Title of Thesis

Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam: a qualitative examination of social stigma, the need for schooling, and government support

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Author's declaration

This thesis results from research completed as a PhD Candidate in the School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University. The research was approved by the Western Sydney University Human Ethics Committee, and my candidature was funded through a joint Western Sydney University and Vietnam International Education Development Research Scholarship (VIED).

The thesis has been subject to professional copyediting (used to detect minor typographical, formatting, and stylistic errors), which was completed by Dr Elena Knox at Rhubarb Academic editing. I, however, take full responsibility for the thesis contents, which remains the product of my own, original work.

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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List of Abbreviations

FST	Feminist Standpoint Theory
PRP	Poverty Reduction Program
VWU	Vietnamese Women's Union

Abstract

In the last three decades, an increase in the number of single mothers in Vietnam has attracted the attention of scholars. Researchers have largely focussed on difficulties faced by single mothers living in a society driven by patriarchal values, with limited support from the government. Few studies have considered the wider social, political, and cultural factors that may influence single mothers and their children, such as expectations placed upon them by their extended families, the role of government policies, or the activities of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU).

In response to the gap in literature, this qualitative study examines the lived experiences of a sample of single mothers in Northern Vietnam, with the secondary aim of providing a corroborated voice to staff members of local branches of the VWU. Using feminist standpoint theory and triangulation of research methods, it considers familial, societal, political, and cultural factors impacting the lives of single mothers and their children in Vietnam. The thesis aims to inform government and VWU policies, allowing these to address more effectively some of the challenges faced by the growing number of single mothers in Northern Vietnam.

Findings show that single mothers and their children frequently encounter social stigma in Northern Vietnam, which can be largely attributed to the mothers' single status (be they widowed, never married, or divorced). While the study's research participants (single mothers) employ different strategies to cope with stigma, one attribute they have in common is striving to be self-sufficient and to provide well for their children. To this end, they invest large amounts of their time and income on their children's education despite the mental, physical, and emotional toll these activities place on them personally. These mothers do so in anticipation that their "sacrifices" will result in better educational outcomes for their children, thereby improving their children's social and economic status, and resulting in the children better supporting their mothers in old age. Participants report that support from the government and VWU is in many cases limited and does not always meet their needs. Consequently, single-

mother families commonly rely on their extended families for assistance. This assistance is often their primary form of support, and is typically financial, taking the form of housing and/or providing childcare.

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 The story of my family

My mother, a single mother for twenty-nine years now, inspired this research. My father was killed in a car accident in 1993, at the age of 34, leaving my mother to bring up two young children on her own. I was just eight years old, and my brother six, when this tragedy occurred. We lived in a remote village in Hai Phong, a province on the north coast of Vietnam.

My father had been the major breadwinner not only for our nuclear family, but also for my paternal grandmother who lived with us. She herself had been a single mother of six children and unable to work for many years due to osteoarthritis. After my father died, my mother had to take responsibility as the only financial provider for the family. Biannually, after the two main harvest seasons, my mother would get casual employment as a cleaner, or a goods carrier, not only to earn sufficient income to support the family, but also to deal with the pain of losing her husband. The image of my mother wearing her old work clothes, standing near the well in the backyard, crying and totally exhausted after returning from work, remains engraved in my mind.

My mother experienced a deep sense of insecurity during her thirties. As a young widow living with an old, dominating mother-in-law and small children, she experienced unpleasant, challenging times and even physical violence that she had never encountered when my father was alive. She was exploited at work, thieves broke into our house several times and, worst of all, she was sexually abused by a man living next door. My mother kept the sexual abuse secret because she felt ashamed, scared, and helpless. It was a tough time and she even contemplated suicide. Only the responsibility for her two young children prevented her from doing so. Subsequently, my mother sold our house and we moved to the centre of Hai Phong where, at the age of 42, my mother started working in a construction material trading company. Thanks to her sacrifices, my brother and I have both received a good education and live a good life

today. My mother is happy now, living near my brother, enjoying her old age with her grandchildren and her friends.

As a child of a single mother, I experienced many difficulties. During our childhoods, my little brother and I often went hungry as my mother did not have enough money to buy food. Our teachers often complained about overdue tuition fees in front of other students in our classes. However, the financial difficulties we encountered seem insignificant when compared to the mental effects of social stigma, which resulted in bad behaviour during our teenage years. Most of the time when we made mistakes, we were blamed for being '*con không cha'* – children growing up without a father. Those harsh words gradually contributed to us becoming stubborn, rebellious teenagers. We took part in fighting at school and in our neighbourhood. We played truant, and when I was in Year Eight, I would have been expelled for fighting had my mother not begged the Principal to allow me to continue my education. Everything changed one evening when my mother told us about the abuse she had suffered at the hands of the neighbour, her suicidal thoughts, her worries about our future, and her love for us. At that time, I realised what an ungrateful child I had been, and we decided to move to the city centre to start a new life.

My mother's life and my childhood experiences have encouraged me to reflect on single motherhood in Vietnam and the fact that many Vietnamese single mothers confront challenges and troubles that married women may not encounter. As a mother myself, I have great sympathy for mothers who have found themselves in similar situations to my mother. The primary aims of my research are to gain further understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers in Vietnam and the everyday troubles they encounter, and to identify aspects of their lives where external support can be provided.

1.2 Brief overview of the situation of single mothers in different parts of the world

This section will provide a brief insight into some of the challenges and issues faced by single mothers in different parts of the world. The number of single mothers (parents) has increased throughout the world in recent decades (Härkönen, 2018). In the United States of America, there were approximately 12 million single-parent families in 2016, with 80 per cent of these headed by single mothers; approximately 23 percent of children under 18 years old lived in these households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the United Kingdom there were 2.9 million single-parent families in 2019, which is 15 per cent of all families in the UK; similarly, households headed by mothers accounted for 84 per cent (U.K. Office for National Statistic, 2019). In Australia, single-parent households are the fastest-growing family type, and in 2019 constituted roughly 14 per cent of all families; again, 83 per cent of these single-parent households were headed by single mothers (cited in Robinson, Magee, & Caputi, 2018). The number is also on the rise in many Asian countries, including China, Japan, and Vietnam (Yeung & Park, 2016; Jones & Yeung, 2014).

While the increase in the number of single mothers in western countries reflects a breakdown in marital relationships and an increase in teenage pregnancy (Robinson et al., 2018), in Asian countries, the rise is mainly a result of an increase in the divorce rate (Yeung & Park, 2016), which in Vietnam rose from 18,308 to 28,076 divorces from 2013 to 2018 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). Official Vietnamese statistics also indicate that from 2002 to 2012, the percentage of widowed women rose from 10.4 to 11.2 per cent (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2012a). Although there are no official statistics for the number of Vietnamese women who have had a child outside of marriage, academic studies claim that this is a growing phenomenon (Murru & Polese, 2017; Phinney, 2005; Van, 2015). Following the definition of the Government of the Social Republic of Vietnam (2013), the term ‘single mother’ in this

study refers to mothers who are raising their child/ren without a father – whether this situation is due to divorce, having a child outside of marriage, or the death of the spouse.

Research has shown that single mothers worldwide are considered a disadvantaged segment of the population and are often less educated than the general population, have lower incomes, have greater trouble with housing affordability, and have less social support, all of which contribute to their lower status (D. Brady & Burroway, 2012; Ochala & Mungai, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018; Son & Bauer, 2010). It is reported that in western countries, although there is some variation between nations, one fourth of single mothers live in poverty (D. Brady & Burroway, 2012). In Australia, for example, almost 25 per cent of single-parent families live in poverty, in contrast to 7 per cent of dual-parent households (Robinson et al., 2018). The rate is even higher in the United States, where nearly 40 per cent of single-mother families live in poverty, again compared to approximately 7 per cent of dual-parent families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Globally, single mothers experience various forms of stigma. This may take the form of criticism and judgement, especially in terms of their intimate lives, economic status, and parenting style. In western countries, in the eyes of the general public, single mothers, especially those who are teenagers, are often considered to be out of control and sexually promiscuous, and hence a threat to the social order (Mann & Roseneil, 2003; Nayak & Kehily, 2014; Pini & Previte, 2013; Tyler, 2008). The parenting capacity of single mothers is also questioned, although some studies in the global north point out that while most single mothers cannot compete with married couples in terms of resources to raise their children, many children in single-mother families still perform well academically (Albelda, Himmelweit, & Humphries, 2004; Berryhill, 2018; Ford-Gilboe & Campbell, 1996). Researchers attribute such positive outcomes to mothers changing their perceptions, reconfiguring their life strategies, and putting much effort into managing their situation (Albelda et al., 2004). However, negative

views on the parenting abilities of single mothers remain dominant, with studies claiming that being raised by a single mother is likely to have a negative impact on a child's life in general and educational outcomes specifically, due to the mother's limited financial and human capital resources (Gertler, Levine, & Ames, 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Jean Yeung & Park, 2015). Children from single-mother families are often considered at risk of school attrition, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and delinquency (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Kelly, 1996; Neill-Weston & Morgan, 2017; Schmitz, 1995). Several studies in the global north shows that single mothers are rarely considered to be capable of being 'good' mothers due to the widely-promoted parenting model which is 'child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1998, p. 8), practices most often attributed to white, heterosexual, married women within a nuclear family (Arendell, 1999a). In contrast, single motherhood is considered problematic, producing an underclass of problematic children who themselves are likely to be irresponsible and become welfare-dependent (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015).

In most western countries, where single mothers and their children benefit from a government welfare system, the poverty they still experience has long been a source of concern and debate, with single mothers frequently condemned as being irresponsibly welfare dependent (Carabine, 2001; Elliott et al., 2015; Morris & Munt, 2019): parasites on scarce resources (Tyler, 2013). Often stereotyped and blamed for their financial insecurity and intergenerational welfare dependence, single mothers are even associated with the 'feminisation of the poor' (Sands & Nuccio, 1989, pp. 29, 34) or the 'culture of poverty' - terms referring to the role of single mothers in the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Lewis, 1966). From the late 1990s onward, countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada have changed their welfare policies, reducing government benefits for single-mother families. These changes, prompted by large budget deficits and public pressure, require single mothers in receipt of welfare

payments to meet certain requirements in regard to training and job searching (de Gendre, Schurer, & Zhang, 2021), an arrangement seen as protecting single mothers from economic insecurity while curtailing their dependence on welfare (D. Brady & Burroway, 2012). In other words, welfare reform initiatives have been redirected with the aim of weaning poor single mothers with no preschool-aged children off welfare payments and into the job market, forcing them to contribute to society via employment and other related activities (de Gendre et al., 2021).

These welfare reforms have occasioned much discussion by politicians and scholars, some arguing that while the changes may appear to have been necessary, studies show that by decreasing single mothers' welfare benefits and requiring them to enter the workforce, the economic position of this group has been harmed and poverty rates have actually increased (M. Brady & Cook, 2015; de Gendre et al., 2021; Fang & Keane, 2004; Wilson, 2019). Some researchers argue that the advantages of welfare to single-mother families outweigh the cost, and that welfare programs should be considered a long-term investment rather than 'a short-term sunk cost in government budgets' (de Gendre et al., 2021, p. 2), because they improve available resources for children, leading to better health and education outcomes, and reducing the likelihood of future reliance on government support (Bailey, Hoynes, Rossin-Slater, & Walker, 2020; de Gendre et al., 2021; Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2018).

The stigma attached to single mothers in western countries cannot be neatly compared to the type of stigma experienced in the Asian context. Single mothers in Asia generally receive very limited government support and are not constructed as welfare parasites; however, strong cultural norms that favour traditional, two-parent families create challenges for single-mother families (Jean Yeung & Park, 2015; Gavin W. Jones & Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, 2014). Contemporary Vietnam, like other South-East Asian countries, is influenced by Confucian ideology which upholds strict adherence to traditional norms of family and marriage. Two-

parent families with the husband as head of the household are expected and still dominate, even though there has been an increase in the number of single mothers (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015) which has attracted the attention of researchers. Studies describing the difficult position in which single mothers find themselves include economic insecurity, stigma, and lack of help (T. Le, 2002; Loenzien, 2016; Murru, 2016; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015; Oosterhoff, Anh, Yen, Wright, & Hardon, 2009; Phinney, 2005; Phinney, 2022). The majority of single mothers in Vietnam not only experience extreme poverty due to insecure employment (T. Le, 2002), but also social stigma, with widows or divorcees made to feel that their family is not complete because of its missing "head" (husband/father) (T. Le, 2002; Oosterhoff et al., 2009). Young, never-married mothers are generally considered to be sexually immoral women and bad mothers (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015). These women face strong criticism for having children out of wedlock and raising them without a father. The judgements people make about single mothers tend to extend to their offspring, with the child/ren, like their mother, facing discrimination or prejudice from the community. The stigma of single motherhood in Vietnam stems from a patriarchal heritage which still has a strong influence, and single mothers can be seen as victims of this culture.

However, there is research that finds Vietnamese single mothers to have some agency. Research by Phinney (2022) focussed on single mothers who had devoted their youth to the fight for national independence and who chose to pursue single motherhood when they found that their culturally sanctioned "marriageable age" was over. Supported by the government and the Vietnamese Women's Union, the mothers in this study decided to *xin con* (ask for a child) in order to cope with loneliness, and to have someone to lean on in their old age in a society where welfare for the elderly is very limited. While in some senses they can be seen as victims of the war, or of the culture of war, they can make claims to security and support by having a

child. Still, as Murru (2016, 2017) has found, while single mothers reported a sense of freedom and liberty in their situation as a single mother, they still experience social stigma and criticism.

1.3 Research problem, research questions, and research aims

Although research on single mothers in Vietnam is growing, few look at how single mothers exercise their agency. Further, an evaluation on supports for single mothers is still lacking. The present study is grounded in the experiences of single mothers living in Northern Vietnam in combination with the experiences of local Vietnamese Women's Union staff officers, who support women in general and single mothers specifically at the grassroots level to cope and support their children in everyday life. The research also evaluates the official government support and informal community and familial support available to these women. The central research questions are as follows:

1. What are the defining experiences of single mothers in contemporary Northern Vietnam?
2. How do single mothers manage their situation?
3. What resources do single mothers draw upon in their day-to-day lives?
4. What support do single mothers receive from the Vietnamese Government, from the community, and from family?
5. How effective are the existing supports, and what support needs to be adjusted, added, or changed?

The thesis aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- to shed light on the lived experience of single mothers in contemporary Northern Vietnam, and better understand how they negotiate their situations and needs;
- to evaluate the available support for single mothers from the perspective of the mothers and of Vietnamese Women's Union staff; and

- to develop possible solutions to provide better support for Vietnam's single-mother families.

The thesis aims to explore experiences of single mothers born after the war time, whose journey of single motherhood aligns with the significant changes occurring in Vietnam during the renewal era. It is important to note that the study does not include older single mothers who sacrificed their youth in the national independence war. Therefore, a comparison between these two groups of single mothers should not be anticipated in this research.

1.4 Research methodology and methods

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) was selected as the most suitable approach to the research questions because it provides a means to promote women's own knowledge of their experiences and how they are impacted by their social position (Harding, 1992, 2004). FST asserts that the everyday lived experience of all women is constructed and maintained by social policy and structures from the vantage points of dominant patriarchal ideology. Women's standpoints emerge by negotiating and surviving within these systems which regulate and limit their lives, producing in women a 'double consciousness' (cited in Bertsch, 2012), that is, seeing life from the social position of both the dominant patriarchal ideology, and navigating society as a member of a marginalised group. FST posits that there is an epistemic advantage to double consciousness. This presumes that women are conscious of the public faces they must adopt to negotiate daily life simultaneously with their own inner realities. The rubric of double consciousness can produce a more realistic picture of women's experiences and how policy and social systems affect and delimit them (Smith, 1987), and can therefore serve as a 'point of entry' for a nuanced investigation (Harding, 2004; N. Hartsock, 1983).

To achieve the aims of this research, the study employed qualitative methods including photo diaries, personal interviews, and photo-elicitation interviews conducted with focus groups. Two groups of six single mothers participated in the photo-elicitation interviews (one group in

Hanoi, and the other in rural Hai Phong), and 12 VWU staff members participated in the personal interviews (six staff members at each research site). Focus groups were used for this research because of the advantages of this data collection method for the feminist standpoint approach. Participants in focus groups are usually recruited through purposive sampling, therefore they may feel more comfortable expressing their views together with others who share the same background and experiences (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999; Morgan, 1997). This approach encourages hard-to-reach populations to talk about strong emotional or sensitive issues that are not usually raised (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). The group photo-elicitation interviews were designed with the goal that they would more effectively represent the participants' worlds; that they would encourage the single mothers to actively engage in the data collection and analysis. As feminist standpoint theory emphasises the standpoint of women as a marginalised group, the theoretical and epistemological framework of this research privileges the experiences of the single mothers over those of the Vietnamese Women's Union's staff, in order to seek to develop more effective avenues of government support from the perspective of the affected group.

In line with FST, the study started out by exploring the everyday lived experiences of single mothers by asking the mother participants, 'What are your experiences as a single mother?' (research question 1). To investigate how dominant social forces shape the lives of single mothers, the participants were then asked, 'What strategies and resources do you employ?', 'What choices do you make to deal with a situation?', and/or 'Why do you believe those are good things to do?' (research questions 2 and 3). The available support for single mothers was then evaluated through eliciting the perspectives of single mother research participants and local area VWU staff members research participants (research questions 4 and 5).

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into three parts and has eight chapters in total. The four chapters of the first part establish the research context, present literature reviews, and explain the methodology. They set out the framework for the project and contextualise its significance within the key debates taken from the literature.

Chapter 1 introduces the motivation behind the research and outlines its questions, subjects, and aims, including a brief introduction of the methodology, and methods employed. Chapter 2 describes the research contexts, introduces traditional norms for women and family in Vietnam, and provides an overview of government social economic policy and VWU activities, which have led to changes in the roles of women in family and society. Chapter 3 provides a critical review of the relevant literature on the topic of single mothers and support for them. Chapter 4 presents the research design, explicating the feminist standpoint theory methodology used, and other methods underpinning the project's delivery. This chapter specifies the particulars of the research setting and details the data collection and analysis process involved. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 make up the second part of the thesis, presenting the three main areas of findings. Chapter 5 consists of first-hand accounts given by single mothers relating to the social stigma they and their children face and strategies they employ to deal with this stigma. Chapter 6 explores the involvement of single mothers in their children's education, including cost of schooling, time commitment, and future hopes for themselves and their children. Aspects of this chapter were published in the article titled 'Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother': an analysis of Vietnamese single mothers' involvement in their children's schooling (T. T. Vu, Huppatz, & Onnudottir, 2021). Chapter 7 examines potential support for single mothers, both from their own perspectives and the viewpoints of VWU staff. The complexities surrounding access to government funding via the VWU and other VWU

assistance, as well as issues related to family support, are explored and recommendations are made for policy makers.

The third part, Chapter 8, summarises and concludes the thesis, analysing its limitations and offering suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

The role of women in Vietnamese history

2.1 Introduction[1]

This chapter explores how the roles of women in Vietnam changed as the country moved from a feudal society into modernity[2]. The common roles of women in Vietnam are still strongly influenced by Confucian ideology, however, decades of French colonialism (1886–1945) and the introduction of Western values have inevitably impacted on traditional roles, changing societal perception of women's social positions and rights, and resulting in the involvement of women in various social and political activities. During the national wars for independence (1945–1975) and then Đổi Mới (Renewal Program of the Vietnamese Government) in 1986, Vietnamese women leaders, aided by Đổi Mới, collaborated with the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU) to create a "new model" for Vietnamese women, encouraging women to take on a double task: being the main emotional and physical carer for their family as well as contributing financially to their household. By promoting this new model, the government and the VWU played an important role in creating new standards, yet also new difficulties and challenges, for women in contemporary Vietnam.

[1] In Vietnamese society, there were significant differences between the elite and peasant classes in terms of following the official kinship rules which have great effect on the role of women within the family and the society. Some of the notable distinctions have been addressed by Vietnamese scholars including marriage practice, inheritance, and education approach. In terms of marriage practice, the elite class placed great importance on arranged marriages as a means of building political alliances, consolidating wealth, and maintaining social status. Marriages among the elite were often strategic. Peasants, on the other hand, had more flexibility in choosing their marriage partners, although societal norms and practical considerations still influenced their choices Regarding inheritance, in elite families, the passing down of assets was carefully regulated and followed strict rules. The eldest son was typically the preferred heir and would inherit the majority of the family's assets. Peasant families had less wealth and property to distribute, and inheritance patterns were generally less formalised, often based on customary practices and family negotiations. Education and literacy were more accessible for the elite class, as they had the means to provide their children (both boys and girls) with formal education. In contrast, peasants, due to economic constraints and limited access to schools, had lower literacy rates and relied more on oral traditions to pass down cultural and kinship knowledge.

[2] Feudal society and modernity are constructed in opposition as feudal society is seen as traditional. The communist party referred to feudal society as a means to encourage people to adopt their revolutionary agenda and so the term feudal often includes negative implications.

2.2 Women's role in family and society in Vietnam: a brief history

2.2.1 Confucian norms regarding marriage and family in Vietnam

Contemporary Vietnam, like many South-East and East Asian countries, is influenced by Confucian ideology which shapes the norms for women and the roles they are expected to undertake in the family and society in general (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2004; Grosse, 2015b; Jayakody & T. T. P. Pham, 2013). Introduced during the Chinese occupation (111 BCE–938 AD), Confucian ideology was officially adopted by the Vietnamese dynasties (1000–1945), and gradually became the dominant doctrine (Grosse, 2015b; N. H. Nguyen, 1998), informing all core expectations, including "feminine" standards for Vietnamese women.

Confucianism holds men and boys in higher esteem than women and girls, with the eldest son responsible for maintaining the family lineage and providing for his parents in their old age (Bélanger, 2002; Bélanger & Oudin, 2007). The Confucian family model was a husband and his wife with their children, although it was expected that this nuclear family lives in an extended household, that is, with the husband's parents. The reasoning behind this was that the young bride would undertake household duties and responsibilities, thus relieving her mother-in-law of such tasks (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004). It was assumed that the bride's own parents would be taken care of by her sister-in-law or an unmarried daughter. A further expectation of the new bride was that she would give birth to a son and the cycle of patriarchy would thus continue. If she "failed" to provide her husband with a son, under Confucian norms, he was entitled to have a son with another woman, and this son would inherit his father's family lineage and property. The senior male in the family held authority over the other members, setting the rules for his wife and children, while also being responsible for protecting and providing for them. The emphasis placed on the leading role of the father as head of the household is illustrated by the Vietnamese expression con không cha như nhà không nóc (a child without a

father is like a house without a roof): he needs to be there to protect his wife and children, educate his children well, and give them a prosperous life. If he became frail and unable to command, his eldest son would assume the position of authority over the household.

The Confucian doctrines position females as subordinate to males and emphasize tightly bound restrictions placed on women, as daughters, wives, and mothers. These are in accordance with the basic moral principles of *Tam Tòng* (Three Obediences) and *Tứ Đức* (Four Virtues) (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004; N. H. Nguyen, 1998; N. K. P. Le, Harman, & Cappellini, 2017; Locke, T. N. H. Nguyen, & T. T. T. Nguyen, 2012). The three moral principles govern how girls and women are expected to interact with and care for the men in their lives: respect and devotion to their father before they marry, which then transfers to their husband after marriage, and their eldest son in widowhood (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004; N. H. Nguyen, 1998). The four virtues that Vietnamese women must practice include *công* (hard work), *dung* (good appearance), *ngôn* (polite speech), and *hạnh* (appropriate behaviour). These virtues require a woman to work as a good housekeeper (*công*), make herself attractive to her husband but not to other men (*dung*), talk politely (*ngôn*), and be an upright, filial, devoted, and kind-hearted person (*hạnh*) (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004; N. K. P. Le et al., 2017; Locke et al., 2012). Of the four virtues, *hạnh* is considered the highest quality: the inner beauty of a woman which is an ultimate outcome of a long process of self-control, self-sacrifice, and self-cultivation. According to T. N. B. Ngo (2004) upon reaching this standard, 'a woman receives recognition and admiration of family members and people in the community as a woman of perfect morality (*đức hạnh vẹn toàn*)' (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004, p. 51). Such an achievement is acquired over time, and a woman only gains *hạnh* when she is of a mature age. To attain *hạnh* a Vietnamese woman is educated in the Confucian four virtues from a very young age, and practices them under the supervision of the senior members of her family and society to ensure that she will serve the important men in her life well.

This tradition situates Vietnamese women in the domestic sphere and only considers them as successful or fulfilled in life once they are married, have children, and have dedicated their life to meeting the needs of their children and husband. This signifies that she is *vợ hiền, mẹ đảm* (self-sacrificing mother and dedicated wife) – a good caregiver to the family (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007; Mestechkina, D. S. Nguyen, & Shin, 2014). By and large, whether in the feudal social structure of the past, or in contemporary Vietnam, Vietnamese women's virtues are still judged by the framework of the four Confucian virtues (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004; Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004; M. T. Vu & T. T. T. Pham, 2021). However, as detailed in the following sections, these beliefs and norms have been challenged for a long time. They were first challenged during French colonial rule due to the influences of western ideologies. Later, during the wars of independence, the Communist Party of Vietnam and its socialist government, in contradiction to the stipulation of Confucian virtues of Vietnamese women, exerted much pressure to mobilise Vietnamese women from all social classes to actively fight for national liberation.

2.2.2 The role of women under French colonialism (1858–1945)

When France invaded Vietnam in 1858, the Nguyen dynasty which had ruled the country since 1802 was forced to concede to France's superior military power and signed a treaty giving France control over Vietnam in 1884. After taking power, French colonial authorities conducted long-term exploitations, making the use of cheap local labour (both male and female) in coal mines, rubber and rice farms, and other work sites (T. L. Nguyen, 2021; V. T. Pham, 2019). It was a time in which Vietnamese women were forced to engage in the workforce in large numbers, marking their role in the colonial economy.

Vietnamese resistance to the French started at the same time as France's invasion in the mid-nineteenth century, with a significant number of Vietnamese scholars and the nation's administrative elite refusing to collaborate with France (Lessard, 2007). During the French

exploitation, this resistance was boosted with the involvement of oppressed workers and farmers in colonial factories and businesses. In addition to arresting these protesters and dealing with them severely, French colonial authorities adopted other ways to deal with resistance, including what they called 'France's civilising mission' (Edwards & Roces, 2006). The mission involved establishing a French colonial education system and extensive promotion of French cultural values and colonial rules. Although French schools only recruited sons and daughters of wealthy Vietnamese elites in major cities such as Hanoi, Hue, and Sai Gon (Ho Chi Minh city today), this was the first time Vietnamese girls received a formal education (Edwards & Roces, 2006; M. Lessard, 2007).

Under Vietnam's feudal dynasties, formal education was a privilege granted to boys only, but the French schools catered for girls and boys. However, Lessard (2007) notes an observation by the French colonial rulers that 'more than men, Vietnamese women seemed hesitant to change and accept French rulers' colonial presence', adding that 'uneducated Vietnamese women posed a serious threat' to the colonial administration system (p. 8). However, the French colonial rulers were confident that Vietnamese women would come to better understand western ways and accept French culture. Furthermore, they reasoned that once educated, young Vietnamese women, as mothers, would pass on the French culture and acceptance of French rule to their children (Lessard, 2007).

The French educational system created profound cultural and social changes in Vietnam, challenging the domination of Confucian norms and values and, in some ways, improving the role of women in family and society (Lessard, 2007; 2002; McHale, 2018; T. V. C. Dang, 2015). In the colonial schools, all instruction was in French, and the curriculum included French history and French literature. Consequently, the young Vietnamese learners – boys and girls – were able to read foreign newspapers, novels, and other literature on various subjects and issues (Lessard, 2007), and began to adopt western values, including ideas about freedom,

equality, and charity (T. V. C. Dang, 2015). These values fed into the emergent women's movement of the early twentieth century, and the Confucian tradition's emphasis on social hierarchy and patriarchal values became increasingly challenged (Scott & T. K. C. Truong, 2007). Women started to step out of the domestic sphere, even participating in public political debates about women's rights, in common with such movements taking place in various western countries. A number of influential female Vietnamese intellectuals, such as Sương Nguyệt Anh[3], Đạm Phương nữ sử[4], and Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hoà[5], became published authors, 'using their pens to affirm the new role of women in society' (T. V. C. Dang, 2015, p. 32).

By the 1930s, there were more than ten women's newspapers circulating in Vietnam, including *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Women's News), *Phụ nữ tân tiến* (Modern Women), *Đàn bà mới* (New Women), and *Việt nữ* (Vietnamese Women), as well as hundreds of newspaper articles and heated debates on women's rights appearing in other Vietnamese press (Marr, 1976; McHale, 2018; T. V. C. Dang, 2015). Simultaneously, numerous books and pamphlets on the topic were published, two key books being *Nữ học luân lý tập đọc* (Reading Lessons in Feminine Morals) by Phan Đình Giáp (1000 copies printed in 1918), and *Nữ sinh độc bản* (Reader for Female Students) by Trịnh Đình Ru (released in 1920). These publications were critical of the way Vietnamese society – including the French colonial rulers – treated local women, arguing the case for improving women's rights in education, employment, and the public sphere (Lessard, 2007; 2002; McHale, 2018; T. V. C. Dang, 2015). They raised awareness, especially in urban areas, of gender inequality, and called for broader roles and opportunities for women than those espoused by Confucianism.

[3] Sương Nguyệt Anh (1864–1921) was editor of the newspaper *Nữ giới chung* (The Women's Bell), which focused on new ideas for the role of women in family and society, promoting women's rights in education, marriage, and employment.

[4] Đạm Phương nữ sử (1881–1947) was a novelist, journalist, social activist, and grand-daughter of Minh Mạng – second King of the Nguyễn dynasty. Her writings were published in *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Women's News).

[5] Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hoà (1896–1982) was a journalist and novelist who wrote for various newspapers, including *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Women's News), *Nam Phong tạp chí*, and *Tiếng Dân* (People's Voice).

As a result of the French education they received, many Vietnamese women, led by influential female intellectuals, not only became critical of certain aspects of Confucianism, but also raised critical voices against the French rulers. They increasingly participated in student protests and strikes against violent policies of the colonial government towards local people (Lessard, 2007). They organised meetings to deliver speeches about feminism and women's liberation (T. V. C. Dang, 2015). They established women's organisations such as the Association of Household Arts (1926), the Women's Literary Association, and the Liberalisation Women's Union (1930), precursor of the Vietnamese Women's Union (T. V. C. Dang, 2015). Set up to connect local women, these organisations promoted women's rights, triggering colonial authorities to take action against educated women who, along with their male supporters, were seen as posing a threat to French rule. Between 1920 and 1930, several students from schools and universities were expelled or arrested for engaging in political activities, protesting against the colonial government (T. V. C. Dang, 2015).

Taking advantage of the situation, male leaders of the national liberation movements, such as Phan Châu Trinh[6], Phan Bội Châu[7], and Hồ Chí Minh[8], who recognised that women were an important force in the liberation process, mobilised women to join the national battle for independence. Phan Chu Trinh encouraged Vietnamese women to play a larger role in national life by gaining a formal education, then seeking employment instead of being limited to working within the domestic realm (Edwards & Roces, 2006). Similarly, Hồ Chí Minh stated that Vietnamese women lived under the prejudices and injustices of a patriarchal ideology

[6] Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926) was founder of the *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* school in Hanoi. He proposed a reform named *Duy Tan* which called for Vietnamese society to replace old customs and beliefs with modern values.
[7] Phan Bội Châu (1864–1940) was founder of the *Việt Nam Duy Tân hội* (Vietnam Modernisation Association), and leader of the *Đông Du* movement (Going to the East) which mobilised Vietnamese students to go to Japan (East Asia) to study and then return as leaders of national independence movements.
[8] Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969), also known as Nguyễn Ái Quốc, was a writer, journalist, and well-known Vietnamese politician. As founder of the *Việt Nam độc lập đồng minh Hội* (Vietnam Independent Association), he led the Vietnam independence movement from 1941, and was appointed President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 until his death in 1969.

which denied them the fundamental human rights of receiving an education and being allowed to vote, and that this was a serious obstacle to the advancement of women (Central Propaganda Committee, 2011). Hồ Chí Minh stated that women could not enjoy freedom and equality until the nation became independent (Central Propaganda Committee, 2011). Following the call of the women's organisations and the Communist Party of Vietnam, Vietnamese women made a great contribution to the success of the August Revolution in 1945, leading to the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in September 1945. Since then, the achievement of gender equality has been an important mission for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945–1975), led by Hồ Chí Minh, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976–present).

Although the century of French colonialism was a challenging period in Vietnamese history, it cannot be denied that western culture had a significant influence on the lives of Vietnamese people, especially regarding traditional norms for gender equality and women's rights. The Vietnamese Communist Party took advantage of this shift in thinking to mobilise Vietnamese women in the fight to free the nation from French rule.

2.2.3 The role of women during war time (1946–1985)

Following the 1945 *Cách mạng tháng Tám* (August revolution), the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) came into power and called on all Vietnamese people to oppose feudalism and imperialism; it proclaimed women's liberation as one of the main goals of the new government (J. Werner, 1981). Gender equality was set in law in the 1946 Constitution, giving Vietnamese girls equal educational rights to boys, and women the rights to vote and stand for election. For the first time in Vietnamese history, all women, regardless of social background, were given the opportunity to participate in the political life of the nation (J. Werner, 1981).

As a result of the numerous wars Vietnam has endured[9], the role of Vietnamese women has changed significantly (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007). Following the call of the CPV for national independence and their promotion of the role of women in winning the war, the majority of women took on sole responsibility of their households while men joined the army. In addition, women took on jobs normally reserved for men, including running local governments, and some were elected as leaders of the CPV which established movements such as *Ba đảm đang* (Three Responsibilities) and *Ba sẵn sàng* (Three Readies). The former movement called on women to take responsibility for maintaining local economies and governments, managing households, and readiness to fight if the enemy came. Readiness was itemised in *Ba sẵn sàng* (Three Readies): one must be ready to work, to fight against the enemy, and to follow the call of the Party for the nation. It was further described in *Giáo dục người phụ nữ mới* (Moral education of the New Woman) as requiring socialist women to be heroic, indomitable, loyal, and resourceful (VWU, 2018). During wartimes, Vietnamese women thus started taking on multiple responsibilities: they were the main caregivers for children and aged parents and ran the domestic economy; they also filled roles previously reserved for men, such as those in local administrative or political organisations. By stepping out of the domestic sphere and taking on men's roles, Vietnamese women assumed a modified version of femininity that presented a combination of both "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. During these turbulent years, a Vietnamese woman's values were no longer simply measured by how well she followed and practiced the four Confucian virtues in the domestic sphere. A woman was honoured by how well she provided for and took care of her own family while her husband was fighting for the country and also how much she contributed to her community and efforts towards national independence.

[9] These wars include the First Indochina War (1946–1954) against France, the Second Indochina War (1955–1975) against the United States of America, and border conflicts with China (1976–1982).

2.2.4. The Renewal Program and the new model of Vietnamese womanhood (1986–present)

In order to build a civilised and prosperous socialist nation, from 1975 to 1986 the CPV maintained a centralised economic planning system throughout Vietnam. However, rapid population growth, strategic mistakes, and poor management by the government, in conjunction with embargoes and the consequences of war, resulted in an economic crisis in the 1980s (Van Arkadie, 1993). This forced the government to introduce *Đổi Mới*, an intensive economic renewal program, in 1986, to turn the country into a market-based economy. Since that time, Vietnam has enjoyed increased economic and cultural globalisation. A key component of *Đổi Mới* is the appeal by the government to all Vietnamese citizens, regardless of gender, to demonstrate their patriotism by contributing to the nation-building agenda. Both the CPV and the government supported this commitment by actively promoting gender equality through economic and political policies, and through education, changes which led to intensive participation of women in the workforce (Bélanger, 2004; N. K. P. Le et al., 2017). Statistics show that Vietnam had one of the highest female labour force participation rates in the world between 2010 and 2020, with about 78 per cent of women aged 15 to 64 in paid employment (Narayan, T. T. Nguyen & X. H. Nghiem, 2021). Vietnamese women now significantly contribute to their household economies and have a stronger voice in decision-making within their families.

Overall, Doi Moi introduced economic reforms and shifted Vietnam from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. It led to sustained economic growth, increased foreign investment, and reduced poverty rates, therefore, improving living standards for Vietnamese people in general and women particularly. Doi Moi also brought significant changes in the education system and emphasised the importance of education for all, including women. The

expansion of educational opportunities enabled more women to access higher education and acquire professional skills, opening doors to better job prospects and leadership positions.

The government encouraged private enterprise, and foreign investment rapidly increased women's economic opportunities. Women started participating more actively in the labour force, especially in manufacturing, services, and small-scale businesses. Women became involved in starting and managing businesses, ranging from small-scale enterprises to larger ventures. This allowed them to gain economic independence, contribute to the national economy, and challenge traditional gender roles.

The state promotion of gender equality aligned with the government's ambition to selectively revitalise some traditional family norms. Alongside promoting gender equality and encouraging women to participate in the workforce, the government somewhat paradoxically emphasised the role of women as main caregivers, homemakers, and educators within the family. Promotion was undertaken predominantly through the Vietnamese Women's Union, a national organisation of women led by the Communist Party and State Government to serve the party's social, political, and economic purposes. Vietnamese women have thus been expected to take responsibility for domestic tasks, and for contributing to both their family economy and the country's economy and safety.

2.3. The Vietnamese Women's Union and its role in empowering women in Vietnam

2.3.1 A brief history of the Vietnamese Women's Union

The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), founded in 1930, is one of the oldest and largest national organisations of women in the world, with approximately 17 million members as of 2018 (VWU, 2018). The VWU underwent many reforms before settling on the present structure. During the period 1930–1950, the organisation changed its name several times: it was the Liberalisation Women's Union from 1931 to 1935, the Anti-imperialism Women's

Union from 1936 to 1938, the Democratic Women's Union from 1939 to 1940, and then the Women's League for National Salvation from 1940 to 1950. It became known as the Vietnamese Women's Union in 1950, after the first Congress of National Women (VWU, 2018).

The VWU has a hierarchical structure. Branches operate throughout Vietnam at four administrative levels: central, provincial, district, and commune/ward (VWU, 2016; Truong, 2004). It has an extensive communication network that includes radio, television, and print media. This network extends the reach of the VWU to the wider Vietnamese population, enabling it to disseminate information, provide feedback on the "grassroots" needs of women and their communities and, perhaps most significantly, communicate and implement government policies at the local level throughout Vietnam.

2.3.2 The role of the Vietnamese Women's Union in empowering women

The history of the VWU closely aligns to the country's history of national independence and development. One of the main functions of the VWU is building and protecting the state and the leading party. Before 1950, predecessor organisations of the VWU, led by the Communist Party, focussed on mobilising women nationwide to take part in anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism movements aiming at liberty for the nation as well as for women (Dang, 2015; VWU, 2018). During the period 1955–1975, when the whole country was tasked to liberate the South from domination by American imperialists and their agents, to protect socialism in the North, and ultimately to unify the country, the VWU under the leadership of the Communist Party initiated many emulation movements nationwide. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, the VWU developed the two slogans *Ba đảm đang* (Three Responsibilities)[10] and *Năm*

[10] Three responsibilities: 1. To take charge of industrial and agricultural production; 2. To manage all family affairs; 3. To take up arms when necessary.

tốt (Five 'Goods')[11], both of which aimed at forming feminine standards for women in wartime – namely, 'womanly stalwartness, self-sacrifice, revolutionary ardour, thrift and sexual asceticism' (Werner, 2006, p. 314). There was already a matching, complementary slogan 'Three Delays'[12] by the Lao Dong Party (another name for the Communist Party) that called upon young Vietnamese people to put their personal lives aside and help the Vietnamese Government liberate the South and unite the nation. At the same time, the slogan *Giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà* (Accomplished in public work, adept at housework) was broadcasted to encourage women to continue to diligently work to build the new Socialist Northern Vietnam and support the battle in the South (Frazier, 2012; L. A. Hoang, 2020; T. D. Truong, 2004). Millions of Vietnamese women enthusiastically embraced this propaganda, feeling responsibility for both nation and family (Schuler et al., 2006).

In 1985, when the war ended, Vietnam started the challenging tasks of recovering and mobilising resources for national economic development. In tune with the national efforts, the VWU successfully launched a campaign titled *Người phụ nữ mới trong xây dựng và bảo vệ tổ quốc* (New women in national construction and defense) which again called upon women to be resourceful at both domestic and social work. From 1986 to the present, many women's movements and campaigns have been launched by the VWU calling upon women to build happy families and contribute to building a wealthy country. Examples are *Phụ nữ tích cực học tập, lao động sáng tạo, nuôi con giỏi và xây dựng gia đình hạnh phúc* (Women study actively, work creatively, raise children well, and build happy families), *Phụ nữ Việt Nam tự tin, tự trọng, trung thành, tháo vát* (Women of Vietnam enhance their self-confidence, self-respect, kind-heartedness, and resourcefulness), and *Phụ nữ nuôi dạy con tốt, giảm số trẻ em suy dinh*

[11] Five forms of 'good': 1. Good solidarity, production, and saving; 2. Good implementation of the government's policies; 3. Good participation in governance; 4. Good study; 5. Good family management and education of children.

[12] Three delays: 1. If you do not have a child, delay having one; 2. If you are not married, delay getting married; 3. If you are not in love, delay love.

dưỡng và trẻ em bỏ học (Mothers are effective parents, reducing children's malnutrition and school drop-outs) (VWU, 2018). During the 2000s, the Vietnamese Government determined that eradication of poverty and hunger was its number one target in the millennium development goals (Vietnamese Government, 2001). Supporting this government target, the VWU has developed more slogans such as *Phụ nữ hỗ trợ nhau phát triển kinh tế gia đình* (Women help one another in the household economy), and *Hỗ trợ phụ nữ khởi nghiệp* (Supporting women in start-up) (VWU, 2017a), aiming to 'build a new cultural family' which features 'wealth, equality, progress, and happiness' (Schuler et al., 2006; Vietnamese Women's Union, 2017a). The VWU is now also a service provider that acts as a bridge between women's grassroots organisations and the government to support the livelihoods of Vietnamese women, especially disadvantaged groups such as women who are ethnic minorities, disabled, and/or single mothers.

The VWU has played an important role in women's liberation and empowerment in Vietnam. However, the organisation does promote conflicting messages: while it strives for gender equality, it also reinforces traditional gender roles. It encourages Vietnamese women to follow a particular model: to have good morality, to work harder to protect and build the nation, and to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their husbands and children. This model emphasises the traditional Confucian role of women as caregivers (Schuler et al., 2006). Thus, the activities of the VWU exhort Vietnamese women to take on a double task: being homemakers and breadwinners, placing a double burden on their shoulders.

2.3.3 VWU activities that aim to support single mothers in Vietnam

Supporting single mothers contributes to the VWU's mission to aid women's development. The first direct assistance, in the 1980s, that the VWU provided to single mothers was to change social perception and promote acceptance for older women who wanted to have their own child after the independence war. These older women, who had responded to the call of the

government and the VWU, foregoing their marital opportunities to participate in the national liberation effort, could not find husbands when the war was over. They experienced loneliness and were faced with insecurity into their old age due to limited state welfare. Hence, many of them wanted to *xin con* (ask someone they would not marry to get them pregnant) to have their own child to love, a child who would then take care of the mother when she aged (Phinney, 2022). However, the desire to become a mother by having a child out of wedlock is thwarted by Confucian norms of virginity and virtue. Recognising this, the government collaborated with the VWU to run the nationwide campaign *Xây dựng gia đình hạnh phúc* (Happy Family Planning) in the 1980s, particularly stressing the social and personal value of biological motherhood and promoting the right of every woman to have a child. In 1986 the state promulgated the new *Law on Marriage and the Family*, which is widely recognised to give all women the right to have a child. Article 3, Chapter 1, of this law states: 'The state and society shall protect the mothers as well as their children, and shall assist the mothers in fulfilling their noble tasks of motherhood' (Fundamental Laws, (1993) cited in Phinney, 2005; 2022). Phinney, in her research on Vietnamese single mothers in this period who asked for a child, notes that though the mothers' unwed status is omitted from the terminology, the reason for the law's introduction could only be to facilitate these mothers.

> It is notable that nothing is said here about single mothers… The law is broadly construed as providing older single women the right to have a child [and this presents a] state recognition of a post-war society in which vast numbers of single women were unlikely to marry, but would need a child to take care of them in their old age. (Phinney, 2005, p. 219)

Phinney concludes that 'the state chose to recognise this reproductive strategy at the beginning of the Renewal Process when it sought to withdraw its welfare responsibilities' (Phinney, 2005, p. 219). To support the government, the VWU conducted propaganda activities through local

community meetings to seek community sympathy for single mothers (Le, 2002). In doing so, it gradually and successfully shifted societal perceptions and promoted acceptance for older women 'asking for a child' in post-war Vietnam (Phinney, 2022).

Over the last two decades, in parallel to the government's poverty reduction programs, the VWU has paid particular attention to single mothers and provided increased support for them. Recognising that large number of single mothers in Vietnam are living in poverty, the VWU supports eligible single mothers in accessing welfare subsidies for their households. The organisation also implemented some programs to help single mothers develop their household economies. During the period 1990 - 2010, the VWU received significant funding from international NGOs, for example, Oxfam International and the Asia Foundation, to strengthen and improve women's economic opportunities and autonomy. With the funding, the VWU at the local level ran *Câu lạc bộ mẹ đơn thân* - 'single mothers' clubs in different communities including Sóc Sơn district of Hanoi, Thái Nguyên province, and Tiền Giang province, to expand economic opportunities for poor single mothers in these areas. These clubs became places for single mothers to share stories of the difficulties they face and to encourage and help each other. Members of the clubs had opportunities to access the financial capital, which was sponsored by international NGOs, and managed by the local VWU leaders, for women to invest in a home business or the education of their children (T. H. Le, 2009; D. H. Nguyen, 2008). Short-term vocational training courses are also provided to members of single mothers' clubs in some wards (D. H. Nguyen, 2008). However, this model has only been set up in few areas, and services a small number of single mothers. It is reported that the VWU wishes to help more single mothers, but that they face shortages of funds and human resources (T. H. Le, 2009). Articles on single mothers' clubs and their effectiveness have featured in Vietnamese academic publications and newspapers such as *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu gia đình và giới* (Journal of Family and Gender Studies), *Tạp chí Lao động và xã hội* (Society and Labour Magazine), and *Tạp chí*

Phụ nữ Việt Nam (Vietnamese Women's Newspaper). This public advocacy and the activities of the VWU have been instrumental in addressing social stigma towards single mothers in Vietnam and in improving their quality of life.

2.4 Conclusion

The role of women in Vietnam has shifted throughout history due to social, economic, cultural, and political changes. Under the feudal system, Vietnamese women were bound by the strict ethical standards of Confucianism, including the three moral principles and four virtues expected of women. The standards defined a woman's role as being confined to the domestic sphere: housekeeper, caregiver, and homemaker. Although one thousand years have passed since Vietnam adopted the Confucian ideology, and despite various historical challenges and changes, this ideology still maintains a strong influence, informing gender relations as well as defining the role of women in contemporary Vietnamese society. Grosse (2015b) claims that, in a sense, many gendered practices that follow Confucian patriarchal norms in Vietnam are, by this time, largely habitual, performed due to custom rather than social or political imperative.

During French colonial rule, the authorities established a French school system and used print media to seek social acceptance for the French presence and the colonial authority of the elite class. One means of doing so was establishing formal education for girls and calling for changes to the roles of women in Vietnamese society. Hence, a significant number of educated women in major cities became aware of possibilities for greater freedom, gender equality, and women's rights. The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed Vietnamese female intellectuals actively engaging in press debates, expressing their thoughts about the role of women in a changing society and women's involvement in political activities, and demanding basic rights. This activity gave rise to the emergence of the 'new-age' woman, who took good care of her family and at the same time claimed a role in society, challenging the idea of the

‘traditional’ woman confined to a quiet life at home (T. V. C. Dang, 2015). Ironically, the actions of the French colonial rulers also empowered women in particular, and Vietnamese society in general, to commence their fight against colonial rule.

Chapter 3
Single mothers: a selected literature review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the literature on the common issues faced by single mothers in different parts of the world, including in Vietnam. Section 3.2, *Single Mothers in Rich Nations*, outlines challenges such as comparative poverty, social stigma, and sole parenting. Section 3.3, *Single Mothers in East Asia*, identifies such challenges in countries where government support is more limited, and where Confucian ideology has a strong influence. Section 3.4 highlights findings and limitations of research on single mothers in Vietnam, identifying gaps in the research field and making an argument for the necessity of this PhD project. Single motherhood is complex and challenging across the globe, but its challenges differ depending on culture and context, public and social support, and levels of agency allowed and exercised by single mothers. Hence, for comparative purpose, the literature review is structured so as to present both the particular and the universal.

3.2 Single mothers in rich western nations

It is clear from extensive research on single mothers in richer western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, United States, and United Kingdom (de Gendre et al., 2021; Härkönen, 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018; Ochala & Mungai, 2016) that this topic arouses heated academic and political debates. The main foci since the turn of the twenty-first century have been evaluation of updated state policies supporting single-mother families, and the experiences of families following those changes (Blank, 2002; M. Brady & Cook, 2015; Fisher & Zhu, 2019). Findings point to significant improvement in the lives of single mothers, largely being due to developments in state welfare systems to provide not only housing benefits and single-parenting payments, but also childcare subsidies and child support (Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2000; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Klett-Davies, 2016; Polakow,

Halskov, & Jørgensen, 2001). However, newer policies have not always been improvements. For example, agendas of mutual obligation, and requirements placed on single mothers in order that they can qualify for support, have been extensively critiqued. Researchers such as Tyler (2008), Blaxland (2009), D. Brady and Burroway (2012), Robinson et al. (2018), and de Gendre et al. (2021) report that despite the available support, single mothers face many obstacles in their daily lives, among them poverty and stigma for relying on welfare benefits, with many single mothers, especially those who are teenagers, considered parasites on the welfare system (Tyler, 2013).

3.2.1 Single mothers and poverty

There is a strong association between single motherhood and poverty. Studies show this group to be particularly vulnerable due to the fact that they are often less educated than the general population, have lower income, lack spousal support, and have the burden of raising their children alone. Social security systems have not been supportive enough to keep many such women and children out of poverty (Blaxland, 2009; Ochala & Mungai, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018; Son & Bauer, 2010). These disadvantages often have a negative impact on the raising of children due to mothers' limited financial and human capital resources (de Lange, Dronkers, & Wolbers, 2014; Gertler et al., 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Kroese, Bernasco, Liefbroer, & Rouwendal, 2021), and contribute to intergenerational poverty and inequality (Madhavan, Clark, & Schmidt, 2021; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). As a result of being less educated, many single mothers are unable to secure employment or struggle to balance low-paid work with caring for their children.

Lack of employment security has been identified as a major cause of poverty among single mothers. Research reveals that it is difficult for many single mothers to participate in employment, either due to lack of employable skills, lack of childcare, or the prohibitive expense of childcare (Bowman & Wickramasinghe, 2020; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018;

Ochala & Mungai, 2016; Shaver, King, & McHugh, 1994). Corcoran et al. (2000) examined the experiences of welfare-dependent single mothers in the United States, finding that on average their educational level and job skills were lower than those of partnered mothers, and that therefore many were unable to secure a job with an adequate income to support their families. According to Corcoran et al. (2000), the jobs single mothers find seldom include flexible working hours or paid sick leave, and their personal circumstances sometimes prevent them from progressing to higher wages or job security. Son and Bauer (2010) conducted research on the experiences of twenty-eight low-income single mothers living in rural communities in the United States and showed that their participants encountered overwhelming demands from their employers and families that led to work–family conflicts and very little likelihood of effectively balancing family life and paid employment.

Similar findings were published by Shaver et al. (1994), who surveyed 243 single mothers of school-aged children in New South Wales, Australia, and found that lack of educational resources was a barrier to finding a stable job with adequate wages, hence the majority were employed as casual workers and full-time employment was rare. More than twenty years later, in the same part of the world, single mothers were not reporting much change. Ochala and Mungai (2016) interviewed single mothers in rural New South Wales to examine the challenges they faced, participants reporting that they had 'very limited income due to lack of necessary skills to acquire employment' (p. 315). Bowman and Wickramasinghe (2020) interviewed thirty single mothers in Victoria, Australia, finding that 'low-income single mothers continue to be caught in the binds of poverty and insecurity, with limited choices and opportunities' (p. 7); participants described being caught between unpredictable working hours and the fixed hours of childcare.

The fieldwork study and interviews for this research were conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the impact of the pandemic on single mother families may not be left

unrecognised as can be outlined by recent research. The COVID-19 pandemic added to the financial burdens on single mothers across the world, especially those with school-aged children or younger, as they found themselves more likely to experience job loss, with no one in their immediate household to help them take care of their children during lockdowns when public school, paid childcare, and other forms of outside help were unavailable (Fortier, 2020; Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2020). Based on an online survey conducted with 800 single mothers mainly from the US, Canada, and the UK in June 2020, Hertz et al. (2020) reported that the single mothers found it had become more difficult for them to do their jobs because they were at the same time providing care for their children and supervising them in home schooling. Hertz et al. (p. 2045) comment that 'the absence of boundaries between paid work and family had a direct and negative impact on [the participants'] productivity and their engagement in employment'. This finding was echoed in research by Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, and Tertilt (2020), which found that without access to paid leave from their employers, many single mothers in United States were forced to quit their jobs to care for their children during the pandemic.

It is clear that there is a strong connection between single mothers and poverty, which can be partly attributed to job insecurity and being the sole career for children. The financial situation of single mothers leads to the other problems that they experience including parenting challenges and social stigma (de Gendre et al., 2021; Hays, 1998; Tyler, 2008).

3.2.2 Single mothers and parenting capacity discourses

The parenting capacity of single mothers is often questioned, with many studies on single motherhood in wealthier nations asserting that growing up in a single-mother family has negative effects on a child's life in general and school performance specifically (de Lange et al., 2014; Gertler et al., 2004; Hays, 1998; Hutchison, 2012; Kroese et al., 2021). Researchers who emphasise the disadvantages of being raised by a single mother point to limited financial

resources and lack of human capital, and the multiple demands being placed on single mothers as the only adult in the nuclear family. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) report that these demands make it more difficult for single mothers in paid work to spend time with their children, increasing the likelihood of single mothers dismissing problematic behaviour in their child/ren. Damm and Dustmann (2014) report that widowed or divorced mothers commonly experience a decrease in income after the loss of their husband or divorce and this may force them to move to lower-income neighbourhoods, potentially exposing their children to higher levels of peer delinquency than they would encounter in higher-income neighbourhoods. In addition, limited financial and human resources prevent single mothers from investing in their children's educational activities. Research by Hays (1998) and Biblarz and Raftery (1999) concludes that many single mothers do not have sufficient resources to spend on activities outside the school, or other opportunities that help children to develop their potential. Thus, research suggests that the limited resources generally available to single mothers may reduce their ability to provide their children with the opportunities that their peers in two-parent families enjoy, increasing the risk of lower academic achievement as well as exposure to negative behaviours.

Despite the above findings, some researchers claim that while single mothers may not be able to compete with partnered parents in terms of resources to raise their children, growing up in a single-mother family does not necessarily have a negative effect on a child's development (Albelda et al., 2004; Berryhill, 2018; Golombok, Jadva, Lycett, Murray, & MacCallum, 2005). Research on the development of children after parental divorce indicates that there are some protective factors which can be beneficial for children's future development, including decreasing exposure or involvement with risk factors (particularly domestic violence) and higher self-esteem and self-efficacy through secure, supportive personal relationships (Gately & Schwebel, 1993). Gately and Schwebel (1993, p. 61) suggest that 'These resiliency-building

factors strengthen children so they will cope more effectively with and master the stressful life events they will encounter in the future'. Similarly, Arditti (1999) research with fifty-eight young adults in the US who experienced parental divorce to investigate mother–child relationships found positive consequences to divorce for children. The findings show that, from the perspective of these children, following divorce 'mothers often leaned on their children for emotional support and advice', helping develop a quality relationship between mother and children that 'contributed to a sense of equality, closeness, and friend status' (p. 109).

Research also shows that single mothers develop various strategies to manage their mothering in order to minimise the impact of their circumstance on their children. For example, Albelda et al. (2004) explain that many single mothers work hard to achieve a positive outcome for their children, as they 'have changed their perception, reconfigured their life strategies, and put much effort into managing their situation' (p. 3). Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, and Golombok (2009) examined the motivations and experiences of 291 never-married single mothers, using online questionnaires. They show that the single mothers enjoyed independent decision-making, especially regarding parenting, which was a perceived reduction in family conflict. Jadva et al. (2009) write that: 'those women also have a great deal of thought to their decision, often seeking advice from friends, relatives, and therapists when they have any concern about their children's social and emotional development' (p. 176). Additionally, there are support groups, books, and online resources that single mothers can access for help and advice (Jadva et al., 2009). These researchers claim that single-mother families can be just as effective in producing positive child outcomes as two-parent families.

3.2.3 Single mothers in 'good motherhood', social stigma, and welfare reform discourse

Hays (1998) argues that the widely-promoted western parenting model is 'child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (p. 8), and that this parenting model is often associated with white, heterosexual, married, middle-class women

within a nuclear family (Arendell, 1999a). Single mothers are not included within this model and so are not viewed as 'good mothers' within the western public discourse.

Further, there is clear evidence of stigma towards single mothers in the media. In the UK, single mothers are often categorised as 'working-class' (Gillies, 2006b), and having a variety of social problems including drug use, involvement in crime, unemployment, and failure to equip their children with skills for social betterment (Gillies, 2006a; Pini & Previte, 2013; Tyler, 2008). The British media tends to classify 'chav' mothers – a term referring to unemployed teenage single mothers – as belonging to the 'feral youth' and 'underserving poor' (Morris & Munt, 2019, p. 5); the popular comedy TV series *Little Britain* portrays the Chav Mum character as 'choosing to get pregnant as a career option… and dropping her knickers in the blink of an eye' (Tyler, 2008, p. 28). Tyler (2008) explores how class, gender, and sexuality intersect in the figure of the 'Chav Mum', noting that the UK media portrayal of young single mothers is often of excessively sexual, disgusting, drunk, fat, lazy, welfare dependents who have many children with different fathers. Building on the work of Tyler (2008), Australian researchers Pini and Previte (2013) examine media representations of the female 'bogan' through a gender lens, revealing similar findings to Tyler: 'the 'Bogan Mother' is characterised as the antithesis of the 'good' middle-class mother whose culturally recognisable and acceptable ways establish a standard against which she is judged' (p. 353). Single mothers are stigmatised and are viewed as producing an underclass of problematic children who themselves are likely to be irresponsible and become welfare dependent and/or involved in criminal activities (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015; Kroese et al., 2021). It is clear from the above that a popular view of single mothers is that they play a role in the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Kelly, 1996; Sands & Nuccio, 1989).

In Western societies, single mothers have long been a target of social stigma, in that they are judged and criticised for their perceived sexual promiscuity, parenting style, and economic

status. As stated before, stigma is particularly attributed to teenage single mothers, as they are often seen as belonging to an underclass of welfare dependents who are irresponsible, out of control, and a threat to the security and stability of society (Gillies, 2006a; Mann & Roseneil, 2003; Pini & Previte, 2013; Tyler, 2008). As outlined in section 2.2, since the parenting capacity of single mothers is often seen as problematic, it follows that there is an increased probability that their children are likely to repeat the pattern of irresponsibility and welfare dependency, thus becoming a threat to the security and stability of society (Gillies, 2006b). Concepts like 'parasites on scarce resources' are unfortunately common (Tyler, 2013, p. 211). Research conducted by Elliott et al. (2015); Morris and Munt (2019); Neill-Weston and Morgan (2017) highlights that public resentment is generally felt towards single mothers who have a child or children without adequate means of support and then rely on government benefits.

As outlined, studies in Western societies show that stigma directed at single mothers is in many cases a consequence of discourses of popular culture. These discourses are shaped by the dominant ideal of the white, middle-class, married mother. This ideal forms the basis for government intervention around good parenting/good citizenship (Gillies, 2006a; Pini & Previte, 2013; Tyler & Slater, 2018). In the western public discourse, single mothers are blamed for their low economic status, and their "problematic" mothering is viewed as a consequence of their choice to indulge in social evils rather than work hard, invest in education, and take advantage of opportunities (Sweeney, 2012). The predicament in which single mothers then find themselves is therefore seen as a personal and developmental issue rather than the consequence of inequality (Gillies, 2006a). The predicament is in most case both out of the control of single mothers and a 'predicament' not of their own making. Hence, public stigma and formal policies have not tended to be kind to single mothers in many parts of the world as some of the following examples will demonstrate.

The public resentment directed towards single mothers, in combination with 'large state budget deficits', prompted a reform of welfare systems in the USA, Australia, and Canada at the turn of the twenty-first century (de Gendre et al., 2021; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006). As mentioned earlier in the thesis, these changes reduced state benefits for single parents and required those in receipt of welfare payments to meet certain work requirements. For example, in Australia before the approval of the *Welfare-to-Work and Other Measures Act* in July 2006, single parents with a dependent child under the age of 16 were eligible for the Parenting Payment Single. The reform reduced an eligible child's age threshold to 8. Single parents of children over the age of 8, who entered the welfare system after 1 July 2006, were instead only eligible for general unemployment benefits regulated by the Newstart Allowance. De Gendre at al. (2021), in their research on two decades of welfare reform in Australia, state that 'the change in eligibility from Parenting Payment Single to Newstart Allowance reduced the maximum payment rates, and affected waiting and preclusion periods and the cut-offs for tax offsets' (p. 3). In addition, recipients were now required to meet work participation requirements:

> The reforms assumed that single mothers have a capacity to work a minimum of 15 hours per week once their youngest child reaches age 8 and that it is feasible for them to fulfil job search requirements to remain eligible for income support (de Gendre et al., 2021, p. 3).

These researchers argue that welfare reform initiatives have been redirected with the aim of weaning poor single mothers with no preschool-aged children off welfare and forcing them into the job market, wherein they are viewed as better contributing to society (de Gendre et al., 2021).

As stated before, and must be stressed, while political powers argue that such welfare reforms are necessary, research shows that they can harm the economic position of single mothers, and

that as a result poverty rates increase (M. Brady & Cook, 2015; de Gendre et al., 2021; Fang & Keane, 2004; Wilson, 2019). Numerous studies show that the benefits of welfare targeted at single-mother families outweigh the cost, and that welfare programs should be considered long-term investments because they help improve available resources for children (Bailey et al., 2020; de Gendre et al., 2021; Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2018). Improvements in children's health and education outcomes reduces the likelihood of their future reliance on government support; in short, improvements benefit the society as a whole.

3.3 Single mothers in East Asia

This section provides an overview of literature on problems faced by single mothers in some Asian societies, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea – all of which have similarities to Vietnam in that they share a cultural background built on Confucian values and norms, and have government welfare systems that provide limited support for single mothers. Like single mothers in western countries, Asian single mothers have to deal with financial hardship, social stigma, and sole parenting, but their challenges are compounded.

For some decades, many Asian countries have experienced significant social, economic, and cultural changes, largely brought about by industrialisation, globalisation, and the impact of western culture. As stated earlier in the thesis, these changes include a shift in the traditional extended family structure, and an increase in the divorce rate, both of which have led to the increased visibility of single-mother families (Cheung & Park, 2016; Jean Yeung & Park, 2015; Gavin W. Jones & Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, 2014; Zhang, 2020). The surge in the divorce rate has been linked to many factors, including the improvement of women's education and overall economic status (Chen, Rizzi, & Yip, 2021; Chen & Yip, 2018), as well as urbanisation and migration (Hu, 2018; Z. Yi, Schultz, Deming, & Danan, 2002; Chong Zhang, Wang, & Zhang, 2014).

For example, the comparative financial hardship suffered by single mothers in East Asia is exacerbated by their disadvantaged in the labour force (resulting in low income) and a heavy, gendered childcare burden – all of which can largely be attributed to limited support from the government and the fathers of the children (Aoki & Aoki, 2005; Choi, Byoun, & Kim, 2020; Shirahase & Raymo, 2014). Research conducted in Japan by Aoki and Aoki (2005) concludes that single mothers are discriminated against in the job market because of concerns held by employers about their availability and commitment due to their parenting responsibilities. The researchers report that never-married and divorced mothers with custody of their children often 'received nothing from the father of the child – their ex-partner/ex-husbands in terms of economic assistance' (p. 13). Similarly, Lai (2021) reports that in Taiwan, the fathers of children born out of wedlock have frequently 'disappeared' before the child is even born, and avoid any responsibility towards the mother or the child. This lack of support from the father of a child leaves a single mother not many options, she needs to seek help from other sources. Single mothers employ various strategies to manage their situations, including turning to their parents and siblings for childcare, housing, and financial support (Shirahase & Raymo, 2014; Zhang, 2020). Shirahase and Raymo (2014) use data from a national survey conducted in Japan between 1986 and 2007 to evaluate how income sharing via intergenerational co-residence limits poverty among single mothers. The findings indicate that co-residing with parents is a common and normative model employed by Japanese single mothers who are economically disadvantaged, and this solution helps to reduce their financial stress and plays an important role in reducing poverty among this population. Zhang (2020) reports similar findings in China, relating that it is common for Chinese single mothers to receive significant support from their parents in terms of housing, finance, and childcare. Zhang attributes this level of involvement to the governmental one-child policy in place at the time of the research, with grandparents tending to give everything they had to their only daughter and her child. Seeking parental help

is common practice for single mothers in East Asia, and despite the high level of stigma attached to single motherhood, for the most part some degree of family assistance is given (Shirahase & Raymo, 2014; Zhang, 2020).

Single mothers and their children in East Asia are more likely to experience higher level of social stima than those in western societies, where divorce is more commonly accepted and children born out of wedlock are not commonly considered a social problem (Zhang, 2020). The high level of social stigma that single mothers, especially divorced and never-married mothers, carry in East Asia is attributed to the strong influence of Confucianism which favours a traditional family structure composed of husband, wife, and children, and emphasises the authoritative role of men in the family (Ebrey, 2014; I. H. Park & Cho, 1995; M. Park & Chesla, 2007). In a Chinese study, 20 per cent of divorced mothers shared that they often felt they were the object of scorn because of their divorce, and about one fourth of children from the sample of divorced families reported being looked down upon by teachers, classmates, or peers (cited in Zhang, 2020). The situation of never-married mothers was worse, as they are not only considered by the public to be "bad women" or "spoiled", they are also subject to government sanctions. In the Taiwanese context, pregnancy outside of marriage purportedly most often arises through affairs with married men, resulting in this specific group of mothers being negatively stereotyped by society (Lee, 2001). A quote from Zhao & Basnyat (2021) referring to China will demonstrate the illuminate this matter: '[In China] for every child born out of wedlock, the mother has to pay a penalty which equates to the municipal annual per capita income… children born outside of marriage remain controlled by a punitive system called 'the social fostering fee' (Zhao & Basnyat, 2021, p. 294). Single mothers in China are not able to obtain social welfare staples such as medical care and public education, because these are regulated by a system of household registration which requires marriage certificates and documents from the father's household (Wu & Treiman, 2004; Zhao & Basnyat, 2021).

Further, if a women in China happens to work in a government department and has a child out of wedlock, she will lose her job if this information is revealed (Zhao & Basnyat, 2021).

There are strong similarities and also differences when it comes to considering the everyday lives of single mothers and their children in Western societies and East Asia. Some of the key factors are family system, social and cultural values, and traditional norms. As outlined in Section 3.2.2, research in western societies has documented an association between parental divorce, single motherhood, and negative child-rearing outcomes. Similarly, East Asia research shows that, compared to children living with married parents, children living with a single mother have been disadvantaged in academic performance, cognitive and noncognitive development, and psychosocial development (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2018). The East Asian public also holds a stereotype that children brought up by single mothers often face troubles; however, research has found that the negative effect of single motherhood on children's academic performance is weaker in some Asian societies than in many western societies (M. Wang & Ngai, 2011). This difference is attributed to the strong family system in Asia (Cheung & Park, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Single mothers in a variety of circumstances often turn to their family for financial support, housing, and childcare. In the context of limited support from the government, the extended family acts as a safety net for single mothers and their children, especially during their most difficult times.

3.4 Single mothers in Vietnam

In Vietnam, although the two-parent nuclear family is still the norm, the structure of the family has been changing gradually since *Đổi Mới* (Renewal) in 1986. Researchers report that single motherhood is an increasing phenomenon (Murru, 2016; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015), and as mentioned, before, the term 'single mother' includes not only women who have at least one child and have never married, but also mothers who are divorced or widowed (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013). The General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2012b)

reported that the percentage of divorced women increased from 0.7 to 1.7 per cent of the female population from 2002 to 2012, and the percentage of widows rose from 6.2 to 6.9 per cent during the same period. There has also been an increase in the number of women choosing to become single mothers, often 'to have someone to lean on in their old age' (Phinney, 2022) or to avoid the responsibilities of being wives and daughters-in-law – a new trend which challenges traditional norms (Murru, 2016, 2017).

The growing number of single mothers in Vietnam has spawned studies (T. Le, 2002; Loenzien, 2016; Murru, 2016; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015; Oosterhoff et al., 2009; Phinney, 2005; 2022). Drawing on interviews with more than 100 never-married women and divorced women living in rural Northern Vietnam, T. Le (2002) examined their lived experiences between 1990 to 2000. She detailed her participants' employment, housing, health, difficulties, and hopes for the future. Although her participants cited different reasons for their single status, all suffered from extreme poverty due to insecure employment, and T. Le recounted the impact that economic and material struggles had on the physical and mental wellbeing of both the mothers and their children.

Whereas the primary focus of T. Le's study was the living conditions of the mothers, T. T. V. Nguyen (2015) and Oosterhoff et al. (2009) explore in depth the social stigma they and their children experience. Based on interviews with twenty-four widows living in Phu Tho province whose husbands had died from AIDS, leaving the wife HIV positive, Oosterhoff et al. (2009) claims that the participants live 'with double stigma, of their single motherhood and being [an] HIV positive woman, having very low self-esteem, feeling… isolation, helplessness, and misunderstanding' (p. 31). T. T. V. Nguyen (2015) conducted a survey with 100 participants, randomly selected, aged between 20 and 60, focussing on the issue of stigma against single mothers. The survey, conducted in inner districts of Hanoi, took the form of a questionnaire; findings show a strong social stigma against single mothers, especially among respondents

aged 40–60, who describe single mothers as spoiled and uneducated. Respondents younger than 40 expressed a greater degree of sympathy towards single mothers, tending to consider having a child outside marriage to be a personal choice. Nguyen also interviewed twenty never-married mothers aged 25–35. Her data reveals a high level of social stigma experienced by the participants, especially during their pregnancy and the first few years raising their children alone, with the majority reporting being rejected by their parents and extended families. The criticisms the new mothers faced were mainly for having a child out of wedlock and for the father being absent. Nguyen concludes that this attitude results from a patriarchal society which favours the two-parent family model and emphasises the role of a man/husband in the household.

Despite the above studies being conducted at different times and with different foci, there are some common findings. All conclude that single mothers in Vietnam face hardships largely attributable to the patriarchal society and/or social impacts and cost to human lives of the wars of independence between 1945 and 1975. The studies examine social discourse on single motherhood in Vietnam and the experience of living with social stigma. However, the impact of the government policy on single mothers' lives – their everyday reality - is not closely examined, and the agency of single mothers is often missing in these investigations.

Still, this gap has been addressed to some degree by Phinney (2005, 2022) and Murru (2016, 2017). As stated earlier, Phinney examines the refashioning of reproductive spaces in post-war Vietnam through the phenomenon of 'older single mothers' asking men they would not marry to impregnate them, which is commonly referred to as *xin con* - 'asking for a child'. Her research focuses on three elements: the women's post-war experiences that prompted them to 'ask for a child', state policies that provided a different dynamic for bearing a child outside marriage, and the manner in which the Vietnamese Women's Union sought to provide social acceptance for those women. The older single mothers in this research, who "lost their youth"

to the war, report that they asked for a child because they were lonely and need someone to take care of them when they are old. Phinney concludes that these women 'demonstrated their pragmatism and reproductive agency' (p. 225) and, as has been stated, the government responded by providing women with social support through legislation and through media campaigns broadcasting a new feminine identity which focuses on the raising of the nation's children.

Murru (2016) chose a wider population in Ha Tay province (currently outskirts of Hanoi) to interview: forty-three single mothers, either divorced or never married, including unwanted pregnancy out of wedlock and older single mothers who asked for a child. All the single mothers in Murru's study testified that, although being a single mother is still harshly stigmatised and criticised, they had 'a great sense of freedom and liberty attached to their condition as single mothers' (2016, p. 102), and that therefore their quality of life surpasses their marginalisation. The researcher points out that single mothers are increasingly empowering themselves as a community by creating 'single mom' groups on Facebook which lead to offline events where these women can share their experiences and support others. Murru concludes that single mothers are 'changing the narrative about family configurations, the place of women in sphere and more generally, and about the 'appropriate path' a woman should follow in life' (2016, p. 103).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a review of issues faced by single mothers as discussed in contemporary literature and research. Single mothers across the globe have different contextual experiences. While single mothers in wealthier societies are often criticised for relying on the welfare system, their counterparts in East Asian countries, here focusing on Vietnam, where government support for single mothers is limited, face strong discrimination for not having a "complete" family; a standard constructed by Confucian culture.

In general, some previous research has described the issues encountered by single mothers in Vietnam, such as economic hardship, social stigma, and sole parenting. However, few studies have considered wider contextual factors that may influence their situation, such as the role of government policies, the activities of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU), and the pressures placed upon their extended families. This qualitative study considers familial, societal, political, and cultural factors impacting the lives of single mothers and their children in rural and urban Vietnam, making a contribution to, and expanding upon, existing contextual research on the lives of single mothers.

The following chapter focuses on the research method and procedures of the study.

Chapter 4
Research design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will detail the research design of this study, from the process of determining the theoretical framework and methods to employ, to the data collection and the analytical approach. The methodology section (4.2) identifies why feminist standpoint theory has been employed, its main assertion being that the experiences of women should serve as the entry point for social research in order to gain a better knowledge of power relationships and dominant forces that regulate the lives of women. The research procedures section (4.3) details the research setting, the research participants, the recruitment process, the ethical issues, and the procedures that were put in place to protect the research participants. Section 4.4 explains the research implementation, which was achieved by simultaneous processes of collecting data through focus groups, photo journals, photo-elicitation interviews with mother participants, and personal interviews with staff members of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU). This section also explains the processes of coding, analysing, and interpreting the data and how the qualitative research software program NVivo was used in the research.

4.2 Feminist standpoint theory

As signalled in Chapter 1, this qualitative inquiry into single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam is directed by feminist standpoint theory (FST). Scholars in this field include Collins (1986), Smith (1983, 1987, 2005), Haraway (2004), Swingonski (1993, 1994), Harding (2004), and N. C. Hartsock (2004). FST is a transformative/emancipatory research approach (Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010) emphasising the experiences of women from the standpoint of women as an oppressed group. The study will consider this the starting point for social research that aims especially to approach and assist women, resulting ideally in transformative actions (Harding, 2004; Swigonski, 1993).

4.2.1 The historical development of FST

FST emerged in early 1980s, in a paper entitled 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism' (1983) by social scientist Nancy Hartsock: this paper is considered the most influential initial work to put forward the concept of standpoint theory (Gurung, 2020). American feminist theorist Sandra Harding, in her book *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) and her subsequent work, developed the term 'standpoint theory' to categorise epistemologies that emphasise women's knowledge. FST became widely recognised during the late 1980s through Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1986) and Dorothy E. Smith's *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (1987). An influential later work is Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledge* (2004). FST, as critical social theory and epistemology, is an approach to social philosophy that focuses on reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge power structures, arguing that social problems stem more from social structures and cultural assumptions than from individuals, and that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation (Case, 1990; Geuss, 1981). As Gurung (2020) argues, FST aims at empowering women (as the oppressed) to improve their social situation, which prior to its advent had been largely ignored in social-political theories and movements (Gurung, 2020). This critical approach of analysing the lives and realities of minority groups and those of lesser or no power from the 'point of view' emerged from critical theoretical approaches within a range of social science disciplines; it can be traced back to the works of early sociological thinkers. FST can be traced to the Marxian analysis of the social and economic stratification and alienation of workers, reflecting class conflict in which knowledge and social power arrangements are imposed by privileged dominant capitalists who perpetuate and maintain them (Bauman, 2001; Harding, 1991, 1995, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987, 2004; Swigonski, 1994). Scholars such as Harding, Hartsock, and Smith, however, gradually began to challenge the essentialism

inherent in early Marxian analysis' emphasis on class and worker alienation, noting that Marx did not account for gender and race stratification (Hartsock, 2004). Nevertheless, feminist standpoint scholars acknowledge the continued importance of the evolving Marxian critique of the alienation of women and of the symbiotic relationship of patriarchy and capitalism in dominant western societies, within which gender is stratified and women experience social alienation (Harding, 2004; Smith, 2005). FST not only produces alternative stances alongside the dominant ones, it also creates spaces of critical tension revealing how uncritically the dominant forms of knowledge have been constructed and deployed (Steckle, 2018). This epistemology – Feminist Standpoint Theory – takes women's lives as an enabling and epistemologically privileged vantage point on the workings of male supremacy and its interaction with the social relations of capitalism (Gurung, 2020).

4.2.2 Key themes of FST

Situated knowledge

FST assumes that social location systematically influences our experiences, and shapes and limits what we know. This assumption leads to the assertions that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups are positioned to possess information and 'inside' intelligence which is not available to more advantaged members of society (Harding, 2004; N. C. Hartsock, 2004; Smith, 1987). In other words, dominant groups are often limited in their epistemic perspectives, in that they only see the social world from the perspective of their own values, and are therefore unable to gain a wider view of interests and experiences. Marginalised groups can attain a more global perspective that begins in their own experiences but also includes consideration of the dominant ideologies they are forced to follow (Harding, 2004; Smith, 1987). Therefore, the perspectives of marginalised or oppressed individuals and groups can help to provide insight into multiple social realities. FST acknowledges the way in which gender shapes the social realities of women as a disadvantaged group, and asserts that gender

inequity stemming from dominant, white, patriarchal, capitalist privilege is regenerated in social knowledge constructions (Smith, 1987). According to Smith (1987), a source of knowledge, such as the education system or the media, may marginalise women's perspectives by representing the male standpoint as universal, and this has consequences for how policy and social systems regulate the daily lives of all people. FST challenges these distortions and seeks to give a voice to women, increasing their representation in decision making. According to Smith (1987) feminist standpoint theorists see women's accounts of their everyday lives, and the meanings they assign to their experiences, as an important source of knowledge acquisition. Smith concludes that research which starts off with 'women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of the rest of social relations' (Harding, 1992, p. 437). Hence, FST is the obvious analytical framework for this thesis and the stories told by the participants in this research; the analytical concepts will be outlined below.

Double consciousness

The term 'double consciousness' was coined by Du Bois (1903) in relation to how black people in the United States of America, construct their knowledge from their unique social position. Du Bois asserts that this comes about as a result of 'living at the very bottom of hardships… with the shadow of slavery, in utter poverty, with broken home, having to deal with war, racism, and capitalism' (p. 5). He concludes that this position allows African Americans to have knowledge not only of their own social locations, but also those of the dominant white Americans; African Americans can see the world, especially in terms of freedom and democratic ideals, in a way that white Americans cannot (Meer, 2019).

Adopting Du Bois' idea of double consciousness, FST posits that women have a kind of double vision or double consciousness which provides them with a broad understanding of social contexts (Gurung, 2020). This is because women can see life from the position of their own

lived experiences, and from the social position of the dominant patriarchy (Collins, 2005; Harding, 2004). As Smith (1987) claims, a researcher's awareness of double consciousness can produce a more realistic picture of women's experiences and how policy and social systems regulate their daily lives. Smith (1987) states that if researchers start their inquiry from women's lives, they can generate questions about why it is primarily women who are assigned certain activities, and what the consequences are for the economy, the state, the family, the educational system, and other social institutions. This kind of question guides researchers in designing their methods, calling for explicit attention to the social relations embedded in women's everyday activities. Therefore, as Harding (1992) stresses, the situation of women and their lived experiences can serve as a 'point of entry' into an investigation. Inevitably, the reality of power and power relations must be taken into account.

Power relations

FST highlights the importance of power relations in the production of knowledge. Since a standpoint specifies a power relationship, one way to understand how power works is to learn from the standpoint of the less powerful. According to Harding (2004), we can use the accounts of the less powerful to gain insights into how power operates and to reveal differences between what is 'claimed' to be true and what people experience.

The following are facts stipulated by FST:

- FST emphasises that knowledge of women has traditionally been constructed by western, white, patriarchal, capitalist ideology which favours and preserves male-dominant power arrangements.
- These constructions of women influence social policy and structures, which regulate and determine the social possibilities and choices of women (Harding, 1986, 2004).
- FST posits that the everyday lives of women, as they understand their own experiences, can produce a more objective representation of women and disclose ways in which their

social lives are mediated by male-dominant systems in order to oppose and transcend these constraints (Bertsch, 2012).

- The methodology of FST is directed towards exposing specific ways in which women experience, and might oppose, their stratification.

By highlighting the importance of power relationships in the process of knowledge construction, FST criticises dominant knowledge practices. Dominant knowledge practices tend to exclude women from inquiry, deny their epistemic authority, reinforce gender hierarchies, and produce theories to serve male interests. FST aims at liberating women from virtually all forms of discrimination and oppression by building an alternative research approach acknowledging the contribution of women in knowledge production. As a methodology, FST provides both a means to address women's overall silence in the public domain regarding their specific lived experience, and to seek the trust necessary to access informants' evidence (Gurung, 2020). Using this approach, researchers often try to build a strong collaborative bond with research participants in order to avoid further marginalising them (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). To achieve this, participants might be invited to design research questions, help collect data, or be involved in the data analysis (Bertsch, 2012; Creswell, 1994). FST aims to provide a voice for participants, raising their consciousness while advancing an agenda for changes to improve their lives. In the main, feminist standpoint studies involve the researcher and participants working together for personal and social transformation. This research/er has attempted to follow all the principles of FST, prioritising voices and agency of the women who have given their stories.

On a practical note, the topic of the present study is single motherhood in contemporary Northern Vietnam. In line with FST, it is a qualitative enquiry that starts exploring the topic by asking the mother participants a question in the realm of the first main research question: 'What are your experiences as a single mother?'. To investigate how dominant forces shape these

experiences, a follow-up question was asked: 'How do you manage your situation [of being a single mother]?'. Finally, to evaluate the support available for single mothers, they were asked:

- What resources do you draw upon in your day-to-day life?
- What support do you receive from the government and family?

Available support was further evaluated through interviews with the VWU's grassroots-level local staff. Due to this being a feminist standpoint study, the research emphasises the experiences of single mothers over those of the staff, hoping to thereby develop more effective avenues of government support. This research was also designed to empower single mother participants by encouraging them to make significant contributions in generating data.

The researcher, as a daughter of a single mother, has her own situated knowledge and experience regarding the research topic. This provided her with insights and contextual understanding that can contribute to a richer interpretation of the data. However, the researcher was aware that her background might also inform some potential biases that may influence the data collection and analysis process. To avoid this, the researcher adopted rigorous research methodologies that promote objectivity and fairness. Detail on how this was achieved is given in section 4.4 of this chapter.

4.3 Research procedures

Data for this project was collected from June to September 2018, after the research had been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference H12738).

4.3.1 Research setting

Participants were recruited from two research sites: the urban area of Hanoi (Vietnam's capital city) and the rural area of Hai Phong province. These two research sites were chosen due to a combination of factors, including access to participants, cultural relevance, and practical

considerations. The researcher was born in rural Hai Phong and lived there until she went to Hanoi for university study, where she started her professional career as a lecturer and researcher. Through her personal and professional connections, the researcher could reach and engage with the targeted population in the research area. When selecting the two research sites, the researcher also considered cultural relevance – sites were selected to allow a deep exploration of cultural norms, practices, and experiences related to the research topic. The settings allowed the use of a comparative approach; this was important as the experiences of single mothers living in these two locations are likely to be different, with both offering insights to inform the study's conclusions. The following section will provide details of places.

Located in the central Red River basin, Hanoi is the biggest city in Vietnam with an area of 3,359 square kilometres and a population of 7.5 million (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2016). It has been the political, cultural, and economic centre of Vietnam since *Đổi Mới* (1986) and has experienced rapid urbanisation and globalisation over the last three decades. Hai Phong, a province on the northern coast of Vietnam, is much smaller than Hanoi, with an area of 1,527 square kilometres and a population of 2.2 million (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2016). Hai Phong is a major industrial province, however there are significant differences in levels of development between its various districts. While the inner suburbs and the eastern districts (the port area) are commercial and industrial, the western districts, such as Vinh Bao and Tien Lang, are agricultural and much less developed.

The participants in this research - both single mothers and staff members of the VWU - live and work either in the inner suburbs of Hanoi capital or regional areas [the western districts] of Hai Phong (please see detail below). As the research findings will demonstrate, there are significant differences in the stories accounted by the research participant. These differences are determined by levels of social economic development, educational and employment opportunities, and, in many cases, personal feelings.

4.3.2 Research participants

Participant selection

In this study, two categories of participants were recruited: (1) single mothers, and (2) staff of the VWU. Since the study was to span rural and urban areas of Vietnam, both categories of participants were recruited from both Hanoi and rural Hai Phong. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

Single mothers (divorced, widowed and never married mothers):

- Having been a single mother for at least two years
- Living in Hanoi, or in rural Hai Phong
- Residing with her child/children under 16 years old

This study did not include older single mothers who sacrificed their youth in the national dependence war (before 1982). This was due to the fact that this group did not meet the research criteria of currently living with children under 16 years old as their children have grown up.

Staff of the VWU:

- Union members living in Hanoi, or in rural Hai Phong
- Having worked for the VWU at the grassroots level for at least five years

Number of participants

Twelve single mothers and six VWU staff were recruited. Six mothers and three staff were in Hanoi, and six mothers and three staff were in Hai Phong. Each group of single mothers included two who were divorced, two widows, and two who had never married.

Table 1: Hanoi/City single mother participant profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Circumstance	Education	No. of children	Career	Years as a single mother
Huong	35	Divorced	Bachelor's degree	2	Business person	4
Ninh	28	Divorced	Bachelor's degree	1	Marketing staff	3

Luong	29	Never married	Bachelor's degree	1	Accountant	7
Oanh	36	Widow	Diploma	1	Nurse	7
Theu	35	Widow	Bachelor's degree	2	Accountant	5
Trang	27	Never married	Bachelor's degree	1	Clerk	3

Table 2: Hai Phong/ Rural single mother participant profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Circumstance	Education	No. of children	Career	Years as a single mother
Thien	40	Never married	12/12	1	Garment worker	12
Hien	38	Widowed	9/12	2	Childcare worker	4
Chang	28	Widowed	9/12	2	Childcare worker	2
Nhung	32	Divorced	9/12	2	Footwear worker	4
Thu	39	Never married	6/12	1	Farmer	12
Chi	27	Divorced	Bachelor's degree	1	Accountant	3

Table 3: Staff participant profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Workplace	No. of years working for the VWU
Doan	60	Hanoi	20
Thuy	55	Hanoi	18
Hai	58	Hanoi	14
Thuong	40	Hai Phong	5
Duyen	48	Hai Phong	12
Khanh	53	Hai Phong	16

The process of participant recruitment

Bryman (2015) states that most sampling in qualitative research entails purposive sampling, which is conducted with reference to the goals of the research, so that the units of analysis are selected in terms of criteria that will allow the research questions to be answered. This study used a generic purposive sampling technique (Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, & Krein, 2008) and also a snowballing technique, in which the researcher initially recruited a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and then used them as referrals to contact other potential participants. Snowball sampling has been used in many studies on disadvantaged women because it is considered an effective way to build rapport between researchers and hard-to-reach populations (Mammen & Sano, 2012; Rao et al., 2017; Varga & Surratt, 2014; Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Woodley and Lockard (2016) state that snowballing is a good way to use social networking to study marginalised populations without further marginalising them. A limitation of snowball sampling is that, while it may produce valid results, it can also lead to broad generalisations being attributed to the findings (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Cohen & Arieli, 2011). However, qualitative studies usually involve intensive and detailed exploration of a relatively small sample rather than generating generalised results for large populations (Forman et al., 2008): therefore, snowball sampling was chosen for this research.

VWU staff participants

After obtaining ethics approval from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee in June 2018, the researcher travelled to Vietnam and asked for appointments with members of the Executive Board of the Vietnamese Women's Union at the district level. This required attending the VWU offices representing eight urban districts of Hanoi (Ba Dinh, Hoan Kiem, Dong Da, Thanh Xuan, Cau Giay, Hoang Mai, Hai Ba Trung, and Tay Ho), and the VWU offices representing five suburban districts of Hai Phong province (Vinh Bao, Tien Lang, Thuy Nguyen, An Lao, and An Duong). Face-to-face meetings were important as these are the

respectful customs when communicating with government agencies in Vietnam. In these meetings with leaders of the Women's Union, the researcher introduced the research documents (including Ethics Approval, Advertisement, Information Sheets, Consent Form, and Interview Question; see Appendix A, B, C), gave a brief description of the project, and asked permission to recruit staff members of the VWU at the grassroots level for the purpose of the study.

In Hanoi, written permission to recruit was obtained from the representatives for Thanh Xuan, Cau Giay, and Dong Da Women's Unions. In Hai Phong, only the representatives from Vinh Bao Women's Union gave approval. The researcher was requested by the President of the Women's Union in each district to contact the Vice President of the area, which she did by phone. The Vice Presidents subsequently contacted their staff at the grassroots level to ascertain their interest in taking part in the project. Three staff members at the grassroots level in Thanh Xuan, Hanoi indicated that they were interested in the project, and four staff in four of the twelve wards of Vinh Bao, Hai Phong indicated their willingness to participate in the study. The Vice Presidents obtained permission from these potential participants to provide their contact details to the researcher, who then arranged a time and place with each to further discuss the study prior to obtaining written consent. After the discussions, three staff of the VWU in Thanh Xuan and three in Vinh Bao were recruited: an equal representation from each of two districts.

Single mother participants

The snowballing technique was used to invite single mothers to take part in the project. The researcher provided potential participants including friends, colleagues, former students, and relatives with the research documents listed above. These initial potential participants were asked to share the research documents with other potential respondents in their social circles.

Anyone who expressed interest could contact the researcher directly via an email address and phone number provided in the research documents.

All six single mother participants in Hanoi were recruited through the snowball sampling technique. Only two single mothers in Hai Phong province were recruited this way. To recruit the planned number of participants in the rural area, the researcher used a contingency strategy and asked the staff participants in Vinh Bao district to help recruit because of their strong connection with the women in their area. Recognising that potential participants in the rural area would not be familiar with using email, this contingency strategy had been planned before the researcher went into the field. The staff participants were asked to introduce the research and documents at the end of the monthly meeting of the VWU in their area as well as explain them to potential participants in their neighbourhood. It was stressed in the research documents, and also announced by the staff, that any single mothers who wished to be involved in the research could contact the researcher via her phone number provided in the information sheet. Within two weeks, four single mothers in rural Hai Phong province had been recruited through this contingency plan.

Each research participant was given a small amount of money (VND 200,000 – approx. AUD 13 at the time of the interviews) as reimbursement for their participation in each step of the research. When the compensation plan was explained in the group interviews, two of the single mothers stated that while they would welcome the money, the most important thing for them was to be able to tell their stories. This last factor is evidence of the importance of this research and the methodological approaches engaged in the research.

4.3.3 Ethical considerations

As this research involved direct interaction with people, ethics approval was required. Ethics clearance from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

was obtained prior to the commencement of the field trip (see Appendix A – Reference H12738).

Some of the key concerns for ethical approach to data collection, and respect to research participant, involved focus groups and photograph taking. The single mothers research participants were asked to participate in focus groups, and to take photographs of activities which illustrated part of their lives, which they would discuss in photo-elicitation interviews. VWU staff participants were only required to do open-ended interviews. The details are provided below.

The central ethical concerns in feminist studies, as in other studies involving people, are informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, respect, privacy, and care (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). These factors were crucial for both categories of research participants because the research explores the personal stories of single mothers – a disadvantaged group – and the experiences of the VWU staff in supporting single mothers. Various strategies were used to ensure an ethical approach in different steps of the project.

Informed consent

The recruitment strategy was designed to ensure that participation was on a voluntary basis. Potential participants were provided with research documents with information about the study, including its purpose, methods of data collection, level of participant involvement, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, level of risk, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the project without prejudice. The potential participants were given time (two weeks) after receiving the research documents to decide whether they wanted to participate in the project. The participants who opted to do so were asked to give written consent prior to taking part (see Appendix B). The consent form was in Vietnamese so as to ensure it was fully understood by the participants.

Anonymity and confidentiality

The matters of anonymity and confidentiality are of great importance to all researcher of peoples and personal lives. This has been acknowledged and actioned in this research. The following will provide detail.

There were some minor risks for both the single mothers and staff participants in sharing their experiences around the issue focused on in this research. Therefore, all participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to be used during the information-gathering process and in publication of the research findings. In addition, the twelve participants in the focus groups were asked to respect the confidentiality of matters discussed among themselves and to not share personal information given by group members. Participants involved in keeping the photo diaries were asked to avoid taking photos of people who had not given consent to be in the research photos. All pictures submitted with images of faces were removed by the researcher (please see Appendix F). These precautions ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were well protected.

Respect, privacy, and care

The interviews with the participants were considered by the researcher to be similar to everyday conversation in which issues of day-to-day living are shared with colleagues and friends. However, the researcher recognised the possibility that the research participants might experience some level of stress when recalling their past experiences or hardships. As outlined below, when stress and/or emotions were felt and expressed by research participants, the interview/focus group talks stopped, and the participant/s shown full respect to continue participation and/or talk about matters of distress. If the participant wanted to withdraw, her decision was respected, and the interview would have been terminated but this was not necessary for any interviews.

The focus group discussions, both in Hanoi and Hai Phong, had to be paused at times as some of the participants did cry and exhibit emotion during the process. However, these women

received both empathy and encouragement from the other participants and the researcher. In a sense, it became obvious that all shared emotions and experiences. After short breaks, we continued the discussion, and common accounts were expressions and appreciation of a rare chance for the participants' stories to be heard and listened to. None of the participants chose to withdraw from the study, despite being given opportunity to do so.

The subsequent photo elicitation interviews went smoothly. This may be because this exercise took place over two months and so there was opportunity for a deep rapport to generate between the researcher and the participants.

Provision was made for a psychologist or counsellor at the community health centre or other health service available in Hanoi or Hai Phong to be contacted by the researcher requesting appointment/s and follow-up support if participation in this research caused any participant distress. No counselling or support was requested by participants.

4.3.4 Data management

In the initial stage of data collection, the researcher stored the audio recordings on her iPhone which she used to record the focus groups and interviews. The iPhone was used as a recorder for its convenience and because it could be synchronised with a laptop, so that the researcher could assess data at any time. Both devices are password protected so that only the researcher can access the data. The data is backed up on iCloud (password protected) to avoid any loss of empirical material. Due to the increasing quantity of data, and to assist with coding procedures, the data has been imported into the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. This is an effective data management system that also facilitates the coding process.

4.3.5 Data trustworthiness

The fullest and richest data can be gained from transcribing verbatim. If possible, researchers transcribe their own tapes because this way they immerse themselves in the

data and become sensitive to the issues of importance. (Holloway & Galvin, 2016, pp. 288-289)

The quote above has informed the researcher. All the focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese – the language in which the discussions and interviews were conducted – by the researcher. Once all the recorded data was transcribed, the researcher read it through while listening to the recording several times, numbering lines of text, correcting spelling or other errors, and inserting notations for pauses, crying, or laughter. Notes were written in the transcription through this stage which proved invaluable for reference during later analysis processes.

Each personal interview transcript was then sent to the informant. Of the eight mother participants who had kept photo diaries (see 4.4.1.1) and the six staff members, three mother participants and two staff added some information to the text; the remaining five single mothers and four staff confirmed the accuracy of the transcriptions. No one asked for the removal of any information.

The researcher, who is bilingual, then translated the transcribed data from Vietnamese into English. After the researcher finished this translation work, a licenced professional Vietnamese – English translator was employed to review random portions of the researcher's translations of the interview data. The translator only assessed a part of the whole data set to ensure the security of the data and anonymity of the participants.

4.4 Research implementation – details.

4.4.1 Data collection

Data for this study was collected via two focus groups totalling twelve single mothers, photo activities and photo-elicitation interviews with eight of those twelve mother participants, and personal interviews with six staff of the VWU.

4.4.1.1 Single mother participants

The data collection process with the single mother participants was made up of three stages: focus groups, photo activities, and photo-elicitation interviews. Twelve single mothers took part in the focus groups and then eight of those twelve participated in photo activities and photo-elicitation interviews.

4.4.1.1.1 Focus groups

a. An overview of focus groups as research technique

Focus groups, or group discussions, are group interviews that capitalise on communication between research participants to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995). This data gathering technique was originally used in the first half of the twentieth century in market and behavioural science research (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014); it was then widely employed in the early 1990s in sociology, psychology, health studies, and anthropology (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Since then, in parallel with the development of qualitative methodology, the use of focus groups has grown, and the method has a special appeal for researchers committed to feminist concerns (Kook, Harel-Shalev, & Yuval, 2019).

The choice of the focus group as one of three data collection instruments for this research derived from its advantages to feminist standpoint studies. Kook et al. (2019) state that 'focus groups not only allow for the collective construction of meaning and knowledge, they also acknowledge the importance of not isolating the research subjects from their social context' (p. 87). Participants in focus groups are usually recruited through purposive sampling, therefore they may feel more comfortable expressing their views with others sharing the same background and experiences (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999; Morgan, 1997). As focus groups also provide informants with a sense of 'security in numbers' (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999), the method encourages often hard-to-reach populations to talk about strong emotional or sensitive issues that are not usually raised. Focus groups are further suitable for eliciting the perspectives of women due to the idea that this method more closely resembles

‘feminised patterns’ of interaction and exchange (Barbour, 2008). Presumably due to these recognised advantages, focus groups have been successfully used in studies on marginalised women such as lower socioeconomic status women (Madriz, 1998), minority women (Kook et al., 2019), and disempowered women in rural areas (Barbara, 2002).

Suggestions regarding the number of members in a focus group vary. According to Morgan (1997), the groups should usually consist of eight to ten participants. Other researchers suggest that no more than twelve members, led by one or two moderators, can be an effective size for a focus group (Barbour, 2008; Kook et al., 2019). Côté-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy (1999), based on their experiences conducting focus groups with pregnant women who experienced perinatal loss, claim that ten to twelve people is too large a group when discussing extremely emotional and sensitive topics. They explain that, in their research, because personal stories told by participants were often lengthy and detailed, ‘the quietest member in the group never joined the spontaneous conversation and was often passed over when the discussion moved around the table’ (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999, p. 280). For this kind of enquiry they recommended having four to five members in a focus group to ensure that all participants can be involved in the discussion and have their voices heard. Greenbaum (1998) comes to the same conclusion, stating that ‘mini groups’, each with four to six members, were most fruitful when the discussion focussed on sensitive topics. Researchers also cite other limitations of focus groups, for example that sometimes a member of the group had dominance over others or the discussion strayed to issues unrelated to the research topic (Barbour, 2008; Greenbaum, 1998) – when this occurred, the facilitator used questions to navigate participants back to the research topic.

b. The focus groups

In this project, six single mothers in Hanoi and another six in Hai Phong participated in focus groups aiming to elicit a broad understanding about the lives of Vietnamese single mothers.

The two focus groups were scheduled on weekends and took place in public libraries at a convenient time for all participants. The researcher contacted the participants to re-confirm their participation and the meeting. In Hanoi, the researcher hired a childcare service provider because two single mothers brought their children to the discussion site. The focus group in Hai Phong was delayed one week because three single mothers in the group had to work on the Saturday initially scheduled.

Prior to the focus group meetings, the participants were asked to review the research documents and encouraged to ask any questions they might have. At the meeting, the researcher then carefully re-explained the information in the information sheets and consent forms to the participants, such as the purpose of the study, the three phases of the data collection process including *(1) focus groups, (2) photography activities and (3) photo-elicitation interviews*, and the rights of research participants. The participants were advised that they should select a pseudonym that would be used to refer to them in any publications of the research findings to ensure their confidentiality.

Further details regarding confidentiality, recording of the group discussions, the transcription of the recorded data, and the future usage of the data were also discussed. The participants were asked to express any concerns related to the data collection process or their participation in the project. The researcher was asked some questions regarding the photography activities, which would be conducted after the group discussions, such as the expected duration of the activities and how to handle technical matters. The researcher explained the prompts to the participants and reminded those who had chosen to participate in photo diaries and follow-up interviews that it was important that they confirmed that they would be able to complete their photo diaries within the four-week timeframe. After reviewing all the information, each participant signed and returned their consent form to the researcher. The group discussion then commenced. The focus groups were considered exploratory discussions and took place before the photography

activities and personal interviews so the researcher could determine key questions or main themes and then follow up issues of importance in more detail.

The researcher began the session by asking each member to briefly introduce herself to the group. They gave basic information such as their age, professional status, number of years as a single mother, and what had led them to becoming a single mother. The researcher also introduced herself, briefly sharing information about her life as the daughter of a widow since the age of seven. Once all the focus group participants were comfortable, the researcher asked open-ended questions relating to the participants experience of being a single mother and their expectations regarding family and government support (see Appendix C). The open-ended questions were used for generating detailed qualitative responses. The focus group members talked about their lives and encouraged others in the group to share their personal experiences. Then, following guidelines provided by Bryman (2015), the researcher used some 'probing questions' or 'follow-up questions'. These had been prepared beforehand and included asking participants if they could expand on what they had said, describe how they felt about what had happened, or explain more clearly what they meant. The purpose of asking these questions at this stage was to encourage diversity of comments or opinions among the group, or sometimes to remind them about the focus of the research.

The duration of the focus groups in Hanoi and Hai Phong were around 150 minutes and 120 minutes respectively. The process of analysing the focus group data is presented in the Data Analysis section.

4.4.1.1.2 Photography activities

a. An overview of photography activities as research technique

The study's use of photography is drawn from elements of a photovoice study method, which is based on the understanding that people are experts in their own lives (C. C. Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). In practice, research participants are provided

with a camera and a list of prompts to take photos over a period of time. The present method also drew on elements of photo-elicitation studies in which visual images are used as a springboard for discussion between the researcher and the photographer about the meaning and the significance of the images, to elicit information related to the topic of interest (Bryman, 2015; Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005; C. C. Wang et al., 2004).

Photographic techniques are not new in data collection, the development of which is often attributed to Collier (1957) who conducted anthropological research on how families adapted to residence among ethnically different people, and to new forms of work in urban factories in Canada (Harper, 2002). Collier gave each participant a camera and asked them to capture images they felt best illustrated the differences between their old and new lives. The technique is now widely used in ethnography and anthropology and is becoming increasingly popular in sociology because of its strengths, such as capturing detailed accounts of experience (Bates, McCann, Kaye, & Taylor, 2017), engaging participants in the research process, and enabling participant control (Allen, 2011; Harper, 2002; Triandafilidis, Ussher, Perz, & Huppatz, 2018).

Photovoice and photo-elicitation methods have two formats: (1) participant-driven – participants are asked to provide photographs they feel are relevant to the research problem and (2) researcher-driven – photographs provided by a researcher are used as discussion prompts (Bates et al., 2017; Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008; Samuels, 2004).

In this study, the former format was employed because the researcher expected that participant-driven photographs would more effectively represent the participants' worlds. In this way, the researcher was provided with greater insights into the experiences (including emotions, feelings, and ideas) of the participants rather than imposing her own framework or perception of a topic (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

The researcher was aware that some caution is required when using photographic activities, especially if the topic is sensitive. Firstly, participants commonly photograph people and this

may compromise the anonymity of the photographer and the photographed (Croghan et al., 2008). Secondly, it is common that people want to show others snapshots which portray them as they wish to be seen, in the moments that reflect the best rather than the worst of their experience (Holland, 2004). Additionally, photographers, with the support of technology, are able to edit their pictures (Croghan et al., 2008), which might result in a significant loss of authenticity. This is a considerable concern in the era of smartphones and the development of photo editing applications for those devices. The researcher adopted some strategies to overcome this possibility; these will be discussed later in the section.

b. The photo activities in this study

After the completion of the focus groups, the participants were invited to take part in the second stage of the study: the photographic activities or photo diaries. All mother participants in Hai Phong expressed their interests in participating in photographic activities, however, two of these six, who had no camera or smartphone, withdrew from that component of participation. This does demonstrate a limitation of the method – it can be less accessible for those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds unless the equipment can be supplied by the researcher. Four single mothers in Hanoi confirmed their willingness and availability to take part in the photo diary activity. In short, eight of the twelve single mothers, four at each research site, were involved in this research activity. The photo diary participants in Hanoi consisted of one divorced mother, one widow, and two unwed mothers. In Hai Phong two were divorced, one was a widow, and one was an unwed mother.

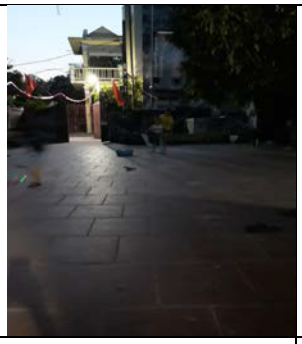
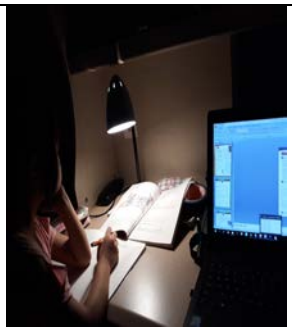
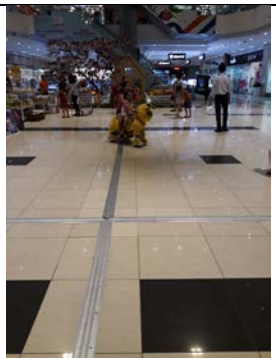
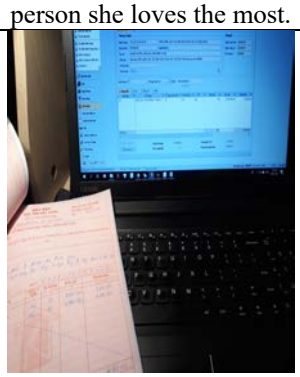
The eight participants were asked to use their own smartphones or cameras to take pictures of their daily lives that represented their experiences of being a single mother. They were given prompts: for example, it was suggested that they may wish to photograph key times in their day and typical activities such as everyday household tasks. Moments might include providing care for their children, leisure activities, household maintenance, indoor/outdoor work, and

celebrations. The participants were asked to avoid, as far as possible, photographing faces in order to preserve anonymity and were advised that facial images would not be used in any publications of the research findings, including the thesis. Further, the researcher stressed that authentic photographs would be appreciated, and the participants should use the camera's automatic mode while shooting photos and not use photo editing applications to edit the images. The participants were asked to give each photograph a caption, and send it to the researcher via email, iMessage, or their chosen social networking applications (such as Facebook, Zalo, and WhatsApp). The duration of the photo journals was four weeks. It was expected that each participant would submit at least ten pictures. The photo diaries were recorded from July to August 2018 at both research sites. The total number of pictures submitted by the participants was 107. Fifty pictures were discarded, including 27 photos that captured facial images and 23 were similar. The participants' ownership of the videos and images was guaranteed in the consent forms.

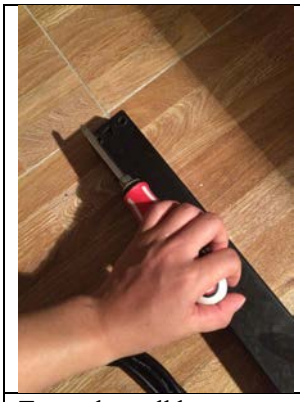
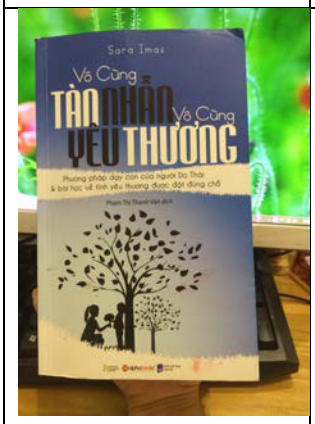
It is important to note that although the photos were used to elicit interviews, the photographs were not always relevant to data analysis. Instead, they were often complementary or peripheral to the interview discussion, so not all of the photos have been referred to in the analysis chapters. The researcher included all the images in the following section, in part, in order to introduce the single mother participants to the reader.

Photo collection:

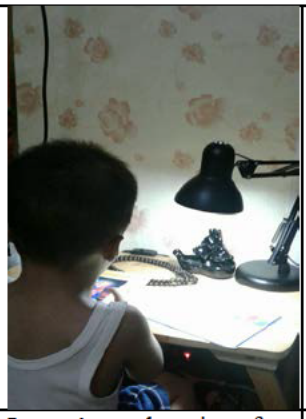
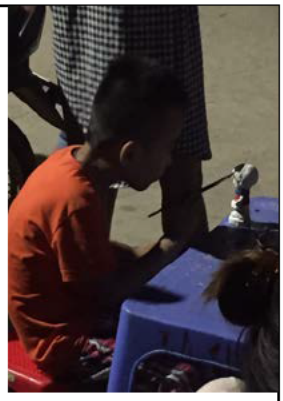
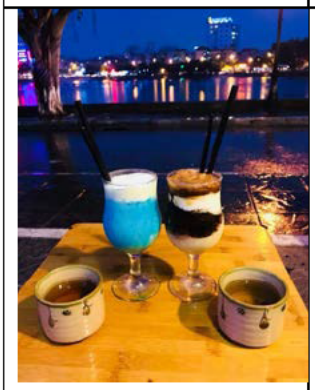
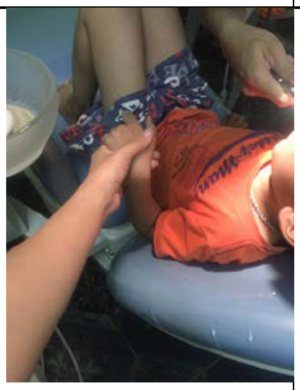
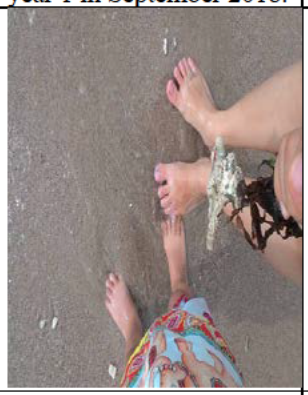
Theu's photos

			
Theu's two-storey house, built one year before her husband's fatal accident.	Theu's daughters playing in the front-yard, waiting for her to come home after work.	Theu working in the evening while her daughters study.	Theu's 9-year-old daughter's school assignment in which she describes her mother as the person she loves the most.
			
One of the many achievement awards of Theu's 13-year-old daughter.	Theu enjoying a glass of fresh milk on holiday while keeping an eye on her children playing by the sea.	Theu's daughters enjoying a ride in a shopping centre at the weekend.	Theu, working in her office, where she is an accountant.
			
An electric pole withstanding a gale near Theu's house. She sees herself as being as strong as the pole.			

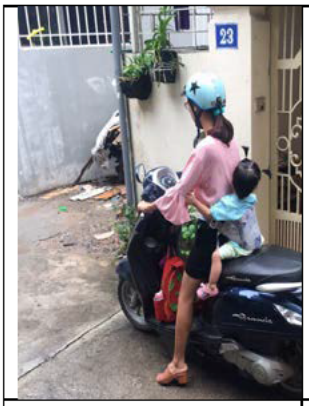
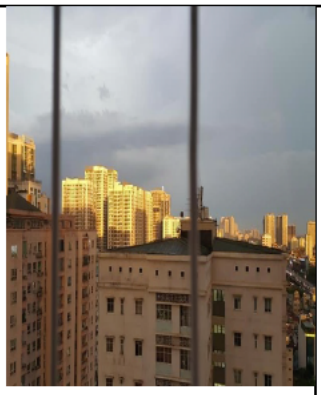
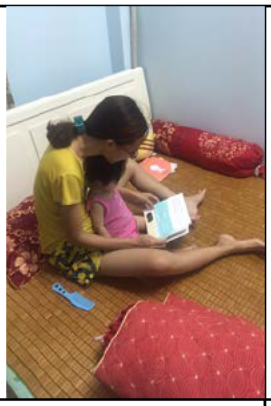
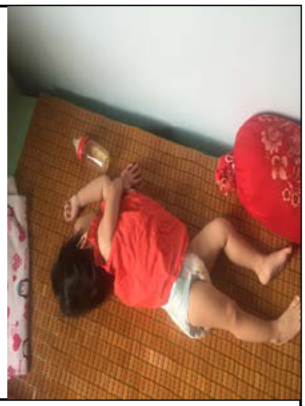
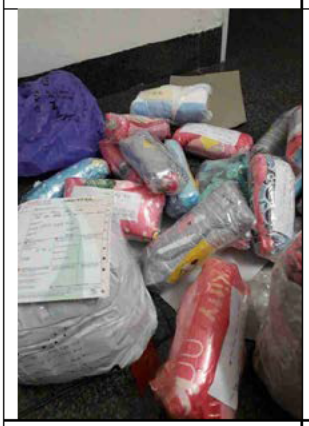
Trang's photos

			
Trang does all home maintenance herself, in order to save money.	The first dress Trang bought for her daughter, when she was 2 years old. She bought a size 3 to get more wear out of it.	The ride-on that Trang would have liked to have bought for her daughter but couldn't afford as she only has enough money for essentials.	The small amount of money Trang has left at the end of the month. Just enough to buy a cup of instant noodles. She often had to borrow money from her friends in the first two years of being a single mother.
			
The book Trang reading with the title 'A mother's strict love' written by Sara Imas. She has been reading many parenting books since becoming a single mother in order to learn to be a good mother.	The first good child sticker Trang's daughter got after she had been in the kindergarten for two months. Trang was so happy with this one.	An electric pole entangled with wires which Trang passes every day. Since becoming a single mother, she has felt that her life, as well as the thoughts in her head, are like this tangle of which sometimes she does not know how to sort out.	One of the pictures in the book that Trang read for her daughter at bed time. She still dreams of having a complete family like other women.

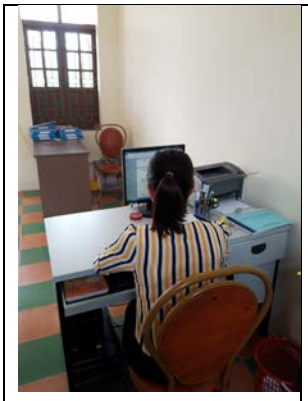
Luong's photos

			
On her way home after work. Luong rushes to pick up her son at a private childcare centre before 6.pm.	Rolls for dinner. Luong makes it simple by putting everything on a mat. Luong and her son sit on the floor, make their roll and eat.	Luong's son learning after dinner. Luong sits next to him, working, helping him to practice hand writing, and learn the alphabet and numbers when necessary. He is preparing to enter year 1 in September 2018.	Luong's son painting a statue at the playground. She takes him out every weekend to relax.
			
Luong and her son having smoothies at the weekend. This is a special treat for them both to celebrate finishing a project at her office.	Luong taking her son to the doctor when he was sick. Her son was sick quite often up to 3 years of age. It was the most stressful time for her.	Luong and her son at the beach on holiday with her company in July 2017.	Luong saw this man and his child playing with the waves when she was on holiday. She wishes her son could grow up with his father like this. She blamed herself for having her son out of marriage.

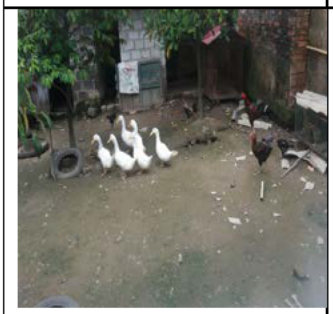
Ninh's photos

			
Ninh taking her daughter to the childcare centre before going to her office in the morning.	The view from Ninh's office. She is a marketing officer, and sees Hanoi as a place full of career opportunities.	Ninh reading a book with her daughter. She does this every evening before bed time.	When Ninh's daughter sleeps she works to earn extra income. Ninh sells clothes via Facebook.
			
Packages of goods Ninh has prepared to send to her customers. She often works late, usually until midnight, to respond to orders, packing the clothes, and recording her sales.	Ninh has little time to cook so she often grabs breakfast for her daughter and herself from a shop near her home.		

Chi's photos

			
Chi working in her office. She works for local government as an accountant.	Chi's parents have a shop selling groceries. She takes responsibility for importing goods and keeping the financial records.	Chi often goes to the town centre to deliver goods for her parents on weekends.	Chi playing with her daughter at the playground in the kindergarten after school.
			
Chi and her daughter playing in the back yard. She tries to spend time as much as she can with her daughter.	Chi's daughter colouring a picture in the evening. She often reads book, does some drawing, or colouring before bed time.		

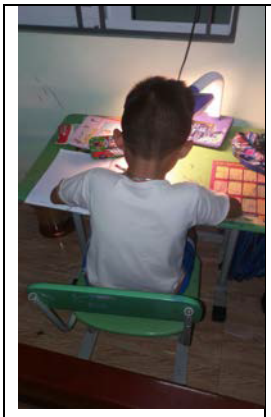
Nhung's photos

			
The bike Nhung rides to work every day. She wants to buy a scooter to save travelling time but cannot afford it.	Nhung and her best friend at her work place. She works for a garment company.	Nhung's mother, working on the farm. She works harder to support Nhung and her children when they came back to live with her parents after the divorce.	Nhung's older daughter doing chores after finishing her homework.
			
Nhung eating dinner. Her daughter often waits for her to come home so that they can have dinner together.	Sometimes, Nhung arrives home very late as she works extra hours. Her daughters are all in bed by the time she arrives.	Nhung fixing a pan. She manages all the house maintenance to save money.	Vện - Nhung's dog-now a member of her family. She felt guilty about thinking she could sell him, most often when she had no money to pay for her daughters' school fees.
			
Poultry in Nhung's garden. She will sell them all to pay for her daughters' school fee before September.			

Thu's photos

			
Thu's house next to her brother's house. She applied for loan from the poverty reduction program to build this one-room house in 2015. Before this, Thu and her son lived in a thatch house built on inherited land from her parents. She is still in debt after two years.	Nhung could not afford to build a kitchen. She cooks in her brother's kitchen. She wishes she could have money to build her own.	Thu working on her paddy. She is growing chillies this season.	Thu harvests snails and crabs after finishing her work on the farm almost every day.
			
Thu selling what she harvested to earn extra income. She will use the money buy meat for dinner or save the money for her son's education.	Thu and her son having dinner. Her son often helps with cooking and chores.	Thu has no money to buy a TV or radio. She often goes to her brother's place to watch TV or she listens to the public speaker attached to the electric pole next to her home for important information broadcast by the local government.	

Hien's photos

			
Hien's older son doing homework in the evening	Hien going to the farm to work on her rice paddy. She is a childcare worker and also works on her farm for extra income.	Hien will sell these dogs to pay for her sons' school fees before September.	Hien's neighbour. This old woman lives alone as her children moved to the city to work. Hien worries that she will be alone when her sons grow up and move out.

There were several advantages to using photo activities in this study, including the development of deeper rapport between the researcher and participants as a result of the photographic journey. This was because each time the participants sent a photograph, the researcher and participant were able to have a brief discussion on it, and they were able to share more of their journey. In turn, this facilitated ease in the subsequent face-to-face interviews, making our interview sessions more like an everyday conversation between friends in which important issues were dissected. As photographers of their own lives, the participants were actively involved in the research process. This helped to balance the relationship between the researcher and participants and acknowledged participants as active and significant contributors to the research data. These factors are important considerations in feminist research with minority groups; and all people for that matter.

4.4.1.1.3 Photo-elicitation interviews

a. An overview of photo-elicitation interviews as research technique

Photo-elicitation interviews are data collection techniques wherein the researcher uses visual images in interviews (Harper, 2002). The history of photo-elicitation interviews has been well-documented and since its first use in the middle of the twentieth century, this method has been widely applied in various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and education (Bates et al., 2017; Harper, 2002). In sociology, photo-elicitation interviews have been successfully used in numerous research projects on sensitive topics such as the experiences of teachers and health care workers supporting young people with HIV in rural South Africa (Mitchell, DeLange, Moletsane, Stuart, & Buthelezi, 2005), the lives of young people with cancer (J. Yi & Zebrack, 2010), and young Australian women's experiences of smoking-related stigma (Triandafilidis et al., 2018). Photo-elicitation interviews have been successfully used in feminist research, for example in gaining in-depth knowledge of Mexican and South Asian migrant women's experiences and strategies for living with violence (Frohmann, 2005).

Photo-elicitation interviews have numerous proven benefits (Bates et al., 2017; Collier, 1957; Croghan et al., 2008; Harper, 2002; Latham, 2008; Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Samuels, 2004). First, they gain rich and in-depth information. Samuels (2004), reporting on a study on child Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, and Collier (1957), details two experiments in interviewing for an anthropological research in which one interviewer (researcher) used photography and the other was conducted verbally. Both researchers commented – after mutual consultation - that using photographs as a research aid stimulated participants to discuss the world about them in more detail than they would in a verbal interview format. Harper (2002) attributes this increase in detail to the fact that photographs evoke memories for the participants. Furthermore, as Collier states, 'the graphic images can assist an informant who lacks fluency of words to make clearer statements about complex situations' (Collier, 1957, p. 858).

One purpose of photo-elicitation interviews is to bring together the interviewee's images and words and to provide 'multiple dimensions' to his or her perspective (Bates et al., 2017;

Latham, 2008). Additionally, photo-elicitation interviews can help to promote positive emotional response for participants; researchers have commented that using photographs in interviews 'deflected any feelings of discomfort about the interview process' while capturing interviewees' attention 'much more easily and for a long period of time' (Samuels, 2004, p. 147). Even in research on sensitive topics, participants have reported that they found the act of talking about their photos to be quite 'therapeutic' (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). Considering these strengths, the researcher decided to employ this method in research on experiences of Vietnamese single mothers, with an expectation that this would provide more detailed, authentic, and reliable data.

b. Photo-elicitation interviews in this study

There were eight mother participants involved in photo activities, who then took part in photo-elicitation interviews. Prior to the photo-elicitation interviews, the researcher had reviewed all 107 photographs submitted. The twenty-five photographs which included facial images of people who had not given their consent to the research were deleted, as were the seventeen photographs which bore similarity to others in the collection. This reduced the number of photos used to sixty-five. Each participant was interviewed at a venue of her choice. The interviews with urban mothers were conducted in local coffee shops, while rural informants were interviewed in their own homes. In each interview, the participant was asked to tell the researcher about each photograph she had submitted and explain its meaning and significance. Such discussion of allows the researcher further insight, and, very importantly, the research participants the autonomy and authority of describing and analysing their own thoughts, experiences, and reality. The main questions asked during these interviews were: 'Can you tell me the meaning/significance of the picture?', 'What is happening?', and 'How does this relate to your life?' (See Appendix C).

The eight interviews were conducted in the second half of August 2018, and, as previously mentioned, were more like daily conversations between friends than formal interviews due to the excellent rapport the researcher and participants had established during the photo diary period. The participants were comfortable during the interviews, which lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, which was longer than the researcher expected. At the end of each photo-elicitation interview, the participant was advised that a copy of the interview transcript would be sent to her so that she could check the accuracy of the information in the document and amend it if she wished.

In practice, each data collection instrument also presented its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, single mothers in the focus groups felt more comfortable expressing their views when provided with a sense of security by being in a group with women sharing the same background and experiences. The sharing of sensitive thoughts and personal information, especially regarding sexual issues and adult relationships, is considered taboo in Vietnam. The participants focus group avoided discussing their experiences of being sexually harassed, or whether they would like to enter into a relationship or remarry in the group. However, when they were alone with the researcher, whom they had grown to trust, the women openly shared their experiences, in many cases of sexual harassment, and, further, their thoughts on remarriage.

4.4.1.2. Staff participants

As mentioned before, the VWU is a government organisation that helps Vietnamese women in general and disadvantaged women in particular (Truong, 2004; Vietnamese Women's Union, 2017c). The researcher interviewed six VWU staff members who work at the grassroots' levels and could provide insights into how single mothers have been supported by the government and the local community. The interview participant number was determined by both time and the availability of participants. Creswell (1994) states that some researchers achieve data

saturation after interviewing about eight participants; in this study, saturation was reached after interviewing three participants. When it became clear to the researcher that there were no significant differences between the information, she was receiving on discussion topics/questions, and so data saturation had been reached, she decided that interviewing three staff at each of the two sites, Hanoi and Hai Phong, would suffice. Hence, the total number of staff interviewees in Hanoi and Hai Phong is six. The similarity in responses between all employees of the VWU does suggest the possibility that they had been instructed as to how much they were permitted to reveal in regard to the workings of the organisation. This is a statement of observation.

The interviews with six female VWU staff members started with the question, 'Can you give me some information about yourself?'. All informants responded that they were married, had children, and had been working with the VWU for more than ten years. Then other seven open-ended questions put to the six staff members included questions asking for: a job description, their perception of the overall function of the VWU, a description of state policies in place to support single-mother families, their opinion on how effective the support was in reality, accounts of challenges they face in assisting single mothers, and suggestions as to how to improve support (see Appendix C). They were set out thus:

Please give the following information on the following themes/questions

- Can you provide demographic information (for the women and area you work in)?
- Can you describe the main tasks/functions of the VWU?
- How would you describe your work?
- What is your understanding of government policy to support single mothers in Vietnam?
- Can you tell me how you evaluate the extent and the effectiveness of government support for single mothers?

- What might be the challenges faced by the VWU when it comes to assisting single mothers?
- Do you have suggestions about how to improve support for women in general and single mothers in particular in Vietnam?

Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and interviews were conducted at venues chosen by respondents: four at their home and two in their office. Interviews were audio recorded for accuracy with the consent of the respondents and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher[13].

4.4.2 Data analysis

Thematic coding, abduction and NvivoXI qualitative analysis computer software were utilised to analyse the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), 'thematic coding is a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set' (p. 57). Through focussing on meanings across a data set, this method allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.

As part of the analysis process, the researcher recorded memos. These took various forms throughout the project, including jottings in the margins of transcripts, several pages of handwritten reflections, emails with supervisors, and entries in the qualitative software program NVivo, which included conceptual maps. Memos help researchers recode ideas that can be useful in confirming, negating, amending and supporting earlier conceptions and in identifying directions for the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

[13] Some foreign researchers reported that they were subject to surveillance from the VWU officials when contacting local single mothers during their field trips (see Phinney, 2022, and Murru, 2017). In this research, although the local VWU officials expressed a level of concern about political sensitivities when the project was run under the supervision of foreign supervisors, the researcher conducted group discussions and interviews with the research participants without surveillance or control from the VWU. To achieve this, the researcher gained credit when presenting a letter of introduction from her office in Vietnam (the university where she has worked as a researcher and lecturer) and research documents (Appendix A, B, and C) to the VWU officials. Those documents provided transparency of the research project.

The data analysis process involved the following steps.

Step 1*: *Familiarisation with the data and generation of initial codes

This phase involves researchers immersing themselves in the data by reading and rereading textual data and listening to audio recordings, as well as making notes on the data as they read or listen (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, the researcher transcribed verbatim all the interview data, which was audio recorded, in the interview language, Vietnamese. The researcher then read through each transcript while listening to the recording several times, taking notes and allocating codes to segments of the data that conveyed what was happening in concise terms. Each photograph generated from the photo-elicitation interviews was analysed and compared with the accompanying transcript. This early stage of coding helped the researcher become familiar with the content of the data set, and to notice lower-level concepts which might be relevant to the research questions. One such example is the amount of time and effort single mothers invested in their children's education. Lower-level concepts were initially noted in the margins of the transcripts or, in the case of in vivo codes, highlighted in the text. Forty initial codes were generated at this stage of data analysis (See Appendix D).

Step 2: Generation of selective codes

Having attributed initial codes to the data, the researcher then divided them into interrelated conceptual categories. These concepts, informed by the wider literature, included stigma on single motherhood, the education of children, future aspirations, bad mother/good mother narratives, and support for single mothers. This was performed in order to delimit the initial coded raw data from the transcripts or photo collections into sub-categories with specific properties. To achieve this grouping, the researcher followed abduction – or abductive reasoning – a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning which recognises that researchers use their prior knowledge and experience to identify patterns, reveal deep structures, and develop satisfactory explanations from empirical data (Denzin, 2017; Farquhar,

Michels, & Robson, 2020; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In this study, the researcher borrowed concepts from existing literature (such as social stigma, sexual harassment, and good mothering) to inform the development of categories. The ongoing interaction between the data, the researcher, and the wider literature served to enhance theoretical sensitivity and helped to suggest relationships between codes to build denser categories and delimit the data. This process is presented in the following table:

Table 4: Example of coding process

What is happening in the data?	*Initial code*	*Selective code/ concept*
I spend a lot on my children's education, especially their foreign language courses which are run by an English language centre and a Chinese language and culture school, independent of their public school.	Income investment in education Extra classes	Education of children
I will support them as much as I can in their studies. I expect that they will perform well at school and be successful. Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother.	Support with schooling Failure mother	Future aspirations Bad mother/good mother

More detail on selective codes can be seen in Appendix D.

Step 3: Searching for and defining themes

This phase involves reviewing the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes to generate themes and subthemes, which are the subcomponents of a theme. It may involve collapsing or clustering codes that seem to share some unifying feature, so that they reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). When analysing the data in this study, the researcher noticed codes clustering around single mothers' experiences of financial hardship, social stigma, and sexual harassment, their investment in their children's education, and their experiences of available support.

Once these potential core themes were conceived, the forty initial codes and the assorted memos were re-examined to identify how each initial code related to each theme. While NVivo

had helped to establish the codes to this point, this next part of the coding and analysis process was done manually. In the collated extracts of data, each quote from focus groups and interviews and each image from photo diary exercises was reviewed individually to ascertain whether there was a correlation between the potential main theme and the selected empirical data. The researcher then reviewed the entire data set to ensure the themes meaningfully captured the data, and this led to collapsing a number of the above potential core themes together. Finally, three main themes were identified:

Theme 1: *I can walk away when they target me, but I cannot stand by and do nothing when my kids are picked on just because they don't have a father*: Vietnamese single mothers' experiences of social stigma.

Theme 2: *Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother*: Vietnamese single mothers' investment in their children's education.

Theme 3: *I have no choice. My family is my only source of support*: potential support for single mothers in Vietnam.

In the interpretation of the data, eight photos collected in the photo diary exercise are included alongside quotes from interviews and focus groups in order to illustrate and elaborate on the respondents' spoken responses. In the final written analysis, the photos are therefore treated as complementary data, that are reviewed alongside the focus groups and interviews, to provide further colour, depth and context to the spoken material. The photos were thematically analysed and clustered by the researcher, along with the focus groups and interviews. More of the photos that were collected can be seen in the Appendix F.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter described the theoretical framework informing the research, the methods employed to collect data, and the data analysis process. Guided by FST, this research treated the narratives of single mothers as its entry point and gave priority to data collected from this

group of participants over those generated by the staff members of the VWU. Although this feminist project had a small number of participants, it generated rich data on single mothers' perceptions and experiences through its triangulation of research methods: combining focus groups, photo journals, and photo-elicitation interviews. Using different methods to collect data over a period of three months was helpful as it gave the researcher more time and opportunities to engage with the participants, gradually building a deep rapport.

As noted in 4.4.1, each data collection instrument presented its own advantages and disadvantages. The data collection methods thus complemented each other and enabled the researcher to gather authentic data that provided insights into the experiences and largely silenced issues of sexual harassment of single mothers and other issues that impact single mothers in Vietnam in their day-to day lives, as discussed in the previous chapter. The data on sensitive issues such as sexual harassment or remarriage provided particular insights into the largely unspoken about challenges Vietnamese single mothers have to carefully navigate.

Chapter 5
‘I can walk away when they target me, but I cannot stand by and do nothing when they pick on my kids just because they don’t have a father’: single mother’s experiences of social stigma

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on data collected from two focus groups of single mothers, follow-up photo-elicitation interviews with some of these single mothers, and interviews with Vietnamese Women’s Union (VWU) staff in Hanoi and Hai Phong. Exploring social stigma in relation to single motherhood in the Vietnamese context, the chapter outlines the strategies the single mothers use to manage their situation. Western theories of stigma, in combination with a recognition of the unique social, historical, and cultural contexts in Vietnam, provide a valuable framework for the analysis.

Stigma is a key obstacle for single mothers and their children in Vietnam today. As mentioned before, the level of social stigma Vietnamese single mothers experience is often dictated by their marital status (widowed, never-married, or divorced). Further, for all the single mother participants in this research who had previously been partnered, the sense of social stigma increased upon becoming single. Hence, the participants experience single motherhood in a social environment wherein traditional norms strongly condemn pre-marital and non-marital sex, and where social and financial support is often limited, and this can be extremely challenging.

In Vietnam, as in many South East and East Asian countries, the judgements people make of single mothers tend to pass to their offspring/s, with the children of single mothers facing discrimination or prejudice from the community (T. Le, 2002; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015; Zhang, 2020). As conveyed in the chapter’s epigraph, these children frequently experience stigma in their daily social interactions, often being discriminated against. This chapter explores

participants' and their children's experiences of stigma/marginalisation and the strategies they adopt to manage their situations.

5.2 Background

5.2.1 Sociological theories on stigma

Sociological literature on stigma has been influenced by the work of Goffman (1963), who defines stigma as 'an attribute that makes a person different from others in a social category', which 'reduces the person to a tainted or discounted status' (p. 3). Goffman (1963), drawing on research with people suffering from mental illness, having physical disability, or practicing what were perceived to be socially 'deviant' behaviours such as homosexuality or crime, argues that the stigmatised individual is seen to possess 'an undesirable difference'. Stigma is thus conceptualised by society on the basis of what constitutes 'difference' or 'deviance', and is applied through rules and sanctions resulting in a kind of 'spoiled identity' for the person concerned (Goffman, 1963, p. 19). It is generated in social contexts and functions as a means of 'formal social control' (Goffman, 1963, p. 138).

Research literature on stigma has grown rapidly since Goffman's influential study. It has been applied in a plethora of scholarly disciplines including health, psychology, and sociology to study a variety of phenomena. Extending Goffman's work, scholars now assert that structural factors such as history, geography, politics, and economic conditions are crucial forces that inform the stigma that emerges in everyday contexts (Link & Phelan, 2001; Meisenbach, 2010; Tyler & Slater, 2018). It is also now recognised that stigma is real in various ways.

Historically, people who were stigma functioned to socially excluded were seen as deviants and protect society against infectious diseases, thereby contributing to survival (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). More recently, the basic function of stigma is exploitation and domination (Phelan et al., 2008). Dominant groups often use their power to label certain attributes or characteristics as deviant or undesirable, thereby

stigmatising individuals or groups who possess these attributes. Stigmatisation can be a means for the powerful to maintain their position of dominance and control over marginalised or minority groups. Another function of stigma is to enforce social norms – to encourage stigmatised individuals to conform to a dominant group's norms. The latter function aligns with the former as more influential groups often define what is normal and acceptable in a society (Phelan et al., 2008). They influence cultural norms, values, and attitudes, which in turn shape societal perceptions of what is stigmatised. In these ways, stigma plays an important role in reproducing and perpetuating social inequalities and injustices (Link & Phelan, 2014; Phelan et al., 2008; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Stigma often works to 'keep others down, in, or away' (Link & Phelan, 2014, p. 24), and stigmatised individuals experiencing negative outcomes. These include devalued social identity, discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, and neglect (Link & Phelan, 2001; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Being stigmatised therefore has detrimental consequences for individuals' psychological wellbeing (Bos et al., 2013).

People who are stigmatised, either as individuals or groups, are usually keenly aware of the social devaluation connected with their circumstance. Consequently, they often live with anxiety, stress, and/or low self-esteem. Whether the stigmatisation is directed at an individual or a group, it can have a ripple effect to include family members, friends, and caregivers (Carabine, 2001; Corrigan & Miller, 2004; Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994; Young, Dixon-Woods, Findlay, & Heney, 2002), who can experience stigma by association. For example, in the case of young/teenager single mothers, questions about their intimate lives and parenting capacity generate discrimination not only for mothers, but also for their children (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015; Tyler, 2008).

Stigmatised people/groups are more likely to experience social exclusion and distress than non-stigmatised people/groups (Bos et al., 2013, p. 4). This sense of being socially devalued – as will be demonstrate in following chapters - leads victims of stigma to adopt certain coping

strategies to protect themselves and their loved ones from the negative stereotyping and prejudice directed at them. These strategies include *problem-focused coping strategies* and *emotion-focused coping strategies.* Problem-focussed coping strategies are employed to alter the relationship between those who are stigmatised and their environment (Bos et al., 2013; Meisenbach, 2010; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). They include selective disclosure, seeking social support, avoiding situations where stigmatisation is likely (Bos et al., 2013), and invoking a common identity (Schmader, Croft, Whitehead, & Stone, 2013). Emotion-focussed coping strategies attempt to regulate negative emotions. Examples include downward social comparison, external reasoning for the stigmatising behaviour of others (e.g., denial, prejudice minimisation, or assumption of ignorance on the part of others) and detaching oneself from one's stigmatised identity (Bos et al., 2013; Meisenbach, 2010; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). The single mothers in this study employed both strategies in managing their social status and protecting themselves and their children. In adopting these strategies, they demonstrated a degree of agency in managing their circumstances and choices, as detailed in 5.3.3.

5.2.2 Stigma, gender violence, and sexual harassment

In the social stigma literature, it becomes evident that stigma often arises from inequalities within society. It manifests when those in positions of power seek to maintain their position and assert control over others. Research by LeMoncheck and Sterba (2001), and recent research by Sapiro, (2018), and Anitha, Jordan, Jameson, and Davy (2021) highlights the profound impact of these dynamics on women's lives. Their work sheds light on the intersection of stigma and harassment, suggesting that harassment can be viewed as a consequence of stigma rather than a mere expression of stigma. This insight paves the way for a deeper understanding of the challenges women face and the urgent need for change. Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual attention a person experiences and is particularly common in any situation where men

have power over women (Berthet & Kantola, 2020; Jackman, 2006; Latcheva, 2017; LeMoncheck & Sterba, 2001).

It is still widely believed that nature is the primary driving force of sexual harassment (Brooks, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Graham, Bernards, Abbey, Dumas, & Wells, 2017). Based on gendered configurations, the male represents 'masculinity as aggressive', and the female 'femininity as vulnerable' (Campbell, 2005). The subsequent construct of male dominance and female submission is considered natural. This belief is strongly criticised as it casts 'male sexual behaviour and feminine vulnerabilities as inevitable' (Brooks, 2011, p. 636) and therefore contributes to perpetuating gender-based violence. In reality, many safekeeping campaigns built on this belief hold women individually responsible for preventing any sexual violence perpetrated against them (Anitha et al., 2021; Brooks, 2011).

As a form of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment can be considered a consequence of stigma, taking place across all human societies. In societies where power is distributed evenly, and where gender roles are less polarized, gender-based violence is less likely to occur (Graham et al., 2017). In contrast, patriarchal societies that hold conservative views about women tend to subscribe to feminine-sex stereotypes, downplay the severity of abuse and/or accept abuse as a normal part of male-female relationships (Campbell, 2005). In these societies, sexual violence against women is often used as a patriarchal strategy to oppress women and maintain men's superiority. Such power differentials between men and women in patriarchal cultures generally influence, and even facilitate, factors of sexual harassment (Campbell, 2005, p.84).

Public awareness about gender-based violence against women in general, and sexual harassment in particular, is increasing. The #metoo movement[14] in 2017 saw women across the

[14] The #metoo movement was created by Tarana Burke (born 1973), an American activist, in 2006 to help victims of sexual violence and abuse. In the wake of the strings of sexual allegations faced by Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, the #metoo movement went viral on social media,

globe publicly protesting against sexual harassment and demand the implementation of zero-tolerance policies regarding any forms of discrimination, abuse, and violence, on the basis of gender (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Moscatelli, Golfieri, Tomasetto, & Bigler, 2021). Despite the facts of such movements and attempts for social 'awakenings' sexual harassment remains as a social and cultural challenge for all to address.

Sexual harassment has been considered a sensitive topic in Vietnam, and Vietnamese women are hesitant to discuss it, let alone report it, for fear of the negative consequences they could face following such disclosure. This can be explained by the nation's patriarchal society, in which Confucian doctrines still have a strong influence and males typically wield power over females from birth (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007; Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004). As stated before, once married, a woman belongs to her husband. While some argue that this tradition is dying out, in practice many Vietnamese men still regard their wives as their property (T. H. Khuat, 2004).

One explanation for this bias is that for generations, following Confucian norms, a woman's role was to obey her husband who, in turn, was deemed responsible for her "care". If she did not conform to his demands, or that of the society, he risked losing face. Furthermore, Confucian norms dictate that a woman's dignity and value are attached to her sexual purity and virtue (T. H. Khuat, 1998; Kwiatkowski, 2016). Over generations, Vietnamese women have been educated to maintain their virginity until they are married, dress modestly, remain chaste, and behave in respectful ways (T. N. B. Ngo, 2004; T. H. Khuat, 1998; 2004; Kwiatkowski, 2016). Since the ideal Vietnamese wife is both a virgin before her marriage and well-educated, talking about such a distasteful topic as sexual harassment would diminish her dignity and value.

helped people to gain a sense of the problem, and to become aware of the scale of sexual harassment that remains pervasive in public, private, and workplaces.

One of the early research by T. H. Khuat (2004) examined sexual harassment against women in the workplace and in educational institutions in urban Vietnam and is considered 'ground-breaking work on sexual harassment' in a Vietnamese context (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004, p. 16). Her research findings, based on interviews with 98 women, points out that since *Đổi mới,* with the expansion of the private sector, this social problem has increased as young women are increasingly involved in the marketing of products and services (T. H. Khuat, 2004). Khuat finds that in Vietnam sexual harassment is viewed as linked to sex rather than gendered power relations. The author explains that sexual harassment is essentialised because women, who considered themselves as 'weak gender', accept harassment as a "natural" activity for the male character: it is the outcome of men's hot and aggressive temperament (p.121). However, T. H. Khuat's study is in the minority, this social and cultural problem has gained little attention by Vietnamese scholars.

After the #metoo movement in 2017, sexual harassment has become a topic of concern in Vietnam, and there has been ongoing research on the issue. In 2019, a pilot study of awareness, knowledge, attitudes and responses toward sexual harassment was conducted by the Institute for Social Development Studies in 5 provinces (both North and South). The study, which involved almost 1800 students from grade 6 to third-year university students, found that 60% of the participants were sexually harassed at least once and 63% took no action when witnessing sexual harassment (Institute for Social Development Studies, 2019). The research emphasised the importance to improve the legal framework and develop specific sanctions for sexual harassment. In particular, specific guidelines and regulations are needed to define sexual harassment and its forms as well as measurement to support the victim. Sexual harassment has been documented in various settings within Vietnam, including the workplace (Quyet, P. X., Long, H. C., 2021; Quyet, P. X., Tien, H. V., & Arumugam, V. M. V., 2023), educational institutions (Hoang, A., Nguyen, C. Q., Duong, C. D., 2018), public spaces, and even online

(Fairchild, K., & Nguyen, H.; 2020). The forms of sexual harassment in Vietnam are diverse, encompassing actions such as deliberate or intrusive eye contact, physical touching, and making others uncomfortable through conversations laced with sexual innuendos. Often, these actions are disguised as harmless jokes. Building upon the insights in T. H. Khuat (2004) on the nature of sexual harassment, researchers point to a cultural barrier - the belief among Vietnamese men that 'women are meant to be teased.' This belief grants men a degree of latitude in treating or perceiving women as objects of sexual desire, leading to a disregard for boundaries and respect in many instances (Hoang et al., 2018; Quyet et al., 2023). This perspective has contributed to a troubling rise in unresolved cases of sexual harassment in Vietnam.

Vietnam has established laws and regulations aimed at addressing sexual harassment, including the Labor Code and the Law on Gender Equality. These legal provisions are designed to safeguard individuals from harassment and discrimination. However, the existing legal framework falls short of comprehensive protection. While sexual harassment is analysed and adjudicated under the Labor Law's section on harassment at work, it is not explicitly mentioned in the Criminal Law. Researchers indicate that the omission is due to the complexity of identifying causes and outcomes, particularly in cases lacking physical injury (Quyet, P. X., Long, H. C., 2021). Consequently, it is a common practice that victims of sexual harassment in Vietnam are often advised to forgive their harassers or maintain silence to avoid losing face in a confrontation where they may have a limited chance of prevailing.

5.2.3 Single motherhood and stigma

Single mothers in both western and non-western countries regularly experience stigma in their daily lives, including stigma from the general public, who tend to see single mothers as immoral women of low status. They are subjected to intrusive scrutiny and judgement in relation to their sexual and intimate lives, and are often presented as out of control and sexually promiscuous,

hence threats to the social order (Mann & Roseneil, 2003; Tyler, 2008). Further, the parenting capacity of single mothers is also frequently called into question. Single mothers are constituted as problematic mothers producing an underclass of problematic children who themselves are likely to become promiscuous and indigent. These perceptions are arguably supported by studies that confirm single motherhood has a negative impact on children's educational outcomes. Certainly, children in single-mother families experience higher rates of school attrition, delinquency, and other social problems (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015), but a non-essentialist reading of this is that these negative outcomes are more likely due to the mothers' limited human and capital resources (Gertler et al., 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Krein & Beller, 1988). Nevertheless, single motherhood is considered to be a threat to the traditional nuclear family model: a heterosexual married couple of a male breadwinner and female caregiver, and their child/ren, which is considered by many to be 'the best arrangement for parenting' (Carabine, 2001, p. 294). Stigma toward single motherhood is thereby widely perpetuated across societies.

In western countries, single mothers are frequently discursively condemned as being irresponsible welfare dependents, parasites who drain scarce resources (Tyler, 2013). Research shows they are resented and generally seen as relying on government benefits, having had children without adequate means of support (Carabine, 2001; Elliott et al., 2015; Morris & Munt, 2019; Neill-Weston & Morgan, 2017). This brand of stigma attached to single mothers in western countries cannot be compared to that experienced in the Asian context, where single mothers are not usually discursively constructed as welfare parasites due to the well-known and all-pervasive limitations of government support.

However, strong cultural norms that favour traditional two-parent families create significant challenges for Asian single-mother families (Jean Yeung & Park, 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Lai, 2021; Chunni Zhang, 2020). As outlined in Chapter 2, the patriarchal ideology in Vietnam,

which assigns women subordinate roles as daughters, wives, and mothers based on the principles of "Three Obediences" (Tam tòng) and "Four Virtues" (Tứ Đức). According to this ideology, women must respect and be devoted to their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their oldest son in widowhood. Additionally, they are expected to practice virtues related to labor, appearance, speech, and behavior. Traditionally, a woman's success and fulfillment in life are tied to marriage, motherhood, and dedicating herself to her family's needs, even in challenging situations like a husband's vices. These societal expectations shape the lives of Vietnamese women, with their morality and value measured by their ability to maintain family harmony and raise successful children, regardless of their husband's behavior. Confucianism also upholds strict adherence to traditional norms of family and marriage. Two-parent families, with a husband as head of the household who has power over his wife and children, are expected. Hence, single mothers sit outside the 'norms', and live with associated social stigma. Widows or single divorced mothers are similarly made to feel that their family is not complete because a husband/father as head of the household is absent (T. Le, 2002). In a society which closely connects unmarried women's virginity to the dignity of her family, never-married single mothers are generally considered to be "bad women" or "spoiled" (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015). However, as mentioned before and must be stressed, in Vietnam, the age of a woman who has a child without being married is relevant when it comes to stigma. If an older, never-married single woman (over the age of 30) has a child out of wedlock, she might be less harshly criticized, as people have a degree of sympathy and recognise that she needs someone to look after her in her old age (T. Le, 2002; Phinney, 2022). In contrast, never-married single mothers in their twenties or younger are usually perceived as sexually immoral and/or degrading traditional family values (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015).

All things considered, stigma is a key obstacle for single mothers and their children in the complex social environment of Vietnam today, where traditional norms strongly condemn pre-

marital sex and motherhood, and where social and financial support is often limited. This chapter explores my study's participants' experiences of stigma and marginalisation, and the strategies they adopt to manage their situations.

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 Discrimination/stigma experienced by single mothers

5.3.1.1 Negative stereotyping of single mothers

When speaking of the social stigma they experienced as single mothers, the study's participants reported various levels of marginalisation. The four widows expressed feeling upset by the pitying looks both they and their children received from people who were aware of their situation: 'I try to forget that I am just a poor widow, but these looks remind me of my unenviable position' (Hien, focus group, Hai Phong). The divorced mothers were acutely aware that they were considered to have failed as women because their marriage had ended; some were held responsible for this failure despite their husbands' infidelity:

> Once I knew he [her ex-husband] cheated on me the second time, I decided to apply for divorce. My friends and my relatives told me that I should try to give him another chance so my daughter would have a complete family. My mum even said that part of it was my fault for not being a good enough wife. (Ninh, focus group, Hanoi)

Chi, a divorced mother in a rural area, who had escaped from her jealous husband, shared a similar experience of being criticised by members of the public for her failed marriage:

> For the first year, I was very ashamed when I went out as I knew the villagers were gossiping about me. Then I thought if I had done something wrong, such as cheating on my husband, being irresponsible, or a lazy wife who lives on his income, then I would have been ashamed. But in fact, I had tried to be a good wife. My broken marriage wasn't my fault. (Chi, focus group, Hai Phong)

Despite Chi's assertion that she was a faithful, supportive, and financially independent woman – "a good wife" – she was stigmatised due to her divorce.

As mentioned in section 5.2.3, in Vietnam, for mothers who have never married, the stigma they experience depends on their age. Women over the age of 30 who are still single and decide to have a child on their own can usually expect a degree of sympathy: it is widely accepted and understood that they need to have a child in order to have someone to look after them when they are old. Since the Vietnamese Government does not have a pension scheme for elderly people under the age of 80 (and even then, the elderly pension is only VND 250,000 (approx. AUD 15) per month) (Government of the Social Republic of Vietnam, 2013), it is a norm that children are responsible for taking care of their parents in their old age; hence the 'need for a child/ren'.

In contrast to 'older' single mother, younger never-married mothers, are often simply seen as being "bad women" or "spoiled" for having a child outside of marriage, and people usually look down on them. In regional areas, where traditional norms of family and marriage have a stronger influence, young, never-married mothers who participated in the research reported as being rejected by their community, many running away to avoid facing the stigma. Asked by the researcher to help recruit participants, Khanh, a VWU staff member working in Hai Phong, replied:

> It is very hard to find young never-married mothers living in this area because they all move to a city. They can't live peacefully here with the scornful eyes of the villagers. (Khanh, staff interview, Hai Phong)

However, single mothers may still experience stigma in the city. Trang, whose hometown is Hai Phong, was abandoned by her boyfriend and gave birth to her daughter at the age of 24. At the time of participating in the research, she was living in Hanoi with her daughter. Trang explained:

> When I told my parents that I got pregnant and there would be no wedding, they scolded me every day that I had *bôi tro trát trấu vào mặt họ* (dragged their name through the mud), and they tried to force me to have an abortion. I decided to go away. […] I still experience stigma [in Hanoi]. Some people in my neighbourhood refer to me as *con chửa hoang* (single mother with an illegitimate child) in their conversation instead of using my name. (Trang, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Trang's story illuminates clearly that in Vietnamese society a woman is defined by her marital status. Wherever she lived, Trang's 'reputation' preceded her; as a consequence, people declined to address her by her own name, they labeled her *con chửa hoang* - a phrase laden with disdain. However, this is not just Trang's story; the mothers participating in this research also shared that they themselves had often been labeled as single mums - like a tag that comes with their name. The self-reports of single mothers illuminate a discursive hierarchy in which marriage is primary: married women are positioned/valued over widows, widows over divorced mothers, divorced mothers over older, never-married mothers who ask for a child, and all of these are positioned/valued over young, never-married mothers. Whatever their position on the societal ladder, they all have a tag 'single mum' – the 'soiled identity' in a society which upholds the traditional concept of two parent family. Single mothers are often seen to be a threat to the existence and dominance of two-partner families (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015). Theu, a widow in Hanoi with two daughters, used a metaphor for this stereotype of single mothers:

> There is a bin [garbage container] used by several families on the street where I live. For me, it represents the rubbish thoughts many people have about single mothers. Some men see them as easy game for extra-marital sex, and married women see them as a threat intent on destroying another family for money. They see single mothers as bad women, gold diggers, that sort of thing. Although I receive sympathy from people

for being a widow, never-married and divorced single mothers encounter deep prejudice and judgment that makes their life much harder than it already is. (Theu, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Figure 5.1 Garbage container near Theu's house

In addition to the stigma experienced from the general public, the research participants claimed that they felt stigmatised by the media, lamenting how single mothers are portrayed in a negative light. Stereotyping includes portraying single mothers as promiscuous, cunning, often *người thứ ba* (a third person in a relationship), or *kẻ phá hoại hạnh phúc gia đình người khác* (a bad woman who ruins a happy family). Nhung, a divorced mother of two girls, said:

> There are movies about adultery on TV every day. In them often single mums are the ones having affairs with married men for money or just because they are lonely. I get sick of that. It doesn't represent our lives. (Nhung, focus group, Hai Phong)

All members of Nhung's focus group agreed with her. In the focus group in Hanoi, the mothers added that online newspapers and magazines are just as bad, often reporting 'negative stories full of judgement' and 'rarely looking at the many hurdles which single mothers face'. The 'comments range from mocking to abusive', feeding on each other to further portray single mothers as deviants and a threat to family life. The power of the media in orienting public opinion and perpetuating stereotypes on single motherhood is evident in the narratives of the

participants. As a result, women can also stigmatise themselves for being single mothers; however, the participants in this research protested that the media mispresented their lives. Oanh explained in the Hanoi focus group: 'the most important thing in my life is being a good mother, and I always try my best to do so'.

5.3.1.2 Sexual harassment experienced by single mothers

The single mothers in both research sites reported experiencing sexual harassment. While it is important to note that all the participants were reluctant to talk about their experience of being harassed in the focus group interviews, in Hai Phong every mother conceded that they had been subjected to sexual harassment by some married men in their neighbourhood. Despite this admission, none of the participants wanted to provide specific examples, seeing it as too shameful. Hien in Hai Phong explained, 'I don't want to talk about that, I could feel the shame rise up in me'. However, in individual interviews conducted later, eight of the twelve mothers volunteered to tell their stories. The mothers' sexual harassment included receiving sexually charged words, looks, and behaviours towards them, such as *cố tình đụng chạm* (unwanted touching) *trêu chọc* (teasing), *tán tỉnh* (courting, flirting), *ve vãn* (wooing), and *gạ gẫm* (solicitation). The participants at both research sites expressed feeling vulnerable, offended, stressed, and angry when they experienced sexual harassment. The participants admitted that sexual harassment could happen to any Vietnamese woman, but they explained that it had been amplified since becoming a single mother. Some mother participants disclosed that they were harassed by some of the males in their friend circle, their workplace, or neighbourhood, and that the perpetrators were men who knew the women's single status.

Friend zone

Friend zone' is an English phrase that was introduced to Vietnam during the internet boom of the early 2000s. Among Vietnamese youth, this phrase is written, pronounced and understood

as its original meaning: it describes individuals whom you are not romantically or sexually attracted to but wish to maintain a friendship with.

The mother participants reported that it was common that the harassers were males in the mothers' friend circle who knew the mothers' status and took advantage of the friendship in approaching them. Hien in Hai Phong, recounted:

> He is a friend of my husband. When my husband was alive, he often came over for drink. After my husband passed away, he texted me or phoned me more often, expressing his condolences and sympathy. I responded politely. Then one day he asked me that if I feel lonely, or if I need "someone"? He told me that he was there, willing to "help" ... I blocked him after telling him that if he didn't stop, I would let his wife know about this. (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Luong, a never married mother in Hanoi had the same story, adding that, some of the perpetrators even told her that 'you have nothing to lose'. Luong commented: 'I thought we were friend!'. Single mothers in this situation often chose to narrow down their friend circle, trying to minimise contact with male friends in order to avoid any incident or misunderstanding. As a result, fear of experiencing sexual harassment prevented them from enjoying social life/public life, restricting their opportunities, resources, and personal power (Campbell, 2005).

Sexual harassment in the workplace

Of the twelve mothers, four in Hanoi and two in Hai Phong have been sexually harassed at work:

> My boss knows that I am a widow. Sometimes, when he tells my circumstances to some of his business partners, some of them began to harass me. A couple of married men at work had even suggested that I become their 'secret romantic partner', offering to give me a lot of money in return. My answer to that type of proposition is that I am not a

> gold-digger, and I would never do anything that would bring shame on my family. (Theu, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Luong told a similar story, adding that one of her boss's business partners had even pressured her to give him a son, offering money, work promotion, a house, and living expenses as compensation. A further dilemma for Luong, and other single mothers, was not wanting to bring shame on their family, yet, at the same time, not wanting to let their bosses down, for example by not securing a sale:

> When I try and make a sale for my boss and the male business representative from the other firm makes personal comments to me, I can't just ignore them or tell him to stop, as this could lead to the loss of a sale. If he invites me to go for a coffee, I always ask my boss to join us and if he can't, then I have to think of an excuse not to go. (Luong, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

It is clear from the above accounts that the single mothers find themselves in a double dilemma when faced with sexual harassment: the need to preserve their own individual and family reputation, and at the same time to maintain sales, thus keeping their job. The harassers at their workplaces, in the accounts of the single mothers, were often men with power over the women, such as bosses or desired customers. Luong, in Hanoi, explained in her interview, 'they just bully me because they know that I am weaker, and I am alone'. Additionally, when women experience sexual harassment in the workplace, they are often told by their employers to let it go, as it could risk damaging the business's reputation or affecting business operations (Quyet et al., 2023). Single mothers who speak up about sexual harassment risk losing their reputation and, in the case of harassment at work, their employment.

Three participants, who reported not experiencing sexual harassment at work, explained that 'as I always display a strong face; no one dares bully me' (Huong), or they felt safe because

they had been working in ‘all-female’ environments such as beauty spas (Trang) or garment companies (Thuy).

It can be said that Doi Moi has brought about numerous employment opportunities for Vietnamese women in general; however, it has also increased the risk of sexual harassment for women as their sphere of activity has expanded beyond the confines of the family. Some studies highlight the profound impact of Vietnam's economic transformation, particularly the Doi Moi policy initiated in 1986, on gender relations and sexual behaviour. The shift toward a market economy has generated men's desire for extramarital relationships by introducing them to a global market economy that supplies sexual opportunities outside the home (Phinney, 2008). In addition, men's ability to pay for leisure activities, including the capacity to afford an extramarital relationship, is seen as a means of demonstrating their social mobility and class status (Nguyen. V. T. H, 2012). Consequently, many married men target women in their working circle to establish a romantic relationship during which they may exhibit their masculinity. Women, often serving as objects through which men assert their manliness, became victims of sexual harassment in these scenarios.

Sexual harassment in public

Of the twelve mother participants, eight had experienced sexual harassment in public in different forms, mostly within their local neighbourhoods where their marital status was common knowledge. These women reported that the most common forms of sexual harassment in public were *chọc ghẹo* (teasing), *ve vãn* (wooing), and *tán tỉnh* (courting), all of which made them feel ‘unsafe’, ‘uncomfortable’, and offended. They shared that they were more likely to be sexually harassed when wearing a new outfit, a new hairstyle, and/or makeup. Both city and regional mothers reported being very mindful about their appearance, and that the best way to avoid being targeted was to maintain a smart-casual appearance in all situations, while the mothers in regional areas shared that they often wore second-hand clothes given them by their

relatives or friends. Hien explained that she dressed this way because 'I don't want some bad guys to wink at me, wolf whistle, or make very rude comments, such as *ngon* (yummy), or *đi hẹn hò đấy* (are you up for it)?'. The fact that these comments are usually made in public for others to hear further exacerbates the women's sense of marginalization and experience of stigma. Nhung shared:

> As you know, I live in a village where everyone knows everybody else. Although most people are friendly, they are also curious, and some married men have come on (*tiếp cận*) to me. There is one man who lives close by who has sexually accosted me on several occasions, asking me if I need someone for the night or saying (half-seriously, half-joking) that he wants to have an affair with me. I always ignore him, but this stresses me so much that I feel sick. I don't know how to stop him bothering me. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

This sense of powerlessness in the face of sexual innuendo and blatant propositions was a common theme among the participants, who each responded in slightly different ways. While the stress of the situation left Nhung feeling 'sick', Ninh feared to speak out about sexual harassment because 'I fear that once the story is told, I might lose my reputation', and Luong's response was anger:

> I know what their game is, and it makes me very angry: if I make a fuss they try and laugh it off, making me look stupid, but because they have been rejected and don't want to lose face, they go around telling all their friends that I came on to him. And of course, everyone will think that I must have done something for it to happen. (Luong, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

In Vietnam, single mothers are often made accountable and blamed for men's actions towards them. Several Vietnamese proverbs normalise this behaviour, which makes the single mothers feel further disempowered to speak up when subjected to sexual harassment. As Khanh, a

VWU staffer in Hai Phong, observed: 'It is unavoidable! Remember the saying: *Làm hoa cho người ta hái. Làm gái cho người ta trêu.* (Flowers are made for people to pick. Girls are born for people to tease)'. The word '*người*' is often interpreted therein as referring to men rather than all people. Duyen, another staffer, added, 'the best way for them [single mothers to react] is just to ignore it.' The responses of the VWU staff members demonstrate the fact that local authorities implicitly admit men have superiority over women and sexual harassment is just a natural way for men to treat women. Sexual harassment is therefore not seen as an issue inherent in gender power relations (Campbell, 2005).

Historically, this avoidance or acceptance has been the approach expected of girls and women in patriarchal societies, even more so in countries such as Vietnam where, following Confucian norms, women are considered subordinate to men (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004). The more vulnerable the female, the more likely she is to be considered easy prey for male harassment. Single mothers, more often than married mothers, become objects for sexual harassment and, as the above accounts illustrate, it is a no-win situation for the woman: if she protests, the man may try to pass it off as a joke, or worse, he may tell everybody that she made advances towards him; if she tries to ignore him, he may finally get the message and leave her alone, but she will always be conscious of needing to dress 'appropriately' and behave in a modest manner. This is consistent with the Institute for Social Development Studies (2019), which found that 60% of adolescents considered staring and whistling at a girl a joke rather than sexual harassment, and many parents believed that some girls experienced sexual harassment because they were 'easy' or dressed provocatively. It is clear that in Vietnam, people tend to attribute more responsibility to the victims of sexual harassment than to the perpetrators. The fear of being blamed or judged by the public has discouraged Vietnamese women, particularly single mothers, from speaking up about the issue. T. H. Khuat (2004) claims that in Vietnam, 'sexual harassment is linked to sex rather than gender power relations' (p. 120) and a woman's

reputation or value is closely attached to her sexual purity and virtue. However, the situation of single mothers in this study demonstrates that it is impossible to disconnect assumptions about sexual purity and respectability from power relations.

The double bind placed on single mothers affects their social interaction. Hien shared the following:

> I remember the time when my husband was still alive. We dressed up and went to community events together. My life was full of joy and happiness. Since he died, I have withdrawn both socially and emotionally too because I am worried that villagers might judge me if I socialise. Some might say that I am 'moving on' or wonder how I can engage and be happy after the loss of my husband. I try to keep away from situations that might ruin my dignity. (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Hence, the research participants tended to modify their behaviour to avoid unwanted sexual attention, for example limiting unnecessary relationship/contact with men to avoid misunderstandings and gossip. This, and the perceived need to dress modestly and not attract attention, aimed to counter a certain societal feminine aesthetic that is read as women encouraging male sexual harassment. In this reading, women are blamed for making themselves targets, and the role of men as perpetrators is neutralised. The stigmatisation of single mothers is perpetuated.

It is apparent that married men in Vietnam do not have the same norms of modesty and fidelity imposed upon them as women. It seems that they feel empowered to make sexual demands of women whether they are themselves married or unmarried. Women's bodies seem to be seen as men's entitlement, and men move easily through public space without the same threat of sanctions and stigma. This is consistent with findings in research by T. H. Khuat (2004) on women facing sexual harassment in the Vietnamese workplace, a research concludes that in

Vietnam, a society where men dominate, 'sexual teasing' is considered a normal way for them to treat women, where in fact they are asserting their gender power.

Despite the government claiming gender equality in Vietnam, it is clear that Vietnamese women do not enjoy equal status and that society is still failing to protect women. This is especially pronounced among single mothers, who find themselves among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society.

5.3.2 Single mothers' recognition of stigma towards their children

All of the research participant gave accounts of how their child/ren were also stigmatised because of their mother's status – lack of status regardless of whether they lived in a city or in a regional area. City mothers reported that when they took their children out on weekends people would openly ask where their father was. If the mother told them that their father had passed away, there would be some pitying looks, or if she was a divorced mother or an unwed mother, there would be another question. As Ninh, a divorced mother in Hanoi, recounted:

> Every time I take my daughter [aged 3] to the park or playground I get asked the same questions: 'Where is your husband?', 'Where is your daughter's father?', 'Why is he not with the two of you?', that sort of thing… They ask me such private questions, not because they care about us, but because they are curious. (Ninh, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Figure 5.2 Ninh with her daughter at a play centre in a shopping mall

It is important to note that in Vietnamese culture there is no ‘small talk’ as often found in western societies where people might start a conversation by commenting on general topics such as the weather. Rather, it is seen as almost a form of greeting to open a conversation with ‘Where do you live?’, ‘How often do you come here?’, or ‘Oh, just the two of you here? Where’s the father?’. Ninh continued:

> If I tell them the truth, as I used to do, they keep asking more questions, seeming to be nice, but I know that they judge me and the words that they are saying are not what they are really thinking. So, I always answer that my daughter’s father is busy at work, and this usually stops them bothering me. (Ninh, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Luong, a young, unwed mother in Hanoi, told her son the same story: that his father was very busy working and that was why he was never at home. She confided that she hated having to lie to her son, but on the other hand she did not want to teach him to lie when strangers asked her directly where his father was. Luong said: ‘My big worry is that when he starts school next year, I’ll have to tell him the truth because there will be all the paperwork and the teachers will know he was born out of wedlock’.

Single mothers in regional Hai Phong, where ‘everyone knows everyone else’, had not had to face the dilemma of lying to their children in order to ‘protect’ them. However, they shared how neighbours and relatives often exclaimed to their children, ‘such a poor boy/girl. How could your father abandon you?’, or ‘so sad, a small boy/girl was left a “father orphan”!’. Although the mothers knew that some people were trying to express sympathy, these sentiments made them feel worse by reminding them about their position and suffering every day. The unwed mothers in Hai Phong reported that some neighbours would tease their children by asking questions to which they already knew the answers, such as ‘where is your father?’, ‘have you ever met him?’, or ‘have you ever received any clothes or gifts from him?’. The

children would not answer but run away from their tormentors and come home crying or angry with their mother.

This taunting of children, as a way to convey disapproval of the mother, is a clear illustration of the importance attached to the two-parent family – a father and a mother – in Vietnamese society. Fathers are seen as essential for children to be protected, educated, and provided with all the material things they need in life as men are always considered as pillars (*trụ cột*) of the family. Open criticism of anyone who does not conform to the socially accepted standard is seen as 'fair game' in Vietnamese society, and single mothers are extremely vulnerable to this form of attack. In other words, this discrimination define two-parent family model is 'normal and acceptable' (Phelan et al., 2008) in Vietnamese society.

Ironically, other common taunts that children of single mothers face include 'your mum will remarry soon, then she will abandon you once she has kids with your step-dad', or 'your mum is falling in love with that man, you are going to have a stepdad. He will steal your mom and treat you badly'. Chi, from Hai Phong, had spent all her life in the same village, and was visibly hurt by what she described as the 'malicious intent' of her life-long neighbours when they made such comments to her 5-year-old daughter. 'They made her very upset. I told them to stop poisoning her, but I know they still do that sometimes. If I were not a single mum my daughter would not be teased'. Hien, a mother of two boys in Hai Phong, described her reaction when people tried to 'poison' her children:

> How can they be so cruel as to make fun of my children?! I can walk away when they target me, but I cannot stand by and do nothing when they pick on my kids just because they don't have a father. When I shout at them to stop, they just laugh and say, 'take it easy. We were just kidding'. All this in front of my sons who are 12 and 4. How bad those people are! (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

All the mothers claimed that they and their children were haunted by the malicious comments directed at the children, who were consequently wary of any man being around their mother. Nhung recounted that her older daughter often directly asked: 'mum, you're not going to remarry, are you?'. City mothers said that if they did ever want to see a man, they always ensured that this was out of the children's sight and that they did not know about it. Mothers in Hai Phong, on the other hand, stated that although they felt very lonely, they would rather remain single for the happiness and wellbeing of their children. These mothers' experiences exemplify the entrenched societal expectation that single mothers stay single and devote their lives to raising their children. This exemplifies another no-win situation for single mothers – while stigmatised for their single status, they are relegated to staying single. Meanwhile, their children are stigmatised by the mothers' singlehood and also being trained, intentionally or unintentionally, to monitor their mothers' relationships.

5.3.3 Coping mechanisms of single mothers facing stigma

The mothers employed different strategies to cope with stigma and promote the wellbeing of their children and themselves. Problem-focused coping mechanisms were often the preferred choice. The city mothers often chose to selectively disclose their marital status, sharing it only with close friends and relatives, and to avoid sharing personal information at their workplace or with the general public. The widowed mothers explained that this was to avoid 'the pitying look'; the divorced and never-married mothers, to avoid being judged or vilified. Luong, from Hanoi, elaborated: 'No one in my workplace knows that I am a single mother, excepted my boss. I do not want to let them know my circumstance as I know they would judge me for having a child out of wedlock.' Luong employs various methods to hide her marital status. She found a new job after giving birth to her son and wears a wedding ring she bought herself so that since she started working in the new place her colleagues have thought that she is married. She hates having to lie to her son, telling him that his father is working far from home and

cannot visit them. When asked about his whereabouts by work colleagues during events organised by the company, or on other occasions such as holidays, both Luong and her son give the same answer: he is busy at work in the building industry and could not be spared from work. By hiding their circumstance, single mothers such as Luong exercised their agency instead of being a victim; they have strategized to shoulder the burden of being a single parent and protect their children.

Figure 5.3 Luong's 'wedding' ring

The single mothers in Hai Phong, unable to hide their marital status from the prying eyes of the villagers, frequently chose to socially withdraw to avoid being targeted:

> Whatever I do, the villagers will gossip. This is why I isolate myself, although deep inside I feel very sad and lonely. Even if I'm invited to social events, such as wedding parties, baby showers, and housewarming parties, I give the host an envelope of 'lucky money' with my good wishes but decline the invitation. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

The single mother participants also tried to find women in similar circumstances to themselves, as a source of comfort and support, with those in Hai Phong seeking help from the VWU. City mothers reported seeking emotional, rather than financial, support by reaching out to other women facing the same predicament, via the internet, for example joining an online group for

single mothers. They explained that sharing and listening to stories from other members comforted them and promoted a sense of being cared for in a safe, non-discriminatory space.

A common theme which emerged from the research interviews, with both city and regional single mothers, was their ambition, regardless of stigma, to model themselves on the culturally accepted image of an 'excellent woman' (*phụ nữ hoàn hảo*) and 'good mother' (*mẹ đảm*). In other words, participants desired to become the pillars of the family, having a job with sufficient income to support their own family and ensure their children receive a good education. These virtues, which are traditional, patriarchal/Confucian ideals, are promoted by both the Vietnamese Government and the VWU. In addition to women needing to work creatively and raise children well, the Vietnamese Government and the VWU have added the virtue of 'studies actively' (*chủ động học tập*), in recognition of the role Vietnamese women are expected to play in building the wealth of the country in a globalised world. In response, the mothers took on training courses needed to improve their skills, knowledge, and profile, preparing for promotion within their current organisation or getting themselves ready for new opportunities. All the mothers reported their close attention to their children's education, investing large amounts of mental, physical, and emotional energy into meeting these high expectations while struggling to survive with a one income and very little time for themselves (T. T. Vu et al., 2021).

5.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the stigma the research participants (single mothers) experience and how they identified the coping strategies they employ to manage their situations. Regardless of their individual circumstances, whether widowed, divorced, or never married, all of the research participants (single mothers) reported being a target of social stigma, whether that be pitying looks and comments for widows or disparaging remarks for divorced and never-married mothers. All felt judged by society, with young, never-married mothers suffering most,

due to verbal and physical attacks on their virtue and morality. Stigma against single mothers present a 'discounted status' or 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) attached to them due to their undesirable marital difference. The source of this stigma in Vietnamese society was traced to the strong emphasis placed on two-parent families, and single mothers being perceived challenging the *status quo.*

All women in Vietnam – as across the world – can face sexual harassment, in Vietnam the status of being both a woman and a single mother amplifies that that peril. All but two of the single mother participants reported that sexual harassment was one of the hardest aspects of being a single mother as it left them vulnerable, isolated, offended, stressed, and angry. The fear of speaking up added to their distress, because whatever their reaction to the unwanted advances of men, the women knew that their tormentors had the power to destroy their reputation, and even their jobs. As with the women in the research by conducted by T. H. Khuat (2004), the participants in this research developed different mechanisms to cope with sexual harassment, including keeping silent and/or ignoring (as possible) unwanted approaches from men. The single mothers in this research also added the strategy of managing their physical appearance, and saw this as the most protective resolution. They often chose to wear dowdy clothes, minimize the use of makeup, and exaggerate modesty in public in the attempt to protect themselves from sexual harassment. Generally, in Vietnam, young women are concerned with highlighting their femaleness and, by association, their sexuality, therefore, they often take great care of their bodies, pay special attention to their skin, and dress in 'feminine' ways (Rydstrøm, 2006). However, the single mother participants in this research tended to shy away from these common practices in order to ensure their safety and their reputation. Simply stating, these women did not stress their gender identity. The research participants live with an internal conflict: they may desire to dress up, to be attractive as women, but the awareness and actual threat of *unwanted* sexual attention prevents them from doing so. These protective

measurements indicate that the research participants accepted and endured the dominance of men and held themselves responsible for any gender-based violence that happened to them. This is similar to the tendency to responsibilise women to deflect attention from men and limit incidences of sexual harassment and violence in western culture (Anitha et al., 2021; Campbell, 2005). This approach has been critiqued because it does not address gender inequality. On the contrary, it shows tolerance for sexual harassment by essentialising men's behaviour and traditional demure femininity.

Although the torments to which the single mothers were subjected were constant painful reminders of their single status, nothing hurt the mothers more than the taunting directed at their children. The participants reported that witnessing their children's distress following snide comments about the absence of their father, or dire warnings about what would happen to them if their mother remarried, left them feeling devastated. As stated in the context chapter, Vietnam, like other East Asian countries, is influenced by Confucian ideology, and two-parent families with a husband as head of the household are normative (Murru, 2017; Murru & Polese, 2017; Van, 2015). Fathers often play a role as a pillar in the family with the responsibility to protect his wife and children, provide them with a good education, and ensure their prosperity. At the same time, the wife is expected to take care of the household, her husband, and their children, and also to contribute to the family income. As such, historically, single mothers have experienced social marginalisation. When there is no husband, the social expectations and pressure placed on single mothers is that they should do all these household duties while remaining single, sacrificing their lives to raise their children to be good citizens.

In contemporary times, although social stigma still exists, single mothers and their children have become more accepted. However, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, the extent of this acceptance depends very much on the category of single motherhood that women fall into. Widows and older, unmarried mothers receive more sympathy from their community than

divorced and young, unmarried mothers. Single mothers, especially young, unmarried mothers, continue to be judged as ‘bad women’ or immoral, and therefore ‘bad mothers’ (Van, 2015)

Findings from this study show that, in order to position themselves as agentic rather than as victims, Vietnamese single mothers cope with the stigma attached to their marital status by developing strategies which align with being seen as both a good mother and a self-sufficient woman. To this end, they strive to ensure that their children are model examples of well-raised children. They report that these strategies help to deflect the discrimination that they and their children experience, although there is still a long way to go in combatting the various economic, political, and historical forces and social structures which promote and maintain prejudice and discrimination directed at single mothers in Vietnam.

The following chapter delves into the endeavors of single mothers as they invest in their children's education. This strategy is employed to address the stigma single mothers experience by demonstrating their competence as mothers.

Chapter 6

‘Although I had a failed marriage, I won’t be a failure as a mother’: Vietnamese single mothers’ investment in their children’s education

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents interview data that pertains to single mothers’ investments in their children’s education. This investment is an effort made by single mothers to counter the stigma they face in a culture in which the two-parent family model is dominant, as is the notion that, in the absence of a father, children cannot receive a good education and develop into responsible citizens. It largely frames the findings within the concepts of good or intensive mothering (Arendell, 1999b; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Hays, 1998) and concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011). Findings reveal that single mothers participating in the research in both regional and urban areas of Vietnam invest a large amount of their limited time and income on their children’s education despite the heavy mental, physical, and emotional toll these investments place on them. The mothers anticipate that their sacrifices will result in better educational outcomes for their children, thereby improving the children’s social and economic status. The sacrifices are also a self-investment, as the mothers anticipate that the children’s education will facilitate class mobility and provide means to support the mothers in old age. Findings illustrate that the parenting styles of single mothers in Vietnam are heavily influenced by the dominant ideology of ‘good mothering’ which is constructed by cultural values, especially Confucian norms, as well as local government rhetoric and globalisation.

6.2 Background

6.2.1 Parental involvement in children’s education

Children’s education is a considerable concern for parents in both Western and Asian societies. In Western countries, students of various Asian backgrounds often perform exceptionally well

academically, outperforming other students (Huang & Gove, 2015a; Watkins, Ho, & Butler, 2017). This phenomenon is sometimes attributed to an Asian parenting style, which is said to emphasise a hierarchical relationship between adults and children and to maintain high ambitions for, and demands of, children (Brown & Iyengar, 2008; Huang & Gove, 2015a; Porter et al., 2005). This authoritarian parenting style is explained as being deeply rooted in cultural notions of education which reflect Confucianism, a belief system which places a high value on scholarship (Huang & Gove, 2015b; Song, 2018; Yamamoto, Holloway, & Suzuki, 2006). Confucian values are observed to influence the everyday lives of Asian families and to emphasise education as the route to scholarly status (Huang & Gove, 2015b). Highly educated individuals are perceived to be more likely to acquire good jobs, better marriages, and wider social relationships, and therefore more likely to live a fulfilling life (Lien, 2006). As such, it is argued that many Asian parents consider parenting to be the most important career in their life – that they take immense responsibility, and make many sacrifices, for their children's success (Huang & Gove, 2015b; Yamamoto et al., 2006).

There has been a tendency in some literature to juxtapose western and Asian parenting approaches, but white, western populations also exhibit anxieties over schooling and invest large amounts of money in education and private tuition (Watkins et al., 2017, p. 2289). As will be explained below, this type of parental investment aligns with discourses of 'intensive' and 'good mothering', found in the global north (Hays, 1998). Although western parents are sometimes considered to be more relaxed and liberal in their approach to education, many middle- and upper-class parents demonstrate an authoritarian parenting style which features high expectations, discipline, and heavy investment of resources into children's education (Hays, 1998; Lareau, 2011). This is especially the case in the era of global capitalism, which affords more opportunities for citizens but also severe competition in the global labour market. Therefore, many parents, regardless of location, race, or ethnicity, share similar ambitions and

anxieties in relation to their children's education and future. Parental 'educational behaviour' cannot be reduced to essentialist 'ethnic categories' or reified 'cultural' family practices, it must be situated within 'social, historical and geo-political contexts' (Watkins et al., 2017, p. 2283). This thesis seeks to understand Vietnamese single mothers' investments in their children's education as specific to their contextual dynamics, which include their marginalisation as single parents, their social class positioning, their class aspirations, global labour markets, and 'good mothering' ideology. Confucianism, supported by government ideology, is understood as just one aspect of these complex dynamics, and so parenting style is not considered a reflection of a fixed culture or ethnicity.

In Vietnam, education is often seen as critical to individual advancement and as a pathway to a better life (London, 2011). Children's high academic achievements have been found to bring pride and positive reputation to parents, and to guarantee their future wellbeing into old age. For these reasons, many Vietnamese parents have ambitions for their children to academically succeed which may drive them to adopt an authoritarian parenting style to facilitate children's academic outcomes (Dang, Weiss, & Trung, 2016). This emphasis on educational success is encouraged and reinforced in government rhetoric. The Communist Party of Vietnam and its government considers education as the most important factor for the future development of the nation. Phrases such as 'education is a national priority' (*Giáo dục là quốc sách hàng đầu*) and 'education is a national strategy' (*Giáo dục là chiến lược quốc gia*) have been repeated by Vietnamese politicians for decades (London, 2011). Since the intensive economic *Đổi Mới*, or Renewal, program began in 1986, the Vietnamese Government has committed more and more support to the nation's educational development, including providing free tuition fees for students since 1999, free education for primary school pupils since 2005 and secondary school students since 2020. The government's call to Vietnamese people, regardless of their gender,

to help drive its nation-building agenda by taking up any and all educational and career opportunities, is presented as a way to demonstrate patriotism.

Vietnamese women have become an important force in the nation-building agenda, and an increasing number have taken on roles as primary caregivers and wage earners, as well as being educators within their family (N. K. P. Le et al., 2017). These simultaneous roles for mothers are reflected in the rhetoric of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU), a national organisation of women led by the Communist Party and the government to serve their social, political, and economic purposes. From the start of the Renewal program, slogans promoted by the VWU have influenced Vietnamese women's attitudes. Since 1989 the slogan *Phụ nữ nuôi dạy con tốt, góp phần hạn chế trẻ em suy dinh dưỡng và bỏ học* (Vietnamese women raise children well and contribute to preventing child malnutrition and school drop-outs) has been widely broadcast on television, radio, and public billboard advertising (VWU, 2017d). Since 1996, the VWU has championed a campaign that calls on women to be 'excellent women' or 'new mothers', who *tích cực học tập, lao động sáng tạo, nuôi con giỏi và xây dựng gia đình hạnh phúc* (study actively, work creatively, raise children well, and build happy families). In particular, the Building Happy Families campaign aims to promote and strengthen the traditional family structure and values. This campaign mainly targets women as over decades, local VWUs have organised monthly meetings to educate their members at the grassroots level about the importance of their roles and responsibilities in creating a harmonious and supportive environment and taking care of the well-being of their children and other family members. Alongside the above campaigns, the VWU has run another campaign titled *Xây dựng gia đình năm không, ba sạch* (Women build the family with 5 'withouts' and 3 'cleans'): these criteria are listed as being without (1) poverty, (2) law violation, social evil or domestic violence, (3) a third child or more, (4) malnourishment, and (5) school drop-out; and clean (1) houses, (2) kitchens, and (3) surrounding lanes (VWU, 2017).

In this particular model, which is encouraged by the VWU, Vietnamese women are dually expected to work hard to build the nation and also to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their husbands and children in order to 'build happy families'. The traditional Confucian role of woman as caregiver is still very much emphasised (Schuler et al., 2006). Those who take responsibility for educating their children to become upstanding Vietnamese citizens are seen as good mothers (Earl, 2013; Murru, 2017), and this notion of good motherhood is a common theme in both Confucian ideologies and socialist frameworks (N. K. P. Le et al., 2017). Thus, women in Vietnam take on multiple roles in their family as financial providers, caregivers, and educators for their children. Capacity to perform these roles is an indicator of success and reputation; it is the capacity to perform 'good motherhood'.

6.2.2 Good mothering

The notion of the 'good mother' has been well documented in western countries. As such, much of the existing literature referred to in this chapter is about experiences in the global north. Hays (1998) argues that the global north features 'intensive mothering'/ 'good mothering' which is constructed as 'child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive'. She explains that an ideal exists in North America whereby a good mother 'must put her child's well-being above her own' and would 'never put her child aside for her own convenience' (p. 8). The good mother must embrace the role of the primary caregiver and invest large amounts of time, money, energy, and emotion into raising her child/ren. In this context, the good mother has been conceptualised as white, heterosexual, and married within a nuclear family (Arendell, 1999b, p. 3). Discourses of good mothering vary across cultures and time to construct and define what mothers should do and how they should feel (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010), yet regardless of their social and cultural background, mothers are aware of, and try to follow, good mothering models – even when this puts them

under significant pressure (Ennis, 2014) – because they 'want to be good' (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010).

The government support for single mothers in Vietnam is very limited (T. Le, 2002; Phinney, 2005; 2022), subject to strict criteria and means tests which deem many single mothers ineligible (Van, 2015). To be eligible for state welfare, mothers must prove that they are living in poverty and co-residing with at least one child of school age. The allocated monthly subsidy for single-mother welfare recipients is about VND 1 million (approx. AUD 588) (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013). Therefore, in order to make a living, most single mothers need to be employed, and many take on a number of jobs, mostly in the private sector and often with no health insurance or superannuation (Nguyen, 2015). Despite their intensive participation in paid employment, the majority of single mothers in Vietnam live in poverty because opportunities for secure and well-paid employment are rare for this group (T. Le, 2002; Van, 2015). Long working hours mean that many single mothers rely on their extended family for childcare. Furthermore, harsh working conditions lead to health problems for many single mothers, and in some cases hospitalisation exacerbates their financial difficulties (T. Le, 2002).

6.2.3. Vietnamese single motherhood and children's education

Parental involvement in a child's education is frequently identified as an important aspect of good parenting or 'good mothering' (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Gillies, 2006b; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2012; Lareau, 2011). Feminist studies point out that mothers' involvement in schooling is traditionally considered an aspect of their unpaid domestic labour, and is often subject to public appraisal (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Smith, 1983). The formal education of children usually demands time, financial resources, and, importantly, emotional labour. Emotional labour is a concept which was originally introduced by Hochschild (1979) and refers to the labour a person undertakes to induce or suppress inner feelings and present an appropriate outward appearance, according to social expectations. In other words, the work of

emotional labour – 'emotion work' – involves 'pretending', or 'acting' to deceive others about what an individual really feels (Hochschild (1979). Many studies show that in general women have socially produced expertise in this regard, particularly in their roles as the main caregiver and educator in the family (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Hutchison, 2012; Young et al., 2002). This chapter will evidence the reality and importance of emotional labour that many of the research participants have undertaken.

Another important factor is that of socio-economic status or class. Parental involvement in children's schooling varies according to social class (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2010). This involvement does extend to educational activities outside the school and varies according to cultures and societies. The concept of a 'concerted cultivation', a parenting practice identified in the global north, aims at fostering children's talents by incorporating adult-organised activities in children's lives, while 'natural growth' is a parenting style that allows children more unstructured time to create their own activities to occupy themselves (Lareau, 2011). The former parenting practice is associated with middle-class mothers who generally have more time and financial and cultural resources to invest in their children's schooling, the latter is more often associated with working-class or poor mothers; single mothers are often among this latter group.

Studies in diverse countries, including Vietnam, reveal varied findings in relation to the impact of single motherhood on children's schooling (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015; Gertler et al., 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Krein & Beller, 1988; T. Le, 2002; Loenzien, 2016; Van, 2015). A common theme is that the education of single mothers' children is negatively impacted due to limited family human capital and material resources (Gertler et al., 2004; Hutchison, 2012; Krein & Beller, 1988). However, it must be stressed that reality is not black and white. Some research presents positive narratives of single mothers' involvement in their children's education. As recent research demonstrates, while most single mothers cannot compete with

the resources available to married parents to raise their children, many children in single-mother families achieve high levels of success at school (Albelda et al., 2004; Ford-Gilboe & Campbell, 1996; Tuzlak & Hillock, 1986). This outcome is attributed to single mothers changing their self-perceptions, reconfiguring their life strategies, reassessing their opportunities, and developing their strengths and abilities to manage their circumstances (Albelda et al., 2004; Blake Berryhill, 2018).The evidences of such efforts by single mothers I outline below in the stories provided by the participants in this research.

6.3 Findings

6.3.1 Single mothers' income investments in their children's education

Many single mothers in modern Vietnamese strive to establish themselves as good mothers by investing heavily in their children's education. The interviews for this research were conducted in July and August 2018, just before a new school year[15]. The participants frequently communicated the stress they suffered from struggling to pay for their children's education: all invested between 50 and 60 per cent of their income in educational expenses.

> I think it is about 60 per cent of my income for both my daughter and son. Money for their tuition fees, school uniforms, books, pens, backpacks, etcetera – and their extra classes that cost me a lot. (Huong, focus group, Hanoi)

Although the participants emphasised that the tuition fees alone were not too high, additional costs, especially for tutoring lessons, were a financial burden. Four city mothers and three regional mothers reported that their children had private lessons, in some cases starting as early as Year 1. These lessons were often at teachers' homes, conducted after school or on weekends. While city children had extra classes for maths, foreign languages (English being the most

[15] The school year in Vietnam starts on September 5.

popular), and literacy, mothers in regional areas only enrolled their children for maths and literacy. Theu, a 35-year-old widow with two children, itemised this investment:

> I spend a lot on my children's education, especially [on] their foreign language courses which are run by an English language centre and a Chinese language and culture school, independent of their public school. It costs me VND 2 million per month for my older daughter, who is in Year 7, to learn both English and Chinese with native speakers. I also pay VND 1 million every month for my younger daughter's English course. (Theu, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Nhung, a divorcee with two children, one of whom was in Year 4, told the focus group:

> I can't teach her at home as I work long hours, so I send her to extra classes after school in her teacher's house where her teacher supervises her doing schoolwork and gives her advanced maths and literacy lessons. (Nhung, focus group, Hai Phong)

Providing everything they could in the way of educational support was very important to the mothers. By investing in private tuition, the single mothers hoped to strengthen their children's academic performance and give them a good start in life. All the city mothers shared the expectation that if their children could speak at least one foreign language, such as English, they would have an advantage when they entered the workforce. This expectation on the part of the mothers reflects the impact of globalisation and socio-economic development in the major cities of Vietnam. As the country is proactively working to attract foreign investors (Brand-Weiner, Francavilla, & Olivari, 2015), employees who are bilingual are more competitive for well-paid jobs in the labour market.

Although the extra classes placed a heavy financial burden on the single mothers, they considered it a major part of their parental responsibility. As Huong, a city mother, explained, 'I have to ensure that my children receive an adequate [formal] education'. The mothers who were unable to afford private tutoring chose instead to invest their own time into their children's

education, assisting them in their study at home. Thien, a mother in the regional area, reported, 'I can't afford extra classes, so I get my son to study at home after school; I often help him with his homework'. In this case, Thien's limited financial capacity became a motivation for her to activate her own emotional and cultural capital to advance her son's academic performance. However, four of the six mothers in regional areas admitted that they would be unable to help their children academically once the children went to secondary school, due to the mothers' own limited qualifications. Paying for their children to attend extra classes would be their only option, and participants reported that they were looking out for ways to budget for that expense in the future.

6.3.2 Mental, physical, and emotional labour of schooling children

As well as a significant financial investment in their children's education, the single mothers invested intensive mental, physical, and emotional labour into their children's learning journeys. They managed their children's time, frequently reminded them about the importance of learning and their obligation to study well, supervised homework, transported them to school and extracurricular classes, and took on extra paid work to pay for their children's schooling. Among these activities, supervising their children when they were studying at home was considered the most important daily task to ensure their children practiced and developed their academic skills. The data from both research sites indicated that all the mothers shared the same schedule in the evening: after dinner their children would sit at a small table doing their homework while the mothers did household chores or paid work while keeping an eye on their children and giving help if needed. As Theu explained when describing one of her photographs (see Figure 6.4):

> You can see a colourful timetable sheet [in the picture], filled up by activities from Monday to Sunday, hanging on the window bars at their eye level. A slogan on the top left corner [of that sheet] reads: 'Time is gold, don't waste it'. I've set up a strict study

schedule for them at home. After we have had dinner, around 7pm, the girls study English or Chinese for an hour, and then do advanced math or Vietnamese literature until 9pm. They then have 15 minutes to read their favourite book before bedtime. My older daughter is sometimes given advanced math questions to do at home which are so difficult that she can't figure them out for herself, so she asks me for help. I then read her books to try and find the answer, which I then explain to her. If I can't work it out, I talk with other parents or teachers on social media, then I pass the information on to my daughter. In fact, I'm learning alongside my children. (Theu, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

Figure 6.4 Theu's daughters doing their homework in the evening

The participants also reported that, in their limited free time, they would organise activities to help cultivate a dedication to learning in their children. For example, the single mothers in Hanoi usually took their children to a bookstore on weekends so they could buy books (Figure 6.5) or read some books for free (Figure 6.6), while those in Hai Phong told their children stories about people who were born into a poor family but then, as a result of intensive study, enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle as adults. The latter are cautionary stories intended to remind non-wealthy children of their precarity and the material benefit of education.

Figure 6.5 Books bought by Huong as a reward for her daughter after a school year

Figure 6.6 Ninh's daughter reading a book in a bookstore

Working overtime (ten to twelve hours per day, six days per week) was a strategy that the mothers used to pay for tuition fees and extra lessons or private tutoring. In Hanoi, Huong, Trang, Ninh, and Oanh ran their own online businesses alongside full-time jobs; Theu and Luong worked for several companies simultaneously and brought work home almost every weeknight. Similarly, in Hai Phong, Thien, Hien, Chang, and Nhung worked in a factory or childcare centre from 7am to 7pm and then on the farm whenever they could. Thu had seasonal employment when she finished planting or harvesting her rice paddies. This extra work was seen as a necessity in order to appropriately finance the education of their children. Luong stated, 'if I didn't work hard I would have less money to invest in my sons' education'.

The mothers held tightly to their belief that investing in their children's education was the only way for their family to progress forward to future happiness. However, this commitment to

long-term educational gains resulted in the mothers pressuring their children to perform well at school, which sometimes led to conflict with their children.

> I'm exhausted after a long day. Some evenings, my boys complain that they're tired of writing, but I know they haven't done maths. They want to play and I just want a rest. However, I try to get them to finish their homework. I know they're unhappy when I talk too much and push them to study more. Yes, I know that, and I'm really stressed but I try to do what I think is best for their future. (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

> We've talked a lot but I'm worried that this might be putting too much pressure on my daughter. She's a teenager so sometimes she's stubborn. Whenever I see her being distracted by mobile devices or anything other than studying, I remind her that her main duty is to study. I then go on to say angrily: 'Have you seen how hard I work? I even work late at night, although I've had an exhausting day at the office. I even work on weekends. What for? I'm trying to earn enough to pay for your study so you should try your best. Don't upset me.' She always cries when I tell her that. I hate to make her feel bad but that's what I have to do. (Oanh, focus group, Hanoi)

The mothers managed the tensions that their expectations of their children, along with their long working hours, placed on their relationships with their children in various ways. For instance, Thu often had a heart-to-heart conversation with her son before he went to sleep at night, talking through the hardship they were currently facing and their dream for a better future. The mothers often told their children that they believed in them but also what they expected of them: obedience and filial piety (which are Confucian norms), and good academic performance. All of the research participants reported undertaking emotional labour – they emphasised that despite ongoing worry, they tried to put on a brave face in front of their children and to maintain family harmony. If a child had not met her mother's academic

expectations, the mother would invest further emotional labour to cover up her disappointment. Oanh said about her daughter:

> She will never know that I was very frustrated when she didn't pass the exam to that [high-ranking] high school. For many nights, I couldn't sleep when I thought this might happen again with her exam for the university entrance. I think I need to have a second plan for her. (Oanh, focus group, Hanoi)

Despite the many challenges they faced, the participants reported that their high-stakes investment in their children's education brought them some positive emotional returns. Theu, Nhung, and Chi were proud of the fact that their children had received high marks and the award of 'excellent student of the year' over several school years (Figures 6.7 and 6.8). The mothers also derived satisfaction from seeing that their children had developed good study habits; as Theu said: 'I'm satisfied that now I can back off and let them organise themselves. They draw up their own study schedules that they follow pretty strictly.' When children achieved in these ways, the mothers believed that their "tough love" approach to their children in terms of learning was validated. The mothers' disciplinary approach in schooling thus equates to a 'labour of love' (Hutchison, 2012). The mothers repeatedly stated that the children were their purpose in life and that their actions aimed to deliver the best for them.

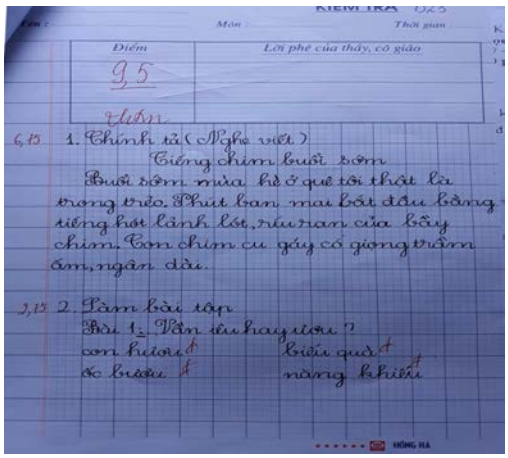


Figure 6.7 Nhung's younger daughter received 9.5 of 10 in a literacy exam

Figure 6.8 One of many awards received by Theu's older daughter for English

Although single mothers often have less financial and human resources available for raising their children than married mothers, a significant number of children in single-mother households attain high levels of academic success. This is because the ability to be a good mother is not determined by marital status but rather by individual qualities and motivation, parenting skills, and extended support systems. Single mothers in this research prove that they can excel in their parenting.

6.3.3 Future aspirations: security for mothers in old age and social status for both mothers and children

The single mothers' extensive investments in their children's schooling also reflected their expectations that this would secure their own welfare when they aged. The participants from both research sites explained that they would only have their children to lean on later in life.

> I got pregnant at the age of 30, when I was already considered to be an "old woman" no man would want to marry. When I gave birth to my son people told me how lucky I was to have him. Yes, they're right. I think I'm blessed. He will be the only one I count on when I'm old. (Thu, focus group, Hai Phong)

When asked about their hopes for the future, all the mothers replied that good health for themselves and their children was their number one priority, because without health they would

not be able to earn enough to raise their children. Their second wish was to live happily with their children and grandchildren when they themselves were old. It was clear that the mothers in this research considered their investment in their children would ensure their future welfare. The participants also asserted that their active involvement in their children's schooling would help to improve their family's social status. They saw this as a long-term investment which would bring a guaranteed return of upward social mobility: a good education would lead to qualifying for a well-paid job, ensuring that both they and their children would have a better life. The women voiced these expectations in the following ways: 'my children can have a good job', 'they will get a well-paid job', 'she will become self-reliant', and 'we can buy/build our own house'.

The participants reported having to keep up the appearance of being strong, self-reliant women and good mothers, maintaining a certain social status despite feeling stigmatised. Nhung, a divorcee whose ex-husband was a drug addict and never visited the children, asserted:

> I try my best to raise my two daughters to become good people in the future so that I won't be blamed for being a bad mother. And if one day my ex-husband comes to visit the children, he can see how well I have done my job without him. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Nhung's comments demonstrate how mothers are held responsible for the welfare of their children in ways that fathers are not. She, rather than the children's father, is the parent who is expected to prove her worth, and she even seeks to demonstrate her capacity to their father, despite his absence and addiction. Another divorced mother, Chi, who had escaped from a very controlling husband, was perhaps the most determined of the participants that her child would surpass other children, even though her family did not fit within the nuclear family norm.

> I will support my daughter as much as I can in her studies. I expect that she will perform well at school and be successful, even more than children from two-parent families.

> Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother. (Chi, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Chi is hopeful that her social worth and future security will be established through her children's success, due to her practice of 'good mothering'.

Raising 'model' children was the number one priority, or 'career', of all the single mothers. Their mental, physical, financial, and emotional investments in their children's education were viewed as measures of their capacities as mothers. These efforts and sacrifices were also viewed as methods of redeeming themselves in the face of prejudice and social stigma, and of securing future class mobility.

6.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has contributed to the limited literature on single mothers' involvement in children's education in the Vietnamese context. It highlights the similarities between the global north discourse of intensive mothering (Hays, 1998), and Confucian norms of good mothering. Single motherhood in urban and rural Vietnam has been shown to be shaped by marginalisation, class status, aspirations for class mobility, local Vietnamese political rhetoric, and global labour markets.

An important finding was that single mothers made significant investments in their children's education in order to secure their own welfare when they aged (T. T. Vu et al., 2021). Like all Vietnamese women, the single mothers are expected to raise 'good citizens' who will contribute to building a wealthy nation, but they are also expected to support themselves, independent of state welfare support. Therefore, the overriding aim of the single mothers' involvement in their children's schooling was to raise children whose qualifications would enable them to secure a well-paid job, and a higher social class, uplifting and sustaining both the children themselves and the mothers by association. To achieve this aim, the mothers engaged their children in extracurricular activities that are akin to the 'concerted cultivation'

practices described by (Lareau, 2011), which are adult-organised activities that foster children's talents in order to reproduce a middle- or upper-class position. However, in the Vietnamese cultural and socioeconomic context (and certainly elsewhere), mothers who invest in concerted cultivation are not necessarily middle-class; in fact, they can be living on single incomes, and many are overworked and further impoverished as a result of their economic investments in extracurricular education. That said, many of the Vietnamese single mothers interviewed were seeking class mobility and aspired to be middle-class, and the middle-class urban mothers interviewed wished to consolidate their position and/or raise their status. Even though some urban single mothers had well-paid jobs – for example, Theu lived in her own two-storey house with her two daughters, and her estimated 2018 income was VND 300 million as against Vietnam's *per capita* income of VND 58.5 million that year (GSO, 2018) – they were anxious to safeguard their socioeconomic positions and resist the stigma they had encountered since becoming a single mother, and increase security heading into old age. They were also conscious of the competitive nature of the global job market (T. T. Vu et al., 2021).

In addition to practicing concerted cultivation, the participants exhibited a 'natural growth' approach to parenting, which Lareau (2011) identifies as common for working-class parents. The single mothers were discipline-oriented (Hays, 1998, p. 86); several authoritarian characteristics were apparent, such as having a tendency to stress the importance of their children's formal education, emphasising the rules children must follow, and demanding obedience in regard to studying. Therefore, the study's single mothering practices were akin to both middle-class and working-class families' parenting practices in other parts of the world. This combination of the two styles of parenting is motivated by Confucian ideology, encouraged in government rhetoric, which emphasises the importance of study and a deep desire for class mobility (T. T. Vu et al., 2021).

The participants experienced high levels of stress and anxiety as a result of working long hours and managing a family budget and an uncertain future. These negative feelings intertwined with happiness and satisfaction, but also demanded that the women engaged in emotional labour to create conducive spaces for children. The women reported having to discipline their emotions, particularly in front of their children and in their workplaces. The mothers discussed undertaking intensive emotion work to 'deceive others' by putting on a brave face, suppressing their 'inner feeling' (Hochschild, 1983). Most of the time they reported being successful in hiding their stress, maintaining their composure, and performing to societal expectations despite their inner anxieties and fears. This emotional labour seemed to sustain the women and contribute to their sense of being a 'good mother'(T. T. Vu et al., 2021).

A disparity was observed between the mothers based in the city and those based in regional areas in terms of their own education, job opportunities and, therefore, income, all of which play a major role in determining their parenting resources. City mothers, who had achieved higher levels of education, had acquired much higher incomes and so enjoyed greater resources to support their children in schooling. Most of the city mothers confirmed that they were able to help their children do their homework up to secondary school level, in contrast with only two participants in the regional areas. City mothers also played an important role in preparing their children for future professional training, while most of their regional counterparts had little understanding of their children's potential future careers, despite their ambition to provide them with the best education possible. In this way they transmitted 'differential advantages' between generations (Lareau, 2011, p. 5).

The research participants are highly regulated by the dominant Vietnamese ideology of 'good mothering'; reproducing the next generation of 'good citizens' and contributing to nation-building agendas (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). This 'model of maternal citizenship' also appears to be informed by a class ideal – that of the professional middle-class mother, who

cultivates the necessary skills in her children as a matter of duty, and is the 'benchmark for successful femininity' (McRobbie, 2013, p. 130). This ideal has been shown to be particularly challenging for the Vietnamese mothers in this study to live up to, especially the poorer mothers from regional areas. This is because this ideal is usually constructed in opposition to the single, working-class mother, who is considered an 'abject maternal figure' by comparison (McRobbie, 2013, p. 124).

The research participants reported that, as heterosexual-partnered parenthood is normative in Confucian-influenced Vietnam, their mothering practices and their morality were scrutinised and they experienced significant social stigma. In the face of this stigma, their investments in their children's education might also be seen as a resistive strategy – the women were attempting to alter how they, as single mothers, are perceived. In asserting, 'although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother', the above-quoted mother viewed parenting, and especially navigating children through a 'successful' education, as a chance for redemption. Unfortunately, the research participants tend to blame themselves for the stigma that they experience, having internalised ideological gender divisions and the hegemony of the nuclear family. This was observed, for example, when Chi stated that she aims for her child to achieve even greater educational success than children in two-parent families. Nuclear families are reproduced in this narrative as an ideal to which Chi and her child need to reach to achieve respectability and 'success'. The mothers also appear to perceive appropriately raising their children as their responsibility, rather than the responsibility of fathers, and they also see it as their responsibility to compensate for structural shortfalls and to challenge perceptions of single mothers and their children, rather than this being the responsibility of wider society. The mothers therefore individualise what are clearly common obstacles and difficulties, seeking to overturn the opinions of others by having 'successful', well-educated children, gaining class mobility, and achieving personal security despite biases in the social system. In this context,

as is seen in other research with working-class parents, failure on the part of the mothers to cultivate well-educated, socially mobile children will result in a perception that the women were 'unable or unwilling to appropriately capitalise on their own lives' (Gillies, 2005, p. 837). The research demonstrates that Vietnamese single mothers' educational behaviours are informed by good mothering ideology. As with all parenting practices, these mothers' investment in their children's education is informed by social context and cannot be reified as a fixed element of culture or ethnicity. The ideology and stigma described here have commonalities with the ideology and stigma associated with good mothering in the global north literature; however, the good mothering discourse observed in this study is informed by particularly local values, especially Confucian norms, as well as Vietnamese governmental rhetoric and the women's class locations and aspirations in globalised marketplaces.

The next chapter discusses support that Vietnamese single mothers can leverage to raise their children. Support, whether from single mothers' extended family or provided by the government and the community, frequently comes with associated costs or specific conditions.

Chapter 7

‘I have no choice. My family is my only source of support’: an evaluation of potential support available for single mothers in Vietnam

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an evaluation of potential support for Vietnamese single mothers, drawing from the perspectives of Vietnamese Women’s Union (VWU) staff (grassroots-level service providers) and single mothers (service users). The twelve research participants were asked questions about what, if any, support they receive from family, community, or government, and their expectations regarding institutional support. Six staff members were asked to give descriptions of their job, their perception of the overall function of the VWU, and the state policies in place to support single-mother families. They were asked to assess how effective the support really was, outline the challenges they faced in assisting single mothers, and provide information on improvements that could be made to the support system.

The resulting data shows that state support is very limited and not directly targeted towards single mothers. The chapter finds that many single mothers in Vietnam cannot access government resources, primarily due to the stringent assessments women are subject to in order to access support. These assessments prioritise moral worthiness, which aligns with the culturally accepted image of 'good women' or ‘good mothers’ promoted nationwide by the government. Single mothers rely, instead, on their extended family for assistance, to greater or lesser degrees, to keep their immediate family together. Family support, usually in the forms of housing, finance, and/or childcare, plays an important role in the lives of single mothers, helping them overcome their most difficult times. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for improving the government support for single mothers in Vietnam.

7.2 Background

7.2.1 Welfare system in Vietnam

The political economy of Doi Moi in Vietnam, combined with the state's current form of governmentality, plays a crucial role in shaping the country's policies related to welfare. As outlined in Chapter 2, in 1986 the Vietnamese Government mandated the Renewal program, introducing market-oriented reforms to transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. These reforms have allowed for significant economic growth and development, turning Vietnam into one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies. The opening up of the economy to foreign investment and trade has attracted foreign capital and fueled export-driven growth. By 1990, fifteen years after the introduction of the Renewal program, Vietnam had developed from a country faced with perpetual food shortages to being one of the world's largest rice exporters. Between 1990 and 2002 it recorded a high and sustained rate of annual economic growth (often above 6.5 per cent per year, one of the highest rates among developing countries), and its annual *per capita* income increased from below USD 100 to USD 417 (Benjamin, Brandt, & McCaig, 2017). As a one-party socialist republic, the Vietnamese government maintains a strong presence in various aspects of society, including the economy, and retains significant control over political and social life, playing a pivotal role in directing economic development and social welfare policies. While economic liberalisation has occurred, the state continues to guide and shape the economy, and it maintains a commitment to socialist principles. However, the state faces the challenge of balancing the need for economic growth and stability with the desire to provide social welfare and ensure social cohesion. In 2001, nearly 30 per cent of the population was still living in poverty (Kang & Imai, 2012; GSO, 2004), with single-parent families with children of school age considered to be among the poorest and most vulnerable (T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015; Truc, Chankrajang, & Yen, 2017). Despite attempts by the government to address this issue by introducing social

protection programs, limited numbers of single parents have been able to access government support due to limited funding and strict criteria.

The social protection programs of the Vietnamese Government fall under two main categories: social insurance and social welfare. The former primarily consists of a 'pay-as-you-go' pension scheme (Roelen, 2010) in which individuals make contributions to a government-owned fund upon which they can draw when they retire. There are also short-term payments made to individuals who are sick, unemployed, or on maternity leave (Evans & Harkness, 2008). Although it is a legal requirement for employers to pay social insurance for their staff, many fail to do so, or deduct it from the employees' wages. Only those employed directly by the government are assured of their entitlements, as the social insurance is paid automatically on behalf of these workers. The consequence of the lack of widespread enforcement of social insurance law is that only those with a stable income, being mainly public servants and those working for well-established businesses, benefit from the government program, and those most in need of support are short-changed (Evans & Harkness, 2008).

In the category of social welfare, there are four main schemes: benefits for war veterans and invalids; support for vulnerable groups such as homeless elderly, orphans, and disabled people; disaster relief; and welfare for people living in poverty. Although single mothers fall into the last category, only a limited number manage to receive welfare support due to the strict selection criteria of the Poverty Reduction Program (*Chương trình xoá đói, giảm nghèo*).

7.2.2 Poverty Reduction Program

Recognising that poverty was the root cause of social and political problems in Vietnam, in 2001 the government launched various programs to address it, one of which was its Poverty Reduction Program (PRP). The groups identified as vulnerable and in need of assistance included orphans or abandoned children under 16 years old, childless people over the age of 80, people with disabilities, low-income families with school-aged children, and single parents

with school-aged children living in poverty. As members of an identified vulnerable group, single mothers could apply for welfare support for their households or for loans if they were eligible.

The mandate of the PRP was the 'eradication of poverty and hunger', which was Vietnam's number one target in the millennium development goals. The second target was 'primary education for all', and the third was 'gender equality and empowerment of women' (Vietnamese Government, 2001). Although, theoretically, all Vietnamese children of primary school age could receive free education, the government was aware that 17 per cent – largely those living in rural and mountainous areas – did not complete the five years of primary schooling (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015). The third priority for the government, empowerment of women, focused on increasing educational opportunities for women, their participation in the workforce, and their representation in the government. As outlined in Chapter 2, a motivating factor in empowering women was to double the country's workforce in order to build a strong economy (in addition to this contribution, women were still expected to fulfil their traditional roles as good wife, mother, and homemaker).

Having identified poverty reduction as the number one priority in the Millennium Development Goals, the government applied various methods to measure their success. Initially, the poverty rate was calculated based on income *per capita*, known as the national standard (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015). The government set a target of reducing the percentage of poor households from 30 to 10 per cent by 2010, averaging a 1.5–2 per cent reduction per year (Government Decision, 2001, 2007). To achieve this goal, the government mobilised national and international resources including domestic budgets, and concessional loans from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Central Government coordinated with local authorities and organisations, including the VWU, to implement their poverty reduction policy. By 2010 the government had surpassed

its target, reporting 9.45 per cent of Vietnamese families living in poverty (Government Resolution, 2011): during the fifteen-year period 1995–2010, 43 million people had been 'lifted out of poverty' (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015, p. 44).

In September 2010, the government adopted a new method of measuring poverty: the 'international standard', which better reflected current economic and social conditions in Vietnam (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015). The standard involved calculating both income *per capita* (adjusted for inflation) and the Customer Price Index, which is based on a reference 'food basket' for poor households that was anchored in nutritional norms with an additional allocation for essential non-food needs (Kozel, 2014). When this standard was applied, the government adjusted the 9.45 per cent poverty rate to 20.7 per cent (Kozel, 2014; Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015), and maintained the practice of reducing poverty by 2 per cent per year between 2011–2015. The government achieved this goal as well: by 2015 the reported poverty rate in Vietnam had dropped from 20.7 per cent in 2010 to 9.8 per cent (World Bank, 2018).

In 2015, in addition to the 'international standard' of measuring poverty, the government introduced a 'multidimensional standard' covering five areas: income *per capita*, living conditions, access to education and healthcare, access to information, and access to insurance and social assistance (Government Decision, 2015). The first criterion to define a poor household, the monthly *per capita* income, was determined as less than VND 800,000 (approx. AUD 47) in rural areas and VND 1 million (approx. AUD 59) in cities. The second criterion, living conditions, comprised access to permanent housing, the electricity grid, a sanitary toilet, hygienic water, and durable goods such as a car, motorbike, refrigerator, washing machine, water heater, or air-conditioner. The fourth criterion, access to information, was assessed as access to a colour television, telephone, and computer. According to this standard, households that could not meet more than a third of basic needs in these areas were identified as

multidimensionally poor, while those lacking more than half were considered critically poor (Government Decision, 2015). This standard was explained as a better fit with the remarkable development of the national economy and improvement in national living standards (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015). As in previous periods, the government set a target to reduce the poverty rate: from 9.8 per cent in 2015 to 2 per cent by 2020, again an average decrease of 1.5–2 per cent in poor households per year. It announced that it had achieved this goal, and that the poverty rate had decreased by 1.48–1.53 per cent per year in the period 2016–2020 (Department of Cooporatives and Rural Development, 2020).

Within three decades of implementing PRP, the Vietnamese Government socially established the program's four pillars. These comprised creating more jobs to increase sustainable income for employees; universalising basic social services such as healthcare and education; granting subsidies for people living in poverty; and providing investment loans with low interest rates for poor families to improve their income. In the period 2016–2020, successful applicants to the PRP could receive a package of benefits in the granted year, including a monthly payment of VND 240,000–360,000 (approx. AUD 14–21), a discount on utility bills, tuition fee waivers for school children, and free healthcare insurance. The grantees could apply for loans to renovate their house or for investment. Single mothers, as potential receivers of this government support, could access the benefits via the assistance of the VWU, closely cooperating with the government during PRP.

7.2.3 The role of the Vietnamese Women's Union in distributing social welfare

As described in Chapter 2, the VWU was established in 1930 and its history is closely aligned with the nation's struggle for independence and social and political development. The stated aim of the VWU is to support women, but this assistance is not unconditional because it is only available to those who register as members with specific conditions under their membership.

Membership of the VWU is compulsory for civil servants and optional for all other Vietnamese women from the age of 18, with an annual membership fee of VND 12,000 (approx. AUD 0.7) (VWU, 2017). Members are required to attend regular meetings organised by their local VWU and do community work such as cleaning the streets, planting trees and flowers, and putting up and taking down street decorations on public holidays. Failure to comply with these 'duties' results in their membership being terminated (Waibel & Glück, 2013). Significantly, only VWU members can apply for the PRP grants, or access other benefits provided by the VWU (L. A. Hoang, 2020). It is clear that becoming a receiver of government support is conditional, and a woman is expected to pay back to the community for what she might receive from the state.

With a total membership of over 17 million (in 2018) and a national network operating at four levels (central, provincial, district, and communal), the VWU disseminates government policies to every corner of Vietnam (L. A. Hoang, 2020; Waibel & Glück, 2013). In turn, the VWU network provides feedback to the government on the 'grassroots' needs of women and their communities. Regarding PRP, VWU staff members play an important role in assessing applications for subsidies and loans, supporting successful applicants in completing the paperwork involved, and sometimes handing out the subsidy payments (often in cash) to the beneficiaries. However, in practical terms, this two-way process is limited in that the all-female civil servants managing the union branches report under-staffing, low wages, and lack of funds to execute government policies (Truong, 2004; Waibel & Glück, 2013). Yet despite these limitations, between 2012 and 2017, the VWU, in cooperation with the government, supported 5.4 million poor households, including 430,000 female-headed families, to escape poverty (VWU, 2017).

In addition to the government-sponsored PRP, staff at local VWUs undertake fundraising activities for short-term programs to support women living in poverty. These programs include

Love Houses (*Nhà Tình thương*), Food Share (*Nhường cơm xẻ áo*), and Harvest Help (*Hỗ trợ ngày công lao động*), and they are financially supported by appealing to VWU members, the public, local businesses, and local government. This approach of seeking donations is widely practiced in Vietnam, and draws on the 'socialist idea of mutual aid and solidarity' (Waibel & Glück, 2013). The Love Houses scheme targets women living in very poor conditions, in a mud house for example, and involves building and providing them with a one-room brick house – although this does not include a kitchen, bathroom, or toilet: these "luxuries" are not expected by recipients, who have always built a wooden fire to cook and had basic washing and toilet facilities. The Food Share program translates literally as 'rice distribution from richer families to poorer families', and consists of union members informing the VWU that they have food such as rice, vegetables, and fruit to share with women in need. The VWU then informs women who are struggling to put food on the table that they can go to the house of the benefactor to collect supplies. Harvest Help, as the name implies, involves VWU staff and member volunteers assisting fellow members at harvest time, the busiest time of the year.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Vietnamese government has emphasised the importance of education for its citizens regardless of their gender, age, or ethnicity, creating opportunities for people to learn new professional knowledge or upgrade their qualifications. The VWU, acting on behalf of the government, provides for its members, including vocational training and other income-generating activities aimed at helping women to acquire a secure and sustainable livelihood. City-based vocational training courses include hair dressing, sewing, and industrial cleaning; training in rural areas typically includes pig raising, vegetable cultivation, and fruit tree planting (Truong, 2004; Waibel & Glück, 2013).

In addition to the above, the VWU can help its members access small loans for investment, which are another part of the PRP support infrastructure. Most of these low-interest loans are provided by the government-owned Vietnam Bank for Social Policy, and the VWU acts as a

credit facilitator for the bank, identifying potential beneficiaries, helping them to apply for loans, and supervising the usage and repayment of the funds. Between 2015 and 2017, several thousand households benefited from these microfinance programs (Waibel & Glück, 2013). This is considered an important strategy to increase women's entrepreneurship, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Through their involvement the PRP, the VWU has made a significant contribution to helping women in living in poverty, including single mothers. However, notwithstanding that in the five-year period 2012–2017 the organisation helped some 430,000 female-headed families escape poverty, this was low coverage compared to the total number of single-mother households nationwide, which is estimated at about 2.5 million (VWU, 2017). As government funding is limited, and local resources are scarce, the amount of welfare is generally too small for any substantial impact on poverty. Further, there is no specific program targeted towards single-mother families. Unable to rely on government support, many must turn to their extended families in a crisis.

7.2.4 Marriage, family, and kinship in Vietnam

There are a number of marriage, family, and kinship norms that define the value of a girl/woman to her family and her position on the family property ladder, all contributing to her propensity to experience poverty if she becomes a single mother. As outlined in Chapter 2, due to the strong influence of traditional Confucian beliefs, Vietnam is a patriarchal and patrilocal society with a marked preference for sons because of their assumed ability to perpetuate their father's patrilineage and the role they play in the ritual worship of paternal ancestors (Bélanger, 2002; Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004; Guilmoto, 2012; Scott, Belanger, Van Anh, & Hong, 2010). It is still common practice in Vietnam for sons, especially the eldest son, to receive the bulk of their parents' inheritance including residential and farming lands and other assets, while daughters rarely inherit anything because they are considered to be *con người ta* (the children

of others) (Scott et al., 2010). The common expectation is that a daughter will marry and her parents will provide a dowry, in the form of money or gold jewelry (Malarney, 2020; Van Bich, 2013). If she is not able to find a husband, she is expected to take care of her parents in their old age. If she does marry, it is her duty to look after her husband's parents in their old age. A further reason for parents to want a son is that it is the best guarantee that they will be cared for in their twilight years: a son will take care of family finances and his wife will take care of the elderly, in addition to earning some extra household income. In the event that a wife cannot have children or that the couple only produces daughters, some Vietnamese men will seek to have a son with another woman, setting up a home for her and their son, although this practice is less common than it has been in the past. The mother of a son born outside of marriage, although technically a single mother, will usually go on to have an intimate, ongoing relationship with the father of her son (without having to assume filial responsibility towards his parents), but will face the stigma of society not only due to her single-mother status but also because she is *người thứ ba* (the third person in a relationship), who ostensibly broke up a "happy" family. Men are rarely blamed for having a second family as it is culturally understood and accepted that it is their responsibility to perpetuate their paternal lineage.

The family home is traditionally passed down through the male line. If there is more than one son, typically the eldest will inherit the house, but the parents will make provision for their other son(s) through land or financial assistance. In urban areas, houses are generally two or three storeys high, but a young city couple just starting out may, with help from their parents, buy a small apartment. If there is financial shortfall, they may ask their siblings or other relatives to lend them money rather than take out a bank loan. In rural areas, it is common practice for a newly-wed couple to live with the husband's parents until they have saved enough money to build their own home, often on his parents' land (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007; Guilmoto, 2012). The homes of rural dwellers are more likely to be ground-level only, with some land to

cultivate. Here, too, young couples will try to borrow from family members so they can build, so as to avoid paying interest on a bank loan. Families are generally flexible about repayments, only expecting the couple to pay the money back when they are in the financial position to do so. The fact that a house is on the land of the husband's parents, in accordance with Vietnam's patrilocal society, means that in the case of separation or divorce it is usually the wife who has to leave the family home (T. Le, 2002; T. T. V. Nguyen, 2015). It is common that she gets custody of her daughters while any sons stay with her ex-husband, who is expected to remarry soon. If the single mother has custody of children, she can go to court to request child benefit payments from their father, but in Vietnam, even if granted, there is no mechanism to ensure these are paid. This means a mother is often left with no assets and has no option but to work long hours to support herself and her children (Oosterhoff et al., 2009). She may opt to return to live with her own parents and/or seek help from other family members, although this can cause resentment and other family problems (Oosterhoff et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2010).

7.3 Findings

7.3.1 The voice of Vietnamese Women's Union staff working with single mothers

All informants described the main role of the VWU as supporting the policies of the Communist Party and government. Thanh, in Hanoi, elaborated that 'the local VWU acts as the eyes and ears of the government', alongside protecting women's rights and supporting local women in their quest to build happy families. The interviewees added that they saw their role as explaining government policies to women, so that the women would better understand their rights and duties as responsible citizens. Since the state promoting patriotism through the contribution to the nation-building agenda - as discussed in chapter 2, this could be interpreted as indicating that VWU activities aim at educating women to follow a state-determined model of good citizenship/womanhood, according to which women put the nation first, rather than their own happiness and rights.

The duties expected of single mothers, as explained by the VWU staff, are the same as those expected of all Vietnamese women: to have paid employment, to educate their children, and to build a happy family. As outlined in a previous chapter, in Vietnam education is considered a domestic task for women (N. K. P. Le et al., 2017); as such, just like married mothers, single mothers carry the responsibility in ensuring the educational success of their children as part of their duty as a good citizen in furthering the prosperity of the country.

7.3.1.1. Support for single mothers

All VWU staff conceded that any support they were able to provide in the local community was for women in general, with no specific assistance tailored for single mothers, other than the fact that they were considered a vulnerable group. This vulnerable status may mean that they are eligible to apply for several government support programs, including subsidies for poor households, investment loans, and free vocational training (available in some areas), but only after a strict process of means assessment by the local community committee, which is usually made up of three to five community members, including the President of the Communal Board and the President of the local VWU.

Subsidies for selected poor single parent households

Subsidies for poor households include healthcare insurance and a monthly cash allowance which the recipient collects in person from the head office of the local authority, discount on electricity bills, and waiver of tuition fees for children attending Year 6 to Year 12[16] . The amount each recipient is allocated depends upon the number of children in the household, at VND 270,000 (approx. AUD 16) per month per child. Duyen, a VWU officer in Hai Phong, detailed additional welfare offerings:

> The package of benefits for poor households in the area includes monthly subsidy payments, electricity discounts, and waiver of tuition fees for children. If a single

[16] Primary school pupils have received free education since 1999.

> mother is head of a household and meets the criteria of living in poverty, she could be eligible for certain benefits for one year. (Duyen, staff interview, Hai Phong)

After the one-year validity period, each recipient has to reapply for the benefit package. Applications usually open in December and are assessed quickly so that the grant is received for the next year. The grant for households living under the poverty line is often the highest-level welfare program available for a single-mother family. As stated, this program is open to all poor households, is very competitive, and has strict criteria. Therefore, the success of each applicant depends partly on the number of requests each community receives:

> The single parent applicants must be living with a child/ren of school age, provide proof that their monthly per capita income is less than VND 700,000 [approx. AUD 40], be unable to pay for their children's tuition fees, and be living in a dilapidated house without basic things, such as clean water, a fridge, washing machine, and TV. (Khanh, staff interview, Hai Phong)

The VWU staff members in Hanoi explained that the same criteria applied for all city applicants, but that in the city their monthly *per capita* income must be below VND 1 million (approx. AUD 58).

The above criteria were determined in 2015 under Decision No. 59/2015/QĐ-TTg (Government of Vietnam, 2015). To be considered a poor household, applicants need to experience deprivation in basic services such as healthcare, education, housing, water, and sanitation – and in access to information, via household assets. Though most poor households in rural areas are still without running water or indoor toilet facilities, and in the cities many families need to cook, eat, and sleep in one single room, the law does not recognise that in terms of asset ownership, motorbikes, telephones, and colour TVs have become commonly owned by almost every family by 2012 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2015): second- and third-hand television sets (considered a device for accessing information), refrigerators,

cellphones, and washing machines now cost very little in Vietnam. Lien, a VWU staff member in Hanoi, noted, 'criteria are out of date and need to be adjusted, seriously taking into account how much income the family makes'.

Applying for a grant for poor households involves two steps of assessment. The first is the mother applying for a grant herself or being nominated by the villagers/community residents. At the annual meeting, the community residents then decide who, on the list of applicants, are most worthy of support:

> They [the applicants] can nominate themselves or be nominated. Then, in the meeting, they need to talk about their circumstance [this presentation is documented for the next step of assessment process]. This is to give evidence, proving that they are the ones who are most in need. Then people in the meeting vote on them. The applicants with the highest number of votes will be processed to the next step of assessment. (Lien, staff interview, Hanoi)

If applicants pass the first round of assessment, their names are given to the community committee. The committee members reassess the successful first-round applications before sending some of them to the next level, which is usually the district government office for processing of payments. Staff members interviewed at both research sites emphasised that this strict process, with two rounds of assessment, was 'to ensure that every applicant is treated equally and there is transparency'.

However, they expressed concerns about the eligibility criteria for applicants seeking government assistance for poor households. VWU officers further emphasised that the application process was becoming even more competitive because the local government wanted to reduce the percentage of poor households in the area to qualify for the PRP by 2 per cent over the next two years. This meant fewer poor households would be granted subsidies. Khanh, a VWU staff member in Hai Phong, explained:

> The higher the number of poor households we can show we have, the higher the budget we will be allocated to help them. However, we have to show we have used the money wisely and reduced the number of recipients. If we don't satisfy this requirement, we risk not receiving further financial assistance from the Poverty Reduction Program. (Khanh, staff interview, Hai Phong)

Doan, a senior staff member in Hanoi, told me that in the twenty-five years she had been looking at candidate applications for the PRP, very few single mothers had ever been successful, and no young unwed mothers had ever qualified:

> I've come across many women suffering financial hardship, but it is policy [in 2017] that only 4 per cent of all households get government support. Sometimes it has been really difficult for us to make a decision on applications, but for the good of the community we need to do everything we can to meet our commitments to the Poverty Reduction Program. (Doan, staff interview, Hanoi)

This response is representative of the views expressed by all the VWU staff interviewed: meeting the target to maintain their place in the PRP was the overriding concern. Other incentives for local government officers and VWU staff as committee members further influenced participation in the program: increased government funding, various 'rewards' such as individual bonuses for key staff, positive media coverage, and framed posters certifying the 'excellence' of both institutions. When the researcher enquired about the exact nature and amount of the individual bonuses, the response from all staff was 'it varies from year to year, but very little', and some gave the caveat, 'the most important thing is that we have helped many poor households in the area when they are most in need'. As noted in Chapter 4, there was uniformity in the responses from all VWU employees. This raises the possibility that they may have received guidance on how much they could disclose information regarding the organisation's operations. Sensitive enquiries like these were often avoided.

Investment loans

Single mothers, like all Vietnamese women, may apply for an investment loan that the local VWUs managing on the behalf of the government. Single mothers may borrow up to VND 50 million (approx. AUD 2,940) with approximately 4 per cent annual interest, and the loans are typically granted for investment in farming in the countryside or starting a small business in the city. To be approved for a loan, applicants must have a permanent resident record and submit an expression of interest and investment plan to VWU staff. There is no collateral required for this loan. VWU staff in regional and urban areas recounted that they received a large number of applications each year, however very few single mothers applied for the loan. The staff members in Hai Phong said that single mothers in the area were too scared of debt and they often did not have a good proposal for investment, therefore they refused to apply for the loan. VWU staff in the city reported that they received a few applications from single mothers, but that most if not all their applications were rejected. Lien, a senior staff member at VWU Hanoi, explained: 'We can't trust all the applicants as many have low credit ratings and no reliability. If they get the money and run away, we can't chase them, and therefore the responsibility falls on us [the local VWU].'

Interviewed staff shared that there were some initiatives applied to minimise the risk of applicants absconding with the money and lumbering the VWU with a debt to repay to the government. For instance, each borrower was required to leave a deposit of 5–10 per cent of the approved funds in a VWU bank account which was offset against their repayments of the loan. Similar incentives were offered to the VWU to motivate their participation, for example the more government loans the VWU secured, the more commission the organisation staff members would receive, the key negotiator for each applicant being the principal beneficiary. Lien explained: 'This aims at encouraging us to engage more with potentially eligible borrowers, and at the same time to self-manage any risks regarding fund distribution'.

Initiatives regarding the distribution of investment loans were more in line with sales activities rather than non-profit government business aiming at supporting women in need of capital. This approach might have been altering the practices of VWU staff: it was understandable that some staff members targeted easy commissions rather than supporting borderline eligible borrowers.

Other support

Alongside the government assistance for poor households and the investment loans, the VWU has other activities at the grassroots level that help local women. It provides free workshops on parenting, reproductive healthcare, food safety, and dealing with domestic violence. However, all the VWU staff members observed that, because the single mothers needing support tend to be younger women, they are busy at work when these classes are offered. They noted that the majority of women attending the workshops were 50 years of age or older. In Hanoi, the local VWU also cooperated with some vocational schools and colleges to provide free courses for women in need:

> We have agreement with three vocational schools in the area to provide local women, who are poor and in need, free training courses that include cooking, sewing, and knitting. If they get a qualification or certificate, we then help introduce them to work. However, young women [including young single mothers] refuse to come. They might have a better choice… They are young and they hold degrees. They might not want to do manual work. (Thuy, staff interview, Hanoi)

Khanh, a staff member in Hai Phong where free training in farming was available, said that single mothers 'would rather work for shoe-making or garment companies in the nearby industrial zone than on farms, for more stable income. They aren't interested in the training. You know farming depends on weather. A storm might take everything away'. Duyen, another staff member in the rural area, shared the same thought: 'Women in general and single mothers

specifically are simply too busy to join, and many think the activities offered are not of interest to them.'

Combined, these forms of assistance are reported by the VWU and government to result in improving the living conditions of many households, lifting many out of poverty (Socialist Repubic of Vietnam, 2015; Vietnamese Women's Union, 2017b). However, it is clear that support for single mothers does not meet the needs of this population. In particular, the free training provided by the VWU seem inappropriate to the situation of single mothers. This suggests that the organisation is disconnected from the needs of the diversity of women they are aiming to help, and oblivious to the difficulties single mothers face in trying to earn a living and uphold societal expectations.

7.3.1.2 Poor working conditions of the VWU

Each of the staff participants expressed a wish that they could do more to support single mothers and their children but said that they felt unable to do so due to their poor working conditions, low wages, lack of human resources, and lack of government funding. The district offices have a maximum of five employees each. The staff are civil servants, receiving an average monthly salary of VND 2–4 million (approx. AUD 110–220). At district level, this salary is unattractive if compared to other civil service positions. On ward (communal) level, only the chairwoman is entitled to the pay and benefits of a civil servant:

> We have no official salary for the hamlet [village] level; they can receive some extra money from the state every month, but only about VND 150,000 [approx. AUD 9], it is very low. There is no salary for heads of groups, only their enthusiasm. (Khanh, staff interview, Hai Phong)

Realistically, VWU staff members at the village level work as volunteers or collaborators rather than in properly employed positions. In fact, staff members at this grassroots level have other jobs in order to earn a living. For example, Thuong in Hai Phong said, 'farming is the main

source of my income. I can't live on my salary. My colleagues are the same'. Additionally, village VWU staff are assigned a lot of community work by the local government: street cleaning, tree planting in public gardens/parks, and so on. Thuy commented: 'Such a demanding job.'

Available funding for local VWUs is very limited. Staff participants reported that they were allocated VND 15–20 million (approx. AUD 880–1,170) per year to organise all activities and events that they were directed to organise by the local government, including meetings to celebrate the International Women's Day (March 8) and National Women's Day (October 20), visiting and gifting veterans in the area on War Invalids and Martyrs Day (July 27), and visiting and gifting poor families on Independence Day (September 2). Duyen reported, 'we're unable to support single mothers more due to limited funding allocation'.

The study's participants related that many VWU staff members left the organisation after a short time. Lien in Hanoi stated, 'only ones who have a passion to work in social work stay', and Doan affirmed, 'I stay because I feel responsibility to help my community, as well as women in my area'. Longer term local VWU staff were running on passion rather than efficient or comprehensive government support.

7.3.2 The voices of single mothers

7.3.2.1 Government support

This section provides details on the single mother participants' experiences of the VWU and government support.

Subsidies for poor households

Two of the twelve participants in this research, both of whom were from rural areas, reported that they had at some stage received the government financial assistance for poor households. None of the participants in Hanoi had applied for the support and they expressed concern that the application process would be too complicated, and said they did not know who to turn to

for assistance with applying. Furthermore, they assumed that any subsidy would be minimal in terms of their requirements living in the city, and they felt their time was better spent looking for a second or third job. Trang, a never-married mother in Hanoi working three jobs, explained, 'the support would be minimal, and it would not be worth completing the complicated process'.

Single mothers in Hai Phong, on the other hand, had knowledge about subsidies for poor households, and how to apply for them. Hien, a widowed mother in Hai Phong and one of the two welfare recipients, recounted:

> I was nominated by one of my neighbours at the annual community meeting where other people were nominating themselves for the Poverty Reduction Program. It's very competitive [becoming a subsidy recipient]. There were more than ten applicants that year [2017], and only three would be selected. As always, the villagers voted to choose who was the most deserving, so I had to defend my case, explaining at the meeting that I have been in a very difficult situation following my husband's death. That year, I was one of the three successful applicants. (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Eligibility was assessed in a public forum where candidates defended their case by speaking out about their poor living conditions and financial hardship, they had experienced to convince community members that they were the most in need of government support. This individualising of the problems they were facing and the guilt and shame they felt when being questioned in front of their fellow villagers or local city residents in a packed hall haunted all the participants who had been subjected to the process. The respondents who had undergone this onerous process spoke of the humiliation they felt being put under such scrutiny:

> I felt ashamed having to talk about my personal problems in public, giving details on our poor living condition. It made me feel ashamed for being unable to provide my

children with basic things so that I have to beg for alms from others. (Hien, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Single mothers reported that it is virtually impossible to hide from prying eyes, and as Nhung (Hai Phong) lamented, 'you can't stop people talking about you'. Trang (Hanoi) stated, 'the shame is too much for the small amount of money I might get'.

Theu, a widow in Hanoi, was not successful with her application. She recounted that prior to being widowed she had lived a comfortable life and had easy access to healthcare, education, and the internet. Losing her husband, who had been the primary breadwinner, meant she was struggling to cope on her own and earn an income while also managing her shock and grief:

> A few months after my husband passed away, I asked a staff member of VWU in my area if I was eligible for government assistance for poor households. She said no, because I own a two-storey house with a gas cooker and two televisions. However, they didn't understand that I've had these things from the time when my husband was alive. It was a very difficult time for us, as I was raising two kids without any income. (Theu, focus group, Hanoi)

Theu's story suggests that a change might be made in the criteria for subsidies for poor households: besides asset ownership, how much income the family currently makes should be seriously taken into account. This perspective was echoed by the staff research participants.

Single mothers in the regional areas stated that although the grant application was very competitive, if successful the government benefits contributed significantly to their income. Thu, a never-married mother in Hai Phong, gave more detail.

> I received government financial support for poor households in the community for two years, 2017 and 2018. The benefits were significant for me. They covered tuition fees for my son, and healthcare insurance for us. Thanks to the monthly payments [VND 279,000] I could buy good food. (Thu, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

The fact that single mothers in regional areas are poorer than their counterparts in urban areas means that they can more easily meet the strict requirements of this form of government support, and more easily show its benefits to their lifestyle and future.

Investment loans

As mentioned, the Vietnamese Government provides low fixed-rate personal loans as a part of the PRP, for families that need capital to develop their household economy. When asked about their wishes to apply for a loan, the mothers in this study said that they had never tried for it. The regional participants explained that they had no investment plan, and they were scared of taking risks or being in debt:

> I know that the Women's Union provides capital for women in the community to help them with their household budget. However, I never think of applying for that because I have no idea about investment, what I should do, and where I should begin. Also, I'm scared that I won't be able to meet the interest payment requirements every month if I take out a loan. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Three of the six mothers in Hanoi, Huong, Trang, and Ninh, expressed an interest in the loan, although they assumed that the loan provided was not much money. However, they had never tried to apply for it because they knew that they were not eligible. Huong, who is running her own restaurant, said:

> I think the loan that the VWU provides is not much. Even so, I was still interested in it, you know, at the time of launching my business – I really needed capital. However, I don't have a permanent resident registration here [Hanoi], so I don't think I am eligible for that loan. (Huong, focus group, Hanoi)

The requirement of holding permanent residency status when applying for any government support is the biggest barrier for single mothers who have moved to Hanoi from a rural province, as did Huong, Trang, and Ninh. If they applied in Hanoi, their application would be

rejected because they did not meet the selection criterion of holding permanent residency where they reside. If they applied in their rural hometown, they would also be unsuccessful because of having a low local credit rating due to their not living in the area.

Other support provided by the VWU

Regarding the extra free support for local VWU members, such as vocational training, consultation, and workshops on various topics, the study's findings show that nine of the twelve single mothers interviewed did not participate in these activities because they did not hold VWU membership, they were too busy, or the training offered was not relevant to their needs. Often, they felt that it was not worth their while to attend workshops on, for example, parenting or breastfeeding as they could find this information on the internet. In regard to the training in cleaning, hairdressing, and sewing available for urban single mothers, they stated that it was of no benefit to them as they already had qualifications in their fields of work, including bachelor's degrees and diplomas in areas such as accounting, education, and finance.

> I used to have a good job as an education officer with a private company, but when I became pregnant, they terminated my contract and refused to pay me while on maternity leave. I would like to get another job in education, but the VWU can't help me. (Trang, interview, Hanoi)

In rural areas, VWUs offer training in areas such as pig and poultry farming, cultivating plants, and fishing, but participants stated that they could earn more working in a factory. Nhung, who had worked in a local garment factory since the age of 18, said, 'working in a factory gives me a more stable income than working on a farm, where everything is seasonal and dependent on the weather'. The set-up costs of farming were also a matter of concern to participants. Thien explained, 'you need money to buy the pigs and feed them and there's always the risk that they get sick, and you lose everything'.

Although three of the six single mothers from Hai Phong were members of the VWU, only two had joined voluntarily. Membership of the VWU is compulsory for all women employed in government sectors, and at the time of interview, Chi, the only government employee mother participant, had been working as an accountant for a local council in Hai Phong for seven years. She had attended many workshops run by the VWU:

> The number of women at these workshops is often not as many as [the VWU staff] expected so all female government employees have to attend to try and boost numbers. For me, workshops on parenting, breastfeeding, and reproductive healthcare were very interesting, but my manager also insisted that I went to others which I wasn't interested in. (Chi, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

The other two members of the Hai Phong VWU, Thu and Hien, a farmer and a childcare worker respectively, explained that as a condition of their membership they were expected to attend at least some of the workshops, and if they did not, they would have no chance of being granted a subsidy for poor households. Hien admitted, 'I have to say that although it's time consuming and not always interesting, attending workshops or training gives me a feeling of having companionship and acceptance by others'. Both Thu and Hien recognised that despite their initial reluctance to join the VWU, membership offered them both potential financial benefits in the form of subsidies and the opportunity to socialise.

The research findings show that despite recognising the benefits offered by VWU membership, the majority of single mothers at both research sites felt that there were still a number of drawbacks, including the fact that the vast majority of VWU members were older, married women. This contributed to the feeling that as young single mothers they would be treated as outsiders, which seems a valid concern given the stigma they face. When I raised the issue of age with VWU staff participants both in Hanoi and Hai Phong, they confirmed that more than

60 per cent of their members were over retirement age and most were married. Senior staff member Doan told me:

> We have tried to attract younger members but have failed. I think this is because they lead very busy lives and the types of activities we offer don't appeal to them. (Doan, staff interview, Hanoi)

The importance of attracting new members to its organisation is highlighted in the Action Plans on the VWU official website, which stated in 2017 that by 2021, 'VWU will increase its nationwide membership by 1 million members and will ensure that every WU unit will recruit at least 50% of women aged 18 and older' (VWU, 2017a).

In addition to the age factor, the majority of the mother participants said something to the effect that the VWU was a bureaucratic organisation serving political purposes rather than addressing social issues. In a focus group, Luong, a never-married mother from Hanoi, stated:

> Although I'm not a member, they keep coming to my house asking for money for various government-supported charities, including support for people affected by natural disasters and for disabled children, and prizes for high-achieving pupils as part of their study promotion fund. Although they call it a donation, because these charities are local government initiatives, it is in fact compulsory to give money. I'm very unhappy about that, although I only give a small amount of money each time. The point here is that they just come to collect money and don't care about my child or our situation. (Luong, focus group, Hanoi)

Other mother participants in the focus group agreed with Luong, emphasising that if they did not make contributions to the charities, they would be considered irresponsible members of the community, and therefore not good citizens, and their names would be raised in every community meeting as a bad example. It can be seen that the VWU is actually increasing single mothers' stress, obligation, and financial hardship by collecting monetary 'contributions' for

community from them. Mothers who did not meet this mutual requirement were further stigmatised as irresponsible members of the community. To avoid this, single mothers had no alternative but to give out donations as required. Ninh concluded, 'disappointed! No one [in the local authorities] sees that I'm struggling to raise my kids alone without any [government] support'. The mothers' accounts once again illustrate the notion that for the VWU staff members, supporting government initiatives and policies was their priority over supporting vulnerable women.

Another reason the mother participants felt disinclined to join the VWU was that they knew that membership came with responsibilities. During a group discussion in Hai Phong, Thien stated, 'I work for a busy garment company and if I have any spare time I would rather stay home with my son and help them with him homework or just play with him'. Nhung, a divorced mother also working for a garment company, said:

> I would like to have some of the support of the VWU, but there are several reasons why I haven't joined. First of all, most of its members are a generation older than I am [40s and above]. Second, their monthly meetings are held in the evening when I'm still working at the factory. Also, I'm too busy to join in their community work – cleaning footpaths or streets, planting trees and flowers in public gardens. Since I can't take on the responsibilities of membership, I'm not applying. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

The above accounts reflect that being a member of the VWU will increase single mothers' obligations and make them even more time-poor. This seems akin to the 'mutual obligation' policies in some western countries: in order for single mothers to receive welfare they must display that they are 'giving back' to society (Blaxland, 2009, 2013; M. Brady & Cook, 2015; de Gendre et al., 2021; Wilson, 2019). As in other countries, in Vietnam the safety net for single mothers is conditional and involves moral judgement. If a Vietnamese single mother

wants to access government support she must show that she is the deserving poor through her hardworking, good mothering practice and her contribution to society through charity/donations or the community work she is asked to participate in. Anyone who does not meet this expectation would be considered the undeserving poor and therefore not eligible for any state welfare.

According to the statements given by single mothers as presented in Chapter 6, due to their heavy workloads, close involvement in their children's education, and other family commitments, they are too time-poor to take on any extra responsibilities. In addition, fear of public exposure regarding their personal life meant the majority of single mothers in this research had decided against joining. Only those working in the government sector, where membership of the VWU is compulsory, reported receiving some minor benefits from being a member – primarily a sense of 'belonging' to a group, and therefore feeling less stigmatised as single mothers. However, as Chi said, she was more protected from stigmatisation and more likely to feel belonging because of her social position (a government worker) rather than as a member of the local VWU.

The study found that single mothers' perspective on government support was not positive. According to the participants, the subsidy for poor, single-mother families was low and had strict criteria and complicated assessment procedures, which discouraged the women to apply. Only those who found no way of earning more money tried for it, and even those who were granted the support expressed feeling shameful and stigmatised which further devastated their self-esteem. The other support provided by the VWU such as loans, free training, and workshops were not very attractive to single mothers, which showed a disconnection between the organisation and the population in need of assistance. Being unable to access enough government support, single mothers had to turn back to their families to manage this difficult time in their lives.

7.3.2.2 Support from family members

All of the mother research participants reported receiving support from their parents or relatives to some degree, and that their extended family played an important role in their survival while they adjusted to their status as single mothers. This support came in various forms, including the provision of food, financial assistance, land to build a house on and/or to farm, childcare, and/or the mother and child/ren returning to live in the family home. Although the mothers strove to be as self-sufficient as possible by seeking employment, minimising their expenditure, and undertaking domestic duties to relieve their parents of additional labour, this was not always achievable. As described in Chapter 6, single mothers needed to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of working in either the public or private sector. Theu, for example, initially worked as a clerk in local government in Hanoi, but her low salary led her to seek a job in a private company where the pay was better but the work hours longer. After typically working a ten-hour day, usually six days a week, she was still expected to take work home. Such expectations of employees are typical in Vietnam, and the single mothers had to manage these expectations alongside their responsibilities to their children and wider family. Thus, they often had to rely on family for domestic matters.

Housing

Of the six single mothers in Hanoi, only Theu had her own house, which was built when her husband was still alive on land that her parents had undersold to them. A few months after they moved into the new home, her husband died in a car accident on the way to work, leaving her with two children and a large debt, mostly to their parents and siblings. After her husband's death, Theu experienced a long period of grieving and depression. During the focus group and interviews, she repeated, 'at that time, I felt I don't know how I can live without him, how I can raise my children alone, and how I can pay back that debt!' The two mothers who were renting accommodation, Trang and Huong, described squalid housing conditions: one room for

everything, very hot in summer and cold and wet in winter. They could not afford better homes because ‘rent is very expensive and increases year by year’. The other two mothers, Ninh and Luong, divorced and never-married respectively, were accommodated in their brothers’ houses without paying rent. They felt lucky as they did not have to pay rent, however, they all expressed the same feeling of bothering their loved ones:

> They’re all good [my brother and sister-in-law]. They know that I have nowhere to go so they tell me to stay and don’t charge me any rent. I just need to share food and utility bills. It’s a four-storey house; my son and I are occupying the highest level with a separated toilet. But you know, some conflicts have happened, for example sometimes my kid and their kids fight or quarrel for toys. It is a headache to me. My brother doesn’t care much as he thinks it’s just kids’ stuff, but I know my sister-in-law does really care and she’s unhappy sometimes. (Luong, photo-elicitation interview, Hanoi)

These city mothers reported that owning a house would be almost impossible for them as single-income families. Ninh and Luong recounted that they took advantage of their current living arrangements to save for small apartments in the future, while Trang and Huong admitted that it was out of their reach.

Of the six mothers in the rural areas, two widows, Hien and Chang, continued to live with their parents-in-law and were expected to look after them into old age on behalf of their deceased husbands. If Hien and Chang perform this duty of care, their sons will inherit the house and land from their paternal grandparents. In the event that they remarry, their sons will stay with the grandparents, as often a new husband does not want to take the wife’s son to his home. This prevents the widow mothers in this study from remarrying; as Hien explained, ‘I am broken down when I think about that. I would never leave my sons for someone just to find my own happiness. They are my life’. Of the other four rural mothers, Chi and Nhung had come back to live in the house of their parents, where their brothers’ families were also living, and Thu

and Thien – never-married mothers – had their own homes built on a corner of their parents' residential land compound, while their brothers' families occupied other parts of the land. Those mothers had the same experience as city mothers in going back to live with their extended family, in terms of conflicts of interest between themselves and their siblings. Nhung, a divorcee, said, 'we're siblings, he couldn't ignore me when I was in trouble. But I know since I returned no one has been really happy'.

Childcare

Of the twelve mothers, ten reported that living near their parents/-in-law or siblings was an arrangement that facilitated childcare and household work. They relied on them to take and collect their children from school, especially when they were primary school age. The relatives also provided before- and after-school care, as well as holiday care during the ten-week summer break and two-week New Year period. This support enabled the mothers to work full-time, and even overtime, in the hope of earning enough to cover their living cost and that of their children's education. Nhung works for a garment company:

> I work from 7am until 9pm sometimes, so when I get home my kids are in bed already. My mother takes them to and from school, cooks for all of us, gives the kids a bath, tells them to do their homework. She is 60 years old and exhausted after a long day. (Nhung, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Two city mothers, Huong and Trang, who had no family members around, had to pay for before- and after-school care and vacation care, and said that this added a significant financial burden and made them more vulnerable than the other single mothers. Those two mothers lived with the fear that if something bad happened to them, there would be no one look after their children.

Financial assistance

The mothers also reported that their parents and siblings supported them financially. The financial assistance was often in the form of gifts for their children (good food, clothes, books, stationery), and/or a specific amount of money in urgent situations (for instance, to pay for overdue tuition fees or healthcare services when the mother or her children were in hospital):

> It has been three years since we split up. It was very hard for the first year for many reasons. At that time, my daughter was small and she was often sick. I took her to the doctor every month. It cost me a lot of money for her medical treatment. There were some months in which my salary was just enough to pay for her healthcare. However, I've received financial support and great encouragement from my parents which has helped me to overcome every difficulty. I can't imagine what my life would be without them. (Chi, focus group, Hai Phong)

Theu, a widow from Hanoi, shared a similar experience:

> For six months following his [her husband's] death, I was in crisis and unable to do anything. I had no idea how I would survive without him or what I could do to raise my children. During that period, my parents looked after me and my daughters. Then they gradually encouraged me back to normal life. (Theu, focus group, Hanoi)

Whether the parents provided short-term or long-term support, and whichever form it took, the single mothers at both research sites reported feeling guilty about being a burden to others:

> It's not easy for me, or for them, because they are both in their seventies, and rarely have a day off. I feel guilty all the time about being a burden on them. They work very hard to support us financially. They raised me and now are helping me raise my child. I feel bad because I know that my parents suffer because of my broken marriage. (Chi, photo-elicitation interview, Hai Phong)

Chi is divorced and receives no support from her daughter's father – on the occasions when he comes to visit he only brings some candy. Nhung, divorced from a drug addict who never sees

their two daughters, also feels guilty about the worry she knows she causes her parents, adding, 'but I have no choice. My family is my only source of support'. Chang, a widow in Hai Phong with children aged 7 and 2, spoke of her devastation when her husband was electrocuted on the day she gave birth to their second child. She and her husband had been living with his widowed mother from the time they got married, and after his death she continued to live there, with her own parents living close by. She felt guilty about relying on her parents to help take care of not only herself and her sons, but also her mother-in-law:

> Since I was widowed, they have given me rice each harvest season and when they buy good food, they share it with us. They try to support us as much as they can. I am thankful for what they have done, but I feel bad about being a worry to them. (Chang, focus group, Hai Phong)

All the above participants were conscious of the fact that their parents were of an age when they deserved to relax more and be supported by their children, but instead that they had to continue to work to support their daughters and grandchildren financially, emotionally, and physically. All participants spoke of their determination to provide for their parents in the future, returning the support they received from them.

7.3.3 Morality - the foremost factor for assessments of government support recipients

The morality of each applicant is considered an important aspect in assessments for all types of government support, including monthly subsidies for poor selected households, development loans, and free training courses. The official documents on the poverty reduction program provides indicators of typical poor households, which were used as criteria in the assessment process. The criteria, as detailed in the section 7.3.1, assessed the material aspects of each household, including monthly per capita income, accessibility to basic services such as healthcare, education, housing, water, and sanitation, and access to information, via household assets. However, in practice, the morality of the applicants was always the first factor to be

considered in the assessment process. Single mothers, especially young ones with a child/children outside of marriage are often rejected due to their 'bad reputation'. Duyen, a senior VWU staff member in Hai Phong, stated, 'we consider the moral worthiness of each applicant, so single mothers with bad reputation, especially being promiscuous or neglecting children, will absolutely be rejected'. Khanh explained, 'so young women who have had a child out of wedlock are not considered suitable candidates'.

Although it is not official government policy to exclude young unwed mothers from eligibility to receive state welfare, all the VWU staff interviewed concurred with Duyen and Khanh, informing that young single mothers 'are often considered spoiled women who destroy moral standards, good customs, and the traditions of the nation; no one in the community should vote for them'. Therefore, all the interviewed VWU staff members reported that no young unwed mothers in their area had passed the first round of assessment. It is clear that 'good' mothering practices and social opinions about single-mother candidates are taken into consideration when granting government support. Single mothers, provided they have given birth while married, are not considered morally questionable if they remain single, exclude themselves from any relationship with men, and practice good mothering and community betterment. Only these single mothers are considered deserving of government support.

It is interesting to note that although Thu was 27 years old when she had her son, she did not apply for assistance from the PRP until 2016, by which time her son was 11 years old. As discussed, young single mothers are not considered suitable candidates for state welfare because the 'moral worthiness' of each applicant is a primary determining factor in the decision-making process. Aware of this fact, Thu had nevertheless approached the VWU, who had reiterated the slim chance she would have should she decide to apply. However, by the time she turned 38, it was known throughout the village that she had dedicated her life to raising her son, to the exclusion of having any relationships with men, and was therefore now a

‘morally worthy’ applicant. One again, this proves that the moral worth was shaped by the notion of good mothering and demure femininity, demonstrating in the slogans promoted by the VWU, as mentioned in Chapter 2, such as *Phụ nữ nuôi con giỏi* (Women raise children well), *xây dựng gia đình văn hoá* (build a cultural family), and *Phụ nữ Việt Nam tự tin, tự trọng* (Women of Vietnam enhance their self-confidence and self-respect).

The element of moral judgement in deciding between deserving and undeserving applicants was a common theme expressed by both sets of participants: even if the applicant could demonstrate that she and her children were living in poverty and in dire need of assistance, if the community or committee entertained any doubts about her moral suitability her application would be rejected. By including this moral worthiness in the evaluation criteria for government support approval and promoting it throughout the nation, the VWU has taken part in the construction of a moral standard for Vietnamese women to uphold. Consequently, the mothering practice and emotional life of single mothers are also judged through the lens of this moral standard. Single mothers in this study tried to cover or sacrifice their adult relationships (detailed in Chapter 5) to avoid being further stigmatised, and at the same time make a significant investment in their children's education with the hope that their children would become well-educated people, hence redeem themselves socially as good mothers (described in Chapter 6). It can be said that moral worthiness is used to remove many single mothers from the welfare system. It also exacerbates social stigma for single mothers, reinforcing the dominance of the two-parent family model.

From single mothers’ perspectives, there was shame, stigma, and moral judgement, as well as the lack of privacy and confidentiality involved in the process of applying for government support. Concerns relating to the above issues discouraged single mothers who were facing difficulties, especially those in the city, from applying for it. Trang and other participants in Hanoi concluded that they would rather spend time finding a second job to boost their income

than applying for the subsidies. Only those women who found no alternative avenues to obtain further income pursued government support to get some benefits for their children.

7.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has investigated potential support for single mothers in Vietnam, using data from VWU staff members directly involved in supporting women in local areas, and from single mothers in need of support. Findings indicate that although the Vietnamese Government and the VWU do not have any particular program that is targeted towards single mothers, there are two welfare schemes with respect to single parent families living in poverty that single mothers might apply for; subsidies for poor households, and government loans with preferential interest. Intensively cooperating with the government in delivering the subsidies, the interviewed VWU staff pointed out that though these welfare schemes are effective at poverty reduction, their limitations include over-strict criteria and misalignment with social and economic development, especially in criteria on income and asset assessment being out of date and prohibitive.

Besides taking part in the delivery of the PRP, the VWU organises activities to support women in general from which single mothers might benefit, including free training and workshops. However, reportedly this is not fruitful for this subset of the population, because most single mothers are either not interested in these offers or unable to take them up. This disconnection between the VWU and the single mother population can be explained by the fact that there are not enough statistics on Vietnamese single-mother families and the issues they are facing. Rather than an in-depth understanding of their situations, it was noted that throughout their interviews, the VWU staff members displayed a level of discrimination towards young, never-married mothers, considering them immoral and therefore excluded from state welfare programs. This presents as a contradiction between the VWU's stated goals and their

perceptions and activities, as one of the main goals of the VWU is to strive for 'gender equality and women's advancement' (Vietnamese Women's Union, 2017b).

The majority of the single mothers in the research, especially the city participants, displayed a marked reluctance to apply for either support from the PRP or government loans, largely due to concerns about having to divulge sensitive personal information, and the high level of social stigma directed towards single-mother applicants when there would be not a significant benefit in return. As a result, only those in the most dire of circumstances apply for financial support, echoing research findings by Evans and Harkness (2008) and (Roelen, 2010), who conclude that the small amount of money made available for welfare beneficiaries in Vietnam is too low to have any substantial impact on poverty. Given the unlikelihood of receiving government support, single mothers in Vietnam have little choice but to seek other forms of help in their struggle to survive.

Regarding potential family support for single mothers, findings show that they fall into three main categories: housing, childcare, and financial assistance. However, this can also lead to family conflict, posing a potential emotional dilemma with accompanying feelings of guilt on the part of the single mothers who do not wish to become a burden on their parents and their relatives. All the research participants expressed concern about the health of their loved ones, as well as their own health, conscious of their own limitations in working long hours and simultaneously taking care of their children and household.

All the research participants would like to see more government support for single mother families and made recommendations for ways in which the government and the VWU can better provide such assistance: long-term support in school fees for school-aged children from single-mother families and assistance with healthcare insurance are necessary. There is also a need for development of a directory or website in which clear information is provided about resources that are available to single-mother families in Vietnam and how to apply for them.

There is need for a straightforward application and assessment process and hotline support, which maintains the personal information and privacy of participants, with all eligibility assessments being conducted privately instead of publicly.

Chapter 8
Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter synthesises the main ideas and findings presented in the study. It begins with a presentation of the research questions, followed by a summary of the key arguments. It then looks at the implications for the parties and stakeholders, namely, the Vietnamese Government, local authorities (specifically staff members of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU)), educators, and single-mother families. The chapter concludes by discussing the limitations of the study and identifying avenues for future research that may build upon this thesis.

8.2 Research questions

This thesis sheds light on the lived experiences of twelve single mothers in Vietnam and the material, emotional, and social support available to them. It addresses the following research questions: 'What are the defining experiences of single mothers in contemporary Vietnam?', 'How do single mothers manage their situation?', 'What resources do single mothers draw upon in their day-to-day lives?', 'What support do single mothers receive from the Vietnamese Government, and from family?', and 'How effective are the existing supports, and what support needs to be adjusted, added, or changed?' To answer these questions, the study considers the social, political, and cultural factors that influence the lives of Vietnamese single mothers and their children in rural and urban areas, paying close attention to social stigma regarding single motherhood, the cultural concept of good mothering, and levels of access to support for from extended families and government. It also looks at how single mothers exercise their agency to negotiate their situations. The perspectives of staff of local VWU branches, which are tasked by the government to support women, are also incorporated. As such, this project is the first study to use multiple research methods to deeply examine issues regarding Vietnamese single-mother families, from the perspectives of both the single mothers and support staff members.

I expect the findings will help inform both government and VWU policies, allowing them to more effectively address the challenges faced by the growing number of single mothers in Vietnam.

Following a qualitative research model, I recruited two groups of six single mothers each, one group in Hanoi and one in Hai Phong. These twelve participants contributed to group discussions, and four of the six participants at each research site then participated in photography exercise activities and photo-elicitation interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with six staff members of local VWUs (three participants at each research site). The data were then triangulated to promote rigour in the analysis.

Thematic analysis of the data identified the following key themes: single mothers' experiences of social stigma, their involvement in their children's education, and the level of support available for single-mother families. The mothers' experiences of social stigma and stigma directed towards their children were found to be directly related to their single-mother status, with three distinct sub-themes evident: negative stereotyping, sexual harassment in the workplace and/or in public, and discrimination towards children in daily social interactions. To manage the stigma, the mothers adopted various strategies, such as trying to conceal their marital status and being cautious when interacting socially in order to avoid being targeted and harassed. These strategies aimed to align the single mothers with the culturally accepted, dominant Confucian model of a 'good mother' who provides for her family and raises successful children.

The second key theme, single mothers' involvement in their children's education, showed that all the mother participants spent much of their income and most of any free time on their children's education, despite the heavy mental, physical, and emotional toll this extracted. They undertook this commitment with the expectation that their investment would result in enhanced educational outcomes for their children, which would lead to a better socioeconomic position

for them in the future; in return, the children would provide well for the mothers in their old age. The third key theme, the level of support available for single mothers in Vietnam, revealed that government support for single mothers in many cases is very limited, often not meeting their needs, leaving them to rely on their extended families. Family assistance was frequently the mothers' primary form of support, and was often financial, taking the form of housing and/or childcare provision. On the basis of these three themes, the following key arguments were established.

8.3 Summary of key arguments

Social stigma is a major challenge faced by single mothers in Vietnam, whether they are widowed, divorced, or have never married. The concept of stigma was first introduced by Goffman (1963) to define socially undesirable differences in a person that reduce a person to a discounted status in a social context. The concept has been applied in sociology to explore structural factors such as history, geography, politics, and economic conditions that perpetuate and reproduce stigma in everyday contexts (Tyler, 2008; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Stigma towards single mothers is perpetuated across societies in order to protect the traditional nuclear family of a heterosexual married couple and their child/ren. Research on teenage single mothers in western countries shows that young single mothers are judged negatively by the wider society, their sexual and intimate lives often presented as out of control and promiscuous, their parenting practices as producing problematic children, and their financial circumstances as welfare-system dependent (M. Brady, 2010; Elliott et al., 2015; Tyler, 2008). Single mothers in East Asia are made to feel that their family is not complete, or are considered "spoiled" women, if they have had a child outside of marriage. Relative to social stigma, single mothers in Vietnam face three key issues in their day-to-day lives: stereotyping, sexual harassment, and discrimination of their children.

As outlined in Chapter 5, the widow participants reported experiencing pity from their community, while the divorced participants reported that they were made to feel they had failed as women for having allowed their marriage to end, regardless of how irresponsible and/or abusive their husband had been. The young, never-married mothers felt judged and labelled spoiled women for having had a child out of wedlock, although single mothers over the age of 30 who had decided to 'ask for a child' reported receiving some sympathy. Such sympathy was interpreted as people understanding their need to have someone to lean on in their old age in a society where social welfare support for the elderly is limited.

Vietnamese women are often defined by their marital status within Vietnam's patriarchal discursive hierarchy in which marriage is central (see Chapter 5). This is evident in the way women are stigmatized in Vietnamese society: married women are accorded the most respect, followed by widows; divorced mothers are further up the hierarchy than older, never-married mothers; and young single mothers who have never married are judged most harshly. However, regardless of her hierarchical position, a single mother is seen as a threat to two-parent families in the eyes of general public. This can be partly attributed to the media's portrayal of single mothers as promiscuous and cunning: often they are portrayed as a third person in a love-triangle relationship, or a bad woman intent on destroying a happy family. This stereotype of single motherhood is a symptom of a society in which the nuclear family is dominant and valued above all other models.

Single mothers are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, both at work and in public, when their single status is known. Their harassers are typically men with whom they are affiliated, for instance bosses, business partners, friends, or neighbours. Participants recounted feeling vulnerable, offended, stressed, and angry when subjected to any form of sexual harassment, including inappropriate touching, sexually-charged words, and being stared at, winked at, or singled out for teasing and flirting. They felt trapped in a "no-win" situation, exacerbated by

the stigma they endure in Vietnamese society: if they speak up, they risk harming their reputation and even their employment, so they keep silent and try to protect themselves by wearing dowdy clothes and behaving extra modestly. Although they might wish to dress up and be attractive, doing so as a single mother in Vietnam can render one vulnerable to sexual harassment. In Vietnam, where women are subordinated to men (Binh, 2004), and where sexual harassment is linked to sex rather than gender power relations (Hong, 2004), single mothers can find very little support in dealing with sexual harassment – they can only rely on themselves. Their powerlessness in being able to actively respond to sexual harassment and protect themselves means this gender-based violence is reproduced over generations (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004).

Children from single-mother families are also stigmatized due to their mothers' status. This discrimination ranges from pitying looks, to joking, teasing, and taunting; it reflects a social norm that emphasises the prominence of the nuclear family – seen as a morally superior form – and the role of a father in the family as provider, protector, and educator who guarantees the lives and comfort of his wife and children. The findings of this research show that, while single mothers might remain silent when stigma is directed towards them, they defend their children in any way they can when the children are subjected to discrimination. For the single mothers, their children are their foci as well as their final point of endurance. By standing up and speaking out to protect their children from discrimination, single mothers demonstrated some agency in managing their circumstances.

The research participants adopted different strategies to protect themselves and their children from social stigma. These included concealing their marital status if possible, ignoring malicious comments, socially withdrawing to avoid being targeted for harassment and gossip, and trying to adopt the culturally accepted image of a self-sufficient woman and good mother by providing for their family and being intensely involved in their children's education. As

argued, this model, promoted by the Vietnamese Government and the VWU, is based on traditional Confucian virtues, and modified to be relevant to the goals of building a prosperous country in the era of globalisation and modernisation.

The participants in this study reported that they invested strongly in their children's education. In terms of finance, all the mothers invested 50–60 per cent of their income in their children's educational expenses, including tuition fees and additional costs (uniforms, stationery, and extra tutoring classes for advanced math, literacy, and foreign languages, English being the most favoured). The mothers also invested intensive physical and emotional labour into their children's learning journeys. They would take on extra shifts at work, supervise their children doing homework, transport them to school and extra classes, and work multiple jobs to earn enough to pay for their children's education. The mothers considered this intense involvement in their children's schooling a part of their mothering responsibilities. Single mothers' intensive investment in their children's education reflects these mothers' expectations that this active involvement will help their children gain a good qualification which will lead to a well-paid job in the future. This will improve their family's social status and secure the mothers' welfare in their old age.

The findings on Vietnamese single mothers' investment in their children's education can be framed by the concepts of good or intensive mothering (Arendell, 1999b; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Hays, 1998). Good/intensive mothering is commonly constructed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive (Hays, 1998). Discourses of good mothering vary across social contexts, but regardless of their social background, mothers often follow good mothering models because they want to be seen as good mothers in the watchful eyes of their community. Findings from this study indicate that the Vietnamese single mothers, through their intensive mothering practices, claim the persona of good mothers for themselves, regardless of their marital status. However, by adopting the

particular model of good motherhood or 'new women' promoted by the Vietnamese Government and the VWU, the single mothers perpetuated gender divisions and the hegemony of the nuclear family. The mothers, arguably due to cultural expectations and norms, perceived that appropriately raising their children was their full responsibility rather than placing any responsibility on the fathers, and they also saw it as their responsibility to compensate for both their own family's 'incompleteness', and structural shortfalls, rather than a responsibility of wider society.

The perspectives of the VWU staff participants and the single mother participants differed on the availability and applicability of government support for single mothers and their children, as discussed in Chapter 7. The staff participants identified no specific support targeted to helping single mothers, but pointed out that single mothers can apply for various generic forms of government assistance, including subsidies for poor households, investment loans with low interest rates, and free vocational trainings and workshops. The staff reported that the assessment processes in applying for subsidies were transparent and objective and welcoming of single mothers who are eligible to apply. Between the two cohorts of single mothers, urban single mothers believed that the government support is too minimal to be worth completing the complicated application process, while those in regional areas said that the subsidies are significant when compared to their low incomes, though those who received them were concerned about exposure of personal information during the assessment process. Successful applicants expressed feeling doubly stigmatised for being a single mother and a person living in poverty, but as they were in dire need, they had applied regardless.

Family is the main safety net for most single mothers in Vietnam (T. Le, 2002; Van, 2015). The majority of the mother participants in this study reported that they relied on their families to overcome difficulties, especially during the first few years after becoming single mothers. Family assistance is often in the forms of housing, childcare, and clothing for children. Relying

on family support can create interpersonal conflict, or feelings of guilt on the part of single mothers for being a burden on parents and siblings. Therefore, the mother participants wished for more government support to be available for single mother families, albeit with more straightforward application processes and an assessment conducted in person instead of publicly to avoid further stigmatisation.

8.4 Recommendations for policy makers

According to this study, single mothers spend the majority of their income on their children's education, expecting that this investment will assure their children's future and their own welfare in their old age. The cost of children's education includes tuition fees, stationery, uniforms, 'volunteered' contributions for school, and extra class fees. The study recommends that policies which offer long-term support for the children of single mothers during their schooling years should be developed to help single-mother families in need. These policies should reduce or remove school or tuition fees, provide uniform and stationery subsidies, and remove the expectation of volunteer contributions. These solutions require the government to commit to funding such initiatives.

Further support might include providing sufficient social welfare such as specific medical care for single mothers living in poverty and their children. Single mothers who work in the private sector commonly have to cover personal insurance at their own cost and rarely receive any support from the government. This adds more financial pressure to their families. Single mothers in this research often had no budget to spend on medical insurance as they needed the money for food, housing, and education. Access to healthcare services would reduce family expenses and anxiety, and provide significant support to single mothers and their children in any health crisis they may encounter.

The limited knowledge that the study's participants had of the government support available for their families suggests the need for a directory or website of services to be developed. The site would include clear information about the resources and support available to single mothers and their children across Vietnam and how to apply for them. This would include the free training courses or workshops offered by VWUs across Vietnam for women who are in need. The current assessment processes for mothers who need access to welfare payments should be revised to reduce the social stigma mothers endure as their application is processed. This research therefore recommends that the government and the VWU provide a streamlined, private application process and hotline support, with all eligibility assessments conducted personally by case officers instead of in public forums.

Sexual harassment experienced by the mother participants in this research suggests there is a need to change current legislation to prevent this gender-based violence from happening, not only to vulnerable single mothers, but to all Vietnamese women. Governments and organisations urgently need to collect data on sexual harassment and provide public awareness, prevention, and support programs. For example, the VWU, with its massive network nationwide, might organise workshops on how to prevent sexual harassment at the grassroots level, with a view to educating men, and to a lesser extent women, audiences in order to change the social perspective on this issue.

The research identified that local VWUs have been in cooperation with vocational centres and schools to provide some free training courses and workshops for women in need. However, the single mothers who participated in the research, especially those living in the city, were not interested in the courses because they do not fit their educational backgrounds and interests. This disinterest suggests that further data on issues faced by single mothers are needed and that a comparative approach to research on single mothers in diverse settings is necessary, in order

to identify useful areas for further assistance and to appropriately tailor government vocational support.

The number of single mother families in Vietnam has been growing due to the changing social norms, increasing divorce rates, and economic factors. Making more investment in social welfare for single mothers and their children is not only a matter of social responsibility but also a wise economic and societal strategy. By providing the necessary support and opportunities, governments can empower single mothers to lead fulfilling lives, improve their children's future prospects, contribute positively to the economy and society, and increase the social stability.

8.5 Significance and limitations of the study

This thesis has presented the key theoretical and methodological decisions underpinning the research, discussed the findings, and examined their implications. This section acknowledges the strengths and limitations of the research. The strengths include the comparison of single mothers between urban and regional areas and incorporation of the perspectives of VWU staff to provide a broader view of the issues single mothers in Vietnam face. This three-pronged approach has not been attempted in any previous research on Vietnamese single mothers.

The limitations include the small sample size. In terms of its population and its sample, this study selected twelve single mothers and six VWU staff members at two research sites (urban/regional) as informants. The small sample in this study may fail to reflect the diversity of difficulties that single mothers experience, especially differences in the experiences of single mothers between urban and regional areas, as might be found in a larger population. As a result, from an empirical or statistical point of view, the findings of this study can be applied only in its particular context, instead of on a broader scale or in different contexts. However, this is a qualitative research study which uses multiple methods and aims at providing an in-depth

exploration, rather than attempting to be representative; therefore, a larger sample might not be necessary to ensure the validity or usefulness of the study.

Using a triangulation of research methods is one of the main strengths of the thesis. The combination of focus groups, personal interviews and photo-diary methods provided rich qualitative data on single mothers' perceptions and experiences and directly helped detect hidden issues, sexual harassment being a key example. Incorporating the perspectives of VWU staff added a further layer of data to the research. The evaluation of support for single mothers (detailed in Chapter 7) includes data collected from the VWU staff members as representatives of the government. The inclusion of these public employees tasked by the government to protect women's rights and support the women's movement was a strength of the research. As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, VWU staff working at the grassroots level often have the best understanding of the implementation of any policy or formal government support for single mothers. The VWU staff participants also helped the researcher with recruiting mother informants in the regional areas. However, it should be noted that the data collected from VWU staff needs to be viewed in the context that these government employees were seriously concerned about the risk of losing their jobs due to information disclosure or leakage. Therefore, they only provided information authorised by the government.

The thesis details single mothers' involvement in their children's education, framing it with the concepts of the 'good mother' and intensive mothering discourse (Chapter 6). In this study, these concepts, well-known in the global north, were applied in the Vietnamese context and findings revealed how they interact with Confucian norms and play a role in normative approaches to family, schooling, and mobility aspirations in East Asia. Therefore, a strength of this thesis is that it provides an extension to the conceptualisation of 'good' or intensive mothering.

8.6 Suggestions for future research

Considering the contributions and limitations of the thesis, it is recommended that there must be further child-centered investigation into single motherhood in Vietnam, and especially into children's lived experiences of growing up in a single-mother family. The understanding of the latter through the perspectives of children can help explore more issues relating to single motherhood/single parenting. However, ethical restrictions when doing research with children need to be considered.

In addition, research on the experiences of single mothers that includes the perspectives of employers and community leaders might identify further issues and avenues of support. This future research would expand the current study by deeply investigating projects that support single mothers in collaboration with the Vietnamese Government.

The findings of this study also provide direction for further research relating to parent involvement in children's schooling, with potential focus areas including comparison between single mothers and single fathers, and/or between married and single mothers.

This research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has increased unemployment and poverty in Vietnam, thereby creating more challenges for single mothers and their children, again with limited support from the government. An investigation into experiences of single mothers during and beyond this crisis is a further avenue for future research.

8.7 Conclusion

This present study, as guided by feminist standpoint theory, granted the women epistemic privilege by engaging them in the data collection process. Their narratives revealed how challenging their lives are due to negative stereotyping of single motherhood, sexual harassment targeted toward themselves, and discrimination toward their children. Their

narratives also revealed intensive involvement in their children's education. The value that the women placed on their children, on motherhood itself, was the impetus not only for their own private satisfaction but more especially for significant change in their mothers' lives and in the development of their family and their own sense of agency.

The voices of participants reminded me of the lived experiences of my own mother, a widow since her early 30s, and myself as a child brought up by a single mother. Although nearly thirty years have passed, I can still see similarities between our experiences and those of this study's single mother participants, in terms of social stigma, varieties of harassment faced, and expectations placed on children in circumstances of financial constraints, limited human resources, and limited government support. There is still a great need to improve the state welfare and education systems in Vietnam in order to support the efforts of single mothers to gain wellbeing for themselves and their children.

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Appendix

Appendix A
Ethics Approval

Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia
Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI)

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

REDI Reference: H12738
Risk Rating: Low 2 - HREC

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

12 June 2018

Doctor Kate Huppatz
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Kate,

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your research proposal H12738 "The experiences of single mothers in contemporary Vietnam", until 12 June 2021 with the provision of a progress report annually if over 12 months and a final report on completion.
In providing this approval the HREC determined that the proposal meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

This protocol covers the following researchers:
Kate Huppatz, Helena Onnudottir, Tho Vu

Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report will be due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.

2. A final report will be due at the expiration of the approval period.

3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee prior to being implemented. Amendments must be requested using the HREC Amendment Request Form:
https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/word_doc/0012/1096995/FORM_Amendment_Request.docx

4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events on participants must be reported to the Human Research Ethics Committee via the Human Ethics Officer as a matter of priority.

5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the Committee as a matter of priority

6. Consent forms are to be retained within the archives of the School or Research Institute and made available to the Committee upon request.

7. Project specific conditions:
There are no specific conditions applicable.

Please quote the registration number and title as indicated above in the subject line on all future correspondence related to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the e-mail address humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au as this e-mail address is closely monitored.

Yours sincerely

Professor Elizabeth Deane
Presiding Member,
Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B
Advertisement, Information sheet and consent form

Appendix B - 1.1.1
Advertisement

Research Project

Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam

If you meet the following criteria you will be invited to participate in this project:

- Having been a single mother for at least two years
- Living in Hanoi, or in rural Hai Phong
- Residing with her child/children under 16 years old

Please email or ring me for more information

Vu Thi Tho
PhD Candidate at Western Sydney university
Mobile phone: 0986865964 (Vietnam)
Email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au

By 9am-9pm, Mon-Sat

Appendix B – 1.1.2
Participant Information Sheet – Vietnamese single mothers

Project Title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

Project Summary: This study will provide an exploration of lived experiences of single mothers in Vietnam - in contemporary social settings in both rural and urban areas.
Six single mothers living in the centre of Hanoi, the capital city, and another six in the rural area of Hai Phong will be invited to take part in the study. The participants in the project must be between the ages of 18-40, living with their children under 16 years of age.
The methods will include focus groups, open-ended interviews, and photo diaries to collect data from single mothers participated this project.

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Mrs Thi Tho Vu – a PhD candidate at Western Sydney University, under the Supervision of Dr Kate Huppatz and Dr Helena Onnudottir at School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Australia.

How is study being paid for?

The researcher has received a scholarship from the Vietnamese Government to conduct this project as a PhD candidate at Western Sydney University, Australia.

What will I be asked to do?

As a single mother, if you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in the following research activities:

+ *Focus groups*

You will be invited to participate in a focus group (or group discussion) for approximately 90 minutes.

+ *Photo diaries*

You might be asked to use smart phones or cameras to take photographs your activities that present your experiences of being a single mother. It is estimated that you need up to four weeks to complete the photography activities and submit the photos to the researcher via email or messenger (Imessage, Facebook messenger, Whatsapp, and so on). You will be given the prompts to direct yourself toward the research questions.

+ *Open-ended interviews*

If you have participated in the photo diaries, then you will be asked to take part in an open-ended interview in which you and researcher discuss on the photographs submitted and their meaning and significance for you, and your experiences of participating in the research. Each open-ended interview will about one hour.

+ *Follow-up interviews*

A follow-up interview may also take place after open-ended interviews if necessary. This will be conducted by phone for about 15 minutes.

You will be asked to choose a pseudonym on your own prior to the commencement of the focus groups. You will be referred by the chosen pseudonym in any publication of the research finding.

All the phases of the data collection process focus on your experiences as a single mother such as the difficulties you have encountered in your situation, any support you have received from your family and from the government since you became a single mother, your expectation for the future.

What benefits will I, and/or the broader community, receive for participating?
As a research participant, you will be reimbursed with VND 200.000 (apprx. AUD 13) in cash for your time and travel expenses for participation in either focus groups, photo diaries, or open-ended interviews.
The study has potential benefits to the broader community as a report of the research findings will be provided to the Vietnamese Women's Union after the project ends. The project will make recommendations for future policies aimed at supporting Vietnamese single mothers.
Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for me? If so, what will be done to rectify it?
There is a minimal level of emotional risk and distress associated with participation in this research. As a single mother, you will be asked to talk about and reflect on your everyday lives as single mothers, which may or may not be stressful. If you feel upset during the interviews you are free to withdraw from the study, or to stop and return to it some other time.
If the participants feel upset during the focus groups, the researcher will delay group discussion until they participants are able to continue taking part in the group discussion.
To protect sensitive personal information, the twelve single mothers participating in focus groups will be asked to respect others and not to share personal information given by other participants in the group.
How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results?
It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that the participant cannot be identified.
In the publications of the project, the participants in the research will be called by their pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality and anonymity.
Will the data and information that I have provided be disposed of?
Please be assured that only the researchers will have access to the raw data you provide. However, your data may be used in other related projects such as a comparative study on the experiences of single mothers in Vietnam and in other countries. The expected time for any reuse of the data can be up to five years.
Can I withdraw from the study?
Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate you can withdraw at any time without giving reason, and the researcher will take your name off the list. However, during and after the focus groups, it will be impossible for participants to withdraw their data, and the participants will be reminded beforehand that due to the nature of the group discussion, once the focus group has been completed, data cannot be withdrawn. Any information that you have supplied will be retained to ensure that the results of the research can be measured properly.
Can I tell other people about the study?
Yes, you can tell other people about the study by providing them with the researcher's contact details. The individuals who are relevant to the research issue can contact the researcher to discuss their participation in the project and obtain a copy of the information sheet, consent form, and an invitation.
What if I require further information?
Please contact the researcher *Thi Tho Vu* should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.
Thi Tho Vu – PhD student
School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University
Phone: +81 986865964 (in Vietnam)
Email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au
What if I have a complaint?

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au.
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form. The information sheet is for you to keep and the consent form is retained by the researcher/s.
This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is *H12738.*

Appendix B – 1.1.3
Consent Form – Single mothers

Project Title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

I hereby consent to participate in the above named research project.
I acknowledge that:

- I have read the participant information sheet (or where appropriate, have had it read to me) and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher.
- The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to:
(Tick box option for each specific activity)
☐ *Participating in a focus group*
☐ *Participating in photography activities*
☐ *Participating in an open-ended interview*
☐ *Participating in a follow-up interview*
☐ *Having my information audio recorded*

I consent for my data and information provided to be used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time.
I understand information gained during the study may be published and stored for other research use. The information may potentially reveal my identity.
I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher now or in the future.
I understand that I will be unable to withdraw my data and information that I have supplied during the focus group.

Signed:
Name:
Date:

Appendix B - 1.2.1
Participant Information Sheet – The staff of the Vietnamese Women's Union

Project Title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

Project Summary: This study will provide comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of single mothers in Vietnam - in contemporary social settings in both rural and urban areas.
To explore the experiences of single mothers, six single mothers living in the centre of Hanoi, the capital city, and another six in the rural area of Hai Phong, a city on the Northern coast of Vietnam, will be invited to take part in the study. The participants in the project must be between the ages of 18-40, living with their children under 16 years of age. Additionally, to investigate the support that single mothers receive from the community and government, the researcher will invite four staff members of the Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU), two working in the centre of Hanoi and others two in the rural area of Hai Phong, to participate in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ms Thi Tho Vu – a PhD student at Western Sydney University, under the Supervision of Dr Kate Huppatz and Dr Helena Onnudottir at School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University.

How is study being paid for?

The researcher has received a scholarship from the Vietnamese Government to conduct this project as a PhD candidate at Western Sydney University, Australia.

What will I be asked to do?

As you are staff member of the Vietnamese Women's Union, if you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in the following research activities:

+ An open-ended interview

You will be invited to participate in an open-ended interview in which the researcher will ask you to provide information about the state policies in place to support single mother families, your experiences of the support which is given, and any obstacles you can identify when it comes to assisting single mothers. An open-ended interview will last up to one hour.

+ A follow-up interview

After the open-ended interview, you might be asked to take part in a follow-up interview if necessary. This will be conducted by phone for about 15 minutes.

What benefits will I, and/or the broader community, receive for participating?

On individual basis, you will be reimbursed VND 200.000 VND (apprx. AUD 13) in cash for your participation in the open-ended interview.
The study has potential benefits to the broader community as a report of the research findings will be returned to the Vietnamese Women's Union after the project ends. The project will make recommendations for future policies aimed at supporting Vietnamese single mothers.

Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for me? If so, what will be done to rectify it?

As staff members of the Vietnamese Women's Union working at the grassroots level, the participants will be asked to talk about how single mothers are supported by the government and community. The researchers recognises the fact that some of the information divulged to the researcher might be critical of the organisation. The researcher will ensure that such information will be kept confidential and treated with respect.

How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results?

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that the participant cannot be identified.
In the publications of the project, the participants in the research will be called by a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality and anonymity. The participants will be asked to choose this pseudonym.

Will the data and information that I have provided be disposed of?

Please be assured that only the researchers will have access to the raw data you provide. However, your data may be used in other related projects such as a comparative study on the welfare system supporting single mothers in Vietnam and in other countries. The expected time for any reuse of the data can be up to five years.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate you can withdraw at any time without giving reason.
If you do choose to withdraw, any information that you have supplied will be retained to ensure that the results of the research can be measured properly. However, if you do not want your data to be included, you must inform the researcher when you withdraw from the project.

Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes, you can tell other people about the study by providing them with the researcher's contact details. They can contact the researcher to discuss their participation in the research project and obtain a copy of the information sheet.

What if I require further information?

Please contact the researcher *Thi Tho Vu* should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

Thi Tho Vu – PhD student
School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University
Phone: +81 986865964 (in Vietnam)
Email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au

What if I have a complaint?

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au.
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form. The information sheet is for you to keep and the consent form is retained by the researcher.
This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is *H12738.*

Appendix B - 1.2.2
Consent Form – The staff of the Vietnamese Women's Union

Project Title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

I hereby consent to participate in the above named research project.
I acknowledge that:

- I have read the participant information sheet (or where appropriate, have had it read to me) and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s
- The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to:
(tick box option for each specific activity)
☐ *Participating in an open-ended interview*
☐ *Participating in a follow-up interview*
☐ *Having my information audio recorded*

I consent for my data and information provided to be used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time.
I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published and stored for other research use but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.
I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s, and any organisations involved, now or in the future.

Signed:
Name:
Date:

Appendix B - 2.1.1
Mẫu quảng cáo

Dự án nghiên cứu

Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay

Dự án cần tuyển các bà mẹ đơn thân tham gia nghiên cứu. Để tham gia, bạn cần thoả mãn các điều kiện sau đây:

- Làm mẹ đơn thân ít nhất 2 năm trở lên
- Sống và làm việc tại Hà Nội hoặc Hải Phòng
- Đang nuôi con dưới 16 tuổi

Nếu như bạn cần thêm thông tin về dự án, xin hãy liên hệ với nghiên cứu viên:
Vũ Thị Thơ
Nghiên cứu sinh Đại học Tây Sydney,
Số điện thoại: 0986865964 (Vietnam)
Email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au

Appendix B - 2.1.2
MẪU THÔNG TIN CHO NGƯỜI THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU
Dành cho mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

Tóm tắt dự án: Nghiên cứu này sẽ cung cấp một cái nhìn kỹ lưỡng về cuộc sống của những người làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay ở hai không gian sống nông thôn và đô thị.
Để nghiên cứu trải nghiệm cuộc sống của mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam, sáu mẹ đơn thân sinh sống ở trung tâm Hà Nội và 6 mẹ đơn thân sinh sống ở khu vực nông thôn Hải Phòng sẽ được mời tham gia vào nghiên cứu. Mẹ đơn thân tham gia vào nghiên cứu này phải trong độ tuổi từ 18-40, đang nuôi con nhỏ dưới 16 tuổi. Ngoài ra, để nghiên cứu những hỗ trợ cho cộng đồng những người làm mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam, nghiên cứu viên sẽ mời bốn cán bộ Hội liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam tại cấp cơ sở tham gia vào nghiên cứu, hai cán bộ Hội công tác tại trung tâm Hà Nội và 2 cán bộ làm việc tại khu vực nông thôn của Hải Phòng. Cán bộ Hội phải có ít nhất 3 năm làm công tác phụ nữ.
Phương pháp nghiên cứu:
Để thu thập dữ liệu, nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn cá nhân đối với cán bộ Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam tại cấp cơ sở và phương pháp thảo luận nhóm, nhật ký ảnh và phỏng vấn cá nhân đối với mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam tham gia nghiên cứu.

Kính mời chị tham gia vào nghiên cứu về trải nghiệm sống của những người làm mẹ đơn thân ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu sự khác nhau trong cuộc sống của phụ nữ làm mẹ đơn thân giữa hai khu vực nông thôn và đô thị ở miền Bắc Việt Nam, đồng thời tìm hiểu sự hỗ trợ mà người làm mẹ đơn thân nhận được từ cộng đồng và chính quyền.
Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện bởi nghiên cứu viên Vũ Thị Thơ (sđt 0986865964, email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au) để hoàn thành yêu cầu của khoá học Tiến sĩ trong 4 năm dưới sự hướng dẫn của Tiến sĩ Kate Huppatz (email: K.Huppatz@westernsydney.edu.au) và Tiến sĩ Helena Onnudottir (email: H.Onnudottir@westernsydney.edu.au) thuộc Khoa Khoa học xã hội và Tâm lý học, Đại học Tây Sydney, Australia.
Nguồn ngân sách cho nghiên cứu này?
Nghiên cứu viên Vũ Thị Thơ đã nhận được học bổng của chính phủ Việt Nam từ chương trình Học bổng nâng cao chất lượng đội ngũ giảng viên để tiến hành nghiên cứu này trong khoá học tiến sĩ tại trường đại học Tây Sydney, Australia.
Tôi sẽ phải làm gì nếu tham gia vào nghiên cứu này?
Là mẹ đơn thân, nếu bạn quyết định tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, bạn có thể sẽ được yêu cầu tham gia vào ba giai đoạn của dự án bao gồm: (1) một cuộc thảo luận nhóm kéo dài khoảng 90 phút, (2) hoạt động nhật ký ảnh trong vòng 3 tuần, và (3) phỏng vấn cá nhân trong 60 phút.
Bạn cũng có thể được mời tham gia một cuộc phỏng vấn bổ sung tiến hành qua điện thoại trong khoảng thời gian 15 phút.
Mỗi mẹ đơn thân sẽ được nhận một khoản tiền 200.000 đồng khi tham gia vào một giai đoạn trong quá trình thu thập dữ liệu cho dự án này.
Mỗi mẹ đơn thân tham gia vào dự án sẽ được yêu cầu tự chọn cho mình một tên giả (bí danh) trước khi thảo luận nhóm được tiến hành. Bí danh này sẽ được sử dụng nhằm bảo mật thông tin cá nhân cho người tham gia khi nhà nghiên cứu công bố kết quả của nghiên cứu trên các tạp chí chuyên ngành.

Quá trình thu thập dữ liệu chỉ tập trung vào những trải nghiệm làm mẹ đơn thân của bạn bao gồm những khó khăn mà bạn trải qua khi làm mẹ đơn thân, những hỗ trợ (nếu có) mà bạn nhận được từ gia đình, từ chính quyền và cộng đồng, những mong muốn cho tương lai của bạn và con cái bạn.

Tôi/hoặc cộng đồng mẹ đơn thân sẽ nhận được lợi ích gì khi tham gia vào nghiên cứu này?

Nghiên cứu này có những lợi ích tiềm năng đối với cộng đồng mẹ đơn thân và con cái của họ bởi vì một báo cáo kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi đến Hội liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam sau khi nghiên cứu kết thúc. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, nghiên cứu viên sẽ đưa ra những tư vấn về chính sách hỗ trợ cộng đồng mẹ đơn thân sau này.

Nếu tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, tôi có phải chịu rủi ro gì không? Nếu có, nghiên cứu viên có giải pháp gì để giảm thiểu các rủi ro?

Là mẹ đơn thân, khi tham gia vào nghiên cứu này bạn sẽ được yêu cầu chia sẻ về các khó khăn của bản thân, điều này có thể khiến bạn cảm thấy căng thẳng hoặc gợi lên những cảm xúc buồn. Nếu như điều này xảy ra, bạn có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu, hoặc dừng tham gia và quay lại khi cảm xúc đã ổn định.

Phương pháp thảo luận nhóm sẽ được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu cho nghiên cứu này. Để bảo vệ các thông tin cá nhân được chia sẻ trong quá trình thảo luận nhóm, những mẹ đơn thân tham gia hoạt động này sẽ được yêu cầu sử dụng tên giả (bí danh) trong suốt thời gian thảo luận. Đồng thời, với tư cách người tham gia nghiên cứu, bạn sẽ được yêu cầu tôn trọng các thành viên trong nhóm và không chia sẻ thông tin các nhân của các thành viên khác để bảo vệ danh tính của họ.

Kế hoạch công bố kết quả nghiên cứu?

Kết quả của nghiên cứu này sẽ được công bố trên các tạp chí nghiên cứu chuyên ngành và được trình bày tại các hội nghị nghiên cứu quốc tế. Trong tất cả các công bố, thông tin cá nhân của người tham gia nghiên cứu sẽ được bảo mật (bằng cách sử dụng mật danh trong các trích dẫn) để danh tính những người tham gia không bị nhận diện.

Tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu không?

Việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu này là hoàn toàn tự nguyện, bạn không bị ép buộc khi tham gia. Nếu bạn quyết định tham gia nghiên cứu, bạn có quyền rút khỏi nghiên cứu bất cứ khi nào mà không cần phải dưa ra lý do cũng như không phải chịu bất kỳ một hậu quả gì.

Tôi có thể nói với những người khác về nghiên cứu này không?

Bạn có thể cung cấp thông tin về nghiên cứu này cho những người khác bằng cách cung cấp mô tả ngắn gọn về dự án và thông tin liên lạc của nghiên cứu viên. Nếu cá nhân nào phù hợp với vấn đề nghiên cứu muốn tham gia vào nghiên cứu này có thể liên lạc với nghiên cứu viên để thảo luận về sự tham gia của họ vào dự án và để nhận được một bản sao thông tin nghiên cứu.

Nếu tôi muốn có thêm thông tin về nghiên cứu này thì cần liên lạc với ai?

Nếu bạn cần thêm thông tin về nghiên cứu này, xin vui lòng liên lạc với nghiên cứu viên Vũ Thị Thơ theo số điện thoại:
+81 986865964 (ở Việt Nam). Email:18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au
Hoặc: vuthitho84@gmail.com

Tôi cần làm gì nếu muốn khiếu nại hoặc gửi phản ánh về việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu?

Nếu bạn có bất kì phàn nàn hoặc thắc mắc gì về khía cạnh đạo đức của sự tham gia của anh/chị trong nghiên cứu này, bạn có thể liên hệ, hoặc khiếu nại lên Uỷ ban Đạo đức Nghiên cứu con người theo số điện thoại +61 2 4736 0229 hoặc email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au. Mọi thắc mắc, khiếu nại của bạn sẽ được xử lý bảo mật và điều tra kỹ càng, kết quả điều tra sẽ được thông báo tới bạn.

Nếu bạn đồng ý tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, bạn sẽ được yêu cầu ký vào Mẫu đồng ý tham gia nghiên cứu. Bạn sẽ được giữ một bản sao của mẫu thông tin nghiên cứu và Mẫu đồng ý tham gia. Nghiên cứu viên sẽ giữ một bản sao.

Khía cạnh đạo đức của nghiên cứu này được thông qua bởi Uỷ ban Đạo đức Nghiên cứu con người của trường Đại học Tây Sydney. Số hồ sơ: H12738.

Appendix B - 2.1.3
MẪU CHẤP THUẬN THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU
DÀNH CHO MẸ ĐƠN THÂN VIỆT NAM

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

Tôi đồng ý tham gia vào nghiên cứu *Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay*
Tôi xác nhận rằng

- Tôi đã đọc mẫu thông tin dành cho người tham gia (hoặc đã được đọc cho nghe toàn bộ mẫu thông tin này) và đã thảo luận mọi thông tin liên quan cũng như thảo luận về sự tham gia của tôi vào đề tài nghiên cứu với nghiên cứu viên.
- Tôi đã được nghiên cứu viên giải thích mọi thủ tục liên quan đến việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu và thời gian nghiên cứu. Mọi câu hỏi của tôi về đề tài nghiên cứu đã được nghiên cứu viên trả lời thoả đáng.

Tôi đồng ý:
(Đánh dấu vào các ô trống sau)
☐ *Tham gia vào cuộc thảo luận nhóm kéo dài khoảng 90 phút*
☐ *Tham gia vào hoạt động nhật ký ảnh*
☐ *Tham gia vào cuộc phỏng vấn cá nhân kéo dài khoảng một tiếng*
☐ *Tham gia vào cuộc phỏng vấn bổ sung trong 15 phút có thể được thực hiện sau phỏng vấn cá nhân. Số điện thoại của tôi……..*
☐ *Các câu trả lời của tôi sẽ được ghi âm lại*
Tôi đồng ý để những thông tin tôi cung cấp cho nghiên cứu viên sẽ được sử dụng cho mục đích của nghiên cứu này và những nghiên cứu liên quan khác.
Tôi hiểu rằng sự tham gia của tôi vào dự án sẽ được bảo mật. Mọi thông tin tôi cung cấp có thể được sử dụng mục đích xuất bản và được lưu trữ để sử dụng trong các nghiên cứu khác liên quan. Tôi hiểu rằng, do bản chất của thảo luận nhóm, thông tin tôi cung cấp có thể có nguy cơ danh tính của tôi bị phát hiện.
Tôi hiểu rằng, tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu ở bất cứ thời điểm nào mà không cần phải đưa ra lý do và chịu hậu quả gì. Và điều này không ảnh hưởng đến mối quan hệ giữa tôi với nhà nghiên cứu dù là thời điểm hiện tại hay trong tương lai.
Tôi hiểu rằng những thông tin tôi đã cung cấp trong cuộc thảo luận nhóm vẫn sẽ được giữ lại kể cả khi tôi đã rút khỏi nghiên cứu.

Ký tên:
Tên:
Ngày:

Appendix B - 2.2.1
MẪU THÔNG TIN CHO NGƯỜI THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU
Dành cho cán bộ Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam cấp cơ sở

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

Tóm tắt dự án: Nghiên cứu này sẽ cung cấp một cái nhìn kỹ lưỡng về cuộc sống của những người làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay ở hai không gian sống nông thôn và đô thị.
Để nghiên cứu trải nghiệm cuộc sống của mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam, sáu mẹ đơn thân sinh sống ở trung tâm Hà Nội và 6 mẹ đơn thân sinh sống ở khu vực Hải Phòng sẽ được mời tham gia vào nghiên cứu. Mẹ đơn thân tham gia vào nghiên cứu này phải trong độ tuổi từ 18-40, đang nuôi con nhỏ dưới 16 tuổi. Ngoài ra, để nghiên cứu những hỗ trợ cho cộng đồng những người làm mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam, nghiên cứu viên sẽ mời sáu cán bộ Hội liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam tại cấp cơ sở tham gia vào nghiên cứu, ba cán bộ Hội công tác tại trung tâm Hà Nội và ba cán bộ làm việc tại khu vực nông thôn của Hải Phòng. Cán bộ Hội phải có ít nhất 3 năm làm công tác phụ nữ.
Phương pháp nghiên cứu:
Để thu thập dữ liệu, nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn cá nhân đối với cán bộ Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam tại cấp cơ sở và phỏng vấn cá nhân, thảo luận nhóm đối với mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam tham gia nghiên cứu.

Kính mời anh/chị tham gia vào nghiên cứu về trải nghiệm sống của những người làm mẹ đơn thân ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu sự khác nhau trong cuộc sống của phụ nữ làm mẹ đơn thân giữa hai khu vực nông thôn và đô thị ở miền Bắc Việt Nam, đồng thời tìm hiểu sự hỗ trợ mà người làm mẹ đơn thân nhận được từ cộng đồng và chính quyền.
Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện bởi cô Vũ Thị Thơ (Sđt: 0986864964, email: 18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au) để hoàn thành yêu cầu của khoá học Tiến sĩ dưới sự hướng dẫn của Tiến sĩ Kate Huppatz (email: K.Huppatz@westernsydney.edu.au) và Tiến sĩ Helena Onnudottir (email: H.Onnudottir@westernsydney.edu.au) Đại học Tây Sydney, Australia.
Nguồn ngân sách cho nghiên cứu này?
Nghiên cứu viên Vũ Thị Thơ đã nhận được học bổng của chính phủ Việt Nam từ chương trình Học bổng nâng cao chất lượng đội ngũ giảng viên để tiến hành nghiên cứu này trong khoá học tiến sĩ tại trường đại học Tây Sydney, Australia.
Tôi sẽ phải làm gì nếu tham gia vào nghiên cứu này?
Nếu anh/chị tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, anh/chị sẽ được yêu cầu trả lời các câu hỏi phỏng vấn cá nhân dành cho cán bộ của Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam tại cấp cơ sở kéo dài khoảng một tiếng và phỏng vấn bổ sung trong khoảng 15 phút có thể được tiến hành sau cuộc phỏng vấn đầu tiên. Cuộc phỏng vấn bổ sung có thể được tiến hành qua điện thoại. Nội dung phỏng vấn chỉ tập trung vào vấn đề nghiên cứu như: những chính sách hỗ trợ hiện có của nhà nước và địa phương dành cho những hộ gia đình mẹ đơn thân, công tác hỗ trợ gia đình phụ nữ làm mẹ đơn thân tại địa phương, và những khó khăn trong quá trình thực hiện công tác hỗ trợ những gia đình này. Vì vậy, anh/chị sẽ không phải tiếp cận với bất kì rủi ro nào và sẽ được nhận một khoản tiền hỗ trợ là 200.000 đồng khi tham gia vào đề tài này.
Tôi/hoặc cộng đồng sẽ nhận được lợi ích gì khi tham gia vào nghiên cứu này?
Nghiên cứu này có những lợi ích tiềm năng đối với cộng đồng mẹ đơn thân và con cái của họ bởi vì một báo cáo kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi đến Hội liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam sau khi

nghiên cứu kết thúc. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, nghiên cứu viên sẽ đưa ra những tư vấn về chính sách hỗ trợ cộng đồng mẹ đơn thân sau này.
Báo cáo kết quả nghiên cứu cũng sẽ giúp ích anh/chị ít nhiều cho công tác phụ nữ mà anh/chị đang đảm nhận với tư cách là Cán bộ Hội.

Nếu tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, tôi có phải chịu rủi ro gì không? Nếu có, nghiên cứu viên có giải pháp gì để giảm thiểu các rủi ro?

Bất kể thông tin hay chi tiết cá nhân thu thập được trong nghiên cứu này đều sẽ được bảo mật, ngoại trừ trường hợp pháp luật yêu cầu. Không một cá nhân nào bị nhận dạng trong bất cứ xuất bản nào của kết quả nghiên cứu. Chỉ có ba người có quyền truy cập vào những dữ liệu thu thập từ các cuộc phỏng vấn với cán bộ Hội là cô Vũ Thị Thơ, cùng hai người hướng dẫn là Tiến sĩ Kate Huppatz và Tiến sĩ Helena Onnudottir. Tóm tắt của kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ được gửi cho anh/chị nếu anh/chị yêu cầu.

Kế hoạch công bố kết quả nghiên cứu?

Kết quả của nghiên cứu này sẽ được công bố trên các tạp chí nghiên cứu chuyên ngành và được trình bày tại các hội nghị nghiên cứu quốc tế. Trong tất cả các công bố, thông tin cá nhân của người tham gia nghiên cứu sẽ được bảo mật để danh tính những người tham gia không bị nhận diện.

Tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu không?

Việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu này là hoàn toàn tự nguyện: anh/chị không bị bắt buộc phải tham gia và nếu anh/chị quyết định tham gia vào nghiên cứu thì cũng có thể tự do rút lui bất cứ lúc nào anh/chị muốn mà không cần phải đưa ra lý do hay chịu bất kì một hậu quả gì.

Tôi có thể nói với những người khác về nghiên cứu này không?

Bạn có thể cung cấp thông tin về nghiên cứu này cho những người khác bằng cách cung cấp mô tả ngắn gọn về dự án và thông tin liên lạc của nghiên cứu viên. Nếu cá nhân nào phù hợp với vấn đề nghiên cứu muốn tham gia vào nghiên cứu này có thể liên lạc với nghiên cứu viên để thảo luận về sự tham gia của họ vào dự án và để nhận được một bản sao thông tin nghiên cứu.

Nếu tôi muốn có thêm thông tin về nghiên cứu này thì cần liên lạc với ai?

Nếu bạn cần thêm thông tin về nghiên cứu này, xin vui lòng liên lạc với nghiên cứu viên Vũ Thị Thơ theo số điện thoại: +81 986865964 (ở Việt Nam).
Email:18847068@student.westernsydney.edu.au

Tôi cần làm gì nếu muốn khiếu nại hoặc gửi phản ánh về việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu?

Nếu bạn có bất kì phàn nàn hoặc thắc mắc gì về khía cạnh đạo đức của sự tham gia của bạn trong nghiên cứu này, anh/chị có thể liên hệ, hoặc khiếu nại lên Uỷ ban Đạo đức Nghiên cứu con người qua email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au. Mọi thắc mắc, khiếu nại của bạn sẽ được xử lý bảo mật và điều tra kỹ càng, kết quả điều tra sẽ được thông báo tới bạn.
Nếu bạn đồng ý tham gia vào nghiên cứu này, bạn sẽ được yêu cầu ký vào Mẫu đồng ý tham gia nghiên cứu. Bạn sẽ được giữ một bản sao của mẫu thông tin nghiên cứu và Mẫu đồng ý tham gia. Nghiên cứu viên sẽ giữ một bản sao.

Khía cạnh đạo đức của nghiên cứu này được thông qua bởi Uỷ ban Đạo đức Nghiên cứu con người của trường Đại học Tây Sydney. Số hồ sơ: H12738

Appendix B - 2.2.2
MẪU CHẤP THUẬN THAM GIA NGHIÊN CỨU
DÀNH CHO CÁN BỘ HỘI LIÊN HIỆP PHỤ NỮ VIỆT NAM CẤP CƠ SỞ

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

Tôi đồng ý tham gia vào nghiên cứu *Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay*
Tôi xác nhận rằng

- Tôi đã đọc mẫu thông tin dành cho người tham gia (hoặc đã được đọc cho nghe toàn bộ mẫu thông tin này) và đã thảo luận mọi thông tin liên quan cũng như thảo luận về sự tham gia của tôi vào đề tài nghiên cứu với nghiên cứu viên.
- Tôi đã được nghiên cứu viên giải thích mọi thủ tục liên quan đến việc tham gia vào nghiên cứu và thời gian nghiên cứu. Mọi câu hỏi của tôi về đề tài nghiên cứu đã được nghiên cứu viên trả lời thoả đáng.

Tôi đồng ý:
(Đánh dấu vào các ô trống sau)
☐ *Tham gia vào cuộc phỏng vấn cá nhân kéo dài khoảng một tiếng*
☐ *Tham gia vào cuộc phỏng vấn bổ sung trong 15 phút có thể được thực hiện sau phỏng vấn cá nhân. Số điện thoại của tôi……..*
☐ *Các câu trả lời của tôi sẽ được ghi âm lại*
Tôi đồng ý để những thông tin tôi cung cấp cho nghiên cứu viên sẽ được sử dụng cho mục đích của nghiên cứu này và những nghiên cứu liên quan khác.
Tôi hiểu rằng sự tham gia của tôi vào dự án sẽ được bảo mật. Mọi thông tin tôi cung cấp có thể được sử dụng mục đích xuất bản và được lưu trữ để sử dụng trong các nghiên cứu khác liên quan. Nhưng không một thông tin nào về danh tính cá nhân của tôi được tiết lộ.
Tôi hiểu rằng, tôi có thể rút khỏi nghiên cứu ở bất cứ thời điểm nào mà không phải đưa ra lý do và chịu hậu quả gì. Và điều này không ảnh hưởng đến mối quan hệ giữa tôi với nhà nghiên cứu, cũng như quan hệ giữa tôi với cơ quan tôi công tác, dù là thời điểm hiện tại hay trong tương lai.

Ký tên:
Họ và tên:
Ngày:

Appendix C
Interview question

Appendix C – 1. English version

1.1 Single mother participants

1.2 Staff members of the Vietnamese Women Union

Appendix C – 2. Vietnamese version

2.1 Single mother participants

2.2 Staff members of the Vietnamese Women Union

Appendix C – 1.1
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - FOR SINGLE MOTHERS

Project title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

1. Focus groups
Question 1: What conditions lead you to become a single mother?
Question 2: What are your experiences as a single mother?
Question 3: What strategies and resources do you employ?
Alternative questions for question 3:
- What choices do you make to deal with a situation?
- Why do you believe those are good things to do?
Question 4: Do you receive support from your family, friends, and colleagues? If so, what kind of support did you receive?
Question 5: Do you receive any support from the community in general and/or the government?
Question 6: What do you expect from the government?
Question 7: What are your hopes and aspirations for you and your child/ren for the future?'

***2. Open-ended interviews* (reflecting on the photo journal)**
Question 1: Can you start by telling me how you experienced taking photos of your everyday life?
Question 2: Can you tell me the meaning/significance of the picture?
Sub-questions:
- What is happening?
- How does this relate to your life?
Question 3: How would you describe your overall experiences of being involved in this research project?

Appendix C – 1.2
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
FOR STAFF OF THE VIETNAMESE WOMEN'S UNION

Project title: ***Single motherhood in contemporary Vietnam***

Question 1: Can you tell me the main tasks of the Vietnamese Women's Union?
Question 2: Can you outline the policies which the Vietnamese Government has in place in support for single mothers?
Question 3: How do you experience the delivery of this support?
Question 4: What would you identify as the main practical obstacles when it comes to assisting single mothers? Can you identify social or cultural obstacles?
Question 5: Can you provide some ideas and recommendations to improve support for women in general and single mothers in particular?

Appendix C – 2.1
MẪU CÂU HỎI PHỎNG VẤN
Dành cho mẹ đơn thân Việt Nam

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

1. Dành cho mẹ đơn thân tham gia thảo luận nhóm

Câu hỏi 1: Xin hãy chia sẻ câu chuyện của bạn. Vì sao bạn trở thành mẹ đơn thân?
Câu hỏi 2: Bạn trải qua những khó khăn gì kể từ khi trở thành mẹ đơn thân?
Câu hỏi 3: Bạn làm thế nào để giải quyết các khó khăn gặp phải khi làm mẹ đơn thân?
Câu hỏi 4: Bạn có nhận được sự giúp đỡ từ phía gia đình, người thân, và bạn bè khi làm mẹ đơn thân không? Nếu có, đó là những trợ giúp gì?
Câu hỏi 5: Bạn có nhận được sự trợ giúp gì từ chính quyền địa phương nơi bạn sinh sống, hay từ chính phủ không (kể từ khi làm mẹ đơn thân)?
Câu hỏi 6: Bạn mong đợi nhận được những hỗ trợ như thế nào từ phía chính quyền?
Câu hỏi 7: Bạn hi vọng/mong muốn điều gì sẽ đến với bạn và con cái bạn trong tương lai?

2. Dành cho mẹ đơn thân tham gia phỏng vấn cá nhân (dựa trên nhật ký ảnh)

Câu hỏi 1: Bạn có thể mô tả bạn cảm thấy như thế nào khi bạn chụp những bức ảnh đời thường của mình?
Câu hỏi 2: Bạn có thể nói rõ hơn về ý nghĩa của bức ảnh này không?
Câu hỏi phụ:
- Bạn hãy mô tả lại tình huống trong ảnh?
- Bức ảnh nói lên điều gì về cuộc sống của bạn?

Câu hỏi 3: Bạn có thể mô tả trải nghiệm của bạn khi tham gia vào nghiên cứu này?

Appendix C – 2.2
MẪU CÂU HỎI PHỎNG VẤN
Dành cho Cán bộ Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam cấp cơ sở

Tên đề tài nghiên cứu: **Làm mẹ đơn thân trong xã hội Việt Nam hiện nay**

Câu hỏi 1: Xin bạn hãy giới thiệu về những nhiệm vụ cơ bản của Hội liên hiệp phụ nữ tại địa phương?
Câu hỏi 2: Hiện nay, nhà nước có chính sách hỗ trợ cho những gia đình bố/mẹ đơn thân không? Nếu có, cụ thể là gì?
Câu hỏi 3: Những hộ gia đình mẹ đơn thân nuôi con nhỏ ở địa phương anh/chị được chính quyền và cộng đồng hỗ trợ như thế nào?
Câu hỏi 4: Công tác hỗ trợ các gia đình mẹ đơn thân nuôi con nhỏ trên thực thế gặp phải những vướng mắc gì?
Câu hỏi 5: Xuất phát từ kinh nghiệm công tác, anh chị có kiến nghị gì giúp cải thiện công tác hỗ trợ phụ nữ địa phương nói chung và các gia đình mẹ đơn thân nói riêng?

Appendix D
An example of coding categories

What is happening in the data?	*Initial code*	*Selective code/ concept*
Widow mothers: I got sympathy Divorced mothers: I was told that part of it was my fault for not being a good enough wife. Villagers were gossiping about me Never-married mothers: My parents scolded me every day that I had dragged their name through the mud. Some people in my neighbourhood refer to me as đứa không chồng mà chửa (single mother with an illegitimate child) in their conversation instead of using my name. It is very hard to find young never-married mothers living in this area because they all move to a city. They can't live peacefully here with the scornful eyes of the villagers. There are movies about adultery on TV every day. In them often single mums are the ones having affairs with married men for money or just because they are lonely. The negative thought many people have about single mothers.	Stereotyping on single motherhood Single mothers and judgment Third person who ruin a happy family Gold diggers Bad women Single mothers are defined by her marital status Discrimination Scornful eyes of public Gossip Single mothers and media	Stereotyping on single motherhood Single mothers and social stigma Moral judgement Protection for two-parent family
My boss knows that I am a widow. Sometimes, when he tells my circumstances to some of his business partners, some of them began to harass me. A couple of married men at work had even suggested that I become their 'secret romantic partner', offering to give me a lot of money in return. When I try and make a sale for my boss and the male business representative from the other firm makes personal comments to me, I can't just ignore them or tell him to stop, as this could lead to the loss of a sale. There is one man who lives close by who has sexually accosted me on several occasions, asking me if I need someone for the night or saying (half-seriously, half-joking) that he wants to have an affair with me. Some bad guys to wink at me, wolf whistle, or make very rude comments, such as ngon (yummy), or đi hẹn hò đấy (are you up for it)? I always ignore him, but this stresses me so much that I feel sick. I don't know how to stop it. I know what their game is, and it makes me very angry. People will think that I must have done something for it to happen.	Suggestion Secret romantic partner Sale Work place Married men have come on to me Male neighbour Feeling (sick, stressed) They think I have done something for it to happen No win situation	Sexual harassment Harassers: men who knows mothers Work place Neighbourhood
Unwanted questions at public regarding the absence of the father. Taunting of children	Emphasis on the role of father. Dominance of two parent family Judgment on single mother's marital status	Discrimination against children of a single mother Emphasis on the role of father.

	Monitor mother's relationships Single mothers are expected to stay single	Dominance of two parent family
I isolate myself, although deep inside I feel very sad and lonely. Even if I'm invited to social events, such as wedding parties, baby showers, and housewarming parties, I give the host an envelope of 'lucky money' with my good wishes but decline the invitation. It is unavoidable! Girls are born for people to tease. The best way for them [single mothers to react] is just to ignore it I am really mindful about what I will put on when I go out. I wear a wedding ring, pretending that I am married. I have withdrawn both socially and emotionally too because I am worried that villagers might judge me if I socialise. I fear that once the story is told, I might lose my reputation.	Social withdrawal Gender violence Smart casual appearance Hide her marital status The best way is to ignore it	Coping mechanism No win situation
Spend a lot on my children's education, especially their foreign language courses, math, and literacy	Income investment in education Extra classes	Investment on children's education
Support children in their studies. Expect that children will perform well at school and be successful. Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother	Support with schooling Failure mother	Future aspirations Bad mother/good mother
Apart from daily demands such as food and utilities, children's study cost a lot Essentials (electricity, food, and tuition fees for children) Other unexpected expenses. Stop buying clothing every season, stop updating fashion trends. Kids need good food to grow up Wear second-hand clothes that being given or buy some things cheap Save money to buy food, new clothes for children, pay for their education	Children's education Childcare fees Daily expenses Reduced food intake for mothers Cutbacks on their beauty budget Limited social activities Food for children Tuition fee	Financial hardship Financial struggle Poverty Spending on children's food and education Self-sacrifice Good mother
50-60% of income is for children's daily demands and study. Extra classes for children Urban single mothers: extra classes including Math, English, and Literacy Rural single mothers: Extra classes including Maths and Literacy	Tuition fees, Uniforms, Books and Stationaries, and extra classes.	Investments in children's schooling Mothers' anxiety over ensuring children's mobility.
Work hard to meet family's daily expenses Full-time job Casual jobs	Working extra hours for extra income	Being a self-reliant Physical labour
Set up a strict study schedule for children at home. Remind and supervise children doing their homework Assisting children doing homework if need Travelling involved extra class	Physical labour Extra loads	Mothers' investments in children's schooling Physical labour Mothering
Mothers are pleased with their children's academic results.	Worries Ambitiousness Pride	Emotional labour Mothering

Worried that this might be putting too much pressure on children. Hate to make children feel bad but that's what I have to do. I'm really stressed but I try to do what I think is best for their future.	Happy Stress Best for their future	Mothers' anxiety about their children's future
Good jobs for children in the future. Children will become good people and self-reliant. I won't be blamed for being a bad mother. Children will take care of the mother in her old age. I got a fail marriage, but I won't be a fail mother.	Self-reliant Good citizens Investment in children's schooling Welfare for mother in her old age Hope for future Redeem social perception: single mothers can raise good children	Mothering Mothers' investment in their children's education Good mother Class mobility
The packet of benefits for poor households in the ara. Criteria: income, housing condition, and access to basic services. Assessment process: two rounds: (1) nominated and voted at the community and (2) assessed by case officer. Investment loans Free trainings and workshops	State welfare for poor households Single parent with school-age children Criteria Assessment process Target of the government in reducing poverty rate	Staff's perspective Transparent of the assessment process Limited resources (human and financial)
It's very competitive [becoming a subsidy recipient]. I had to defend my case in public if I apply for government support. Regional mothers: The benefits were significant for me. I felt ashamed having to talk about my personal problems in public, giving details on our poor living condition. City mothers: too much shame for a small amount of money I might get. Free trainings and workshops are not my interest. Procedure to apply for government support is complicated Lack of information about government support	Assessment process Competitive Subsidies for poor household is significant to regional mothers Assessment process and shame Little amount of welfare benefit Too much shame	Single mothers' perspective Concern of unconcealed personal information Complicated procedure Lack of information Government support is not significant
Support from family Housing Childcare Finance	My family is my only source of support Conflict in extended family	Mothers' perspective Family as a safety net

Appendix E
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'Although I had a failed marriage, I won't be a failure as a mother': An analysis of Vietnamese single mothers' involvement in their children's schooling

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ABSTRACT

Parents' involvement in their children's schooling is well documented in sociological and educational research. However, the ways in which single mothers engage in their children's schooling is an understudied subject in the Vietnamese context. This article aims to address this gap by documenting single mothers' investments in their children's education. The findings reveal that single mothers in both rural and urban areas invest a large amount of their limited time and income on their children's education despite the heavy mental, physical and emotional toll these activities place on them. The mothers anticipate that these sacrifices will result in better educational outcomes for their children, thereby improving their social and economic status. These sacrifices are also a self-investment as the mothers anticipate that their children's education will facilitate class mobility and provide the mothers with support in old age. The findings illustrate that the parenting style of single mothers in Vietnam is heavily influenced by the dominant ideology of 'good mothering' which is constructed by cultural values, especially Confucian norms, as well as local government rhetoric and globalisation.

1. Introduction

The number of single parent households, both in Western and non-Western countries, has increased in recent times with the majority headed by single mothers (Elliott et al., 2015; Kavas & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2013; Loenzien, 2016). Vietnam is no exception to this phenomenon. Although the two-parent nuclear family is still normative, the number of households headed by single mothers in Vietnam has grown significantly in the last three decades; particularly following the State driven economic renovations referred to as *Doi Moi*, which began in 1986. From 2002 to 2012, the percentage of widowed women rose from 10.4 to 11.2%, from 2013 to 2018 the number of divorce cases throughout Vietnam rose from 18,308 to 28,076 (General Statistic Office of Vietnam, 2019), and it is reported that a significant number of Vietnamese women have had a child outside of marriage (Loenzien, 2016; Nguyen, 2015; Phinney, 2005).

This rise in the number of Vietnamese single mothers has attracted some scholarly attention (see for example Thi (2005), Nguyen (2015), Murru (2016)). However, very little is known about how single mothers in Vietnam invest in their children's education. Similarly, more information is needed on how single mothers may be influenced by ideological discourses and local norms of motherhood. In order to bridge this knowledge gap, the first author conducted a study on the mothering experiences of 12 single mothers, six from Hanoi city centre and six from the rural areas of Hai Phong province. Making use of focus groups as well as interviews that were facilitated by photo diaries, the study explored single mothers' experiences of social stigma and social support and their approaches to parenting. This article focuses on the interview data that pertains to the participants' investments in their children's education and largely frames the findings with the concepts of good or intensive mothering (Arendell, 1999; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Hays, 1998) and concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011). The study offers novel insights into the everyday lives of single mothers in Vietnam, particularly in relation to their engagement in their children's schooling.

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