Elderly People in Vietnam: Some Issues of Concern from a Family and Gender Perspective.

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This paper will focus on some main contents as the follows:

1. An overview of ageing context in Vietnam:

During the last 25 years, in a context of transition towards market-oriented economy with socialist orientations, Vietnam has gone through fundamental social changes. A rapid change of population dynamics and family lives has been seen in this context.

Vietnam’s ageing trend, which is similar to many other Asian countries, has been resulted from some positive improvement of general socio-economic, demographic conditions, such as the decrease of mortality rate, reduction of birth rate and increase in people life expectancy years by years.

Statistics show that in Vietnam, the TFR (number of children per women) has been clearly decreased, from 4.81 children/women (in 1979), to 2.33 children/women (in 1999), and 2.03 children/women (in 2009), due to the State’s active “2 children only” family planning policy and health care measures and other influencing factors. The mortality rate has been decreased. Maternal mortality rate reduced from 233/100.000 live births (in 1999) to 69/100.000 live births in 2009 (VN GSO, 2010).

People life expectancy is increasing, from male - 63.0 years and female - 67.5 years (in 1989), to 70.2 years and 75.6 years respectively (in 2009). It is expected that in 2025, the average life expectancy would be 75.8 years, and the gap between female and male would be about 4-5 years. The women life expectancy has been improved better than that of men (VN GSO 2009).

There is a clear trend toward an ageing population in the society.

Regarding the aged population (60 years and over), some research and statistics of Population and Housing Census (Nguyen Dinh Cu, 2008, VN GSO, 1979-2009, UNFPA, 2011), shows an increase in of the older persons, in term of number and in proportion in the population.
Table 1: Elderly population (Million) in Vietnam, 1979-2020 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population over 60 years</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>53.74</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>64.41</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>76.32</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>85.155</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>99.003</td>
<td>11.24</td>
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According to Data of Population and Housing Survey 1999-2009, the rate of elderly people who are 60 years and over increased from 8% to 9.0% (GSO, 1999-2009).

If looking at the age structure of population, during the period 1979-2009, the rate of older population (60 years and over) increased as much as double, to 2.12 times and was the highest among other population groups (for example, group of 0-14 years had been reduced a half, and working aged population 15-59 years was increased as double as -2.08 times). The impact of age structure leads to the changing dependency ratio. The population statistics (VN GSO, 2010) indicate that, the ageing index (i.e. ratio of population over 60 years on children population (0-14 years), for instance, in 1989 this ratio comprises of 18.2%, and in 2009 - up to 35.7% and is higher than that average ratio of South East Asia region (30%) and as forecasts for the period 2009-2049, that it will be rapidly increased; The old dependency ratio is increased by years (say, for 2009, 7 persons of working age may support for 1 older person, and for 2049, this number will be reduced to only 2 persons supporting for 1 older person, respectively).

There is a phenomenon of “feminization” of Vietnam’s ageing population.

In Vietnam’s population, the number of elderly women is always higher than that of men. Specifically, there is a bigger gap of older ages. For example, the data of 2009 show that, at the age of 60-69, there is a ratio 100 men /131 women, and at the age of 70-79 and over, the ratio is 80 - 149 men /200 women. It is projected that ageing “feminization” will continue to increase.

Table 2: “Feminization” of ageing population in Vietnam (Million), 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Ratio Women/Men</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-70</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Giang Thanh Long, 2012, GSO, 2010)
**Elderly residency and concentration**

If looking at residence location, most of the older persons are now living in the rural areas (72.49% in the rural, and 27.5% in urban, in 2008 (GSO, VLSS, 2008)). As the rate of urbanization will be increased, currently at about 30%, and it reaches to 50% (in 2020), it would lead to stronger shift of people residence, living arrangement and lifestyles, especially for older persons.

The ageing population varies differently by 6 geographic regions as well as by provinces, with the percentage of elderly ranging from <8% to > 10% by location. Most of older persons now reside in 2 big North and South agricultural deltas.

On the other hand, the ageing reality may cause many social and policy concerns, regarding the issues of income, social security, care services, and welfare and older persons’ needs.

The main challenge is: With the rapid pace of ageing more than expected, but given the country’s socio-economic condition and current status as just entered into groups of low middle income countries, i.e. with rather limited resources for satisfying various needs of the elderly people (elderly contribution towards family and society, material and spiritual care, and development or their better adaptation in later life), as well as their family well-being. There is the need of better planning for meeting ageing population, the various needs of older population, especially specific gender, age and or other characteristics groups.

2. **Socio-demographic characteristics of older persons in families:**

**Elderly marriage status:** Some data of Household Living Standard Survey (VN HLSS 1998-2008) show, most of the older persons are married and live with spouses, with the rate of 61.63% (in 1998) and 59.1%( in 2008); the rate of older persons without wife or husband is increasing from 35.8% to 38.65%; and the rate of other status (separation, divorced or non-marriage) was small, from 2.56% to 2.2%, respectively.

**Living arrangement:** An important aspect of elderly population needs to be considered is their living arrangement. Traditionally, elderly people live and desire to live together with their families. A strong tradition of respecting older age is carrying on in families. Due to changes in the family structure and diversified family forms, changes in the relationships between parents and children, and other social factors, like increased migration, children economic independence, shift of lifestyles .., the pattern of elderly living arrangements gradually has been changed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2008</th>
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<tr>
<td>Living with children</td>
<td>74.48%</td>
<td>62.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only elderly spouses</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>21.47%</td>
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The data of VN HLSS 1998-2008 indicate that, there is still a large proportion of elderly living with their children in homes, but it has been decreasing through time. The percentage of elderly, who live on their own as couples and live alone, is increasing.

The data of Vietnam Nationwide Family Survey 2006 (GSO, MOCST, UNICEF, IFGS, 2006) shows that, 36% of households have elderly. In this type of household, the majority live with their children and grandchildren. The proportion of elderly living with spouses (husband or wife) is decreasing at higher ages, for example, from 73.2% at 61-65 years; 61.2% at 66-70 year; 53.3% at 71-75 years; and to 34.8% at 76 years and over... (Le Ngoc Lan, Tran Qui Long, 2009). The type of skip-generations households, where elderly live with grandchildren, is also increasing. Most of these households live in the countryside, as a consequence of migration, and other factors... Most of older persons living alone in the countryside (80%) and most of them (80%) are women (Giang Thanh Long, 2011).

**Status of elderly in the family:**

*Elderly education level:* The literate rate of elderly 60 years and over has been improved by years, but there still exists a gender difference in elderly education level. As it is indicated in the Nationwide Family Survey 2006, the rate of illiterate older women is higher, with 31% women and 7.6% men. The data of VLSS 2008 also indicates that there is 23.4% elderly illiterate. These differences may vary by geographic regions, and those elderly who live in the remote or high mountainous areas are more likely to be illiterate or have a lower education level. By marital status, the married elderly who live alone, or widowed, often have lower education level than who are married or single. These are remaining obstacles to elderly in these areas to access social services.

*Elderly economic status:* In general, elderly has continuously made an economic contribution to family both in their working ages and after the retirement ages. Elderly contribution to family life as well as society has been widely acknowledged.

The elderly, who former worked in formal economic sector, can rely on pensions or savings to support at old age. However, the proportion of elderly who has stable income source, like pensions and savings, or other sources of social assistance is rather low, 35% in urban and 21.9% in rural areas (GSO, 2009). Their income proportion in total household income is small (Giang Thanh Long- Pfau, 2010).

At the age of 60 and over, there is still a proportion of elderly participating in economic activities. Data show that, this elderly working rate was increasing, from 25% (in 1999) to 35.2% (30.3% women and 417% men) in 2009. The rate of men engaged in economic...
activities is higher, but the rate of elderly women taking part in doing domestic chores is as high as 5 times, as compared with men (Nguyen Dinh Cu, 2009). The elderly economic participation is decreasing through ages. Most elderly are still working actively at the age of 60-69 (61.9%), at the age of 70-79 – 34.5%, and at 80 and over - 7.8% (GSO, Population and Housing Census, 2009). Most of the elderly are involved in the agriculture, forestry and aquaculture sector (60%) and self-employed or services for family (29.9%), and only small percentage - 9.3% earn wage or salary. It is noted that, there are 18.6% elderly over 65 years who work as migrants.

By location, the rate of elderly, who are working in urban area, comprises of 25.96%, and in rural area- 49.09% (VN HLLS, 2008). Most of working elderly live in the rural areas (87.1%) (GSO, Population and Housing Census, 2009).

In fact, given the women economic participation rate is lower than men at working ages (15-60), women participation is 71.8% and men - 81%, and women early retirement age (at 55), and other socio-cultural, institutional factors, like women are more concentrated in informal sector, etc. ., so the level of women’s economic income security at home is lower. Most of elderly, especially women, who work in the informal sector, have to rely on personal savings and their adult children’s supports.

The survey data of VN CA 2007 show that, on average, the proportion of elderly income is lower than national average income/person level, i.e., about 59% (UNFPA, 2011). Other sources like social allowance or protection for prevention life risks are limited, so to ensure the optional level of elderly income security is still a difficult task.

Besides participating in economic activities to earn wages for themself, the elderly also make a great contribution to improving the household income and well-being. By doing various chores and tasks, they confirm their role as well as responsibilities in extended family, strengthening emotion bonds with children and grandchildren... As a tradition, male elderly often make economic contribution or support adult children in household economic activities, or children education and occupation training, meanwhile female elderly often spend time and undertake more care responsibilities and tasks in family. There are still many factors related to housework and care in family, including available gender, social norms and values. For example, women are perceived as “ministers of interior” and influence of “traditional virtues “focused on women taking care of family, and more responsibilities for household care (children, old, sick) and well-being... etc. .

Elderly poverty: The data of Nationwide Family Survey 2006 (GSO, MOCST, UNCEF, IFGS, 2006), show that only 51.1% elderly self-reported that their economic life is ensured, 44.7%-partly ensured and 4.1%-not ensured. There are still 35.4% poor households, where the elderly live. Statistics (VNHLLS, 2008) also confirm that the poverty is prevalent among elderly population. Elderly poverty is increasing at older ages or in accordance with upgrading poverty line measure. By ages, as the aged getting older, the higher probability of
elderly falling into poverty and poor elderly women rate is higher than men’s. There is a social concern for this group of households, regarding “their burden” in taking care and nurturing elderly, while the amount of state financial support and assistance is still limited.

Elderly health status: 95% elderly has health problems. On the average, every elderly suffers 2.69 diseases/person (MOLISA, 2006). Data of Nationwide Family Survey 2006 indicates 51.3% elderly self-reported as has a weak health status. Elderly men assessed their health as good is higher than that of women, 10% and 5%, respectively. Most elderly living in rural areas have a poorer health status than their counterparts in urban areas.

Family role in taking care and support of elderly: As tradition, family plays a very important role as stable shelter and warm atmosphere for elderly. Few studies show that, family still plays main responsibilities for elderly support and care. The reciprocal material and spiritual relationships between adult children and their elderly parents are maintained. Adult children (18-60 years of age), whether living together or apart, still play a role as the main source of supporting their parents in old age. Other kind or forms of support (from relatives or community and other…) is smaller.

Some data of the Nationwide Family Survey 2006 indicate that there is a 32% of adult children reported that they provide economic support to their elderly parents. The amount and times of support is increased accordingly to adult children ages. A household sample survey with 1200 households (IFGS, 2011) also indicates that, the rate of adult children do provide various forms of material and spiritual assistance for their elderly parents and parent- in- laws is rather high, 52.6% and 41.3%, respectively.

Besides, there is also social concern over emerging and new issues, like rapid changing lifestyles, migration, generations gaps or conflicts, poverty prevalence… may affect the family relationships and elderly well-being.

In short, the main issues of concern such as elderly income security, health care… and other social security conditions, and given situation that many elderly tend to be more vulnerable to various socio-economic changes and shocks, such a changing pattern of elderly living arrangement, trend migration, elderly poverty and other… needs to be better and sensitively taken into relevant policy considerations.

The elderly poor, especially women as specific and more vulnerable population group, with main socio-economic characteristics like a lower education level, less income stability, and higher rate of widowhood…, still face various constraints in their old age life and wellbeing.


Laws and Decrees, Guidelines:
The elderly role and status as precious assets and social mass forces in Vietnam solidary, multi-ethnic society and families, has been recognized and acknowledged by Vietnam Communist Party and Socialist State.


The first Constitution 1946 states: “Older citizen, disables who cannot work, shall be supported” (Article 14). The Constitution 1959 stipulates that: “To support the elderly, the sick, and disables, extend social security, health insurance and social protection” (Article 32).

The Constitution 1992 stipulates on the state and society role: “The elderly is one of population groups that State and Society have responsibilities to support”, “Elderly, disable, orphan children without place to live, shall be supported by the State and society” (Article 87); and the family members reciprocal responsibilities towards older persons: “Parents shall take responsibilities of raising children. Children take responsibilities of respecting, nurturing, and taking care parents and grandparents” (Article 64).

The Party Secretariat issued various decrees and guidelines on “Taking care, nurturing and bringing about the elderly best role” for the cause of country’s renovation and modernization. In particular, it is underlined, that State should spend budget to solve social issues, among which, there is a taking care and protection of elderly. The State has given high priorities to guarantee support to specific elderly target groups like high-honored, policy-favored older persons, heroic mothers, anti-war older veterans, elderly living alone, elderly without relatives, disabled, or poor...

The State continues to improve a supportive and active environment for ageing, through legal, institutional and other target measures.

New law and relevant regulations, guidelines as well as policies have been released regarding older persons care and protection, in accordance with changing socio-economic situation and international integration.

The Ordinance of Older Persons (in 2000), later, it has been upgrading to the Law on Elderly (2010 in effect), with 6 Chapters and 31 Articles. Law stipulates the rights, responsibilities of individuals, organizations, agencies in taking care, nurturing and brings about elderly role and status in family and society. “The elderly protection is served, taken care by family, state and society” (Article 2); “Create conditions for elderly to contribute their minds, talents, best qualities to various activities, including transfer of skills, experiences, socio-cultural knowledge, science and technology, and traditional trades to younger generation” (Article 23); create favorable conditions and encourage elderly taking part in laws implementation and oversights on various policies...
Especially, there is an article specifying spiritual care for elderly and tradition of respecting old age, to hold a celebration of longevity for elderly 70 years and over. At the age of 90 and over, the Provincial/City PPC Chairman, and at the age of 100 years and over- the President of SRV will congratulate and deliver gifts on the elderly’s birthday occasion. The State budget and other sources will be mobilized for these activities (Article 21).

Elderly and ageing issues have been mainstreamed into relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies and Development strategies... in order to ensure material, spiritual, social life and health care for elderly and bring about their best role in family, community and society.

The Marriage and Family Law (in 2000) also has several articles stipulating the adult children responsibilities towards parents: “the children have responsibilities to respect, nurture and care for elderly parents” (Article 2). In specific cases, grandchildren should take care of grandparents. The adult children, who do not live together with parents, have responsibilities to provide material resources to parents, who could not be able to work, have no assets to lean on”. Children having acts of abuse, neglect and insult parents are forbidden (Article 36).

The Civil Law has Articles referring on penalties measures for public violent acts towards elderly, children abuse acts towards parents in families.

The Law on Prevention and Suppression of Domestic Violence (2008) also specifies on family members rights and responsibilities, especially penalties on abuse act of elderly.

The Law on People Health Protection (2005) stipulates: to give priorities to older persons to primary health care prevention and treatment, consultation and information for elderly health risks preventions etc... (Article 41).

The Law on Labor (2003, revised 2013) has regulation over elderly labor issues (Article 124).

The Law on Legal Assistance (2006) specifies some target elderly groups, who should be freely assisted in legal matters.

The Law on Tax (2010), stipulates a tax reduce or exemption for cases of taking care of old aged dependent members in family, exemption on fee or social contribution etc.

**Integrate elderly issues in policies and strategies:**

The Government realizes that, ageing issues are complex social phenomenon and important issues that need to work out a comprehensive policy system and measures to deal with. The main concerned issues of elderly poverty, social security and social protection, health care... are being incorporated into various policy and development strategies, specifying the work targets and concrete measures and highlight the responsibilities of state.

In Vietnam, there currently exist different types of policies, programs towards older persons protection( UNFPA, 2011), including social security (social insurance, health care insurance,
social protection); Policies for elderly services and facilities, for example, regarding health care, cultural, sport, tourism activities, access to public transportation; promotion of public communication, education and awareness raising on elderly image and role... , and policies for strengthening ageing institutions (both public and private, community-based or religious based organization... ).

The National Strategy of Social Security by 2011-2020 (MOLISA, 2011) underlines the needs of building up comprehensive social security mechanisms, health care and social assistance for elderly to better address their economic, social risks and health, etc..

The Strategy of Population and Reproductive Health 2011-2020 (MOH, 2011), for example, focuses on some priorities targets, including strengthening elderly primary health care system, with the target of increasing the number of services facilities to 50% by 2020; increased elderly health care access to 50% by 2020.

The Strategy for Family Development by 2020, vision 2030 (MOCST, 2011), focuses on strengthening interfamily relationships, household economy development, family data base, family research and assessment etc., in which, there is attention to elderly matters in family.

Many ministries and states agencies like MOCTT, MOET, Transportation and Construction, Communication... and local authorities, have specific programs, and NGOs develop initiatives for addressing the ageing issues etc..

**Ageing institutions:**

The Vietnam Elderly Association (VAE) - an organization representative for elderly interests and benefits, is established in 1994. The Government issued Decree 117/CP 1996 on support VAE regarding budget, and favorable conditions for operation. The VAE has a lot of memberships (about 9 million persons).

Vietnam Committee for Elderly (VNCA), established in 2004, by Prime Minister Decision by 141/2004/QD-TTG, to better fulfill an international commitment, coordinate and support elderly as well as involve, advocate other mass organizations and elderly to take part in implementation Madrid Plan of Action for ageing (MIFA, 2002).

The Committee for Social Affairs (National Assembly) undertakes oversight on the implementation of the Law of Elderly (2010).

**Main achievements:** as the country’s socio-economic conditions improvement and other favorable environment like increased mobilization of resources, opportunities of learning lessons and development practices from other countries..., there is an improvement of material and spiritual situation of elderly in Vietnam in terms of elderly benefits, like income security, health care, and family, social/community participation. More resources and
facilities have been mobilized and dedicated for elderly care and protection. Role and images of older persons have been acknowledged and promoted in family and society.

**Problems and challenges:** The Vietnam country has just entered in a low level of middle-income groups and a lot of people are working in informal, self-employed, and agricultural sectors. Rather limitation or insufficiency of financial budgets and resources mobilized for social and family policies.

There remain constraints in developing broad social security system or upgrading health care facilities, specifically for elderly, lack of enough trained HR or caregivers for elderly disabled, lonely older persons.... both at public, private institutions (Social Protection Centers, Nursing Homes) or even at homes.

Some Laws and policies did not meet or were slowly adjusted to elderly livelihoods, health patterns, and various care needs and rapid changing population structure and ageing. For example, a different retirement age is still specified for women and men (The Law of Labor 2003, 2013 revised), or there is a gap in the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality (2006), and especially, a lack of gender and age perspective and sensitivity of policies, strategies or develop programs.

The role of public ageing institutions and other related mass, community- based organizations is still limited, in regarding the budget, capacity or policy mobilization etc.

4. **Conclusion**

Vietnam now is entering the stage of demographic transition. A rapid country socio-economic development, urbanization and industrialization, provide both opportunities and challenges. As a consequence of demographic transition, and structural change of population, the proportion of older persons will be increased rapidly.

As it is noted, there are challenges remaining, especially, from a family and gender perspective. The aging population has multiple dimensions, which include biological, psychological, sociological, economical and other approaches ... Each population group, has their own problems and needs according to their age, gender, or family characteristics and circumstances.

There is a need of improving understanding, better knowledge and data of the nature, trends and implications of various ageing issues related to household structure changes, family strategies, health care patterns, and socio-economic, cultural factors influencing..., that enable to foresee and develop appropriate policies and measures to ensure socio-economic conditions, livelihoods development as well be better adaptive to ageing period.

Especially, there is a strong need of learning experiences, and workable polices and measures, to better address the needs of gender, specific - aged population social groups.
The is a need of enlarging a collaboration and cooperation between Asian countries and regions regarding ageing matters.,,

References:


