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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

The Vietnamese Setting

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

The Concept of Childhood

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

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