



Received: 07-11-2023  
Accepted: 17-12-2023

## International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

### Social Work in Care of the Elderly in Vietnam, Current Situation and Solutions

**Tang Anh Cuong**

University of Labour and Social Affairs, Hanoi, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: **Tang Anh Cuong**

#### Abstract

Vietnam is facing great challenges of the rapid population aging process. Elderly people with changes in health, physiology, labor-income, social relationships and lifestyle face many obstacles, difficulties in life and are identified by social workers as needing assistance. Although the Party and State pay great attention, the mental, material, and health care conditions of the elderly across the country still have

many difficulties, requiring the cooperation and contribution of the entire society. Within the scope of this article, the author mentions the current situation of the elderly in Vietnam, evaluates the role of social work in caring for the elderly and from there offers solutions related to social work to better care for the elderly.

**Keywords:** Elderly People, Social Work, Elderly Care

#### 1. Introduction

Population aging has been a matter of concern for countries around the world. Due to decreasing birthrates and increasing life expectancy, more and more countries have rapidly aging populations. Between 2005 and 2050, half of the world's population growth will be due to growth in the population aged 60 and over, while the number of children (those under 15 years of age) will decline slightly. Furthermore, in more developed regions, the population aged 60 and over is expected to nearly double (from 245 million in 2005 to 406 million in 2050), while the population under 60 will decrease (from 971 million in 2005 to 839 million in 2050). Elderly people in developing countries face many difficulties to ensure their lives. They encounter difficulties first of all because of physical decline due to the aging process. In addition, common diseases, serious diseases, new diseases and migration as well as urbanization trends have negatively impacted the lives of the elderly. Therefore, they are one of the most vulnerable groups.

Vietnam is also a country that is aging rapidly, because the average life expectancy is increasing while the birth rate and death rate are decreasing. This demographic trend is one of the great achievements for Vietnam, associated with significant improvements in health, nutrition and socio-economic development. However, rapid population aging also creates major challenges for Vietnam. Time for Vietnam to transition from an "aging" population structure to a population structure "aging" will be much shorter than in countries with a high level of development. This poses big challenges for us in caring for the elderly. Caring for and supporting the elderly is not simply understood as a responsibility in caring for the physical health of the elderly, it also includes including taking care of spiritual needs, maintaining and strengthening mental relationships physical, emotional, family and social communication for the elderly.

In recent years, elderly care has been one of the issues that our Party and State have paid attention to with basic priorities such as: Creating appropriate opportunities for the elderly to participate in socio-economic activities, continuing to contribute to the overall development of the country; Enhance health and improve material and spiritual life for the elderly; Ensure a favorable environment and essential services to support the lives of the elderly. Although the Party and State pay great attention, the mental, material, and health care conditions of the elderly across the country still have many difficulties, requiring the cooperation and contribution of the entire society. Therefore, using qualitative research methods, through statistical data from the information portal of the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, the General Statistics Office, articles and research articles related to the topic, The author analyzed the current situation of the elderly in Vietnam, evaluated the role of social work in caring for the elderly and from there proposed solutions related to social work to better care for the elderly. This is a study that has both theoretical and practical significance.

**2. Content**

**2.1 Related concepts**

**2.1.1 Elderly**

The elderly is a concept often used to refer to people who are older in society. In terms of law, in each country, in different periods, depending on specific socio-economic conditions, there are different definitions of the concept of the elderly. In some developed countries such as Germany, the United States... the elderly are defined as people 65 years of age or older. Regulations in each country are different due to differences in age and aging symptoms of people in those countries are different. In countries with good medical and health care systems, people's life expectancy and health are also improved. Therefore, the symptoms of old age often come later. Therefore, the age regulations of those countries are also different [5].

In Vietnam today, according to the provisions of the Law on the Elderly dated November 23, 2009, "elderly people are Vietnamese citizens aged 60 years or older" [6].

**2.1.2 Community service**

According to the International Association of Social Work and International Schools of Social Work (2011): social work is a profession engaged in solving problems related to human relationships and promoting social change, enhancing empowerment and releasing power to improve people's quality of life. Social work uses theories of human behavior and social systems theory to intervene in human interaction with the living environment.

According to the International Association of Social Workers, "Social work is a practice-based profession and a science that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, human empowerment and liberation. The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to social work. Based on theories from social work, social sciences and humanities, as well as indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and social structures in solving problems, problems to arise in life and promote well-being" (IFSW, 2014) [2].

In the process of implementing policies programs and projects related to elderly care, social work plays an important role. Social work supports the implementation of effective social policies, ensuring sustainability. Therefore, applying social work to implementing laws and policies for the elderly will help those laws and policies meet the needs of the elderly. The motto of social work is to promote internal and external resources to solve clients' problems. In the field of care and assistance for the elderly, the application of social work theory and skills will help promote the internal strengths of the elderly and their families in the work of caring for and helping the elderly as enhancing children's sense of responsibility to care for their parents at home instead of sending the elderly to live in nursing centers. Social work knowledge and skills will help mobilize the community's potential in caring for the elderly on the foundation of the culture and tradition of valuing the elderly in our country. Neighbor-to-neighborhood relationships will be promoted, creating bonds between the elderly in the community as well as other community members. These are the strengths and foundations for implementing effective policies related to the elderly.

Considering from the functional aspect of social work, the application of social work to care and help for the elderly

has the effect of preventing as well as intervening to solve social problems of the elderly in a sustainable way.

With the preventive function, through activities such as consulting and providing knowledge and social work skills, it will help the elderly prevent problems that may occur to them such as physical health problems, psychosocial issues (loneliness, depression when starting to retire, when children build a family...), social interaction.

With the function of intervening and solving problems, social work will help the elderly and their families solve problems that the elderly and their families may encounter such as elder care, helpless elderly people, psychological problems, violence against the elderly, conflicts and discord between the elderly and their families, issues related to ownership, property management, conflicts due to differences in lifestyle between generations... Due to the increasing proportion of elderly people in many countries around the world, countries are very interested in developing service systems for the elderly in which staff work. society as a provider or coordinator. Therefore, the State, community and each family need to prepare for this reality in the future.

**2.2 Current status of social work in elderly care in Vietnam**

Vietnam is one of the countries with a very rapid aging rate in the world. The proportion of elderly people in 2009 was 9%, in 2019 it was 11.8%, in 2021 it was 12.8% (table 1) and will double to 23% in 2040 (UNFPA, 2014) [9]. The rapid aging rate has posed policy challenges for the elderly when per capita income is not high and the social security system is limited, posing many challenges in care and ensuring security. for the elderly.

**Table 1:** Number and proportion of elderly people over the years

Year	Total population (million people)	Number of elderly people 60+ (million people)	Proportion of elderly people 60+ in the total population (%)
1979	53,74	3,71	6,90
1989	64,38	4,64	7,20
1999	76,33	6,19	8,10
2009	85,79	7,72	9,00
2019	96,21	11,41	11,80
2021	98,28	12,58	12,80

**Source:** The author compiled data

According to the results of the 2021 National Survey on the Elderly, the country has more than 12.58 million elderly people, the proportion of women is higher than that of men (table 2).

**Table 2:** Key statistics on Vietnam's elderly population

Targets	2021	2050
Population aged 60 and over (total)	12.580.000	29.841.000
Population aged 60 and over (% of total population)	12,80	27,2
Older women aged 60 and over (% of total population)	14,68	15,08
Life expectancy (male)	71,1	77,2
Life expectancy (female)	76,4	83,22
Old age dependency ratio (65+/15-64 years old)	12,6	32,8
Elderly people in rural areas (% of total population)	12,91	

Urban elderly (% of total population)	12,61	
Elderly people living alone aged 60 and over (% of total population aged 60 and over)	9,6	

**Source:** The author compiled data

With a developed socio-economic life and health system, the life expectancy of Vietnamese people has increased, with an average of 75.6 years old, ranking 2nd in the region and 56th in the world. However, the burden of illness among Vietnamese people is also large, the duration of illness in a lifetime is about 15.3 years. Currently, we are facing a double burden of disease. On average, an elderly Vietnamese person has 3 diseases with about 95% of elderly people having diseases, mainly chronic non-communicable diseases. About 50% of elderly people have diseases that go untreated even though they know it is dangerous to their health or life because they cannot pay. Health costs for the elderly increase 7-10 times higher than other age groups. 56.3% of elderly people perceive poor health, 36.3% have normal health and only 7.6% have good health. About 23% of elderly people are having difficulty with daily activities, of which 90% need assistance. However, the health care system for the elderly has not met the increasing needs of the elderly, the qualifications of doctors are still limited, and activities related to the elderly only partially meet their needs. The majority of elderly people still do not have full access to medical care services, especially in rural, mountainous, and remote areas. This causes considerable difficulties and challenges for social work activities. The field of elder care in documents does not cover all important subjects and does not balance care roles. The role of the State is mentioned mainly in policies and emphasized in the social security model. The two subjects family and community are quite important in caring for the elderly, only mentioned in the form of "encouragement" and reminders of moral responsibility, but have not been "institutionalized" into regulations. clear, making it difficult to check and monitor implementation results. Therefore, it partly creates difficulties in coordination between subjects and limits social work activities in caring for the elderly. Awareness and attitudes of individuals, families and communities are one of the factors affecting the feasibility of exercising the rights of the elderly. This factor is considered the infrastructure for effective social work activities. Recently, care for the elderly has become a central content in policy documents, national programs, schemes and support projects related to the elderly. The legal basis for social work activities in assisting the elderly has been issued.

Besides the difficulties in health care, the biggest difficulty that can be seen is that the material life of the Vietnamese elderly is still low. Up to 68% of Vietnamese elderly people mainly live in rural areas, are farmers and work in agriculture. The main source of living for the elderly is from their children and grandchildren (41.2%), from pensions and benefits (25.5%) and from their labor (29.4%). The older the person is, the greater their dependence on their children's support (increasing from 25.6% in the 60-69 group to 41.7% in the 70-79 group and 68.3% in the 80+ group). Living source from previously accumulated wealth and other sources 3.9% (UNFPA-GAI-Prudential, 2015) [7]. 72.3% of the elderly live with their children and grandchildren, while the trend of Vietnamese family size is gradually shifting from traditional families to nuclear families. Compared to

2019, the rate of married elderly people increased slightly (from 67.65% in 2019 to 67.81%) and the rate of widows/husbands decreased (from 28.19% in 2019 to 27.73%) [1]. A huge difference that is maintained over time when compared with previous surveys is: the elderly group (80 years old and above) has a rate of widowhood nearly four times higher than the elderly group (60-69) and the widowhood rate of elderly women is more than four times higher than the widowhood rate of elderly men [1]. With the health of the elderly still limited, having to live alone is a very disadvantage for the elderly, because the family is always the basic support for each member in old age.

In summary, in the trend of population aging, income and health are two main aspects in the lives of the elderly. Vietnam is facing three major challenges. First, the number of elderly people is increasing rapidly. Second, many elderly people live at the poverty level, near poverty. Third, most elderly people have poor health and are increasingly withdrawn and lonely because traditional support from the extended family is shrinking due to the decrease in the number of children; increase in the number of people of working age working away from home. The role of social work in caring for the elderly is posed as an urgent task. With the current situation of the elderly, social work with the elderly pays attention to training medical staff, volunteers, and providing social work services for the elderly, towards the goal of security for the elderly through their care activities. Social work as a professional activity plays a key "bridge" role and is an effective means in implementing social security policies, ensuring the country's social security goals (Ha, 2014) [3]. Through programs, models, social work services and practical activities of social workers, activities from social protection establishments and families and communities take on the roles of specific role to promote welfare and improve quality of life for the elderly. The role of social work is expressed in two forms: caring for lonely elderly people in social protection facilities and providing care services for the elderly at home and in the community. Related to the 4 elderly care subjects (state, family, community, and market), there are 3 elderly care models, each with different characteristics and effectiveness.

**Model 1:** Social protection centers are a model fully subsidized by the State. The social protection center has helped the majority of poor and disadvantaged elderly people, but due to low investment, lack of professional attention, and lack of social workers..., operational efficiency is low. In these facilities, there is coordination between social workers and experts such as doctors, nurses, nutritionists, psychological counselors... Social workers role: receiving objects; visit and encourage; Organize fun activities; maintain health and social communication for the elderly; maintain regular contact between the elderly and family members; Caring for and guiding the elderly to perform personal and health care activities; psychological consultation support; taking notes and keeping records. The form of providing care services for the elderly at home and in the community is usually social establishments that receive elderly people and send social workers to their families to directly perform consulting and assessment services, identify problems, help develop plans, establish family and social relationships, provide social work services to create the best support environment for the elderly.

**Model 2:** Private nursing home model - market-based, mainly appearing in big cities. This is a type of high-quality care service for the elderly with contributions from their families. This type is still small and spontaneous, so there are almost no specific regulations on programs, staff and necessary skills to care for the elderly. With quite high service costs (about 10 million VND/month), this model is only for groups of well-off families, so it is very difficult for elderly people from families with average and poor living standards to access.

**Model 3:** Model of care for the elderly in the community by family members, relatives, neighbors... The model is mainly voluntary although the government provides partial support. Because the elderly often choose to live with family and children for help or support (at least mentally and emotionally). Therefore, the "community care model for the elderly" is appropriate and is being replicated in our country. From more than 500 pilot clubs in 4 provinces: Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, there are now more than 700 clubs nationwide. Each club has the participation of intergenerational members (over 50 years old), from families with different living standards, many types of occupations with diverse educational levels and life experiences, maintain traditional cohesion, community... They support each other in doing business, learning, and taking care of their health. The activities bring practical material and spiritual benefits, in accordance with the current situation and needs of the elderly and improve their quality of life.

In choosing care services for themselves, a segment of the elderly has the need and ability to use paid services (mainly in the private sector) to varying degrees. That specific choice creates certain changes and entails challenges for professional social work when approaching this department. The traditional way of caring for the elderly in each family and community has changed a lot due to the impact of modern culture and lifestyle. According to the results of many family studies, along with the development process, today's generations of children and grandchildren tend to lower the values and spiritual, psychological, and emotional needs of the elderly and their children. Instead, there is purely in-kind or financial support. Social assistance policies mention the role of the community but do not have clear regulations or specific activities. Some projects, "Community-based health care and consulting for the elderly", "Support to care for the cultural and spiritual life of the elderly", or the "Intergenerational Club" model Mutual help system" is often more of a movement than a policy institution (Luan, 2014) [8].

Social work in our country has advantages and opportunities for professional development due to society's increasing need for human resources with social work expertise, promoting activities related to research, teaching and participating in social work services. There has been the attention of the Party and the state and the legal basis for professional development of social work. Social work activities are expanding with cooperation between public and private services from social organizations and non-governmental organizations that are increasingly developing towards the elderly group. According to research by Ha (2014) [3], basically, social work in our country is formed and developed in accordance with the needs and demands of reality. The development of the social work profession in a professional direction was set out in 2009 and was officially

recognized as a profession by Decision No. 32/2010/D-PM dated March 25, 2010 of the Prime Minister. A series of decisions, circulars and professional training institutions on social work were established afterward. The policy system on social work development in our country has expressed views, orientations and social policies. The challenges of social work activities in caring for the elderly stem from the characteristics of the elderly and inadequacies in policy implementation. Most policies only focus on subsidies and relief, while activities to care for the spiritual life of the elderly (with the participation of the elderly) are still of a movement nature. Furthermore, the social work sector with specialized services for elderly care in our country is lacking and weak. All have created limitations and challenges in caring for them through social work activities. Currently, many factors and conditions for the development of professional social work are lacking such as legal framework, scientific methods, core social work team, and human resources for social work networks, research programs, awareness of the necessity and superiority of the profession, weak translation systems and practice and practice facilities. Research by Ha (2013) [4] has shown that in addition to the low response capacity of social work and the lack of professional social workers, people's awareness of the workers is also very limited.

### 2.3 Solutions related to social work to care for the elderly

To effectively engage in diverse activities in caring for the elderly, social work needs to aim to meet the needs associated with the psychological and physiological characteristics of the elderly. This is the basic condition for good care for the elderly. There are also a series of factors that influence and limit social work activities in elderly care such as: limitations of many levels of leadership and the community in awareness of population aging and its impact on socio-economic development; society's negative view of the elderly; The elderly themselves are not aware of the need to care for and protect themselves; People in rural areas do not have the conditions and do not care about preparing for old age...

In the near future, our country will have millions of elderly people in need of social support with diverse needs. Completing the social assistance policy system and perfecting service delivery programs in elderly care is essential to ensure security and improve the quality of life for the elderly. It is necessary to innovate activity programs, support networks, and provide social work services in elderly care; Complete and expand social work services in elderly care, develop home care facilities for the elderly for those who can afford it.

### 3. Conclusion

In the global trend of population aging, social work in elderly care increasingly requires improved professionalism and strong international integration. It is necessary to continue to learn from the experiences, results and limitations of social work activities in elderly care from developed countries. Research, training and development of social work human resources need attention. Raising society's awareness of the position and necessary role of social work in ensuring social security goals and especially in caring for the elderly is also something that needs to be done regularly.



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