labour as being on a par with paid employment, which requires that investment, training, supporting services and ultimately its production is included into the measurement of GDP. It is necessary to either develop or complement a national system of statistical data in terms of time use and with more specific regard of time used for housework and childcare,

as well as the indicators for measuring those tasks’ value. To this end, housework should be identified as a separate job in the list of jobs and occupations employed in the national statistical research programme.

Of equal importance, media practitioners, planners and programmers/producers have to be trained and retrained in gender awareness and sensitivity before and during the campaign to be conducted. An important goal of these activities is the awareness and recognition at the highest level of society of the vital role of household work in the maintenance of a nation; that is, that while work for pay is vital, so too are the daily tasks of cooking, cleaning, and caring for people. It should not be assumed that work for pay has more value to society than the work of caring for others. More work could be done to assign socially-reasonable values for the work often done by women without pay which could then lead to sounder socio-economic policies regarding the importance of paid and unpaid labour. Other policy considerations would include the need to bring full- and part-time household workers into existing social security systems and benefit programs, and to expand opportunities to work part-time and to have more flexible time in order to allow those of both sexes to devote more time and attention to their household, family and the community.

c. A renewed agenda for research

Calculating the value of domestic labour is new in terms of both theories and practice in Vietnam, especially the measurement approaches. While predominantly of an exploratory nature, this study is nonetheless one of the very first examples of research in this field. It is therefore advisable to conduct larger-scale and more specific research studies so as

to gain a better and more precise understanding of issues organized around housework and women's economic contribution through so-called "invisible" work. In addition, more research efforts are needed to develop or make up the deficiency in the existing theoretical system of measuring domestic labour. It is only through this renewed research agenda that the complete story regarding domestic labour will be fully explored, allowing a more comprehensive picture to emerge that will prove invaluable in informing future policy-making in this crucial area.

Conclusion

Vast changes in the society and economy of Vietnam are reflected in changing social norms. This research has revealed interesting and important gaps between the symbolic importance paid to the sharing of housework between the sexes and the actual division of responsibilities. Although much progress has been made in convincing people to give lip service to such equal sharing, less has happened in practice, and likely little has been understood to date in terms of the economic value of that housework.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to further understanding of the importance of women's unpaid work, as well as to data to support advocacy efforts to further improve the status of women in Vietnam.

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