

A Specific-gender Analysis of Childcare Provision in Vietnam and Policy Implications

Trần Thị Minh Thi*

Received on 1 December 2024. Accepted on 1 June 2025.

Abstract: Vietnam has the diversification of ethnicity and subcultures and shows a complex modernization. Child care responsibilities have shifted away from the family to the provision of daycare services in order to mobilize women into the labor force. Referring to national statistics on care provision and the brand-new Vietnam national survey on gender equality 2024, this paper aims to unpick structural and gender roles in the provision and typologies of child care in contemporary Vietnam. The paper first analyzes the development of child care policies and provisions under the forces of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market-oriented one, which has transformed the political economy of family life, and exposed Vietnamese people to liberal and individualistic western family values. Secondly, the paper emphasizes the role of gender and cultural influences on family ties under the umbrella of state policies to develop emerging child care issues for policy implications. In particular, how child care is divided at both family and social levels in the context of changing family functions, changing values attached to children, increasing living standards, high rates of migration, lower fertility, gender dynamics generating new family structures, and limited maternity cover.

Keywords: Child care, child education, Vietnam, gender.

Subject classification: Sociology.

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the *Đổi mới* (Renovation) in 1986, Vietnam has successfully overcome the consequences of war, embargoes, and difficulties stemming from the centrally planned economy in the early 1980s, and has transitioned to a socialist-oriented market economy. In the first decades of the 21st century, Vietnam was developing rapidly in terms of the economy, culture, and society thanks to the open-door policy, economic integration, and international exchange as well as important reforms in the policy and legal systems. Statistics indicate that real GDP per capita soared from less than USD 700 in 1986 to almost

* Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Email: thichuong@gmail.com

USD 4,500 in 2023, although the rural-urban gap is glaring, with the urban population earning almost double that of its rural counterpart (General Statistics Office, 2023). This economic transition has redefined Vietnamese families, shifting them toward a nuclear family structure with smaller average household sizes (3.4 people in 2019) and increasing female participation in the labor market (General Statistics Office, 2019). However, this shift has exposed a critical gap in child care as families struggle to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. Rising marriage ages, declining fertility rates, and evolving societal values, such as greater acceptance of single motherhood and women's sexual autonomy (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021), further highlight the changing family dynamics and the growing need for comprehensive child care provision.

Strong economic changes take place simultaneously with strong cultural and social changes, including within the family, because they create substantial changes in all areas of social life. Vietnamese families are currently undergoing a strong transformation, showing obvious nuclearization with an average family size of 3.4 people in 2019 (General Statistics Office, 2019), and extensive participation of women in the labor market. Marriage remains universally popular, yet the age couples marry for the first time has tended to increase in recent decades (General Statistics Office, 2022). Families have been establishing new values about love, sex, and marriage, such as higher social acceptance of premarital cohabitation, celibacy, women's sexual autonomy, childlessness, and single motherhood (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021).

The economic function of the household is changing, moving towards the family becoming more of a consumer unit. The educational function of the family is at risk of decline because many people are still confused about determining the content and methods of educating their children in the context of the internet explosion, rapidly changing cyberspace and social space, the pressure of work, migration, care and rapid changes in children's psychology in the period of deep international integration (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021). Vietnamese families show a strong connection among family members and filial piety is a highly valued practice (Trịnh Duy Luân & Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2017).

Vietnam attaches importance to promoting gender equality in the family and society and has made great progress in pursuing this and women's rights in all areas. In 2023, Vietnam ranked 72/146 countries in narrowing the gender gap index, up 11 places compared to 2022, and up 15 places compared to 2021 (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2023a) in the top group in Southeast Asia. The country is putting emphasis on mobilizing women to participate in the labor force. By 2019 more than 70% of women were in the labour force (General Statistics Office, 2019), promoting gender equality and improving the status of women, driven by the socialist ideology of women's liberation; this saw women's economic independence by working outside the home and participating in social production.

Economic integration contributes to boosting the economy, thereby raising people's income and living standards, helping women become more economically independent and self-determined in matters related to their lives, such as the high rate of women initiating divorce (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2023b). In the family sphere,

although the dual-earner nuclear family model became the norm, gender inequality remained challenging, including few women representatives in the political system, gender inequality in terms of salary, and lower female coverage in the social insurance system (Nguyen Hai Dat & Dao Thi Vi Phuong, 2023). At the same time, the division of household responsibilities remained unequal and the double burden for women was felt to be acute, such as women spending 2.87 times more than men in unpaid care work (World Bank, 2023). As a result of higher gender equality, stronger individualization, as in 2023, the total fertility rate first declined after decades to 1.96 children per woman. For years, the rate of women participate in the labour market is relatively high (i.e. over 70% of women participate in the labour market) yet this rate has started to decrease significantly since 2020 to 62.9% in 2023 (General Statistics Office, 2024).

Vietnam values children highly (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021); however, this is changing. Historically, having children, and particularly many offspring, was one of the important priorities of marriage and family, with sayings such as ‘many children, many assets’ [đông con, đông của], or ‘children are saving property’ [con cái là của để dành]. Today, children continue to be an important part of marriage, but the Vietnamese no longer want to have many children, especially those with a modern outlook (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021), with the obvious trend of decreasing birth rates in some large modern cities such as Ho Chi Minh City (General Statistics Office, 2019). The value of children is gradually shifting from social ones (i.e., preferring sons), security (i.e., taking care of parents in old age), economic (i.e. having a source of labor) to psychological and emotional values (i.e., having children means happiness and enjoying the feeling of being a parent) (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021). Therefore, child care and education are top concerns of the family and society. This can be seen through the multi-layered pillars of care: (1) *the state*, through the system of institutions, policies, care services, education, and social security; (2) *the family*, through the care and education role of family members; (3) *the market* providing child care services; and (4) *the community* that further supports care activities, in which the role of the state and family is the most significant.

By reviewing current policies on child care in Vietnam, analyzing national statistics on kindergartens, as well as findings from brand-new state-level independent project "Research and overall assessment of gender equality for sustainable development", code 02/22-DTĐL.XH-XNT, sponsored by the Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology launched in the years 2022-2025, led by the author, including a national survey on gender equality, this paper sheds light on gender gaps in child care provision in both the family and social levels, and suggests policy implications. This national survey on gender equality builds a basic, comprehensive information system on gender equality in the fields of: i) Politics, leadership and management; ii) Education, training, science and technology; iii) Economy, labor and employment; iv) Health care; v) Family; vi) Gender-based violence; and vii) Respond to climate change, natural disasters, epidemics and environmental disasters. The survey was conducted on a sample of 9,094 people aged 18 and over representing six economic and social regions of Vietnam. The national survey applied in-person interviews using questionnaires, have just completed in July 2024.

2. Expansion of public child care service and exacerbating gaps

2.1. Legal provision of child care

In Vietnam's socialist-oriented market economy, child care policies are integrated through legal provisions, parental leave, and daycare arrangements, shaping family functions and child caregiving in today's society. The State restructures the family model and functions, as well as shaping behavioral patterns for child care and education in the process of modernization. Currently, Vietnam has issued a number of laws and policies to protect, care for, and educate children. The 2015 Penal Code (amended and supplemented in 2017) includes new regulations on dealing with people under 18 years old who commit crimes as well as the child victims of crime. All children are eligible for free legal aid in the form of legal advice, participation in litigation and out-of-court representation. Decision No.1437/QĐ-TTg dated October 29, 2018 of the Prime Minister approves the project on care for the comprehensive development of children in their early years in the family and community for the period 2018-2025; Directive No.28-CT/TW dated December 25, 2023 of the Politburo is on strengthening child care, education, and protection to meet the requirements of national development.

The most important legal document is the Law on Child Protection, Care and Education (normally called the Law on Children) approved by the National Assembly in 1991, amended in 2004 and in 2016. The law identifies 25 children's rights and five children's responsibilities. Specifically, Chapters III and VI define the various responsibilities of government levels, agencies, organizations, families, and individuals in guaranteeing the care, education, recreational, and communication activities of children. This revised law defines these as follows: "Children, whether female or male, born in or out of wedlock, biological or adopted, born to either or both parties to a marriage; irrespective of their nationality, beliefs, religion, social background and position as well as the political opinions of their parents or guardians, are all protected, cared for and educated, and enjoy rights prescribed by law".

In public services, children under 6 years old are entitled to free health insurance (Articles 7 and 3, Decree No.146/2018/ND-CP, and Article 6, Clause 1, in the Law on Health Insurance amended and supplemented in 2014); they are entitled to free bus transport; children under 12 years old are exempted or benefit from reduced fares when traveling by plane (Article 147, Item 6, Vietnam Civil Aviation Law, No.03/VBHN-VPQH 2023); and under Decree No.81/2021/ND-CP dated August 27, 2021 of the Government the following are eligible for free school tuition during the 2024-2025 school year: public primary school pupils, pre-school children up to 5 years old, children living in vulnerable conditions such as the ethnic minorities in mountainous regions, children of communes in coastal areas and islands that face economic issues, poor households, and those who lack basic care provisions (Decree No.81/2021/ND-CP of the Government).

2.2. *Parental leave*

The length and generosity of parental leave is significant because this supports the recovery process from having a baby and during the first period of breastfeeding. The key legal documents which define the architecture and design of maternity protection in Vietnam are the Labor Code (2019), Social Insurance Law (2014), and Decree No.39/2015/ND-CP on cash benefits for Ethnic Minority women, along with a system of other sub-laws. Maternity protection for workers is regulated by the 2019 Labor Code that sets out specific regulations to ensure gender equality and maternity protection, and it prohibits discriminatory action against women. Maternity protection outlined in the Social Insurance Law (2014) and its 2024 amendment offers benefits for seven types of workers: pregnant female employees; female employees giving birth to children; female employees as surrogate mothers and intended mothers; female workers using surrogacy; employees adopting under 6-month-old children; female employees having intrauterine devices or employees taking sterilization measures; male employees currently paying social insurance premiums whose wives give birth to. The maternity benefits covered by the Social Insurance Law (2024) include: prenatal check-ups, miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancy, and giving birth, as stipulated in articles 51, 52, 53 of Social Insurance Law (2024). ; cash benefits for one month's maternity are equal to 100% of one's average salary over the most recent six months preceding maternity leave on which social insurance premiums are based, as stated by article 59 of Social Insurance Law (2024). Female employees are entitled to six months pre- and post-natal leave under the maternity benefits scheme. A female employee who gives birth to more than one baby is entitled to an additional one month's leave per infant from the second baby. Male employees whose wives give birth are entitled to five to 14 days paternity leave depending on the type of delivery and the number of new borns. Female employees who have a multiple pregnancy and, if at childbirth, the fetus dies in the uterus or during delivery, maternity leave and benefits and a one-time allowance upon childbirth are calculated based on the number of fetuses, including live, dead, and stillborn babies. Male employees whose wives die after giving birth or who suffer poor health are entitled to their wife's maternity leave. Within 30 days from the end of their maternity leave, female employees who have not got better are entitled to a period of rest and recuperation, as article 60 of Social Insurance Law (2024). Additionally, female employees who give birth or employees who adopt children under 6 months old or adopt through surrogacy are entitled to a lump-sum allowance, as article 58 of Social Insurance Law (2024) stated, equaling twice their basic salary (statutory pay rate) for each child in the month of childbirth or child adoption. In cases where the mother gives birth but only the father is covered by social insurance, the latter is entitled to a lump-sum allowance equaling twice his basic salary for each child in the month of childbirth. The Government issued Decree No.39/2015/ND-CP stipulating policies to support poor women from ethnic minorities when giving birth. Accordingly, "in compliance with the Government population policy" they are supported by 2 million VND/person from the first month after giving birth.

2.3. Day-care arrangement

In Vietnam, preschool education [giáo dục mầm non] is the first level in the national educational system. It sets the foundation for the comprehensive development of the Vietnamese, nurturing, caring for, and educating children from 3 months to 6 years of age (Article 23 of the Law on Education 2019). Preschool education includes nursery education (for children aged 3 to 36 months [nhà trẻ]) and senior kindergarten (for children aged 3 to 5 years [mẫu giáo]) (Articles 6 and 26 of the Law on Education 2019, No.43/2019/QH14). It is divided into public and private (non-public) education. Kindergartens are further divided into two age-groups before enrolment in primary education, for children 3 to 5 years old, and preschool universalization (phổ cập học sinh mầm non) for 5 to 6 year olds (Article 4, Decree No.20/2014/ND-CP on educational universalization and illiteracy eradication). There are therefore three forms of preschool educational institutions: (1) nursery schools [nhà trẻ] and independent nursery groups [nhóm trẻ độc lập], receiving children from 3 months until 36 months; (2) kindergarten schools and independent kindergarten classes [lớp mẫu giáo độc lập] receiving children from 3-6 years old; and (3) pre-primary schools and independent pre-primary classes combining both nursery and kindergarten types, receiving children from 3 months to 6 years old (Article 26, Law on Education 2019).

In the senior kindergartens for children 3-5 years old, the number of children in public senior kindergartens is about five times higher than that of children in the private sector (Table 1). In 84.2% of senior kindergartens children are studying in the public sector, showing the State's decisive role in providing day care services for children as well as the popularity and availability of senior kindergartens for older children. Vietnam also shows a very high rate of children (85.3%) aged 3-5 years attending senior kindergartens and the rate is even higher for the 5 year old group (Table 2).

Similarly, the majority of nursery children are in the public nursery schools. In the school years from 2013-2014 to 2021-2022, the number of children in public nursery schools was about twice as high as that in private nursery schools. In the 2021-2022 school year, there were 613,752 nursery children, of which, 436,796 nursery children in the public sector (equivalent to 71.1%) and of nursery children were in the public sector and 176,956 nursery children in the private sector (equivalent to 28.9%) (Table 1). It is interesting to note that the number of children going to nursery schools or independent nursery groups tended to increase steadily until 2020 after which it started to decrease, in both the public and private sectors. This suggests that there was a very strong social desire for children to go nursery schools prior to the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020-2022.

On the one hand, a drop in the number of nurseries amidst high participation rates of men and women in the labor force has created a huge gap between the social demand for nurseries and the educational system's capacity. While the public sector has not been well prepared to respond to the social demands for children under 3 years old, the private sector has recently played an increasing role in providing care services for young children. It is obvious that caring for children under 3 years old requires high levels of care responsibility, good nutritional

knowledge, a basic knowledge of health care, a separate curriculum, and so on. Therefore, tuition fees and other nursery school costs are higher than kindergarten fees and much higher in private schools. Even so, this does not mean that parents can send children to nurseries at any age. Most private ones only admit children from 18 months of age. And as mothers have to return to work by 6 months after giving birth, the family itself has to fill the gap.

During the 2019-2020 school year, when the 2019 Population and Housing Census was conducted, which also looked the population structure by age, the shortage of preschool services for children under 36 months of age can be seen more clearly. Specifically, only 17.6% of children under 36 months of age went to nursery school (Table 2), in the context that the maternity insurance coverage rate in 2021 was 39.68% of the total of more than 1.5 million Vietnamese women giving birth (Nguyen Hai Dat & Dao Thi Vi Phuong, 2023); for women with maternity insurance, maternity leave was 6 months and this created a huge need for nursery services for women in both the formal and informal sectors, with and without maternity leave insurance. If calculating the population of children aged 1-2 years old only then the enrolment rate was also very low (Table 2).

Table 1: Number of Children in Nurseries and Kindergartens in Vietnam, 2013-2022

	2013-2014	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Total children in nursery	661,877	648,795	676,059	707,990	757,959	780,293	740,733	613,752
Total children in public nurseries	494,387	484,485	477,870	475,709	521,648	521,392	473,724	436,796
Total children in private (non public) nurseries	167,490	164,310	198,189	232,365	236,311	258,901	267,009	176,956
Total children in kindergartens	3,754,975	3,978,521	4,409,576	4,598,546	4,415,233	4,314,744	4,327,735	3,863,032
Total children in public kindergartens	3,280,109	3,470,478	3,771,612	3,855,778	3,709,236	3,573,610	3,546,654	3,251,571
Total children in private (non public) kindergartens	474,866	508,043	637,964	744,063	705,997	741,134	781,081	611,461

Source: Tran Thi Minh Thi calculated from Annual Preschool Statistics, Ministry of Education and Training. <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx?ItemID=7385>

Table 2: Share of Nursery and Kindergarten Children - Total Children by Age

Year	Population under 36 months	Population under 1-2 years old	Population 3-5 years old
Census 2019	4,438,045	3,063,429	5,055,632
The 2019-2020 school year	780,293		4,314,744
-Public school children	521,392		3,573,610
-Private (non-public) school children	258,901		741,134
Enrolment rate	17.6	25.5	85.3

Source: Author calculated from Annual Preschool Statistics, Ministry of Education and Training. <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx?ItemID=7385> and from Census 2019.

This suggests that at least three-quarters of children under 36 months of age are not in any typologies of day-care and are cared for at home. This raises important questions about the roles and responsibilities of child care at home and the double burden faced by Vietnamese women today. The following section discusses how families cope with the limitations of child care due to gaps in service provision.

3. Gender gap in the kindergarten system

Figure 1 shows that the number of children attending nursery school had been increasing over time, but it started to decrease by 2020. This fall may be closely related to the declining birth rate in Vietnam in recent years. Also, the number of girls is less than half of the total, reflecting a gender gap in access to nursery education.

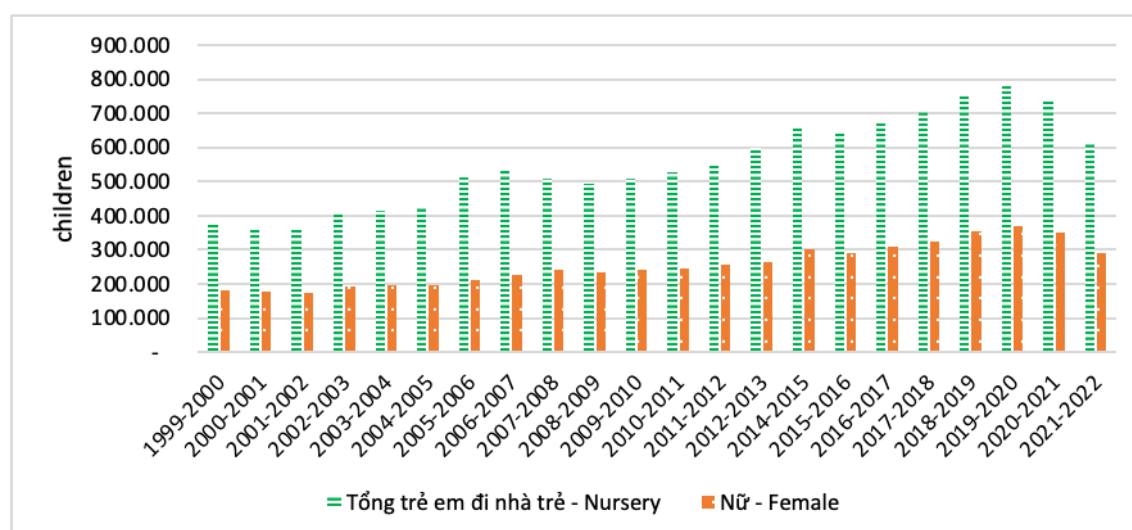
In Vietnam, traditional beliefs still influence parents' decisions to send their children to nursery school; girls may be kept at home more than boys, especially in families with limited economic conditions. In addition, the cost of child care can be a barrier for many households, especially when they prioritize boys in accessing early care services. Younger children still need special care from their families, especially from their mothers. Cultural beliefs make many parents believe that their children are too young to be away from them, and that they, or the grandparents, need to take care of them. This is especially true in the context of strong intergenerational family relationships in Vietnam. Many parents tend to keep their children at home instead of sending them to daycare to ensure the closest attachment and care in the early stages of their child's life. Despite the increasing rate of women participating in the labor

market, a number of women still choose to stop working or do home-based work during the early years of their children's lives. This partly leads to a decrease in the demand for nursery daycare compared to kindergartens, where children's attendance prepares them better to enter primary school.

In addition, early childhood education is increasingly focusing on supporting working parents, especially in the context of rapid urbanization and the expansion of industrial zones that create jobs for young people. However, the rate of children under 3 years old in daycare remains low compared to the total number of children of the same age, as the cost of daycare is high and some areas lack suitable facilities. The school system has not developed evenly in places, especially in rural areas, and the nursery school system has not received as much investment as kindergartens. Public kindergartens are more popular, while nurseries are mainly in form of private or home-based group care, leading to a difference in the number of children attending.

This situation may affect women more, as they are often the ones responsible for taking care of young children. Therefore, expanding the public nursery system, reducing service costs, and providing gender equality in access to preschool education are important solutions to ensure that both boys and girls have the opportunity to develop from an early age.

Figure 1: Quantity of Nursery School Children in Vietnam by Gender in the Period 1999-2022

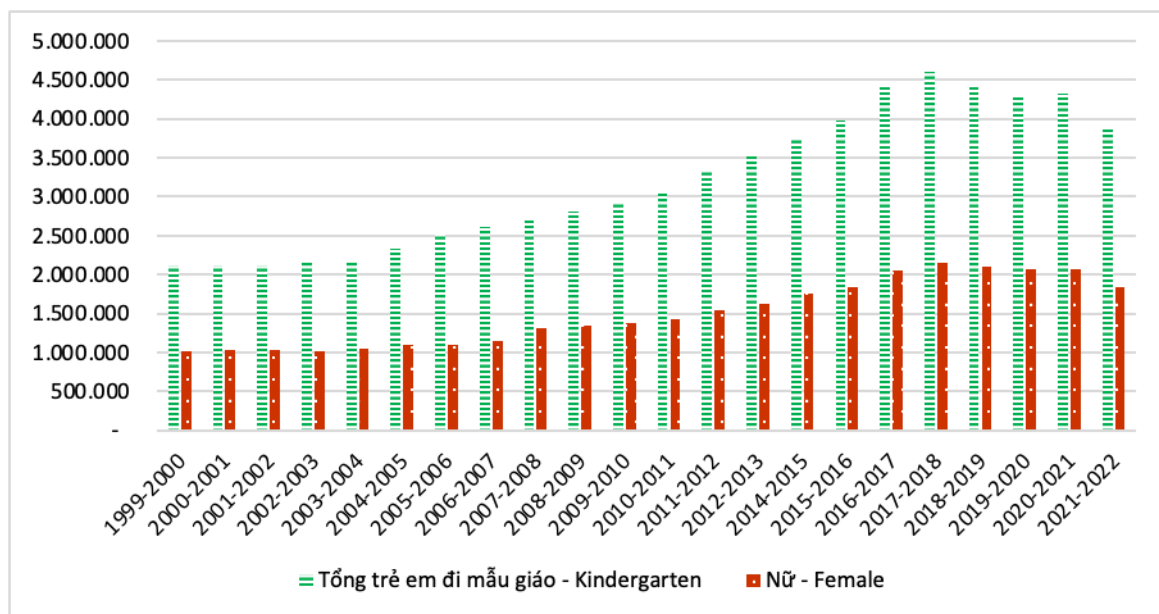


Source: Trần Thị Minh Thi calculated from annual statistics of Ministry of Education and Training via website <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx>, retrieved time December 2024.

Figure 2 shows the number of kindergarten students in Vietnam in the period 1999-2022, divided by the total number of children and the number of girls. The general trend shows that the number of children attending kindergarten has increased, especially since 2010, with significant growth until 2019. However, since

2020, the number of children has tended to decrease slightly, possibly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to many school closures and parents limiting the number of children attending classes. From a gender perspective, the chart shows that the number of girls attending kindergarten is always lower than half of the total number of children, but there is not a significant difference. This shows that Vietnam has achieved a certain gender balance in kindergarten education, reflecting the policy of promoting equality in access to education. Compared to nursery education, the proportion of girls attending kindergarten is higher, which may be because kindergartens are considered an important stage to prepare for primary school.

Figure 2: Quantity of Kindergarten Children in Vietnam by Gender in the Period 1999-2022



Source: Trần Thị Minh Thi calculated from annual statistics of Ministry of Education and Training via website <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx>, retrieved time December 2024.

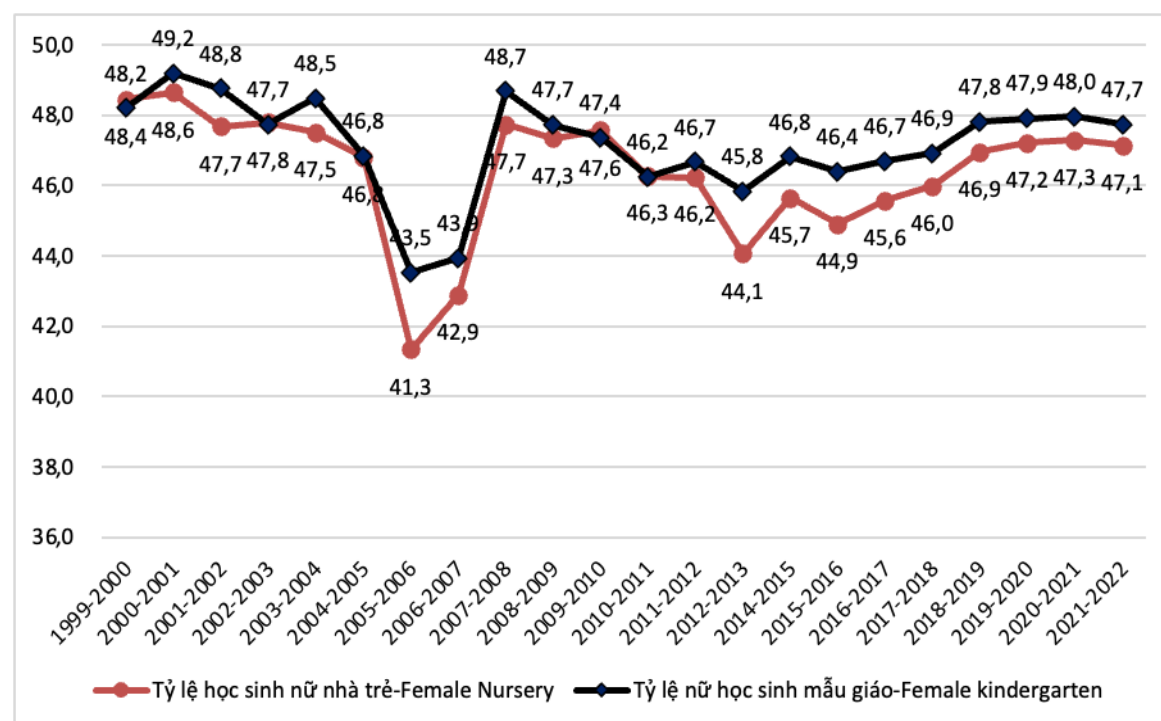
Figure 3 shows the proportion of female preschool children in the period 1999-2022 in Vietnam, divided into two groups: girls attending nursery school and those attending kindergarten. In general, the proportion of females in both groups fluctuates at around 46-48%, showing that the number of girls in school is always lower than boys. In particular, there was a significant decrease in the period 2006-2008, when the proportion of girls fell to the lowest level at around 41-43%, before recovering and stabilizing after 2010. In the period 2006-2008, the proportion of girls in preschool in Vietnam decreased compared to other years, which may stem from the policy of converting semi-public preschools to private ones according to the provisions of law. This process may result in a temporary shortage of public

preschools, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas where parents may not be able to afford private schools. This affects children's access to preschool education, especially for girls.

Since 2012, the higher rate of girls attending school, which may be linked to the socio-economic context of the job market, has meant parents need to send their children to preschool while they go out to work. Supportive policies, such as tuition exemptions for 5 years old and the expansion of the public preschool system, have helped reduce barriers to girls' schooling.

There may be several reasons for the lower rate of girls than boys. One is the socio-cultural factor; in some rural and mountainous areas, traditional notions of gender roles still exist, according to which girls may be expected to help with housework or look after their younger siblings instead of going to school at an early age. This may affect the rate of girls going to nursery school, especially in the early years. The second is the economic factor. The cost of child care is an important issue, especially for low-income families. When faced with the choice of sending their children to school or keeping them at home, some families may favor boys over girls, leading to a gap in enrolment rates and also reflecting gender inequality in access to early childhood education.

Figure 3: The Percentage Distribution of Preschool Children in Vietnam by Gender in the Period 1999-2022



Source: Trần Thị Minh Thi calculated from annual statistics of Ministry of Education and Training via website <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx>, retrieved time December 2024.

4. Strong gendered family care provision and policy implications

In the survey on the role of care in Vietnamese families today, the authors asked two questions: (1) Who is the primary caregiver in the family according to respondents' points of view and expectations, and (2) Who is the actual primary caregiver in the family listing four options: wife, husband, both spouses, and others. Vietnamese families show a high level of sharing the child care role, reflected both in the highest desire and actual sharing of care roles (Table 3); however, there is a very obvious gender difference. The wife is expected to be the primary caregiver much more so than the husband, and this is the case in reality. Respondents themselves also showed strong gender bias in the direction that female respondents self-identified as taking a much higher primary role in child care than male respondents, both in expectations and reality (Table 3). This result reaffirms the double burden that Vietnamese women are still shouldering today, which is contributing to both an economic role and taking on the main caregiving burden in the family with social and cultural norms related to motherhood.

Although most people expect husbands and wives to share child care responsibilities, the reality is that the majority of these responsibilities fall on women. Men tend to expect more equality in child care but participate less in reality. This suggests that measures are needed to promote men's role in child care, to reduce the pressure on women, and ensure gender balance in today's family structure.

Table 3: Expectations and Actual Childcare Providers in Vietnamese Families

		Expectations of primary child care, provider in the family (N=8,467)			Actual primary child care provider in the family (N=7,693)		
		Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Wife	Count	507	1,188	1,695	619	1,822	2,441
	%	13.5	25.2	20.0	18.3	42.2	31.7
Husband	Count	101	99	200	210	85	295
	%	2.7	2.1	2.4	6.2	2.0	3.8
Both spouses	Count	3,094	3,359	6,453	2,097	1,989	4,086
	%	82.3	71.4	76.2	62.1	46.1	53.1
Others	Count	59	60	119	452	419	871
	%	1.6	1.3	1.4	13.4	9.7	11.3
TOTAL	Count	3,761	4,706	8,467	3,378	4,315	7,693
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: National survey on gender equality in Vietnam 2024, National Science Project “Research and assessment of gender equality for sustainable development”, code 02/22-ĐTĐL.XH-XNT, led by Assoc. Prof., PhD. Trần Thị Minh Thi, granted by the Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology, 2022-2025.

The primary person in child education in Vietnam shows a similar trend to child care. In terms of expectations and desires, Vietnamese people want both husband and wife to participate in their child's education, but in reality, the role of joint care is much lower than expected. Regarding the role of the husband or wife, people, especially women themselves, still expect the wife to play the main role in their child's education. In fact, the wife also plays the main role in their child's education. Although men, especially fathers, have increasingly participated in this area, the role of women, specifically mothers, remains dominant, showing a closer connection between mothers and their children (Table 4). Previous literature compiled in Vietnam on the role of child care and education in the family also shows a similar trend where most of the household chores and care work is done by women; this is rooted in the traditional masculine culture, institutionalizing the dependent relationship of the wife on her husband and his family (Vũ Mạnh Lợi, 2004; Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2023b). This shows the persistence of traditional gender roles that assign responsibility for child care and education to women, despite the fact that they also participate widely in the labor market. The new pattern is increasingly sharing the burden of unpaid care currently due to the shift from the extended family to the nuclear family model promoting the participation of fathers in child care and education, although the participation rate remains low compared to that of women.

Table 4: Expectations and Actual Child Education Providers in Vietnamese Families

		Expectations of primary child education provider in the family (N=8,577)			Actual primary child education provider in the family (N=7,990)		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	All
Wife	Count	220	666	886	300	1,270	1,570
	%	5.8	14.0	10.3	8.5	28.4	19.6
Husband	Count	161	152	313	304	151	455
	%	4.2	3.2	3.6	8.6	3.4	5.7
Both spouses	Count	3,378	3,899	7,277	2,459	2,639	5,098
	%	88.7	81.7	84.8	69.9	59.0	63.8
Other	Count	49	52	101	457	410	867
	%	1.3	1.1	12	13.0	9.2	10.9
TOTAL	Count	3,808	4,769	8,577	3,520	4,470	7,990
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: National survey on gender equality in Vietnam 2024, National Science Project “Research and assessment of gender equality for sustainable development,” Code 02/22-ĐTĐL.XH-XNT, led by Assoc. Prof., PhD. Trần Thị Minh Thi, granted by the Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology, 2022-2025.

This forces women to prioritize between “work” and “family”, as they are two separate entities. A portion of women choose to prioritize their family, stepping back to let their husbands develop their careers (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2021). The unequal burden of child care responsibilities that women bear and the potential adverse impact of childbearing on their careers are barriers to having children and delaying marriage, especially in large cities where there are very low total fertility rates (General Statistics Office, 2024). A portion of women proactively seek divorce to end unhappy marriages due to conflicts and contradictions, including those related to the burden of child care and housework (Trần Thị Minh Thi, 2023).

Literature notes that the pressure on Vietnamese women to balance work and family life has been alleviated by several traditional social values. One of the most important is that of highly valuing children, i.e., where children are regarded as the most valuable property of the family and clan. Because of the high social expectations placed on children, child care is often shared by grandparents and other family members. Grandmothers often help look after their grandchildren when the parents are out at work, especially in rural areas where domestic help and private kindergartens are not available; in urban areas, young parents can still rely on support from their parents or from domestic workers. The strength of family ties is clearly shown in the way grandparents help with child care in both urban and rural areas. Care relationships are a dynamic feature of exchange and reciprocity between children and their parents. From the perspective of the parents, their parents taking care of their children as a moral example, as well as nurturing their children’s good character as a value transfer from generation to generation toward reciprocity. This latest survey affirms that the involvement of other family members in child care and education accounts for a significant proportion, even when Vietnam is showing a clear trend towards the nuclear family.

5. Some conclusions and policy recommendations

Vietnam is currently undergoing a speedy transition under the forces of increasing migration, economic development, and gender equality. The State has been developing a more comprehensive legal framework for child care and aiming at defamilization in child care in order to mobilize more women into the labor market and promote gender equality, as well as demonstrating a consistent view of caring for, and educating, children to ensure the country's sustainable future development. The gap in preschool education services for children under 3 years old shows both the high cohesion in family relationships where family members

support the child care role and the difficulties women face when they have to go to work, especially those in the informal sector without maternity insurance.

For working women with very young children, the state provides child care assistance through maternity leave and priority in the work place; however, women working in the informal sector do not receive such specific benefits. There remains strong traditional gender roles toward household chores and care giving since women still have to ensure these things are done while going out to work, raising the issue of maintaining social norms rooted in Confucian ideology of patriarchy favoring men over women in both family and society.

However, as the result of *Đổi mới*, and increasing modernization in Vietnam, the private sector and market are increasingly involved in child care. In particular, the social solidarity and intergenerational support of the family in the context that marriage is universal and children are universally expected, especially child care support given to working couples by the grandparents.

Given that there is no clear policy to support working mothers with children under 3 years old, nor a policy for care providers in the family, will family and gender issues in Vietnam follow the trend of refamilization as have several societies in the world today? This trend is not yet clear, though there are some indicators such as reducing the number of children in the short term, retaining maternity leave, and pressure of balancing family life and work for women. However, it is necessary for the State to develop policies that provide certain material encouragement and support families with care recipients to fulfill their role. In order to maintain the number of women in the labor force, it is vital to develop sufficient ways and services for taking care of children, including both formal and informal care. Meanwhile, the appreciation and promotion of the traditional roles of the family in supporting and taking care of family members is significant in order to maintain unity in changing times, because the family should be a safety valve to balance our public lives.

Acknowledgements: This paper is a work of the research project “Research and assessment of gender equality for sustainable development”, code 02/22-ĐTĐL.XH-XNT, led by Assoc. Prof., PhD. Trần Thị Minh Thi, granted by the Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology.

References

- General Statistics Office. (2019). *The 2019 Vietnam population census: Major findings*.
General Statistics Office. (2023). *Socio-economic situation in the fourth quarter and 2023*.

<https://www.gso.gov.vn/bai-top/2023/12/bao-cao-tinh-hinh-kinh-te-xa-hoi-quy-iv-va-nam-2023>

General Statistics Office. (2024). *Press release on population, labor and employment situation in the fourth quarter and 2023*. <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2023/12/thong-cao-bao-chi-ve-tinh-hinh-dan-so-lao-dong-viec-lam-quy-iv-va-nam-2023/>

Ministry of Education and Training. (2024). *Annual preschool statistics*. <https://moet.gov.vn/thong-ke/Pages/thong-ke-giao-duc-mam-non.aspx?ItemID=8822>

Nguyen Hai Dat & Dao Thi Vi Phuong (2023). Towards universal maternity protection in Vietnam - The case of multi-tiered maternity benefits. *Journal of Family and Gender Studies*, 18: 3-26.

The National Assembly. (2019). *Law No.43/2019/QH14 Education in Vietnam*.

Trần Thị Minh Thi (ed.). (2021). *Basic values of family in contemporary Vietnam*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi. ISBN 978-604-956- 988-3.

Trần Thị Minh Thi. (2018). Child care diamond in transforming Vietnam. *Journal of Family and Gender Studies*, 2.

Trần Thị Minh Thi. (2023a). Gender equality in Vietnam: Some results and issues. *Journal Family and Gender Studies*, 3: 18-33.

Trần Thị Minh Thi. (2023b). *Divorce in Vietnam: Individualization, family values and culture*. Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.

Trịnh Duy Luân & Trần Thị Minh Thi. (2017). *Caring for the elderly in a transitional Vietnamese society: Policy and structural dimensions (monograph)*. Social Sciences Publishing House.

Vũ Mạnh Lợi. (2004). Division of labor in the family. In *Family trends today (Some characteristics from experimental research in Hải Dương province)* by Vũ Tuấn Huy (ed.). Social Sciences Publishing House. Hanoi.

World Bank. (2023). *Vietnam time use survey 2022. Initial results*.