

## The Rate of Women Having a Third Child and Preference of Son in Present Day Vietnamese Families

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**Abstract** Vietnam has been implementing the policy of fertility decline through the population program, fertility health care including family planning. Small household size is now encouraged. Together with services of fertility health care, family planning provided, a lot of popularizing, propagandizing activities for changing behaviors have been organized in order to equip couples with knowledge and encourage them to carry out the target of family planning. We have of course obtained some certain success<sup>1</sup>, however there still exists the problem of couples giving birth to a third child, especially in some geographic regions, this rate tends to increase. One of the most important reasons for giving birth to a third child arise from the need of Vietnamese families to have at least one son. Because the son is responsible for caring for old parents, ancestor worship, continuity the lineage, etc.

**Keywords:** women; Vietnamese; son; families

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### 1. Introduction

The paper will answer the following questions: i) how many percent do Vietnamese women have a third child in families?, ii) Is there any differences between geographic regions in proportion of women having a third child in Vietnam?, iii) what is the reason for giving a third child in Vietnamese families recent year?, and iv) why do almost Vietnamese people want to have at least one son?

### 2. Literature Review

In recent years, there have been many researches into birth rate in Vietnam such as Cu (1996) and Van (2000). These researches focus mainly on the current situation, comparing and contrasting birth rate in urban areas with rural areas, and also among areas nationwide. These studies have identified the causes and anticipated the birth trend in Vietnam in the coming years. However, the situation of giving birth to the third child in Vietnamese families has been hardly mentioned in these studies. It is therefore necessary to conduct researches on the rate of the families giving birth to the third child because this figure is likely to increase in a number of areas in the country. This article will hopefully discover the causes of the above stated situation and also give the reasons to prove the need of having a son in Vietnamese families, which hasn't been mentioned in the previous studies.

### 3. Methods

This paper follows a qualitative research methodology. It depends 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 as well as other studies. I also use literary works, both written (novels, short stories and so on) and oral ones (tales, folk songs, proverbs, and sayings, etc.) as a source to write this article because they are an indispensable part of the Vietnamese culture.

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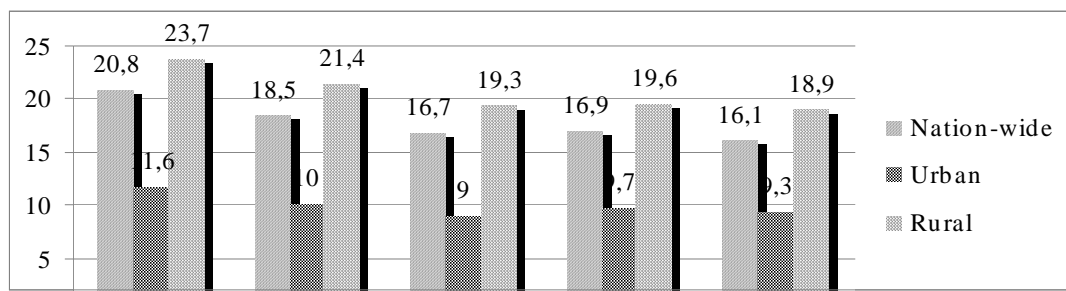
<sup>1</sup> In 1999, Vietnam was awarded by the United Nations for the fast decline of population development rate.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Proportion of Vietnamese Women Having a third Child in Recent Years

The rate of women having a third child or more shows the number of women having a third child or more for 12 months before research over 100 women during that period.

Fig. 1. The rate of women from 15 - 49 having a third child by area (Urban and rural), 2005 - 2009 (%)



Source: The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census: Total result.

Fig. 1 represents the rate of women from 15 - 49 giving birth to a third child or more in Vietnam from 2005 to 2009 categorized into rural and urban area. The data shows that during this period of time, this rate all over the country dropped from 20.8% in 2005 to 16.1% in 2009. The rate of women stopping giving birth after the first and second fertility in both urban and rural areas rose, especially in urban areas, helping decreasing the fertility rate in Vietnam. This helps Vietnam stabilize population, decrease dependence on children and creates favorable opportunities for Vietnam to carry out targets of developing a stable and quality economy. A difference in the rate of women giving birth to a third child or more can be seen in different geographic regions. The regions with a low rate of women giving birth to a third child were the Southeast (10.9%), the Mekong River Delta (12.4%) and the Red River Delta (13.2%). The highest rates belonged to the Central Highlands (27.4%), North Central Coast (21.1%) (see table 1). As a general rule, in well-developed regions, this rate is low, and vice versa, in remote areas with hard life this rate is high.

Table 1. The percentage of women giving birth to a third child or more

Regions	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Red River Delta	17	14.7	13.7	13.8	13.2
Northeast	19	17.1	15.0	14.7	18.7
Northwest	23	20.7	17.7	18.0	
North Central	29	28.3	23.5	26.5	21.1
South Central Coast	23	22.4	21.8	19.4	
Central Highlands	39	32.2	30.0	26.9	27.4
Southeast	17	14.3	13.8	14.4	10.9
Mekong River Delta	16	13.9	12.6	12.6	12.4

Source: UNFPA: The fact of Vietnam's population in 2008 - The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census: Total result.

For the past years, the rate of women giving birth to a third child tends to decline in all the geographic regions, particularly in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous (Northeast and Northwest), and the Central

Highlands has the rising trend. Thus, in the coming time, Vietnam needs to focus on solving the situation of women giving birth to a third child in these regions, as well as maintaining the trend of fertility decline in other geographic regions in order to achieve a stable decrease of women having a third child.

The rate of women having a third child or more is closely related to their education level. According to the research data in 2007, this rate of illiterate women was 43.1%, 28.1% for women who have not finished elementary school, 19.4% for elementary school graduates, 15.3% for secondary school graduates and 4.5% for women with high school education level or over (see table 2).

**Table 2. The rate of women giving birth to a third child or more by education level, 2007 (%)**

Illiterate	Elementary school unfinished	Elementary school graduate	Secondary school	High school
43.1	28.1	19.4	15.3	4.5

**Source: UNFPA: The fact of Vietnam's population in 2007**

It can be concluded that the higher women's education level is, the lower the rate of having a third child is. With high education level, women are aware that children must be looked after and nurtured well so they do not desire to have too many children, resulting in their relatively low rate of having a third child. Additionally, because their awareness and use of contraceptive methods are more effective so this group's rate of giving birth to a third child is lower than groups of low educational level. Thus, in order to change the situation, the program of family planning needs to focus on propagandizing to women at low education level. Normally, these women have low income, and live in rural, mountainous and remote areas. Thus, it is essential to have suitable techniques of propaganda for this group.

During the last years, Vietnam has tried their best to encourage families to stop giving birth to a third child. We have obtained some certain success, however there still exists the problem of couples giving birth to a third child, especially in some geographic regions, this rate tends to increase. The authorities and experts from the Committee of Population, Family and Children have stated some causes related to the implementation of population, family planning in local area such as: there is self-satisfaction about some achievement; the letting loose of leadership and population work conduction; the organization system of family planning staff has not been strong enough and overloaded with work; the propagandizing, educating, providing services and building policies, regimes face many problems, etc. These are indirect causes, what are the direct reasons why women have a third child? According to Le Thi, the reasons for giving birth to a third child arise from the couples themselves (Thi, 2006). Initially, it is male supremacy and discrimination against women that leads to the desire to have a son. Families with two daughters did not intend to have a third child but now they give birth to the third child in the hope of having a son. This is often the case with civil servants in urban areas. The case of Mrs. Hoai<sup>2</sup> can be taken as an example. She said that both her husband and she were intellectuals, she was an editor of a magazine, he was a science researcher. As a gentle, diligent woman, she was loved and respected by her husband's family. When they had two pretty daughters, her husband went abroad to study. For 3 years, she herself nurtured her children, went to work and had extra jobs to support her family, looked after her old and weak parents in law. When her husband came back, she was extremely happy. Nevertheless, the happiness of reunion had not lasted long; she was urged to have a son by her husband and his family. Despite being a civil servant, she thought of her family's happiness, parents' desire and husband's pride, she had a third child but it was a daughter again. After the baby was born, she felt really painful when all the members in her husband's family became cold toward her;

<sup>2</sup> The family and society newspaper, issued on 27-11-2003

her husband ignored both her and the baby. Whenever coming home, he was drunk and always yelled at her. Through Mrs. Hoai's story, we can realize that male supremacy and discrimination against women is still obviously shown in part of Vietnamese population. The main aim of having a third, fourth child, etc. is only to have a son to be the heir of the family.

Secondly, some families with two sons still want to have both sons and daughters like their friends, because in Vietnamese tradition, giving birth means having both sons and daughters. As a result, many families with sons still try to have a third child in the hope of having a daughter if they can afford it. However, in fact, the pressure of having a daughter is not as heavy as having a son.

Thirdly, there is a mentality of desiring to have many children, because in their opinion, having a lot of children means possessing a lot of property, happiness and luckiness. This mentality has existed since the old days and instilled in many households' mind, especially in rural and mountainous areas. Two children are too few for them; four to five children are enough (Thi, 2006) in case they die young. Having many children also means a lot of labor force. This plays an especially important role when production stages have not applied much technology but mainly used manual labor, especially in many rural households' farm work. In other words, having many children in that period of time was very economically beneficial; it was a basis to create income for households. Although having many children means lots of food consumed, these children helped their parents a lot in production and housework, etc. Now, household economy mainly depends on parents' and children's effort. Even if the nation lends them capital for business, this amount of capital will not yield positive effectiveness without enough labor resource. As a result, many families want to have many children.

Fourthly, the mentality of desiring to have many children who they can depend on and be looked after by when people get old. Because if a family have many children, especially sons, they can look after their parents by turns when their parents are weak or too old. It is very necessary for everybody to be cared by someone at the old age when a lot of farmers do not have medical and social insurance. Even with public servants, the allowance of medical and social insurance is too little. Thus, when they should be ill or have accidents, they mainly depend on their family and children. With many children, the life of old or ill people can be better ensured by only one child.

#### 4.2. Preference of Son in Vietnamese Families

In the Vietnamese families, daughters are not so looked down as in China<sup>3</sup>; daughter births are welcomed. In the traditional peasant family, a daughter was especially appreciated if she was the first child because she would help her parents a great deal in doing, and sharing household chores. That was why a Vietnamese proverb went: *"Having a piece of fertile female buffalo is not as valuable as having a daughter as your first child"*. Another proverb goes: *"It would be better to have both glutinous rice and ordinary one"*; that means people like to have children of both sex. For that reason some families that have already had many sons still wish for a daughter. If the family has a daughter as a first child, and a son as a second one, they will get mark *"ter"*. It is even better than a son as the first and the daughter as the second child. There is a popular saying which people often say to the parents' new - born daughters: *"Co hoa mung hoa, co nu mung nu"* (Let us rejoice, whether buds or flowers). That means that child - birth is always a happy event regardless of the sex of the new - born child. However, son preference is a prominent feature of Vietnamese culture, particularly in the north of the country where the Confucian influence has been the strongest. Foreign researchers have made a comparison that in Vietnam, the importance of having male children is stressed more than in Thailand and Burma. People, especially in countryside, like to have son so much, regardless of their social categories: from ordinary people to officials, from non - members of political affiliation to communist party

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<sup>3</sup> Due to one child policy in China, almost families want to have a son only.

members (Bich, 1997:275). The preference for sons is so strong that parent who have a new - born son in the commune draw fire crackers to celebrate, or they slaughter one, even two pigs to entertain all members of their lineage (Tinh, 1994:27). In other words, the whole family happily greets the birth of a son. By contrast, people who have already had more than one child, but do not have a son yet feel disappointed. In mass media there are often stories about how men who are waiting for a son react to their new - born female children. For instance, Nguyen Tri Thuc (1995) tells us about his relative who had already had four daughters: the man prepared well in advance for a celebration in the hope of getting a son when his wife was going to give birth to a new child. He kept carefully some chickens that his family had raised to slaughter if the new - born child would be a son. Nevertheless, hearing that the new - born child was a daughter again, he was disappointed, and released the chickens. Compared to the above son birth, this daughter's birth is entirely opposite: no celebration, not even some good food for the parturient.

Why people have no son feel boring like that? This derives from a tradition according to which when having no son, people very often thought that something wrong with the wife. Her position in the family would be insecure, no matter how well she performed her duties as a wife and daughter-in-law. For example, according to the pre-1945 law<sup>4</sup>, failure to give birth to a male child was the first reason of the seven ones which would allow a man to repudiate his wife. Despite decades of socialist policies that promote gender equality, son preference remains strong (Belanger, 2002; Goodkind, 1995). It reminds us of a traditional proverb: "*If you have a son, you can say you have a descendent; but you can not say thus, even if you have ten daughters*" (Dong, 1991; Rydström, 1998).

When asked about the expected number of sons, as shown in the recent survey result, an average of couples wants to have from 1 to 2 sons.

**Table 3. The expected number of sons categorized into geographic regions and education level (Unit: children)**

Ordinal numbers	Geographic regions and education level	Expected number of sons
	<b>Geographic regions</b>	1.33
1	Urban	1.22
2	Plains	1.37
3	Midlands-Mountainous	1.35
	<b>Education level</b>	1.33
1	Illiterate	1.68
2	Elementary School	1.56
3	Secondary school	1.30
4	High school	1.20
5	Post-secondary	1.29

**Source: Van, L.N., Khieu, N.L., Binh, D.T (2002): Basic data about Vietnamese families and women in families in the industrialization and modernization period**

Table 3 shows that urban families have a little lower demand of sons than families in other regions. The main reason may originate from the fact that urban people have stable incomes and do not need to depend on their children when getting old, so having sons to depend on at the old age is not very necessary for them. As a result, urban families' demand of having sons is not higher than families' in other regions. In terms of

<sup>4</sup> According to Gia long code of law it was mainly the husband who had the right to initiate divorce. Based on the so-called "seven outs" men could repudiate their wives on the following grounds: Infertility; adultery; neglect of parent-in-law; talkativeness; theft; jealousy; incurable diseases. (Binh, 1992:63).

education level, a general trend is that the lower couples' education level is, the higher their demands of having sons. The number of sons expected by illiterate couples is 1.68, whereas couples with above high school education want to have 1.29 sons. People with high education level often have stable jobs and enjoy social allowances at the old age so they do not depend much on their children, especially sons. Meanwhile, people without certain education level do not have stable jobs in state organs, so when they lose their working ability, they have to live on their children, normally their sons as in conventions. This obviously leads to the demands of having sons to depend on later.

Among the reasons of giving birth to sons in families of Vietnam, the results (table 4) show the necessity of having sons to depend on at the old age is quite common, accounting for 64% (in cities 51%, in plains 67% and in midlands and mountainous areas 65.2%). The second reason is to continue the lineage of families (accounting for nearly 61%). Clearly, in the regions where the social allowance for the old is little, the demand of having sons is higher and that is the reason to explain the difference in the demand of having sons between urban and rural areas and among different groups of occupations.

**Table 4. The necessary reasons for having sons by geographic regions (%)**

Numbers	Reasons	Urban	Plains	Midlands and Mountainous	Nation-wide
1	To depend on at old age	51.0	67.0	65.2	64.3
2	To carry on the lineage	37.0	68.4	56.6	60.6
3	To have labour source	7.0	9.7	9.0	9.2
4	Others	0.0	2.7	0.5	1.6

**Source: Van, L.N., Khieu, N.L., Binh, D.T (2002): Basic data about Vietnamese families and women in families in the industrialization and modernization period**

#### *4.3 Care for Old Parents*

It may be explained that the patrilocal model and its variant play a role here. Like the traditional family, contemporary marriage has required a bride to leave her parents, to go live with the groom's family. The crucial point was not the residence model, but the social security system related to this model. As a source shows, since then on, daughter's main responsibilities of caring old people were towards her parent-in-law, not natal parents (Anh, 153-154). That is why in the Confucian tradition; girls were likened to 'flying ducks', lost to their parental family at marriage. So that, to make sure about their security in old age, parents do their best to keep close their relationships to their children, especially the oldest son. Because they normally live with or depend on his family when they are old.

#### *4.4 Continue of the Lineage*

In Vietnam, the importance of the community called lineage in comparison to the individual person lies in this point: in a patrilineal lineage, a man is not an independent person, an individual in the full sense of the word, but a member of a given lineage. He is the personification of this lineage at present. His existence is not only a link in the communal chain. He must continue his lineage by having at least one son to guarantee that someone will fulfill in the future his present obligations. It is only a male child who can ensure the continuation of the lineage in two senses. Only he can practice the ancestor worship because it can't be done by female descendants who are treated as members of their husbands' families. And it is only a son who can ensure the continuation of the bloodline because of the prevailing patrilineage. If a man should die without male progeny, his whole lineage, including his ancestors and his unborn descendants would die with him. An end would be put to the line of descent because nobody takes care of that lineage anymore. You could also see the children's surname is followed by father's one. So the sons are very important for the lineage.

#### 4.5 Ancestor Worship

Although ancestor worship does not mention in table 4 but it is indispensable in Vietnamese families. Ancestor worship is very important because it is to worship people in the former times from one whom is descended. A Vietnamese folk song goes: "*Men have ancestors, just as trees have roots and rivers have sources*". The worship duty to parents starts from their death. Traditionally, in the funeral procession, sons of the deceased wear straw hats and walk on canes; daughters and daughters-in-law lie in the courtyard in the path of the coffin. In the funeral of his father, the son clothes in coarse fiber, and walks on a bamboo cane. He moves backward before the casket of his death parent. Now, a new ritual system according to which every ritual must be simplified was imposed to replace the old one. Sons put their dead father's coffin into a carrier, took it to graveyard, and they no longer wore straw hats and walked on cane; daughters and daughters-in-law no longer lay in the courtyard in the path of the coffin in procession. (Hy, 1993:82). However, it is very essential to have at least a son who walks on cane before one's coffin. Since then, sons continue their worship duty to their death parents. One of the fundamental purposes of ancestor worship is to ensure the happiness of death parents in otherworld. While alive, parents are served and respected; when dead, they are served and worshipped. Their other world existence needs the same things as this world existence does. If the parents need food, clothing, shelter and money when they are alive, they would continue to need that when they are dead. By practicing ancestor worship, children supply their dead parents with these essentials. In celebrating death anniversaries of their parents, children "transfer" goods from this world to the next. This transfer is achieved by burning. Paper clothes, and paper money could all be sent on to the dead parents in this way. Real food is not burnt, but merely offered to the dead parents.

Dead parents need the worship of their children in order to be comfortable and happy. A soul with no descendants is doomed to eternal wandering in the World of Shadow because it would not receive homage. Children who do not observe the sacrifice are considered as committing a serious crime of being impetuous, and undutiful because the souls of their dead parents have to make a precarious living as wandering beggars.

However, the relationship between dead parents and their children is the mutual interdependence. To their turn, dead parents are believed to become the protectors of their descendants. In return for the sacrifices and services of the living, the dead parents give their descendants some blessings that are in their supernatural power. Moreover, they could warn their children about some coming unhappy events so that children could escape. To request intercession for success in business or on behalf of a sick child, sacrifices are offered, and prayers are said to the souls of the dead parents. The interaction between dead people and their family members is not limited to the periodical, annual occasions<sup>5</sup> of ancestor worship; but also on the other occasions<sup>6</sup>. They want the ancestors to know the event and bless them on the occasion. To do it, ancestor worship requires the installation of an altar table in the home. Every family had ancestral altar in the center of the house. That may not be an exaggerated estimation because people did their best to get ancestral altar at home, however poor they were and however simple it was. The practice of worshipping is based on the principle of male members of the family, on the oldest son. In general, he had to bear all expenses for celebrating death anniversaries; that was why he received the greatest part of property handed down by his parents, mainly land. Other sons or girls have to go to the eldest son's house with their families to attend the ceremony, although they can place a very simple altar in their own houses.

To sum up, we can say that one of the main meanings of reproduction for Vietnamese people is to get sons to practice ancestor worship. Only a man could perform the ancestral rituals and pray for the souls of the dead. If a man died without a son, his lineage was broken and all his ancestors and unborn dependents

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Lunar New Year; Thanh Minh festival; death anniversaries; the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month according to lunar calendar and so on.

<sup>6</sup> For instance: On wedding day of descendants; on day exam of family's members to university; on day to build new house; etc.

would die with him. The deep cultural value of sons in combination with the strong government policies advocating a small family has created conflicts and dilemmas for Vietnam families if no son is born, especially for the women (Johansson, 1998).

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide empirical evidence on the rate of Vietnamese women having a third child and preference of son in Vietnamese families nowadays. In brief, the researcher arrived at the following conclusions:

- The rate of women stopping giving birth after the first and second fertility in both urban and rural areas rose, especially in urban areas, helping decreasing the fertility rate in Vietnam. As a general rule, in well-developed regions, the rate of women having a third child is low, and vice versa, in remote areas with hard life this rate is high.
- There still exists the problem of couples giving birth to a third child, especially in some geographic regions, this rate tends to increase. The reasons for giving birth to a third child arise from indirect causes related to the implementation of population, family planning in local area such as: there is self-satisfaction about some achievement; the letting loose of leadership and population work conduction; the organization system of family planning staff has not been strong enough and overloaded with work; the propagandizing, educating, providing services and building policies, regimes face many problems, etc. as well as from direct causes related to the couples themselves.
- Son preference is a prominent feature of Vietnamese culture so that each family wants to have at least one son. They are responsible for caring for old parents, ancestor worship, continuity the lineage, etc.

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