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# Is It My Job to Make Him Care? Middle-Class Women and Gender Inequality in Ho Chi Minh City

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**Abstract**

Despite considerable material and social gains, urban middle-class women in turn of the 21st century Vietnam continued to face gender inequality. Although the nature of gender inequality had certainly changed in the preceding approximately two decades, it nonetheless continued to impact these women's lives, showing little or no sign of abating. Investigating these developments for more than a decade, the research upon which this article is based provides ethnographic evidence of the persistence of gender inequality, documenting the disproportionate share of work or burden with which middle-class women were shouldered. This burden came in three basic arenas: work outside the home, work inside the home, and sociocultural or symbolic work. Combined, these three pillars of inequality demonstrate that gender norms and expectations in Vietnam, while certainly not static, are best understood as a refashioned version of the longstanding imbalance between men and women in a society wherein healthy gender relations have remained at least partly illusive.

**Keywords:** gender inequality, social class, middle class, Vietnam work/labor

## Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City faced gender inequality that illustrates the intractability of the common and well-documented imbalance between men and women. This article reveals the nature of this persistence by analyzing three overlapping categories of work, or burden. Scholars recognize two types of burden these women encountered (Lamphere 1987; Hochschild and Machung 1989; In-Sook 1997) – both of which are shaped by the reality that "cultural systems give authority and [greater] value to the roles and activities of men" (Rosaldo 1974:19). On the one hand, Vietnamese middle-class women worked outside the home as much as if not more than middle-class men. Additionally, despite the increased use of domestic labor, these women also contributed considerably more time and energy in the domestic sphere, albeit in newly configured patterns. Combined, these formed the pillars of double-burden inequality similar to those observed by other scholars (Berk 1985; Gerson 1985; Lamphere 1987).

The third burden for urban middle-class Vietnamese women was shouldering a disproportionate share of the cultural or symbolic work required by the Vietnamese urban middle-class to create, maintain, and defend class-based identity boundaries. Identity processes associated with social class require sociocultural work (Liechty 2003; Lacy 2007); among the middle-class in Ho Chi Minh City, women were responsible for a greater share of this work. Although less tangible and sometimes less obvious, this third contributor to gender inequality in urban Vietnam nonetheless significantly impacted the lives of urban middle-class women. In this article, I describe the everyday experiences of middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City as they were impacted by work in three categories – work outside the home, work inside the home, and sociocultural or symbolic work.

My investigation into gender inequality in urban Vietnam began with 2 years of intensive ethnographic research between 2002 and 2004 that explored gender, social class, and consumerism in Ho Chi Minh City. Understandings that I gained during seven subsequent years of living, working, and continuing research in Ho Chi Minh City through the spring of 2011 augment the insights from this initial project. Most recently, I undertook a total of 10 weeks of research during the summers of 2012 and 2013. This broad time frame has allowed me to track the lives of 25 women and to gauge whether norms and patterns I observed in the early 2000s persisted or transformed. I have known many of the women whose lives I discuss here for more than a decade; I have followed important changes in their lives and listened as they reflected on these transitions. There was both continuity and change with regard to gender roles and the dynamics between men and women. The same applies to many more general aspects of social life that defined the global and historical context within which the profiles and stories I present here took place.

Ho Chi Minh City at the turn of the 21st century was challenging to capture in generalities. What it

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Figure 1. Gender and class on display in Ho Chi Minh City.



Figure 2. "Tiger Beer Girls" are lined up to greet customers at a restaurant.

meant to be an urban Vietnamese person at this juncture was, of course, determined by a host of factors and specificities. Even so, it is clear that consumer capitalism had taken hold as a powerful and relatively new force profoundly shaping life in the city. Middle-class women, for their part, were among the most thoroughly engaged in the processes associated with it. Careers in factory management, marketing events management, advertising, sales, and public relations, to name some of the most common, were opening up a host of new opportunities – and challenges – for a certain subsection of women. In line with the general increase in economic opportunity for women in urban Vietnam, such as assembly work in the garment sector for low-income women (Tran 2001; Nghiem 2002), such jobs were providing incomes for middle-class women that many had never expected to earn. These women also represented a growing population of middle-class consumers, who were gaining access to previously unavailable cultural forms that were shaping their lives in important ways (Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012; Earl 2014). Consumer society played a key role, moreover, in the growing importance of social performance in everyday life that was defining what it meant to be urban middle-class women (Goffman 1959; Leshkowich 2011) (Figure 1).

Within this sociocultural context, my ethnographic research indicates that middle-class women's struggles against gender inequality in Vietnam persisted, and the increased importance of consumerism and class hierarchy over the past approximately 20 years has added to the price urban middle-class women pay relative to their male counterparts to participate in urban middle-class life and culture. The nature of how gender inequality manifests in everyday life has certainly changed, but women's overall position and power relative to the men in their lives remained highly problematic. The stories and portraits I have collected indicate that middle-class women remained overburdened.

**The Political Economy of Gender Inequality**

Through the period of economic reform and integration into the global economy (starting in the early 1990s) and until the end of my research (the summer of 2013), Vietnamese women, in general, have faced a range of disadvantages.[1] Women have been half as likely as men to participate in the formal economy and have therefore disproportionately been denied access to salaried employment, pensions, paid leave, and other entitlements. There have also been gaps in earnings, educational attainment, corporate leadership, and political representation (Taylor 2004). Paid maternity leave has been reduced, and there has been discrimination against women regarding mandatory age of retirement. Growth resulting from reforms and globalization, furthermore, has also resulted in the increased commodification of women's bodies in media, advertising, and marketing (see Figure 2), but also through rises in prostitution, mistress arrangements, and sex-worker trafficking (Fahey 1998; Luong 2003; Hoang 2011).

Urban middle-class women's experiences with gender inequality were defined in no small part by their socioeconomic position. All of the women in my study worked outside the home. They were professional women, identifying as such, who worked in offices throughout the city in a wide range of sectors. Important to the analysis here, working in such positions was a defining feature of being middle-class women. It was a key feature of the norms and expectations associated with urban middle-class Vietnamese

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femininity. Considered from this perspective, the work middle-class women undertook outside the domestic sphere was an especially noteworthy aspect of their lived experience.

Phuong, for example, was married and had a 7-year-old daughter.[2] She was a midlevel manager for a manufacturing company located in an industrial park approximately 45 minutes from downtown Ho Chi Minh City. In our discussions, she talked often about being a mother, a wife, and a professional. After approximately half a dozen informal discussions, she invited me to visit her at her office. On my drive out that day through the throngs of motor scooters and screaming horns, I was reminded that Phuong made this grueling hour-long trip five evenings a week to study English at a language center located downtown, at the request of her foreign manager to improve her English skills. This was always after a full workday.

At her workplace, her roomy office and her large wooden desk evidenced her advancement within the company. She invited me to drink tea in the small lounge area located within her office. After several cups of tea and more than an hour of talking, I got up to use her private restroom and was struck by the number of toiletries: a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, large and small towels, multiple types of perfume, lipstick, and several other makeup items. As I made my way back to my seat, I joked with her about what I had seen:

> Rylan: It almost looks like you live here.
> Phuong: It often feels that way. I spend more time here than I do at home most weeks.
> Rylan: And the drive into town each day for class?
> Phuong: It is not the drive that is bad. I do not like that it takes so much time. It is time I could spend with my daughter.
> Rylan: It must be hard.
> Phuong: It is, but there are no options. I cannot quit. And I cannot go back down to my old position.
> Rylan: Why?
> Phuong: The money, but also the position. Around here [in urban Vietnam], nowadays people look down on it. If you step down from a position, it is the same as failing. It says you could not handle it. I would have to quit or just keep going.
> Rylan: And you're going to keep going?
> Phuong: For now.

Phuong's work life and comments about it reflect one of the dominant themes from my research. Middle-class women regularly pointed to high expectations and corresponding levels of stress related to their jobs. Some got calls from clients at three in the morning. Others worked under great pressure to complete tasks under unreasonable deadlines or had to sacrifice important aspects of life such as participating in death anniversary ceremonies for family members because of work commitments.[3] Most women I knew commonly worked 50 hours per week and some weeks many women worked more than 60 hours. In short, middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City who were trying to maintain or further develop their careers committed tremendous amounts of time and energy to accomplishing these goals. This constantly resulted in sacrificing other aspects of their life, mostly notable family commitments.

Middle-class women were earning more than they ever had; many were making two or three times what their parents were earning. Yet the majority were also always pining for advancement within their current company or looking for better paying or higher-ranking positions in others. As Van, who worked in advertising, explained over coffee one day, "You can always make yourself better. There is always a better job that pays more." Despite the stressfulness of this environment, the women I knew were not looking for this to change. They often pointed to these pressures as affecting them negatively, but they did not necessarily argue that things should be different. The pressures were signs of progress, in their minds, and thus were not ultimately viewed as problematic.

In considering the professional domain of these women's lives, a number of points are worth considering. Although reliance on it has continued in the somewhat recent past (Bradley and Khor 1993), the efficacy of Michelle Rosaldo's (1974) domestic–public dichotomy has been questioned by many (Nelson 1974; Driessen 1983) – including Rosaldo (1980) herself. In short, understandings derived from the idea that women's disadvantages stem largely from being relegated to the domestic sphere regularly do not match with the lived experiences of women. This was true in urban Vietnam. The women participating in my study were fully engaged in the public domain. They were interacting directly with relatively powerful individuals and institutions in both government and corporate spheres. Indeed, some were brokers in what has been described elsewhere as the collusion between private wealth and public officials (Harms 2012). In fact, I argue that their active and stressful roles in the public domain, alongside their roles in other domains, created overburdened lives – disproportionately so relative to the men in their lives.

Such observations, then, rest at least somewhat uncomfortably next to the results of recent quantitative studies suggesting that gender inequality across the globe is decreasing (Jackson 1998; Blau et al. 2006; Paxton et al. 2006; Dorius and Firebaugh 2010). These studies attempt to measure gender inequality using various social indices or welfare indicators, and, although they reveal somewhat variable

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outcomes, the trend they suggest is rather unequivocal: gender relations and women's lives appear to be improving. The research I report here does not so much contradict these claims, but it does call into question what such studies reveal about the realities and challenges women face day-to-day. Such realities and challenges, I argue, are not well understood when researchers rely solely or even primarily on statistical data, such as that generated by various United Nations studies, for example. The women in my research did not lack access to education or capital or even political power (when compared with the men in their lives, that is); however, they nonetheless experienced gender inequality at levels that indicate something other than improved gender relations was afoot. This was especially apparent in the domestic sphere.

**Inequality in the Domestic Sphere**

Middle-class women in Vietnam tended to separate the issues that defined their lives into two broad categories. "Work" referred to labor outside the home, which came with the challenges mentioned earlier. "Family" encompassed a range of activities and issues within the domestic sphere. In gender studies, scholars point to the reality that many women who work outside the home are faced with a double burden because they are also expected to assume the primary role regarding various forms of domestic work, such as taking care of children, cooking, and cleaning the home (Lamphere 1987; Hochschild and Machung 1989; In-Sook 1997). The lives of Vietnamese middle-class women were no exception. Although specific issues varied according to life circumstances, all of the women in my study had something problematic to report in this arena.

As middle-class women negotiated the allocation of work associated with the home and childcare with husbands, they were increasingly aware that gender inequality remained a defining feature of their lives. It is important to highlight that these struggles took place within a sociocultural environment wherein extended family, society, and the state all continued to strongly emphasize the role of women as being primarily responsible for nurturing and maintaining a happy family. Longstanding norms regarding gender roles, while certainly not static, were changing slowly. Considerable historical continuity defined the expectations that people throughout and beyond urban Vietnam had on Vietnamese women as caretakers within their families (Goodkind 1995; Le 1996; Luong 2003; Pettus 2003). Middle-class women, in addition to working long hours outside the home, were experiencing a host of challenges in the domestic sphere.

Linh's experience is telling of these struggles. She was in her 40s. She owned and operated a small and successful business in the heart of the city. We met and began talking about her life in the fall of 2002. During our most recent discussion in the summer of 2013, she expressed her discontent in terms of how her marriage and her expectations of it had changed over 13 years. It was clear that the arrangement she thought she entered with her husband when they were first married in 2000 had changed – for the worse. Back in 2000 and for a short period thereafter, she believed that she had married someone who would not support what she considered common gender-role patterns in Vietnam wherein women were expected to do the majority or even all of the domestic work. She believed that he would share both decision-making power and various responsibilities around their home, and at first, he did. This began to change. Patterns in line with Linh's expectations of other Vietnamese men accelerated rapidly soon after their first of two children was born. At first, she was surprised, and eventually very disappointed, both in him and in herself for having believed in a "fairy tale" – her word for the belief that her life would be different than her mother's life when it came to gender relations. "My life is so different from that fairy tale," she noted.

Though Linh told me several stories of her husband failing to live up to her expectations, certain aspects struck Linh as the most problematic. She became visibly upset when she spoke of them. These had to do with her two children and her husband's role in raising them (*cham soc tre*), or lack thereof. In our most recent discussion in 2013, Linh confided in me that she was not comfortable leaving her children alone with her husband for any length of time. She was not afraid of abuse, or even of the children's general safety, necessarily. It was clear to her, however, that her husband was incapable of parenting. He did not know how to play with their children; he lacked strategies for dealing with fights between them; he did not know their favorite activities or foods; he could not put the youngest down for his nap. The list went on.

As she described her husband's role in the raising of their children, it became clear that he was a bystander. Neither of the children liked being left alone with their father, and Linh was certain that long periods of time alone with him were not good for her children's development. He, Linh claimed, was more than happy to not shoulder this burden; she was convinced that he was purposely not developing parenting skills as part of a strategy to avoid having to contribute. For her part, Linh had resigned to not push for his greater involvement. She was convinced that doing so would require more effort on her behalf, and more stress, than allowing things to continue as they were. The couple had hired a domestic child-care worker (a nanny), and Linh preferred that the nanny care for her children when she could not.

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Reliance on nannies became common among middle-class households during the time of my study, and they presented another arena within which middle-class women contributed much more than their husbands, as Linh's experience demonstrates. In addition to his inability and unwillingness to directly parent, Linh's husband was almost entirely uninvolved in the oversight or management of the nanny, who cared for the couple's children on a daily basis while they worked and during evenings and weekends when the couple socialized without their children. According to Linh, her husband was unconcerned about this aspect of their life, and his apathy meant she had to shoulder this burden alone. "He has told me many times that it is better for me to worry about things like this [the nanny], because he does not understand what I want. He is supposed to want something too, to want good things for our children," Linh exclaimed in a tone that demonstrated how deeply this bothered her.

For Linh, hiring a nanny was a sacrifice, one that she was willing to make, but one that nonetheless caused her considerable emotional strain. Was her career worth it? Were her children learning "backward" ways from their nanny, given the caretaker's rural low-income background? Was there any way to know what was going on when they were not home? Were the children watching too much television? Linh worried about all of these things, and her husband appeared as though he did not. She had attempted to talk to him about these issues, but he was almost never willing to fully engage in such conversations. As she explained to me, "He always has something more important to do, more important to him. Soccer [on television] is more important than his children? Or he had a long day. My days are long too! And they do not end when I get home."

Linh felt strongly that, as parents, she and her husband needed to remain as in control as possible of their children's lives. "You hire someone to take care of your children, but you then have to be a parent for that person. She is young. She is from the countryside. It is like you have a third child taking care of the [two] younger children. He [her husband] does not understand this, or he pretends not to, so that he does not have to deal with the problems." Linh said that she argued with the nanny multiple times most weeks. These arguments were rarely over major issues, but combined they took their toll, and Linh shouldered this burden with virtually no help from her husband. "I want him to care about our family, but how do I make him care? Is it my job to make him care?" she explained in frustration.

All of the mothers who participated in my study had concerns regarding their husbands' roles in caring for their children. A few women were dealing with somewhat less problematic situations than Linh, but they nonetheless regularly had to confront the reality that their husbands were less committed to parenting than they were. I also heard stories of husbands fully neglecting children, by, for example, leaving children under 1 year of age home alone while running an errand. One woman explained that her husband simply did not know that this constituted neglect. "I could not believe it, but I do not think he knew it was wrong. That is how little he knew [about parenting]. After I found out, he admitted he had done it before!" she exclaimed. In one case, a woman divorced her husband because he had become physically abusive after several intense verbal fights over what she perceived to be his lack of care for their daughter.

Childcare was not the only arena within which middle-class women faced challenges. The domestic sphere was also challenging when it came to *viec nha*, or housework. This was the case for married and unmarried women alike. Single women who lived with extended family, for example, were still responsible for cooking and taking care of the family home, whereas fathers and male siblings were typically not. If other women in the household did not work full-time outside of the home, then often women who did were excused from most housework, but this, too, could prove problematic. As Thien, a mid-level factory manager who often worked 60 hours per week, explained to me, "My father tells me all the time that my sister-in-law is doing my share of the house work. He jokes, but he means it. And he does not do this with my brother, who works [outside the home] less than I do and does nothing around the house."

A growing number of families employed domestic laborers and this significantly reduced the amount of physical work that women working outside the home were expected to do (Nguyen 2015), but, in ways similar to the issues faced by working mothers who hired nannies, such arrangements came with challenges and duties for middle-class women. As discussed by Sara Dickey (2000), the introduction of class-other women as domestic workers into households meant that someone had to manage the work and the behavior of these workers. All domestic workers were women; most were young with rural low-income backgrounds.

These women needed to provide services that matched the sensibilities of urban middle-class families (Nguyen 2015), and once they were trained according to these prescripts, they needed to be policed, often on a daily basis. As Ngoc, a receptionist at a large foreign bank, explained, "Men do not do this either. It is our [women's] responsibility for training and watching over workers, and not men's. So, yes, there is less [physical] work, but we still have to take care of everything in the house. Back when we first

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hired our maid, there were days when I thought it would be easier to do the cleaning myself." Middle-class men were mostly uninvolved in this managerial work.

Furthermore, young rural women also presented moral challenges to households. Middle-class women believed that they were responsible for the well-being and safety of domestic workers. They felt they needed to control domestic workers almost as they would their own children, especially when it came to behaviors that could be morally worrisome. Sexuality was among the most common concerns. This added a new responsibility to the household taken on primarily by women.

Thuy was in marketing and lived at home with her parents. She explained to me, "My mother and I feel like it is our responsibility if our house cleaner goes with boys. She [the domestic worker] is only 16, and we do not want her dating. She will start having sex. We will be responsible for that." Young domestic workers were vulnerable, in need of protection from an urban environment that, according to middle-class women, young domestic workers could not negotiate on their own. These attitudes mirrored those reported among factory managers in the garment industry wherein young unmarried rural women were deemed susceptible to "modern life" (Nghiem 2002). A domestic worker that encountered problems, furthermore, reflected badly on the middle-class household. Families had a *moral* responsibility to keep domestic staff safe, from both physical harm and so-called social evils.[4] Middle-class women were the primary providers of this protection.

Though considered vulnerable in these ways, young rural women were also threatening. Specifically, in some households middle-class women had to mitigate the potential for sexual relations between young female domestic workers and middle-class men. Some women talked about these problems as they affected friends or neighbors; one woman spoke about them in her own household. There were various ways of handling such situations.

Women could selectively hire older rural women as domestic workers whenever this was possible, but this was challenging because fewer older women were looking for this kind of work, and because it made training and managing female domestic workers more difficult. Young rural women were easier to discipline, and thus more desirable. Another solution was simply to fire domestic staff when middle-class women were concerned that sexual behavior was occurring or might be likely to occur. This meant that an otherwise competent and trained domestic worker had to be replaced, which meant finding and training someone else. Both of these solutions thus created more work for middle-class women, who recognized that men's actual or potential sexual behavior came with repercussions for women.

Interacting with families in Ho Chi Minh City for nearly a decade confirmed the stories I heard from middle-class women. For approximately 1 year, I rented a bedroom in the home of a middle-class family. Their live-in domestic worker was a young rural woman who presented a host of concerns for the family. This most commonly had to do with her desires to leave the house. The wife/mother of the household wanted the young woman in the house anytime the family was gone, and she was never supposed to go out late at night, for her own safety. I witnessed dozens of confrontations over this issue. The young woman was also regularly scolded for not performing her job properly. It was clear that the wife/mother, who worked 50 or more hours per week outside the home, was responsible for all matters related to their domestic worker – a pattern I observed when visiting other homes.

Another telling example involved Cuong, an educator in Ho Chi Minh City, and his family. We had known each other for about a year when he invited me to coffee with the specific intent of introducing me to his 3-year-old son. When I arrived, Cuong brought his son around the table so I could greet him. For this interaction, he was an attentive father, introducing us and trying to convince his son to speak to me in English. Although his son never did muster the courage, it was nonetheless an endearing few minutes of interacting between the three of us.

Cuong's wife, on the other hand, was mostly a bystander during this introduction; Cuong actually never did introduce his wife to me. I eventually initiated an exchange of names with her – her name was Hien – and then we ordered drinks and started talking. Cuong dominated the couple's side of the conversation, explaining the particulars of his son's English language education and more. Hien sat without much of a chance to speak. As Cuong was talking, his son got up from the table to explore the courtyard of the café. He walked around, grabbing plant leaves and shuffling through a rack of magazines.

Hien was mid sentence – it had been her first opportunity to participate in our conversation – when Cuong noticed that their son was approaching a fountain in the middle of the café. Cuong interrupted Hien before she completed her thought, indicating she needed to tend to their son, which she did. Hien spent the rest of our stay looking after their son while Cuong and I talked and drank our drinks. Hien never came back to the table. Her drink sat on the table nearly full, ice cubes melted, as we paid the bill and headed to a nearby shopping center, where a similar pattern persisted. Hien seemed to be there to facilitate Cuong's outing, taking care of their son when Cuong was

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otherwise occupied and getting a break only when Cuong had something fun he wanted to do with his son.

Such interactions were common when I socialized with middle-class families both in their homes and in public. It was common for husbands to actively parent during the first few minutes of an interaction. Men were keen to introduce their children, often encouraging them to practice their English. Once this initial stage was over, however, the more everyday aspects of childcare were passed on to wives. Depending on the length of a visit, there were often intermittent episodes wherein a father showcased something else about a child – their musical talents or some cute behavior. Once this had been accomplished, the husband would again disengage from parenting, often quite quickly. My outing with Cuong and many other interactions demonstrated that wives were primarily responsible for childcare while husbands typically played the less burdensome and less time consuming, but nonetheless more venerated, role of displayers of children. Husbands, moreover, typically made the decisions about how these interactions played out.

**The Burden of Sociocultural Work**

Pierre Bourdieu argues that:

> A class or a class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production . . . [but also] by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated. (Bourdieu 1984:108)

For more than a decade, I have investigated the tacit requirements associated with middle-class life in Ho Chi Minh City, as they have functioned to either include or exclude beliefs, practices, and values as part of that identity. Much sociocultural work has gone into maintaining middle-class identity in urban Vietnam, and women clearly have shouldered a disproportionate share of this burden.

Borrowing heavily from Mark Liechty (2003), I argue that *middle-class culture* is best understood as a *sociocultural project* wherein class, gender, and consumerism are interactive and mutually constitutive. In Ho Chi Minh City, this project encompassed a wide range of beliefs and behaviors that allowed middle-class people to define social and moral boundaries, inclusive of all who could afford to perform "themselves in to cultural existence" (Liechty 2003:265). The project was also profoundly exclusionary with regard to those who could not perform accordingly – that is, class others.

In considering Vietnamese middle-class femininity, conceptualizing class and gender as a project entails a broadening of West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion, now nearly classic, that people *do* gender more than they *are* a gender. The concept of a social *process* does capture some aspects of middle-class femininity, precisely because it is dynamic and never complete. However, the notion of a *project* is essential. As the term implies, making middle-class femininity required sociocultural work. It had to be accomplished through effort. It had to be negotiated, as economic situations were evolving and social norms were being reevaluated. These were not merely processes that happened, but social actions that middle-class women carried out.

Middle-class women strove to construct and maintain a middle ground, a sociocultural space of their own that located them in contradistinction to class others. This *middleness* (Liechty 2003), furthermore, was defined in both cultural and moral terms. Occupying the middle meant being neither too traditional nor too modern, neither too local nor too global. It meant that one was supposed to behave like she was neither elite nor poor. This middle ground was rationalized as being the most appropriate social space, culturally and morally. Beliefs and behaviors outside this *middleness* were both culturally distinct and morally compromised.

Interactions and discussions with middle-class women in my study demonstrated that they were disproportionately burdened in this arena like they were with regard to other forms of work in homes and offices. Conversations highlighted how middle-class women had to participate in this sociocultural or symbolic work more regularly, more earnestly, and with more at stake, when compared with the men in their lives.

Hanh was one of the most fashion-conscious women I knew. When I first met her in 2003, she had been working in marketing events management for three years. Her appearance always suggested that she put a lot of thought into the clothes she wore and the image she presented. Conversations with her (and many other women) revealed that, while there was no clear middle-class dress code, there was a set of shifting and ambiguous rules that guided middle-class women's decision about how to dress. Hanh's thoughts on low-rise jeans represent a telling example of the need to strike a balance between being too traditional and too modern.

This style of jeans rides low on the hip, and by 2004, throughout Ho Chi Minh City, women wearing them were relatively common sights. Hanh had decided to wear low-rise jeans, but avoided those that sat "too low." While trying to explain "too low" to me, Hanh subtly pointed to another woman sitting two tables over, with her back to us. Her jeans sat low enough to expose her buttocks and underwear. Hanh

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explained: "That shows too much. I would never wear those. It is not polite. Look how much everyone can see."

The pair of jeans that Hanh was wearing, however, sat perhaps only one inch higher on her hips. To be clear, Hanh's underwear was not exposed, nor was as much of her buttocks as the other woman. Even so, her jeans exposed more of her body than the jeans of several other women in the café. Referencing Hanh's jeans and those of the woman she had pointed out, I asked whether there was really that big of a difference. For Hanh, there was a world of difference. In a hushed, now serious tone, Hanh made this clear:

> There is a big difference. My jeans show a little, which is in style, but hers show too much. She looks like a prostitute. I am sorry, but it is true. Look at her. For Vietnamese women, it is too much. Her jeans show too much. People will think that she is not a good girl.

Middle-class women regularly had to negotiate decisions about how to participate in "modern" fashion trends, constantly pushing the proverbial envelope, without fully transgressing expectations regarding how "virtuous" Vietnamese women display their bodies. One's dress could be "too showy" or "too sexy," and this meant putting oneself at risk of moral compromise. Such efforts were part of the larger project of middle-class identity construction wherein sociocultural performance played a key role. In short, there was a fine line between acting (and dressing) in ways that could be interpreted as abandoning one's Vietnamese-ness, which was something middle-class people accused the rich of doing. This was a much bigger concern for women than it was for men.

Middle-class people also avoided performances they associated with class others at the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum. In essence, this was to avoid looking poor or too traditional, especially in public. When it came to dress, this was especially important for women. Middle-class women avoided wearing clothing that they associated with rural or low-income lifestyles. They avoided conical hats and "peasant pajamas," for example, precisely because they signified the presumed backwardness associated with rural and low-income women. The Vietnamese term *nha que* expresses this rural backwardness, and was used commonly by middle-class women to describe many non-middle-class cultural forms, including someone's physical appearance.

Certain behaviors were *nha que*. Toothpicks, appearing on nearly every table at restaurants in Vietnam and used commonly after meals, illustrate how this was often highly gendered and class based. Middle-class men used toothpicks with little regard for the image their actions presented to the person sitting opposite them. With their mouth open wide, they worked on their teeth without discretion, often sucking the food they had dislodged from their teeth off the toothpick. In short, middle-class men seemed unconcerned what this practice communicated. I regularly observed lower-income women use toothpicks in a broadly similar manner.

When middle-class women used toothpicks, on the other hand, they were careful to open their mouths only enough to insert a toothpick; they almost always covered their mouths with one hand, maneuvering the toothpick with the other, allowing the person on the other side of the table to see little. Women and men explained this difference as being in line with other gender-based double standards in Vietnam. Nguyen-Marshall et al. (2012:20) demonstrate convincingly that middle-class women were considered the "heroes of modernization" and the "symbols of middle-class values." When I sat with them at dinner tables throughout Ho Chi Minh City, I thus observed that middle-class women were expected to uphold prescribed notions of purity and beauty. Neither middle-class men nor low-income women seemed to be similarly burdened this way.

Nose picking provides another example. Like toothpick use, nose picking was also very common in Vietnam. It was especially common among men, of all class backgrounds, but also among many lower-income women. I regularly saw people picking their nose without regard for what other people might think. On more than one occasion early in my study, while interviewing middle-class men, I became quite distracted by how openly, and for how long they would undertake this activity. It did not take me long to learn that this was clearly normal behavior, and I soon became accustomed to it. Most middle-class women, on the other hand, were careful not to pick their noses so openly, especially in public. When a middle-class woman did, it was not uncommon for another woman (a friend or relative) to discretely remind her not to, while pointing to the practice as backward.

The most dramatic ethnographic encounter along these lines happened at a group dinner celebrating the birthday of a study participant. I was sitting at the end of the table, across from one woman, and next to a second woman at the head of the table. At one point, the woman at the head of the table, after apparently noticing something in the nostril of the woman sitting across from me, reached over to remove it with her own finger. The woman sitting across from me, whom I knew quite well, became visibly upset and embarrassed. A few minutes of awkwardness ensued as she scolded her friend. Later in the meal, she explained that this was common for her and her friends when they were young, but that it was now impolite, not appropriate for professional women. It

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highlighted that middle-class women were executing restraint when working to achieve the so-called civilized elegance expected of someone of their class and gender.

For many middle-class women, riding a motorcycle also involved a social performance of elegance signifying gender- and class-based distinction. Whereas the two performances just described required only momentary restraint, riding a motorcycle involved a more sustained performance, one lasting the entire length of a ride. Yet the posture that middle-class women held while riding appeared to come almost effortlessly. Despite the distinct deportment involved, the positions and poise middle-class women maintained on motorcycles seemed almost "natural."

The streets of Ho Chi Minh City were heavily congested; the vast majority of the traffic was motorcycle traffic. Nearly all middle-class people spent many hours per week riding motorcycles that, as Allison Truitt (2008) shows, were markers of class mobility – one of the many props in the performance of middle-class culture. It is not surprising then that there also was something significant about the *manner* in which middle-class women rode motorcycles. If the self that middle-class women presented to others was important, and I am arguing that it was, why would this have been any different while atop one's motorcycle, where the self was commonly highly visible?

The way many lower-income women rode motorcycles differed noticeably from how middle-class women did. When I suggested this to the middle-class women in my study they typically agreed, labeling women who rode their bikes a certain way: *cong nhan* (worker) or even *nguoi ngheo* (poor). On several occasions, while sitting in outdoor sections of cafes, I would watch the traffic scene with middle-class women and ask them to show me what they meant. According to middle-class logic, some women riding by were clearly middle class. Others were clearly not, because they rode in a style that middle-class women often described as *nha que*. Discussions about what we saw indicated that middle-class women did not necessarily mean to imply that these class-other women were poverty stricken or destitute. They simply were not participating in the same lifestyle as middle-class women, and this was obvious from how one rode a motorcycle – among a host of other everyday elements of performance.

In Figure 3, a woman is straddling her motorcycle, with both legs around the side. Her knees are spread wide, her arms are bowed with the elbows out somewhat, and she appears to grip the handlebars firmly. In short, she looks to be handling her bike with a certain pragmatic fortitude. She appears to be worrying about the basket she is carrying between her legs and the traffic around her more than she is about how she looks. It is entirely possible that she is presenting a self to those around her, but if she is, she is presenting an altogether different self than that presented by middle-class women when they ride their motorcycles.



Figure 3. Example of non-middle-class riding style.



Figure 4. Example of middle-class riding style.

In Figure 4, the woman is dressed differently than the first woman, and her motorcycle likely is a slightly more expensive and newer model. As importantly, her riding style is quite distinct from the woman in Figure 3. She is not straddling her motorcycle so much as she is perched somewhat gracefully atop it. Her knees nearly touch in the space between the handlebars and the seat, rather than jutting out from her bike. Her elbows are also drawn in, so her arms curve in toward her body, extending to the handlebars, where her hands, of course, grip the handlebar, but not before her wrists bend quite

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noticeably, suggesting a somewhat delicate embrace of her bike. Significantly, the wrists of the man on the motorcycle behind her are straight, conveying a firmer, perhaps more masculine grip on the controls of his bike. As I saw it expressed on motorcycles in Ho Chi Minh City, middle-class femininity aligned with Helle Rydstrom's (2003) historical discussion explaining how morally appropriate behavior for women in Vietnam has long been defined, embodied, and evaluated according to expectations requiring grace, nimbleness, and ultimately accommodation.

Though gender relations were experiencing some positive changes, scholars reported profound tensions over protecting the image and chastity of women within an urban environment wherein women's bodies were increasingly commodified and wherein it was widely known that men were increasingly buying sex from women prostitutes (Gammeltoft 2003; Nguyen 2007). My discussions with both sexes revealed a variety of double standards along these lines. Thus, continuing a long history wherein women were expected to conform to higher moral standards when it came to nearly all matters of the body, there was more at stake during postprandial toothpick activity and when riding to work for women than there was for men.

As Ashley Pettus (2003) convincingly demonstrates, the state has made more than a few attempts to influence the kind of women Vietnamese society produces. Much of the popular media and government policy deployed in these efforts have presented idealized and contradictory images of women that align with observations that I made while documenting the role that women have played in maintaining middle-class culture in Ho Chi Minh City. If the project I have partially described earlier required symbolic labor, Vietnamese women undertook this work in an environment wherein the state, as Pettus (2003) makes clear, tried to orchestrate social life toward the goal of promoting the state's idealized version of womanhood, which itself, of course, has changed over time to some degree, but which has also been marked by considerable continuity. Somewhat older expectations emphasized hard work (especially in the domestic sphere), modesty (e.g., in dress), sexual restraint, and sacrifice. More recently, the state has also emphasized the need for the country's women to be "modern" or technologically and intellectually sophisticated. Importantly, for middle-class women, the modern has not replaced the traditional, but has instead been layered onto previous norms.

As Ann Marie Leshkowich (2012:95) describes, middle-class Vietnamese women "present themselves and their families in modern, attractive ways, while avoiding displays that might seem decadent, crass or inappropriate." Accordingly, the women in my study felt great pressure to behave, dress, and talk in particular ways. Much of this was connected to consumption and fashion. It was, for example, not only important to be knowledgeable regarding the latest fashion trends, but also to know where in Ho Chi Minh City one could find trusted vendors that carried the necessary clothing items of a price and a quality that allowed middle-class women to incorporate them into their wardrobe. These women also felt compelled to maintain slim body types and show constraint in what they ate, while they walked the thin line between presenting themselves as sexy enough, but not too sexy. As one scholar explains, maintaining this middle ground was about "out-whoring" prostitutes without being recognized as doing so (Nguyen-vo 2008:213). Significantly, middle-class Vietnamese masculinity, while also an effort in social performance, required much less work along these lines.

**Discussion**

My purpose here has not been to argue the existence of the Vietnamese middle class; others have already done so convincingly (King et al. 2008; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012; Earl 2014). Rather, my goal has been to interrogate the meaning of its existence, specifically with regard to the lived experiences of women who identify with and participate in urban middle-class culture. My primary conclusion is both straightforward and rather troubling: despite a variety of material and social gains, urban middle-class women continued to encounter and live with gender inequality that showed few signs of abating. The nature and shape of gender inequality had been changing, but it remained a powerful and negative impact on these women. The impact varied according to each woman's life circumstance and personal response to it, but the persistence of gender inequality appeared to be broad.

I am also not arguing here that urban middle-class men in Vietnam had it easy, so to speak. On the one hand, I agree with feminist scholars such as hooks (2000) who point out that maintaining the apparatuses of patriarchal systems is work that comes with its own negative effects. This was occasionally revealed when I spoke with middle-class men Ho Chi Minh City. These men, moreover, were also burdened by trying to uphold their portion of the impressions that needed to be projected in the ongoing project to produce and maintain middle-class culture and masculinity. Even so, although they did not necessarily live worry-free or leisurely lives; I am arguing here that men undertook considerably less work in all three of the categories I have discussed in this article when compared with the efforts of middle-class women. Men clearly were less burdened than women.

As I reflect on these three types of burden in their contemporary context, I am struck by how they

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parallel the much older *four virtues* and *three obediences* of the Confucian moral code intended to control the behavior of Vietnamese women. The virtues, as Thi Ngan Binh Ngo (2004) explains, consist of labor, appearance, speech, and behavior; the obediences, according to Rydstrom (2003), are to one's father before marriage, to one's husband after marriage, and to one's eldest son when widowed. While it is certainly true that the contemporary sociocultural context allows for greater flexibility with regard to these Confucian norms, which could be defined as traditional forms of subjugation (Schuler et al. 2006), the three burdens as I have exposed them in this ethnographic account suggest strongly that traditional expectations have not been replaced so much as they have been transformed and expressed in both class-specific and historically specific ways. In this light, the three burdens of modern middle-class Vietnamese femininity can be seen as an adaptation of older gender norms, while to some degree also sitting along-side them.

The Vietnamese middle-class women in my study, for their part, appeared quite aware that some things indeed seemed not to have changed much at all. As a consequence, they were disillusioned and disappointed, and also sometimes angry or sad. As importantly, they were exhausted, because, as I hope this analysis has made clear, they were overworked and overburdened. The burdens they undertook came in many forms. There was physical work, mental work, emotional work, and sociocultural work. Caring about someone (e.g., a child) or something (e.g., a clean house) took energy, especially when done with little or no help from husbands. Shouldering the lion's share of the heavy burden require to maintain the middle class's (if not the entire country's) symbolic and moral worth, moreover, required considerable energy and time. In determining the overall well-being of Vietnam's middle-class women, it is essential to conceptualize work as encompassing these multiple types of burden. We otherwise only partially understand women's lives and are thus likely to misunderstand the nature of gender inequality in contemporary urban Vietnam.

One of the more ubiquitous sights in Ho Chi Minh City is that of the street-side coffee stall. To visit one early on nearly any morning, significantly, is to witness one of the key leisure spaces that men have carved out as their own. Importantly, I know of no such space for urban middle-class women in Vietnam. Shortly after driving past such a stall, where a dozen or so middle-class men drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, one would likely encounter a primary school, where mostly mothers (or nannies) and only a very few men drop young children off at school. Indeed, the gender imbalance in Ho Chi Minh City is often quite visible. Although I would very much like to find a way to think about such juxtapositions positively and to interpret the various material gains middle-class women in urban Vietnam have made as progress overall, I am more than a little hesitant to do so. Perhaps things are simply changing too slowly to see them in real ethnographic time; perhaps these women just need to wait for economic prosperity to usher in the gender equality they await. Nothing in my research suggests this is likely, however, and I am left considering the possibility that gender relations are not moving toward greater equality, despite the hard work and earnest expectations of Vietnam's middle-class women.

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## Notes

1 I refer here to the early 1990s as the beginning of significant socioeconomic changes for ordinary people in Vietnam even though reforms started as early as 1979. Reforms, however, including those associated with the 1986 *Doi Moi* policies, were slow in producing change. The lifting of the U.S. embargo in 1994, furthermore, was as least as significant in impacting people's lives.

2 Phuong, like all names in this article, is a pseudonym.

3 Ancestral worship is important to the vast majority of Vietnamese people, and death anniversary ceremonies for deceased relatives are an essential part of the way that people honor their ancestors.

4 In the Vietnamese context, "social evil" refers to a wide range of behaviors considered either illegal or morally wrong or both, such as drug use, gambling, and prostitution. The state has a bureau designated solely to the prevention of such behaviors, which it sees in part as a byproduct of Vietnam's increased exposure to the West via globalization.

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