

Social Participation of Vietnamese Elderly from Active Ageing Perspective

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Abstract: Recent studies searched for social positivity among Vietnamese elderly people through their social participation. The question, however, is whether such participation is entirely positive and what factors help explain the social participation of the elderly in Vietnam today. This article, drawn from a qualitative study of older people in Hanoi and Vĩnh Long, examines the social participation of older people from an active ageing approach. The article addresses the following aspects: taking care of children and grandchildren, taking care of the elderly, participating in volunteer activities, and participating in the politics of the elderly. The results show the fact that the elderly place themselves in a dependent relationship with their children and grandchildren can be a factor hindering their old-age well-being. The life course approach also suggests building infrastructure and providing services for the elderly that take into account spatial familiarity to give them a sense of security.

Keywords: Active ageing, activity space, elderly, life course approach, social participation.

Subject classification: Sociology

1. Introduction

The growth rate of the elderly population in Vietnam in recent years is the highest in the region. With the proportion of the population aged 60 and over being at more than 10% and the proportion of the population aged 65 and over reaching 7.1% in 2014, Vietnam officially entered the ageing population stage (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2019, p.23). Policy responses were issued, emphasising caring and promoting the role of the elderly as a response to the population ageing. Most notably are the Constitution amended in 2013 and Resolution No.21-NQ/TW in 2017, stipulating the protection, care, and promotion of the role of the elderly. Ageing is a biological process but also a social one, requiring the elderly to prepare and adapt not only to physical change but also to areas of personal and social life.

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Before the above-mentioned practical and policy issues, social scientists in recent years have focused on studying the social participation of the elderly in search of their social positivity. Recent research results show different dimensions of social participation of the elderly in Vietnam, mainly in a positive direction (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Tùng, 2016; Đỗ Thị Kim Anh, 2019; Đoàn Vương Diễm Khánh et al., 2019; Nguyễn Hữu Minh & Lê Thúy Hằng, 2020; Tạ Thị Thu Thảo Trang et al., 2021). There are few studies describing how social engagement occurs (Jane Parry et al., 2018); whether it is purely positive; and what factors help explain the social participation of the elderly in Vietnam today.

To answer the above research question, this paper examines the social participation of the elderly in Vietnam through indicators of active ageing. The data of the article are drawn from the results of qualitative research on the transition from passive to active ageing of the elderly in four communes and wards in Hanoi and Vĩnh Long province conducted in 2021-2022.

2. Theoretical basis and research methods

2.1. Theoretical background

The World Health Organisation defines active ageing as “the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance the quality of life as people age [...]. It allows people to realise their potential for physical, social, and mental [health] throughout their life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires, and capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they require assistance” (WHO, 2002, p.12). Social participation is one of the contents used to assess the active ageing process. In a broad sense, social participation is one’s involvement in activities that provide interactions with others in society or the community (Levasseur et al., 2010, p.2148).

Aiming to consider social participation as an indicator of the active ageing process of the elderly in Vietnam, this article uses indicators of “participation in society” from the Active Aging Index (UNECE, 2018). This set of indicators measures the extent to which older people can realise their full potential in terms of their expectations of healthy living, participating in economic, social, and cultural life, and living independently. Accordingly, the participation in society of the elderly is considered through indicators of i) Care for children and grandchildren; ii) Care for the elderly; iii) Participation in voluntary activities; and iv) Political participation. This article examines these indicators in the Vietnamese elderly from a life course perspective.

The life course approach notes that individuals, as social entities, are influenced by their significant others. Thus, studying the elderly is not only learning about them, but it is necessary to put them in relationships with the people around them, i.e., with their children, spouses, relatives, friends, associations/groups, neighbours, and others. The application of this

approach allows for exploiting the concept of the activity space of the elderly, their neighbourhoods, and institutions for the elderly. Research on the social participation of older people tells us who (individuals, social groups, organisations) they interact with, and how these people and institutions influence the elderly's well-being. The authors hypothesise that the active social connection and expansion of the activity space of the elderly in Vietnam might be the factors that help them adapt to the active ageing process.

2.2. Research overview

Research on the social participation of older people has been systematically carried out in developed countries such as the US, Germany, and Japan (J. M. Pinto & A. L. Neri, 2017). In Japan, data on the social participation of older people are integrated into an annual national database to provide the most up-to-date information on the situation (Cabinet Office Japan 2002-2021). In general, the data obtained from these studies show the gradual narrowing of the activity space and social network of the elderly when entering old age. They limit their participation to voluntary activities to serve the community in their residence. Social participation was more active in the early old groups and decreased in the older ones. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a sharp decline in the participation of the elderly in voluntary activities. About 70% of the elderly in the US, 50% of the elderly in Sweden, 30% of the elderly in Germany, and 20% of the elderly in Japan said they had given up volunteer activities (or activities were cancelled) or the number of days and hours for voluntary activities have been reduced due to the spread of COVID-19 (Cabinet Office Japan, 2021).

In countries within Asia-Pacific, which are mainly developing ones, the database on the social participation of older people is still lacking consistency. In countries with a relatively young population structure such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, data on ageing is of less interest to collect, especially data related to the social participation of older people. Six out of fourteen countries, including Vietnam, do not have any data on voluntary activities. Vietnam is also among the four countries where data is not available to assess the elderly's political participation (Jane Parry et al., 2018, p.91).

To assess the social participation of the elderly in Vietnam, it is necessary to consider the results of more specific studies on the elderly. The 1996 Red River Delta Elderly Study is perhaps the first social survey mentioning this issue. Research results showed that the elderly's social interaction was mainly expressed through access to the mass media (watching TV) and visiting neighbours, friends, and colleagues. At this time, the elderly rarely read books and newspapers; most of them did not meet their friends or colleagues. The associative activities were unfamiliar to them (Bùi Thế Cường, 2005). Ten years later, a survey by the Vietnam National Committee on Aging still indicated that the rate of the elderly's participation in associations was low. However, the proportion of older people accessing the mass media and being well aware of socio-economic issues was quite high (VNCA, 2007).

Over time, nurturing social participation to maintain relationships outside the family sphere has been increasingly emphasised among senior citizens. A study by Lê Ngọc Lân (2010) proved that a certain percentage of the elderly participates in community management activities such as learning promotion movement, movement to build cultural families and cultural residential areas, advising on policy development for local authorities, participating in training courses on agricultural/forestry extension, and disseminating healthcare knowledge for the elderly. In addition, many older people also participated in reconciliation groups and local people's security groups.

The survey on the elderly in 2011 conducted in 12 provinces and cities in six ecological regions, with over 4,000 representatives of the near-elderly and elderly population, also showed that the elderly's sociability was much more positive. About 36.4% of the elderly have joined at least one socio-political organisation or local club. Approximately 71% of the elderly were members of the Association of the Elderly, and 28% of old women were members of the Women's Union. The percentage of older people participating in other organisations such as the Farmers' Union and the Veteran's Association was lower. However, once members, the elderly actively took part in the activities of these organisations. More than 80% of the members of these organisations actively participated in all activities during the year. Through these organisations, the elderly contributed to developing the community and society in many forms such as agricultural extension, study extension, and many more activities (Giang Thanh Long, 2012).

Social participation of the elderly in Vietnam through the activities of the Association of the Elderly is positively evaluated at many levels. As of 2015, the Vietnam Association of the Elderly had 8.3 million members, 11,112 branches, and 100,000 sub-branches. Several branches and sub-branches have also joined the Intergenerational Self-Help Club to implement programmes of microcredit, livelihoods, health promotion, and elderly rights promotion (HelpAge International, 2015). According to a report of the National Vietnam Association of the Elderly, its associations at all levels actively contributed to amending the 1992 Constitution in the direction of increasing rights for the elderly. As a result, the 2013 Constitution defined "the elderly are respected, cared for, and their role is promoted by the State, families, and society" (Clause 3, Article 37); and "The State creates equal opportunities for citizens to enjoy social welfare, develops the social security system, and adopts policies to support the elderly, the disabled, the poor, and other disadvantaged people" (Clause 2, Article 59). This is the highest legal basis for all state levels, sectors and the whole society to care for, nurture, and promote the role of the elderly (MOLISA & UNFPA, 2016). According to the recently updated statistics of the Vietnam Association of the Elderly, there are currently 656,000 elderly people nationwide participating in various institutions of the Party, government, Fatherland Front, other mass organisations, and within people's inspection and grassroots reconciliation. There are 300,150 elderly people participating in people's security groups at the grassroots level (Vietnam Association of the Elderly, 2021).

Social organisations at the grassroots level attract the participation of the elderly and play an important role in taking care of the elderly such as reconciliation groups, sports clubs, and other

recreational organisations (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Tùng, 2016; Đoàn Vương Diễm Khánh et al., 2019; Nguyễn Hữu Minh & Lê Thúy Hằng, 2020). By the end of 2021, there were 77,149 elderly's clubs at the grassroots level with various types of cultural, artistic, and sports activities, attracting over 2.5 million elderly people to participate annually. Local associations for the elderly proactively or coordinately organise sports tournaments, singing festivals, fitness contests, and dances, creating a joyful and healthy atmosphere for the elderly. The Central Association has cooperated with the General Department of Physical Education and Sports to organise national sports tournaments for the elderly. Hundreds of groups and individuals have received medals of all kinds (Vietnam Association for the Elderly, 2021). In addition, there are nearly 3,500 intergenerational self-help clubs that have been established in a short time and operated in most of the country (Central of Vietnam Association for the Elderly, 2020).

The above data show various forms of social participation of the elderly in Vietnam, mainly focusing on indicators of participation in social organisations or participation in communities and local activities. There are no studies on social participation as a measure of the active ageing process of the elderly in Vietnam, nor do they consider childcare and elderly care as indicators of social participation.

2.3. Research method

The database of the article is based on results from a qualitative survey with 71 elderly people aged 55 years and older that was conducted in two years 2021-2022 in four communes and wards in Hanoi and Vĩnh Long province, including Hàng Bạc ward (Hoàn Kiếm district), Dục Tú commune (Đông Anh district), Ward 4 (Vĩnh Long city), and Song Phú commune (Tam Bình district). The reason for choosing diverse locations of residence is to see the possible impact of the activity space of the elderly, their neighbourhoods, and institutions on their social participation. The elderly in these four localities were selected on a gender balance and according to the criteria of age group (divided into four groups: under 60 years old, 60-64 years old, 65-69 years old, and over 70 years old); family status (with spouse and/or children) and migration status. The in-depth interviews were conducted directly at home or the meeting room of the ward/commune's elderly association, ensuring privacy and familiarity.

3. Forms of social participation of the elderly in Vietnam

3.1. Care to children and grandchildren

The 2009-2019 Census data shows that the percentage of the elderly living with their children and other caregivers still accounts for more than two-thirds of the total number of households with the elderly (GSO 2021, p.22). Our research results affirm that, at present,

older people still desire and like to live with their children and grandchildren. They are only willing to leave their children when housing conditions do not allow expanding the household size. Due to the nature of such family arrangements, the fact that the elderly spend time and effort taking care of their children and grandchildren is considered by themselves an obvious responsibility of being parents and grandparents, as well as the joy of old age.

The practice of caring for family members is first expressed through taking care of children. Living with children, old parents consider it their responsibility to help and support the household chores. Doing housework, including going to markets, cooking, and house cleaning are the main activities that many older people indicated in the interviews.

“The main [responsible person for] housework is me, cooking, sweeping, and then taking care of my grandchildren. When it comes to food, she [daughter-in-law] goes to the market in the morning, I prepare food for meals, or I go to buy food as exercise” (Interview No. 47, female, 78 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

“When I wake up in the morning to do exercise, I sweep the house from upstairs to downstairs, then sweep the yard. His mother [daughter-in-law] got up earlier to brush her teeth, wash her face, and then go back to her room to practice yoga” (Interview No. 28a, male, 74 years old, Dục Tú, Hanoi).

“I am still healthy to help my children comfortably. Children can rest assured that when they come home from work, they just need to eat and rest” (Interview No. 38, female, 74 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

Not only taking care of the daily household chores some also take care of the daughter-in-law while she is in confinement:

“Everybody thought I was her mother. During the caesarean section, I cleaned her body, changed her clothes, carried her home, and cleaned up. After her delivery, she stayed here and I took care of her for 3-4 months. Two months before her return to work, she went to her mother’s home, but the first few months after giving birth, she stayed here. In the early mornings, I went to the market to buy food to cook for my daughter-in-law so she could have enough milk for the baby” (Interview No. 36b, female, 68 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

Along with taking care of the housework, many old people with pensions are also in charge of the family’s expenses:

“I am in charge [of the family expenses], and my children contribute a supplement. Now the living standards are high, in the past, we only ate rice. I cook during the weekdays. On Saturday and Sunday, I’m off work, and my daughter-in-law will cook. She will buy whatever she likes” (Interview No. 36a, female, 72 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

Research results on the elderly in 2018 also showed that about 28% of the elderly provide material, financial, and instrumental support for their children (Vũ Công Nguyên et al., 2020). Many older people are even in charge of durable things like buying a house and dividing the land for their children:

“When each child grew up, I arranged houses for them and helped them set up [their life] at the beginning. At that time, having millions of VND was still rare, so I gave each child

about VND 40-60 million, and they had to contribute the rest. By doing that, I succeeded in arranging four houses for my children. The land reserved for the eldest son is still the land I am living on now. I think the eldest son must always have more than his siblings because he is responsible for the place of worship” (Interview No. 42, male, 81 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

At any stage of the life cycle, taking care of their children’s lives has become a permanent responsibility that Vietnamese elderly take on throughout their lives. This parental responsibility can be deepened by the concept of activity space for the elderly in Vietnam, which is mostly confined to the family, along with the intimate primary relationships between the elderly and their children and grandparents. This practice is further clarified when we review more than 700 pages of our interview minutes discussing with the elderly their life, activities, health, and thoughts. In which, words indicating family relationships such as “grandparents”, “father/parents”, “wife/husband”, “children”, “descendants”, “sons”, and “daughters” all have frequencies from 500 to nearly 1,000 times. In that space of familiar relationships, older people naturally expand the scope of their parenting responsibilities to even taking care of their grandchildren.

Taking care of children and grandchildren becomes a package of responsibilities attached to co-residing with the children of the elderly. Not only taking care of their children and grandchildren living with them, grandparents also take care of their children who are not living with them anymore:

“He lives with me, I raise him, how can I not assist him? Now in my family, he and his wife with three children are five, plus my husband and I are seven members. Previously, I still worked part-time and gave my husband seven million, but I still paid for [grandchildren’s] school fees, electricity, water, food, and drink. Every day I have to spend on buying milk for my grandchildren. Considering our expenditures now, ten million sometimes is not enough. Years ago, my daughter’s family also co-resided with us. When my son got married, I let my daughter’s family live on its own. After more than a year, we bought our daughter a house to live separately, but they still come here to have dinner with us” (Interview No. 29, female, 62 years old, Dục Tú commune, Hanoi).

Those with a monthly pension who do not co-reside with children choose to give their children a few extra funds to support their grandchildren:

“I still have to support my child, because education expenditure for my grandchildren is expensive. Now they have to buy costly educational equipment¹. I do not have to look after them, as they are all grown up. But I still have to buy food for them. My children do not have time to cook. Before they were quarantined, now they even got Covid” (Interview No. 36, female, 72 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

¹ Due to social distancing in the Covid-19 pandemic, children had to take online courses instead of going to schools. So, they had to be equipped with an Ipad, a laptop, or a smartphone for online learning (author’s explanation).

Among those who are still able to continue working to earn a living, many older people are willing to sacrifice the opportunity to generate income for their old age security to stay at home to take care of their grandchildren to help their children:

“Taking care of my grandchildren, there is no more income, staying home to assist my children, doing this or that” (Interview No. 52, female, 68 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

“Now I am old, and I have even been busy taking care of my grandchildren, so my kids told me to stop [growing rice] and to buy the rice” (Interview No. 28a, male, 74 years old, Dục Tú commune, Hanoi).

Apart from taking care of their grandchildren’s daily life, some grandparents also maintain other expenses for their grandchildren, such as giving gifts to them when they have good academic performance, pass university exams, or on their birthday and other special events. Grandparents who can afford it even buy their grandchildren insurance to prepare for their future. For many older people, taking care of and rewarding their grandchildren becomes the joy of their old age.

“I buy life insurance for my grandchildren, pay the contracts every year until they go to college” (Interview No. 45, female, 65 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

“[I should have] something to encourage the grandkids! Recently, my grandson passed the university exam, so I presented him with a few million VND. He just changed his cellphone, we gave him four million VND. His father said he would like to borrow me money, but I told him I offered him the money, and not necessary to borrow. He needed to buy a motorbike for his son to go to school, we also contributed a half, plus one more million for the motorbike registration” (Interview No. 28a, male, 74 years old, Dục Tú commune, Hanoi).

Our interview minutes also revealed the repeated usage of the adjectives “worried”, “anxious”, and “responsible”, with a high frequency of concentration when it comes to stories about the descendants. The above evidence suggests that children and grandchildren have become the significant others of the elderly, which helps establish the connection and living environment of the elderly mainly within the family. However, this indicator is not necessarily considered an indicator of the ability of the elderly to live independently and actively in Vietnam today.

3.2. Care to older adults

Over the past decade, the elderly in Vietnam are tending to live more independently from their children. The results of the Census 2019 recorded an increase of 10 percentage points in the group of old people living with their spouses or alone (from 18.36% in 2009 to 27.84% in 2019) (GSO, 2021). Many scholars stated that the causes of this situation are that older people today are more independent (Giang Thanh Long & Pfau W.D., 2007; VNCA & GIZ, 2014), the family size is now smaller, children want to live alone (J. E. Knodel

& Nguyen Minh Duc, 2015; Teerawichitchainan et al., 2015), and because of migration (Nguyen Van Cong & Tran Thi Truc, 2016; VNCA & UNFPA, 2019). Regardless of the causes, the fact of living alone or with spouses leads old people to take care of their ageing spouse and even their old parents:

“My wife is responsible for my father. If he sleeps here, I will stay there, and she sleeps outside. When he is well enough, I can skip [sleeping next to him], and I can also quit looking after him as long as he can walk” (Interview No. 53, male, 61 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

In addition to fulfilling children’s responsibilities to elderly parents, the data on the mutual care of elderly spouses present a more proactive and relaxed attitude in the division of labour or living arrangements. For example, between an elderly couple, there is almost no clear division of responsibility and obligation.

“If she cooks rice, then I cook this and that and do the washing. We do things of our own will and do not assign tasks to each other. I do whatever I have free time. But she does the majority, and I do supplementary” (Interview No. 48, male, 55 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

“There are no assignments, now we two get along very well. For example, when we have guests coming over for a meal, there are many dishes, then she does the cleaning, and I do the rinsing. It is the same with cleaning the house, whoever finds it dirty will clean it without considering it the wife or husband’s task” (Interview No. 51, male, 58 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

“[We] assist each other and I do the cooking. I am the main cook. Now it is like there is nothing to do” (Interview No. 46, male, 60 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

Along with housework, expenditure management has also become more customised and easier than when older people had to shoulder more family responsibilities with their children and grandchildren:

“My pension is three million, [I] give her two million, and I keep only one million for my spending. Sometimes it took me just a few days to use up one million. If my spouse keeps it, we still have money, otherwise, I would spend it all. Currently, the next month’s pension has not yet come but I have no penny left” (Interview No. 28a, male, 74 years old, Dục Tú commune, Hanoi). “He keeps money in his pocket as if he is afraid it would jump all the way, so he just buys this and buys that. He bought duck meat for us then he had to buy another for our eldest son’s family. If he buys something, he always gets it for both households to be fair. If we eat together, it is not necessary to buy the food separately. But as we eat separately, he would buy for both” (Interview No. 28b, female, 67 years old, Dục Tú commune, Hanoi).

Although the common desire of the elderly is to live with their children and grandchildren, some people choose to live separately while they are still healthy and can take care of each other. As the saying goes, “The care of children cannot compare to that of a spouse.”

“Living separately is more comfortable, not dependent on children. Of course, it is good to be taken care of by our children, but as I am still healthy, it is not my children’s turn to

take care of me. If I can do it on my own, I will be more comfortable” (Interview No. 48, male, 67 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

Examining the mutual care practice among old people, it can be seen that they subjectively prepare for ageing together, keeping a balance to welcome old age:

“Nothing [to prepare for later life] right now. Mental relaxation is the most important because I have a decent pension. We should nurture our mental well-being, too, because if our thoughts are at ease, husband and wife get along well, and we will live a long life. If we keep overthinking, our health will not be good and we will not live long” (Interview No. 48, male, 67 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

Or they prepare themselves some savings for old age or the end of life for themselves and their partners:

“As for me, now I also have to consider the balance of business resources, assets, land, and expenses. There must be considerations in case there might be a problem with old age. Right now everything is still normal, nothing specific, but I think each year I adjust step by step according to the conditions that I calculate” (Interview No. 53, male, 65 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

“As for the grave, I already bought it ten years ago. I built one grave for my husband and the other for me. Then I registered myself in the pagoda goers group, Buddhist chanting, and reciting group, contributing VND 20,000 per month, VND 240,000 a year. Later on, in my last moment, people would come to chant and recite for me. If I would not have money, at least I could still get a coffin or get chanted” (Interview No. 43, female, 63 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

In taking care of each other, Vietnamese seniors have also made certain preparations for their old age. The attitude towards ageing among older people is somewhat active and positive when they can narrow the scope of their activity space to meet their own needs and aspirations.

3.3. Participating in voluntary activities

Examining the participation in voluntary activities of the elderly in Vietnam leads us to another activity space, where they step out from familiar primary contacts to participate in collective and community activities. In this section, we look at how older people participate in voluntary activities based on their neighbourhoods.

Voluntary activities can be carried out in many forms, formal or informal, part-time or full-time, voluntarily for the common good and not for profit. Due to constraints in physical strength, mobility, time availability, and local expertise, older people almost only choose to participate part-time in voluntary activities within their residence area.

In the surveyed areas, the participation of the elderly in social organisations is prominent through the associations for the elderly, veterans associations, and women’s

unions. Among them, the Vietnam Association of the Elderly is considered to be the most suitable organisation and attracts the most participation of the elderly in localities. Senior citizens join these organisations first of all because they find their activities suitable for their needs. At the same time, it can also protect their interests, as well as contribute to the local common activities.

The Vietnam Association of the Elderly is organised into branches at the village level, gathering senior members living in the area to participate in social activities. It is also the institution to care, nurture, and promote the role of the elderly and protect their interests. Thus, elderly people are both partners and beneficiaries when participating in the association. To join and maintain membership, each person needs to pay an annual membership fee of VND 24,000 (equivalent to USD 1,00). This funding, along with a one-time contribution upon joining (usually a few hundred thousand, to raise funds for the association), is used for visiting members in sickness or paying visits to members' funerals.

With simple requirements, the Vietnam Association of the Elderly is considered an organisation operating based on the voluntary participation of its members. It has implemented activities that bring practical benefits to its members. For example, through the association, the enumeration of the elderly eligible for social pension upon reaching age is carried out transparently, ensuring the legal interests of the elderly.

“I like the association the most because it has practical activities. For example, in my hamlet, a member was sick, I heard the news and then gathered other members to visit and console him. His family warmly welcomed us, which made me feel proud too. In case of a funeral, the head and vice-head of the association were present, and I as a member also went to the funeral. We formed a group representing our institution, though each one gave their own money to the deceased's family. The association also has a budget to buy incense, lamps, fruit, and cakes to pay the last visit to its members. Then the membership fee of the deceased member is returned to the family” (Interview No. 50, male, 72 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

The elderly themselves also have positive evaluations of their participation in local social activities. They go out to meet their peers, have fun chatting together, or share thoughts - that makes their minds at ease and is good for their mental health. Every year, they also organise a party to celebrate the members' longevity, and then they might take each other to go travelling and pay visits to pagodas here and there. Each person contributes a little but brings joy to each other. Then, there are also health clubs, arts, sports, and others voluntarily organised by the elderly, both diversifying the daily activities of the elderly and strengthening the relationship between neighbours and each other. In addition, the association even has a fund with a small amount of capital for internal loans. Whoever needs money for medical examination and treatment can be loaned; or if any member is in difficulty, the association also deducts funds to give him/her as a gift to shoulder him/her in their hard time. Through such activities, the elderly feel that they live useful lives. This can help explain the current number of older people's associations and

clubs, which have grown in number and type across the country (Vietnam Association of the Elderly, 2021).

Besides participating in social organisations working for the community, the elderly also participate in voluntary activities organised by local authorities. In particular, in the past two years, the pandemic has seen the elderly undertake many volunteer activities in the community. From checking the list of infected people, monitoring the isolation at home, to the isolation checkpoint; as well as going on patrol and surveillance, then to the vaccination teams and market groups - all saw the presence of old people.

“We have had a hard time with COVID-19. My injection team almost went to every alley, every corner, and also to the shops, going from house to house. At first, [people] were afraid to inject, but seeing people injecting too much, they asked for it. After giving the invitation, they did not inject. When people got all the injections, they impatiently asked for them again. I don’t know how many laps I had to go” (Interview No. 43, female, 63 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

Assessing the voluntary activities of the elderly in the form of being a member of social organisations or being mobilised into specific volunteer activities to serve the community, we can see the shift in interaction and connection activities of old people from the family context to the context of the broader neighbourhoods. However, these interactions still largely revolve around the scope of the neighbourhood space. For those who have lived their whole life or most of their lives in one location, the social connections of older people in this area still basically belong to their familiar operating space. They own this space, establish connections with their neighbours, friends, and groups, and find themselves safe in it.

3.4. Political participation

Political participation is any voluntary activity undertaken by older people to directly influence public policies or influence the selection of those who make those policies (C. J. Uhlaner, 2015). In this section, we will examine the political participation of the elderly as demonstrated by how they hold important positions in the local administration, and how they participate in public meetings and give suggestions to local communities and local government policies or decisions.

At the grassroots level, members of the Association of the Elderly can be seen taking a responsible part in many activities such as in the Fatherland Front, in the Party cells, and in social organisations. As mentioned above, in the past two years, the elderly have actively joined in pandemic prevention activities. At the residential level, they participate in party organisations, authorities, cell branches, neighbourhood groups, and reconciliation groups. Two leading positions at the village level are usually held by the elderly as the Secretary of the Party and the Head of the Fatherland Front. In this matter, it can be stated that the participation of the elderly in political activities at the grassroots level is quite common.

Another indicator that helps identify the political positivity of the elderly is their participation in public meetings. Our data indicates the prevalence and consistency of elderly men as representatives of households participating in people's meetings and giving opinions in defence of regulations and justice.

“I have to go to neighbourhood meetings. My wife is busy, and everyone has been at work all day, so I go to the evening meetings to join our neighbourhood. I care about security, social problems, family affairs, and the neighbourhood, that's all. To earn a living, people have to roll out on the street to do business. Of course, when they do their business, they have to respect the law, not just sit around and do dirty things. I am adamant about that. If I find them wrong, I will insist on getting rid of the wrong deeds. The authority allows us to do business, we have to pay full taxes in return, we cannot do it for our own sake only” (Interview No. 41, male, 68 years old, Hàng Bạc ward, Hanoi).

The political activity of the elderly is promoted and encouraged by legal corridors to promote their role, namely the Constitution, as the highest one. They are the basis for local authorities not only to care but also to use old people's voices and reputations in management and administration activities. Old people's opinions are not only consulted through meetings but also expressed in the fact that they are approached by government leaders to ask for advice:

“The younger commune/ward leaders also care for the opinions of the old men, pay attention and listen. Sometimes, if they want to do something, they will also meet me to get a consultation. They seek various opinions, then they can choose and apply the most suitable ones. [...] I am also excited and happy because they still trust me” (Interview No. 54, male, 68 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

Senior people's integrity and frankness in reflecting on the local situation are the reason why their voices are respected and listened to:

“For example during the COVID-19 period, I saw a household having infected members. The ward official respected me and asked me whether there was any infected case. If there was not any case, I would report no case. But if there was still that household with a sick member I would have to tell the truth. That household might think badly of me, blaming me for tracing the leaves to find worms. They were so afraid of quarantine camp that they decided to do the treatment at home. Everything could be fine if the treatment went well. But if it did not and became an outbreak, who would be responsible for it? If I did not report it, the authority would never know. So I reported, then my prestige was reserved” (Interview No. 45, female, 65 years old, Ward 4, Vĩnh Long).

Of course, it is not always the case for any elderly that their voices are heard and trusted. Besides those who actively participate in local issues, some people do not want to connect with others. Some people were mobilised back and forth five to seven times by the mass organisations but they still do not take part in any local activities or social organisations.

Overall assessment of their social participation in the locality, some see it first and foremost as an activity beneficial to their physical health, providing them with an important source of information, a way to help them integrate into society, as well as a channel to open economic opportunities for the family:

“[Firstly], if you do not go back and forth, if you do not do this or that, you won’t have normal health. Secondly, you go back and forth to talk with other neighbours, you would get news on your surroundings. And if you do not go out to socialise, you do not even say greetings to others, you won’t know anything except what happens in your own house and your yard. Then sometimes when people tell jokes, you cannot even smile. So old age is to live up to the end, as long as you can walk, just do it. If you can do something in a club, let’s join and play. If you can’t, then you can join a bonsai club, and then you guys can talk to each other. For example, people do not exchange bonsai stuff but discuss other business issues, and then you go back and tell your children and grandchildren how others do business. But if you stay at home, it is nothing” (Interview No. 51, male, 58 years old, Song Phú commune, Vĩnh Long).

Participating in social activities in the locality can bring benefits to the elderly. They can participate in contributing to local development. The process of connecting with people around gives them common interests, creating opportunities to talk, share, confide, and understand each other, thereby helping them to expand their connections with surrounding people, as well as expand the scope of their activities, to more easily adapt to the ageing process of themselves and those around them.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of qualitative research on older people conducted in 2021-2022, the article examined the current social participation practices of the elderly in Vietnam according to four criteria of active ageing. Accordingly, taking care of children and grandchildren is considered a permanent responsibility and concern of the elderly. It results in the fact that the activity space of the elderly remains within the family and primary relationships. This might be a negative indicator for the elderly to prepare for active ageing in the near future. As for the indicator of caring for older adults, research results suggest that when taking off responsibilities for their children, the elderly seem to prepare better for their old age. Examining voluntary and political participation of the elderly, we find a shift from familiar relationships to social contacts, although it is still based on familiar residential areas. Political participation is a further engagement of the elderly in the realm of purely social relations. Many hold important positions and roles in the management apparatus, express their voice, and promote their role in the community. In general, it can be seen that the social participation process of the elderly in Vietnam is influenced by their

activity space. Accordingly, the fact that old people place themselves in the space of primary relationships can be an obstacle to their active ageing process.

Studying social participation as an indicator of active ageing of the elderly in Vietnam is a new approach, because it places senior individuals at the centre of their relationships with their significant others. Besides this, assessing the social participation indicators of the elderly from the life course approach and considering their activity space can suggest that the construction of infrastructure and provision of services for the elderly should take into account spatial familiarity to strengthen their sense of security.

Note: Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

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