

## The trend of Vietnamese household size in recent years

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**Abstract.** Along with the country's socio-economic development, Vietnamese families have undergone considerable changes. These changes can be clearly seen in the obvious decline in household size. This success is attributed to Vietnam's population and family planning policy and the change in model of multi-generation living together which has existed for thousands of years now. Nonetheless, the reduction in household size is also due to such negative factors as the increasing divorce rate of couples or the trend that a part of the population, especially young people do not want to get married or give birth in order to enjoy their own life. Across the country, single household account for a very low proportion. Small household size (households with 4 members or fewer) is common in our country, especially in urban areas. Generally, rural household size is larger than urban one throughout the country. In terms of geographic regions, the Central Highlands has the largest household size; the second is the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas. The Red River Delta is the region with the smallest household size. Household size is inversely proportional to incomes of household. Household with the highest incomes (quintile 1) has the smallest size; in contrast, the poorest household (quintile 5) has the largest one. If the correlation between household size and genders of household heads is considered, female-headed households are smaller than male-headed households.

**Keywords:** Household, family, Vietnam.

### 1. Introduction

Household size indicates how big a family is - it is a unit of measurement used to show the number of members living in a family, consisting of parents, children and others. Household size depends on couples' birth rate and model of different generations living together in a family. In traditional agricultural society, a big number of offspring is a symbol of a happy family, having many children means lots of fortune. As a result, in the early last century, when analyzing Vietnam's traditional society, Gourou wrote: "...it is certain that Vietnamese women give birth to as many children as they can. Getting married early, often before 20, they continuously give birth until menopause period" (Gourou, 2003:175). In this society, due to the lack of developed science and technology, a big amount of manual labor was needed. This led to a high birth rate and big household size. Also, many generations lived under the same roof. Whereas in the process of industrialization in recent years Vietnam, the birth rate is low and grown up children do not live with their parents, so the household size is smaller. This article tries to answer the following questions: what is the trend of Vietnamese household size now? And which characteristics does it have?

### 2. Results

#### 2.1. Vietnamese household size tends to shrink

According to the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census conducted on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, Vietnam had 22,628 thousand households, increasing by 5967 households compared with 1999, up 36%. During the period of 1999 - 2009, the annual average growth rate of household number was 3%. Nevertheless, when Vietnamese household size is taken into consideration, we could realize that household size of Vietnam decreased from 5.22 persons per household in 1979 to 4.48 persons per household in 1989, 4.61 persons per

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household in 1999 and this number was 3.8 in 2009, declining by 0.81 person compared with 1999 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Vietnamese household size from 1979 - 2009

	1979	1989	1999	2009
Household size (person)	5.22	4.84	4.61	3.8

*Source: The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census*

The causes of the tendency of smaller household size are vast; some following can be mentioned.

The first is the success of birth control campaign in Vietnam. The birth control campaign in Vietnam in the 80s and 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was greatly successful with the target of increasing marriage age of couples, encouraging each couple to have from 1 to 2 children and fertility gap of 5 years. The average number of children that a woman at childbearing age had decreased, population growth rate tended to drop gradually, and the rate of the third childbirth in families also had a declining tendency through the years.

Secondly, people's demand about the number of children has changed; people tend to have fewer children but better nurturing and caring. It is this change that leads to the decline of household size in Vietnam in the current period. The development of economy has positively affected the acceptance of small household size, because economic growth contributes to improving material and spiritual life, providing better education and raising awareness, generating the demand of less childbirth.

The results of midterm medical and demographic surveys show that the awareness and demand of women in rural areas of a small household is increasingly apparent. The rate of woman aged 15 - 49 who want to have from 1 to 2 children gradually increased from 31% in 1988 to 49% in 1994 and 69% in 1997. Besides, the proportion of women who want to have 4 children or more has dropped rather drastically (Van, 2004). All these have reflected a remarkable change in Vietnamese women's opinion of having fewer children over the past years. The comprehensive survey conducted in 1998 - 2000 by the Centre for Studies of Family and Women on Vietnamese family and women's role in family during the period of industrialization, modernization showed that the average number of expected children was higher than the current number in all the researched regions, at different ages and levels of education. This fact has reflected couples' awareness, behavior and obligation about the population target and policy as well as the popularity of small household size in Vietnam in the current period. In urban areas, generally couples do not want to have many children. In plains, midlands and mountains, the real birth rate is lower than the expected number of children.

Table 2. Couples' expected number of children (person)

Number	Researched regions	Expected number of children
	All the regions	2.48
1	Urban	2.30
2	Plain	2.53
3	Midlands-Mountains	2.48

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

There is a remarkable difference in the demand of child birth among people of different age groups. The older the age is, the greater the demand of childbirth is. The number of children expected by people above 50 is highest, at 2.94. This group of women belongs to older generations so they expect large number of children, which is different from younger women. Specifically, the younger women are, the fewer the expected number of children is. The number of children expected by couples below 30 is lowest (2.03 children). What needs to be considered is that the group of people above 50 has the highest demand of child birth but the expected number of children does not exceed 3. This represents Vietnam's success in encouraging all the people to implement population and family planning policy.

Considering education, generally the lower the education level is, the higher the expected number of children is (except for those with post-secondary education wishing to have more children than people with

the education level of high school). Illiterate people have the highest demand of childbirth (2.95 children), and people with high school education has the lowest demand of childbirth (2.34 children).

Therefore, together with socio-economic development, the change in awareness arose from not only increasing education levels but also the influence of population and family planning programme with the target of small household size in order to have a happy, well-fed life. Especially, during the process of implementing Vietnamese population strategy in the period of 2001 - 2010 and carrying out the population ordinance with the objective of population and family planning policy that each family only has from 1 to 2 children, reproductive function of family has changed towards the trend of having fewer children, which is suitable with the right and responsibility of each couple in the process of building a well-fed, equal, progressive, happy and stable family. This has quite a big effect on increasingly smaller household size in recent years.

The third reason is the transformation in the model of generations living together. The change in households' average size is determined by not only the birth rate and death rate but also the process of household joining and separating. In Vietnam, this process takes place regularly. Normally, when getting married, a woman will separate from her parents and join in her husband's family. As a rule, household size in the whole society will not be changed because when husband's family has more members, wife's family has fewer. However, household size will be enlarged when a married woman begins to give birth. In fact, for the last decades, Vietnamese household size has not increased but decreased as most couples only live with parents-in-law for a short time, and then have a separate life. By Vietnamese tradition, husband's parents often live with one of their children (in the North, parents live with their oldest son whereas in the South, they usually live with their youngest son). Other children leave their family after marriage sooner or later, building new families.

Consequently, in Vietnam, nuclear family (a family with two generations: parents and an immature child) accounts for much higher proportion than family with three generations (consisting of grandparents, parents and grandchildren) The data of basic survey about Vietnamese family in 2002 showed that in the North, families with two generations account for 78%, families with 3 generations 18.2% and families with 1 generation 3.3 %.

The fourth reason is that apart from lower average rate of childbirth and the change in the model of different generations living together; the rise of divorce, celibacy, no demands of giving birth and illegitimate childbirth also contribute to smaller family size.

First of all, we are going to analyze the situation of divorce in Vietnam. According to the results of the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census, the rate of widowhood, divorce and separation of population at the age of 15 and older is 2.8% of men and 12.5% of women. The divorce rate of population at the age of 15 and older is 2.2%, (men account for 30.4% and women 69.6%). Women's divorce rate is higher than men's, especially in urban areas possibly due to economic conditions, particularly because urban women are more independent than rural ones so they are easier to accept divorce. In general, the divorce rate in Vietnam is much lower than in other countries in the world. Although the divorce rate in Vietnam is not high, the number of divorce has increased through the years. According to statistics of the People's Supreme Court, the number of couples who want to divorce rose from 51,361 in 2000 to 54,226 in 2001, 56,478 in 2002; in the first 8 months of 2003 there were 41,326 divorce cases all over the country.

Causes of divorce are vast and complicated. Based on the court's actual trials of divorce cases proceeded yearly, it can be seen that the common causes of divorce are: 1) family conflict, maltreatment, 2) adultery, 3) economic conflict, 4) husband or wife missing, 5) husband or wife living abroad or coming back from abroad, 6) husband or wife being administratively penalized or criminally prosecuted, 7) disease, no children, 8) others.

Although celibate is not common in our country, the rate of single household has been rising due to a lot of social impacts such as late marriage crusade, unmarried people being past their prime, widowhood, divorce, separation, etc. This leads to a significant decline in household size. According to the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census, the number of single households is 1,625,592, accounting for 7.24% (urban

areas 8.29%, rural areas 6.78%). The rate of single household in 2009 went up by 3.02% compared with 1999 (4.22%).

During the recent years, the appearance and rising of families without children have been one of the factors that decline average household size. For example, a study by the Committee of Population, Family and Children, Hanoi shows that, in the inner area of Hanoi there have been a small number of couples who do not want to have children (1.7%). For these couples, giving birth and having many children are not principal purposes of marriage. Success in career and personal satisfaction in life are the reasons why some people do not want to have children.

In short, one of the reasons why household size has declined is the appearance of non-traditional family models like single households, unmarried women having children, families without children.

## **2.2. There are differences in household size between rural and urban household, among households in different geographic regions, among households with different incomes, and between male and female households headship.**

The survey conducted by General Statistical Office over the last years shows that rural household size is always larger than urban one (Table 3). However, that difference is not much. The result of the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census indicated that rural household size was 3.9 persons, and urban household size was 3.7 persons.

Table 3. Rural - urban household size through the years (Unit: person)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2009
Rural	4.49	4.41	4.28	4.14	3.9
Urban	4.27	4.20	4.13	4.07	3.7

*Source: The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census*

Rural household size is often larger than urban one possibly because rural families' birth rate is still higher than urban families'. Geographically, in 2008 the Northwest had the largest household size with 4.85 persons; the second is the Central Highlands with 4.8 persons. The area with the smallest household size is the Red River Delta (3.79 persons). This is the only region where an average household has less than 4.0 persons. The Northwest and Central Highlands have the largest and excessively bigger household size compared with other geographic regions because these are two areas of the least economic development, low level of awareness, concentration of ethnic minorities, high birth rate and maintenance of multi-generation family tradition. For instance, when studying household size in the Northwest, the author Do Thuy Binh pointed out that household size of ethnic minorities here was very large, much larger than that of Kinh ethnic group. Specifically, Tay ethnic group's average household size was 6.3 persons, Nung: 7.5 persons, Thai: 8.5 persons. More than half of Nung's families consist of from 7 to 10 persons, 78% of Thai's families have 7 persons or more (Binh, 1994). Another survey conducted in 2002 showed the number of 4.3 persons per Kinh household, 5.68 persons per Thai, 5.65 persons per Dao, 5.14 persons per Nung, H'Mong and 5 persons per Khmer household (Khanh & Quy, 2007). In Central Highlands area, as is Ede custom, sons-in-law live in their wives' long houses. As a result, the size of these households is very large.

Table 4. Household size by geographic regions through the years (Unit: person)

Geographic regions	2002	2004	2006	2008
Red River Delta	3.97	3.92	3.84	3.79
Northeast	4.55	4.46	4.30	4.16
Northwest	5.15	5.15	4.93	4.85
North Central	4.53	4.40	4.28	4.06
South Central Coast	4.38	4.24	4.22	4.11
Central Highlands	5.08	5.09	4.93	4.80
Southeast	4.52	4.48	4.34	4.24
Mekong River Delta	4.60	4.47	4.32	4.16

*Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey*

In terms of the declining rate of household size, the North Central ranks at the top (in 2008, the dropping rate of household size was 0.47 persons compared with 2002), the second is Mekong River Delta with the

dropping rate of 0.49 persons (the comparison of the year 2008 and 2002). According to the latest survey from the 2009 Vietnam population and housing census, household size in different geographic regions<sup>2</sup> is as follows. Red River Delta had the smallest average number of persons per household (3.4 persons). The region with the biggest average number of persons per household was Central Highlands (4.1 persons), the second was Northern Midlands and Mountainous area as well as Mekong River Delta (4.0 persons).

In terms of income groups, we can clearly realize the difference in household size. In 2008, quintile 1 (the poorest) had the largest household size (4.41 persons). The size declined gradually among the higher income groups. With the highest income group (quintile 5), the household size was only 3.77 persons. Thus, it can be concluded that the wealthier families are, the smaller household size is. In contrast, the poorer families are, the larger household size is.

The difference in household size can be clearly showed when we bring male and female household headship into comparison. Specifically, household size of female-headed households in 2008 was only 3.52 persons. Meanwhile, that of male-headed households was higher, at 4.33.

Table 5. Household size by genders of household headship through the years (Unit: person)

	2002	2004	2006	2008
Men	4.68	4.59	4.45	4.33
Women	3.71	3.68	3.63	3.52

*Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey*

The main cause of this difference is that women heading households are often widows without remarriage, divorced women, women separating from husbands or with husbands regularly away (accounting for 67% of female-headed households) (Van, 2004). By tradition, divorced women or widows keep living alone to bring their children up in stead of remarrying, so household size is small due to the absence of men in families. In other words, women are often heads of single-parent families, so small household size is absolutely reasonable. In contrast, man-headed complete families mean large household size. In addition, the rate of men remarrying after divorce or after wives' death is very high. Then, they continue heading new families; keep giving birth so household size mastered by men is larger than that of households mastered by women.

### 3. Conclusion

The results of the analyzes and discussions indicated that Vietnamese household size is decreasing gradually. The main reasons are the lower average rate of childbirth and the change in the model of different generations living together, the rise of divorce, celibacy, or no demands of giving birth and illegitimate childbirth. Rural household size is often larger than urban household size. Geographically, the Northwest had the largest household size; the second is the Central Highlands. The area with the smallest household size is the Red River Delta. In terms of income groups, we can clearly realize the difference in household size. In 2008, quintile 1 (the poorest) had the largest household size. The size declined gradually among the higher income groups. The difference in household size can be clearly showed when we bring male and female household headship into comparison. Household size mastered by men is larger than that of households mastered by women.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2009 Vietnam population and housing census was not categorized into 8 geographic regions as before, instead it was classified into 6 geographic regions: Northern Midlands and Mountainous area, Red River Delta, North and South Central Coast, Central Highlands, Southeast and Mekong River Delta.

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