

## **Elderly people in Vietnam at present time**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

*By using the statistics from the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census as well as Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey in recent years, we could conclude that the proportion of old people is rising sharply in almost countries all over the world. Vietnam is not an exception. The number of elderly people increased yearly. By the year 2008, with the elderly population of 11%, Vietnam population starts ageing. The ageing population is focused mainly in the age groups 60 - 64 and 65 - 69. There are more elderly females than males. Most aged Vietnamese people are married or widows/widowers. They are involved in various forms of economic activities to earn income. A majority of elderly Vietnamese is literate, but only a minority of them professes a religion. Vietnamese elderly people mainly live in rural areas.*

**Keywords:** *Ageing, Vietnam, family*

### **1. Introduction**

The elderly populations in many countries all over the world are growing and will continue to grow in the coming years, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the population. According to the medium-variant population projections of the United Nations (2004), there are about 610 million people aged 60 and over (or 10 percent of the world population in 2000). The number of elderly people reached 672 million in 2005 and this number is expected to grow to around 1.9 billion people (or 22 percent of the world population) in 2050. Vietnam is experiencing the changes just described or not? The article tries to answer this question by clarifying the situation of elderly people in Vietnam at present time. Specifically, this article briefly introduces the Vietnam's elderly people by number and percentage. After that, we will analyze the issue of Vietnamese elderly people based on the criteria as follows: age and gender distribution, marital status, the involvement of ageing Vietnamese in economic activities, education qualifications, health of elderly people, religious adherence, and residence of ageing Vietnamese.

### **2. Methodology**

This article relies on the result of a lot of research: the statistics from the statistical agencies, especially from General Statistical Office, General Office for Population Family Planning. It provides an overview statistics about Vietnamese elderly people at present time. The main statistics to write this article is from: i) the result of the survey on the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census. It is the most update and official information about aspects of families including Vietnamese elderly people; ii) the result of the survey on the household living standard which has been conducted regularly by the General Statistical Office every two years from 2002 to 2008. The focus of the survey has been household size, birth rate, death rate, household income and expenditures, etc. Of course, it covers a lot of information related to

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elderly people in Vietnam; iii) the result of other surveys about Vietnam's older population. I collect, interpret and evaluate these results and used here as the main method to write this article.

### 3. Results

In Vietnam, people aged from 60 years or above are defined as older persons or elderly people (Clause 1, Chapter 1, The Ordinance on Elderly). In 1979, there were 3.71 million men and women age 60 and above, representing 6.9% of the total population, and in 1989 the total of elderly people estimated 4.64 million accounted for 7.2% of the total population. In 1999, the percentage of older people reached 8.2% or 6.19 million. According to the statistics from the 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey, the total of elderly people estimated 9.47 million accounted for 11% of the total population. By the year 2020, Vietnam is expected to have more than 12 million older persons. The importance of the issue becomes clearer when the projected increases in the numbers of elderly people are (i) compared with those in the past and (ii) seen within the context of the growth in the total population.

**Table 1: Vietnam's elderly people by number and percentage**

Year	Population (Million)	Elderly people (Million)	Elderly people in total population (%)
1979	53.74	3.71	6.9
1989	64.41	4.64	7.2
1999	76.32	6.19	8.2
2002	79.73	7.37	9.24
2004	82.03	8.12	9.9
2006	84.14	8.75	10.4
2008	86.21	9.47	11

Source: - Authors' calculates using National Committee for Population, Families and Children, Country Report, December 2002

- Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey and Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam 2008

The number of elderly people increased by 5.76 million during 1979 - 2008. By the year 2008, with the elderly population of 11%, Vietnam population starts ageing<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Age and gender distribution of older persons*

Table 2 shows the distribution of the Vietnamese elderly population according to the age groups 60 - 64, 65 - 69, 70 - 74, and over 80 following two censuses conducted in Vietnam in 1999 and 2009. The table also shows the ratio of ageing males in comparison with that of ageing females.

**Table 2: Distribution of Vietnamese elderly population by age and gender in 1999 and 2009 (%)**

	1999			2009		
	Total	Gender		Total	Gender	
		Male	Female		Male	Female
60 - 64	28.5	30.1	27.3	26.0	28.6	24.2
65 - 69	26.8	28.8	25.5	20.9	21.7	20.3
70 - 74	19.7	19.8	19.7	18.9	18.9	19.0
75 - 79	13.4	12.2	14.2	16.1	15.9	16.2
80+	11.6	9.1	13.3	18.1	14.9	20.3
Total:	100	100	100	100	100	100
Rate of gender by age (male per 100 female):						
60 - 64	77	--	--	80	--	--
65 - 69	79	--	--	72	--	--
70 - 74	70	--	--	79	--	--
75 - 79	60	--	--	67	--	--
80+	48	--	--	50	--	--

<sup>1</sup> According to United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), population starts ageing when the percentage of older-age persons to the total population represents more than 10%.

Total	70	--	--	68	--	--
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*Source:* Author's calculation based on the 1999, 2009 Vietnam population and housing census: Total result  
 Comparing the rates of the elderly population in 1999 and 2009, it is possible to see the rate of ageing population in the age groups 60 - 64 and 65 - 69 in 2009 showed a decrease when compared to the figures for 1999 (it was 28.5%, 26.8% in 2009 and 26%, 20.9% in 1999 respectively). However, the ratio of the ageing population at older ages (from 70 years of age onwards) in 2009 is higher than in 1999 (see Table 2). It is possible to conclude that Vietnamese ageing people, especially females, are living longer and this is one of the factors that makes the average life span of Vietnamese people tends to be greater over recent years.

Regarding gender, the survey results show in the age groups 60 - 64 and 65 - 69 the ratio of ageing males is higher than that of the ageing females. However, in the age groups 70 - 74 and 75 - 79, and over 80, the ratio of ageing females is higher than that of the ageing males. The higher the ages, the more different they are. The biggest difference is seen at the age of over 80 with the ratio in 2009 being 20.3% for females and 14.9% for males. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the older the age the more females are represented. The reason for this situation is that the average life expectancy of females is often longer than that of males and for the case of Vietnam it is possible that the prolonged war may have taken the lives of many men, and as a result the number of men still left alive is low.

Following the ratio of gender by age (ratio of males to 100 females), the survey results show in 1999 that the highest ratio of males to 100 females is at the age of 65 - 69 (77 males to 100 females) and the lowest ratio is at the age of over 80 (48 males to 100 females). In 2009, the highest ratio of ageing males to 100 females is at the age of 60 - 64, and the lowest ratio is also at the age of over 80, with 50 males to 100 females.

As shown in table 2, in 1999, there are 70 elderly males out of every 100 elderly females but in 2009 this ratio reduces by 68 males on 100 females. This means ageing females account for a higher ratio compared to males, and the ratio of widows would account for a higher rate compared to widowers.

*In short*, the rate of Vietnamese elderly population by age varies in terms of size. The ageing population is focused mainly in the age groups 60 - 64 and 65 - 69. There are more ageing females than males. The rate of ageing males at lower ages is higher. But the rate of ageing females at higher ages is higher than that of the ageing males.

***Marital status of the Vietnamese ageing population***

Presently as in the past, Vietnamese people see marriage as a permanent institution. Therefore, there are very few Vietnamese people who have never married. Similarly, divorce and/or separation is not common in Vietnam. Accordingly that is why most aged Vietnamese people are married or widows or widowers (see table 3). Most of the ageing Vietnamese people at the age of 60 - 64 is married. In 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 it is respectively: 74.9%, 60.3%, 76.4% and 77.9%. The rate of the ageing widows and widowers older than 65 years is: 42.5% in 2002, 43.5% in 2006 and 43.6% in 2008

**Table 3: Marital status of ageing Vietnamese by age, 2002 - 2008 (%)**

Marital status	2002		2004		2006		2008	
	60 - 64	+65	60 - 64	+65	60 - 64	+65	60 - 64	+65
Never married	1.5	0.8	1.0	-	2.0	0.8	2.3	0.9
Married	74.9	56	60.3	-	74.6	54.9	77.9	54.6
Widowers/widows	22.2	42.5	37.6	-	19.6	43.5	18.2	43.6
Divorce	0.7	0.3	0.5	-	1.2	0.4	1.0	0.5
Separation	0.8	0.4	0.6	-	0.7	0.4	0.7	0.4
Total	100	100	100	-	100	100	100	100

*Source:* 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey

***The involvement of ageing Vietnamese in economic activities***

In accordance with Vietnamese law, women retire at the age of 55 years, and men at 60 years. This means that when they enter their old ages, ageing Vietnamese do not need to be involved in economic activities. However, in reality, ageing Vietnamese are involved in various forms of economic activities to earn income for themselves and/or their families. The survey shows approximately 0.3%, 0.4% and 0.5% of aged people were involved in economic activities in 2002, 2006, and 2008 (2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey). Ageing Vietnamese rely mainly on agricultural related activities. Nearly 71 % were involved in agricultural production in 2008. This is understandable since, as analyzed in later parts of the study, we can see that most ageing Vietnamese live in rural areas. As they live in the countryside they easily get involved in agricultural production for income. Very few ageing people take part in forest and construction activities, which require a lot of physical health.

**Table 4: Rate of ageing Vietnamese working in the past 12 months by production sector, 2002 - 2008 (%)**

Year	Agriculture	Forest	Aquaculture	Industry	Construction	Trade	Services	Total
2002	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2004	74.4	0.4	2.3	5.5	0.5	9.3	7.6	100.0
2006	72.0	0.3	2.4	5.5	0.7	10.2	9.0	100.0
2008	71.8	0.6	2.7	5.6	0.7	9.0	9.6	100.0

Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey

***Education qualifications of ageing Vietnamese people***

The census in 2009 shows a majority of ageing Vietnamese is literate (81.6%). This reflects the endless efforts that Vietnam has made in education. However, there is still a certain percentage of ageing people who are illiterate. Specifically, 18% out of the total ageing Vietnamese population is illiterate. There is a big difference between the illiteracy rates for males and females (7% male and 25.4% female). The reason could be that the male is more respected than female in traditional society and that prevented females from going to school resulting in more females being denied access to any educational services and therefore remaining illiterate. As we know in Vietnamese traditional society, especially in feudal time, women and children used to have low positions in their families as well as in society. Women spent most of their time at home. They were hardly involved in any community activities, including going to school. Only men were encouraged to attend school. Vietnamese people were used to traditional images of a wife spinning and weaving silk while her husband is reading books by a light - preparing for his exams. The wife was hard working and sacrificed herself for her husband to pass the exams and bring about glory for his own and extended family. The wife herself didn't take any classes. She did all the housework and took care of her husband and children. This may be the cause of the high percentage of ageing Vietnamese females who are illiterate in comparison to the percentage of males who are illiterate.

**Table 5: Literacy rate of ageing Vietnamese by age, gender, and residence, 2009 (%)**

	Total	Gender		Residence	
		Male	Female	Urban	Rural
Literate					
60 - 69	89.8	95.3	85.5	95.0	87.5
70 - 74	83.3	93.7	76.3	89.5	81.0
75 - 79	77.8	91.4	68.7	84.9	75.3
+80	62.3	84.3	51.3	72.7	59.0
Total:	81.6	92.7	74.1	89.0	78.8

Illiterate					
60 - 69	10.0	4.6	14.2	4.8	12.2
70 - 74	16.4	6.1	23.3	10.2	18.6
75 - 79	21.7	8.4	30.7	14.7	24.1
+80	37.0	15.2	47.9	26.8	40.2
Total:	18.0	7.0	25.4	10.8	20.8
Unknown					
60 - 69	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2
70 - 74	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.4
75 - 79	0.5	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.5
+80	0.7	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.7
Total:	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.4

*Source: Calculated by author following the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census: Total result*

At different ages, the rate of illiterate ageing people varies. At the higher ages, the rate of illiterate ageing people tends to increase. The rate of illiterate ageing people in the age groups 60 - 69, 70 - 74, 75 - 79 and over 80 is: 10%, 16.4%, 21.7% and 37%. This could be because of social and historical features. When society is more developed and advanced, all people, including the aged, have more opportunities to access educational services and this may have decreased the rate of illiterate aged Vietnamese.

The rate of literate elderly people living in urban areas is higher than those living in rural areas. Conversely, the rate of illiterate ageing people in rural areas is higher than in urban areas. Table 5 shows 89% of ageing people living in urban areas who are literate while only 78.8% of their counterparts in rural areas are literate. The rate of illiterate ageing people in urban settings is 10.8% - much lower than in rural areas - 20.8%. Clearly, the living standards in urban areas are higher, so educational services are much more available. These factors lead to an understandable situation where the rate of literacy for elderly people living in urban situations is higher than that of elderly people living in rural areas.

#### ***Health of elderly people***

According to a survey on the status of Vietnamese elderly, conducted in 8 provinces in 2007, about 95% of elderly people suffer from a disease. On average an elderly person suffers from 2.6 diseases, which are mainly chronic but without transmission, such as bones related diseases (about 40%), cardiovascular, blood pressure (about 45%). There is high percentage of elderly people with poor health (23%). The percentage of healthy elderly people accounts for about 5%.

With such a health status, about 23% elderly people have difficulties in their daily life, of which more than 90% need support from other people. The survey's results also show that commune health centers are the places where elderly people always come for their medical check-ups and treatments (about 45%). Next are hospitals (about 19%) and the rest are self-treatment, private health clinics and others.

The survey found no big discrepancy in the percentage of elderly people having regular check-ups (20.7%) or visiting doctors when falling ill (88.7%) in both rural and urban areas. Elderly people in eight provinces were provided with medical advice or health care instruction, with 60% in urban areas, and 50% in rural areas (Toan & Chau, 2007).

#### ***Religious adherence***

In many societies, older persons play an important role as religious leaders and old age is associated with increasing preoccupation with religious matters (1986). In Vietnam, however, as table 6 indicates, only a minority of the older people professes a religion, likely reflecting a de-emphasis of religion as part of the long-standing socialist orientation of the government. Overall, just modestly more than a fourth (28%) of

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the older population profess a religion according to the 1999 census. There is only a very slight tendency for the proportion doing so to increase with age within the elderly age span. More pronounced is a gender difference with older women more likely than men to profess a religion. In addition, religious adherence is higher among urban than rural elderly.

**Table 6: Religious adherence by age, sex and residence, Vietnam 1999**

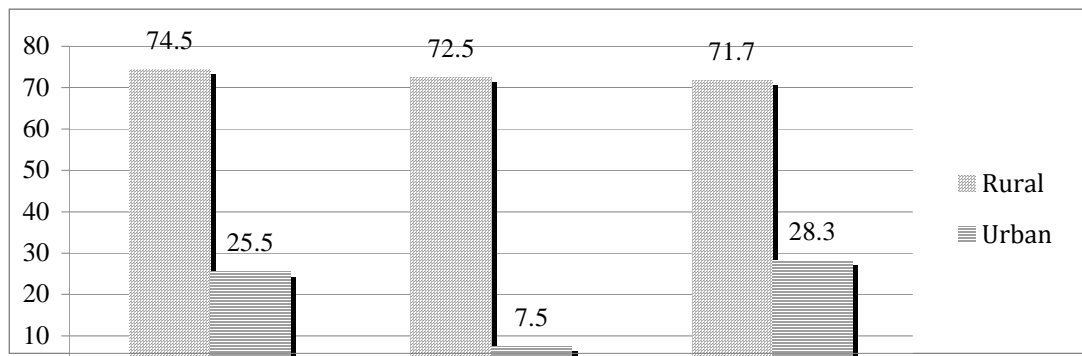
	Total	Sex		Residence	
		Male	Female	Urban	Rural
% who profess a religion					
60 - 64	26.9	21.7	31.0	33.9	24.9
65 - 69	27.8	23.1	31.5	34.2	26.0
70 - 74	29.3	23.8	33.3	34.3	28.0
75 - 79	28.6	23.2	31.9	32.8	27.5
+80	30.1	27.5	31.4	34.6	28.9
Total	28.2	23.2	31.7	34.0	26.6
% distribution by religion among those who profess a religion					
Buddhist	63.8	56.5	67.6	68.6	62.1
Catholic	22.4	26.1	20.5	24.0	21.9
Cao Dai	6.0	7.0	5.4	3.9	6.7
Hoa Hao	6.2	8.4	5.1	2.7	7.5
Other	1.6	1.9	1.4	0.8	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: John Knodel & Truong Si Anh (2002): *Vietnam's older population: The view from the Census*

Clearly regional differences, not show in the table, exist with half (50%) of the older residents of the southeast region and over two fifth (43%) of those in the Mekong River Delta indicating a religious affiliation. Among elders who profess a religion, almost two thirds (64%) are Buddhists and over one fifth (22%) are Catholics. The remainders are accounted for mainly by two indigenous regional religious sects, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. Adherents of the former are largely concentrated in the Southeast and Mekong River Delta regions and the latter are almost exclusively restricted to the Mekong River Delta.

### *Residence of elderly Vietnamese people*

As surveyed, most elderly Vietnamese people live in rural areas - accounting for 74.5%, 72.5% and 71.7% in 2004, 2006, 2008 respectively. It is possible to see that during the four years surveyed there is an annual reduction in the number of ageing people living in rural areas. This is due to the strong urbanization trend in Vietnam.



Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey

**Fig. 1: The rate of ageing Vietnamese according to urban and rural residence, 2004 - 2008 (%)**

Regarding geographical distribution, in 2008, the greatest number of ageing people lived in Red River Delta (13.0%), followed by the North Central area (12.7%), and the lowest number lived in the Central Highlands (6.9%) and Northwest (6.6%). So, the number of aged people who live in Red River Delta is twice more than aged people in the Northwest. What causes such an uneven distribution of ageing people? In my opinion, it is because the living conditions in the Central Highlands and Northwest are poorer, birthrates however are higher and the average life span of the ageing people in those two areas is the lowest nationwide.

**Table 7: Rate of ageing Vietnamese by geographic areas 2004 - 2008 (%)**

Regions	2004	2006	2008
Red River Delta	11.9	12.5	13.0
Northeast	9.0	9.3	9.8
Northwest	7.2	7.2	6.6
North Central	10.6	10.9	12.7
South Central Coast	11.1	11.7	11.9
Central Highlands	6.0	6.3	6.9
Southeast	9.3	9.7	9.7
Mekong River Delta	9.5	10.1	10.9

*Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey*

As shown in Table 7, we can conclude that a majority of ageing Vietnamese live in favorable economic and social areas where there is good health care and good social services areas such as the Red River Delta. Vice versa, there are much fewer ageing people living in geographically, economically, and socially disadvantaged areas. This causes uneven distribution of the ageing population across areas nationwide.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although Vietnam's population is quite young, the proportion of old people is rising sharply. The ageing population is focused mainly in the age groups 60 - 64 and 65 - 69. There are more ageing females than males. The rate of ageing males at lower ages is higher. But the rate of ageing females at higher ages is higher than that of the ageing males. Talking about the marital status of the Vietnamese ageing population, it is easily to see that most aged Vietnamese people are married or widows or widowers. Elderly Vietnamese people are involved in various forms of economic activities to earn income for themselves and/or their families, especially related to agricultural activities. The statistics shows a majority of ageing Vietnamese is literate. However, there is still a certain percentage of ageing people who are illiterate. At different ages, the rate of illiterate ageing people varies. At the higher ages, the rate of illiterate ageing people tends to increase. The rate of literate ageing people living in urban areas is higher than those living in rural areas. In Vietnam, only a minority of the older people professes a religion. More pronounced is a gender difference with older women more likely than men to profess a religion. In addition, religious adherence is higher among urban than rural elderly. Elderly people mainly live in rural areas. Differences in geographical locations result in dissimilarities in elderly ratio among different regions. Generally, in urban areas and deltas, the ratio of old people is higher than that in mountainous, remote and far-flung areas. The highest rate of old people is in Red River Delta, the lowest in Central Highlands.

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