Social Responses for Older People in COVID-19 Pandemic: Experience from Vietnam

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**KEYWORDS**

Older people; social response; social work; pandemic; Vietnam

Dear Editor

For a few months, a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread globally. The World Health Organization has been coordinating the global efforts to control the negative effects and announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. Particularly, on April 20, 2020, there were nearly

2.4 million confirmed cases and nearly 165 thousand deaths (Worldometers, [2020](#_bookmark34)). The negative effect of this epidemic was unprecedented when about 20% of the global population (nearly 1.7 billion people) must work from home and many countries had to enter lockdown to fight the disease (Davidson, [2020](#_bookmark18); Gopinath, [2020](#_bookmark24)). It is also emphasized that COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest threat to the whole of humanity since the Second World War with unprecedented risks (United Nations, [2020](#_bookmark32)). Many urgent solutions have been applied by many countries to slow down the spread of this dangerous disease (Lee & Morling, [2020](#_bookmark26)), however, the current situation is still very serious (United Nations, [2020](#_bookmark32)).

According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the global population in drastic ways, however, older people are facing the most threats and challenges at this time. Especially in areas with high rates of older people, 95% of death cases those older than 60 years (World Health Organization, [2020](#_bookmark33)). In Vietnam, older people are defined as persons aged 60 and over (Ministry of Health, [2017](#_bookmark27)). The aging population is a social challenge in Vietnam now ([Figure 1](#_bookmark8)). This country will be one of the rapidly aging countries in the world in the next 30 years (Giang et al., [2019](#_bookmark23)).

The statistical report pointed out that the aging of the population in Vietnam has occurred quickly with the population aged 60 years and older is 11.3 million people (accounting for about 11.7% of the total population).

The Vietnamese aging index was 48.8% in 2019, an increase of 13.3% points compared to 2009 and twice as much as 1999 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, [2019](#_bookmark21)). According to data from the Ministry of Health, the Vietnamese people aged 60 years and older have 2.6 diseases on average, besides, the population aged 80 years and older have 6.8 on average (Ministry of Health, [2017](#_bookmark27)). Like many Asian countries, the older people in Vietnam often live with later generations in a large family. In the same situation as many countries in the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam is carefully protecting older people now.

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak rapidly around the world, Vietnam is becoming a highlighted country that is successfully coping with the risk of the virus spreading in society (Fleming, [2020](#_bookmark22); Reed, [2020](#_bookmark30)). In fact, Vietnam has high risks from COVID-19 because this country has a quite large population of nearly 97 million people (ranked 15th in the world), the series virus outbreak of neighbor countries, and its high economic openness. However, the success of Vietnam is proved by the very low rate of positive cases (as 0.0002% of the population) and still no-death (Worldometers, [2020](#_bookmark34)). Until 22/04/2020, there are 80% of patients recovered in the total number of 268 confirmed cases (Ministry of Health, [2020](#_bookmark28)). The Vietnamese government is said to have taken reasonable and timely responses to deal with the COVID- 19 pandemic, besides, the people are also highly appreciated for the compli- ance level as well as their trust and support for the government activities (Ebbighausen, [2020](#_bookmark20); Sullivan, [2020](#_bookmark31)). In addition, the good experiences gained from being the first successful country in dealing with the SARS epidemic (in 2003) also have brought much value to Vietnam in the current situation. The urgent and strong activities of the government, socio-political organizations, entrepreneurs and private sponsors and a high consensus of the people have helped Vietnam to contain the spread of disease.

The descriptive statistics show that the number of older patients is the smallest in the sample of 218 COVID-19 confirmed cases (accounting for only 10% of the total number of patients). Although there are some older patients having diseases, there is still no-death due to COVID-19 in Vietnam. This is in contrast to the situation in most other countries because a large number of Vietnamese patients are young people (20–29 years), accounting for 37% because they were the Vietnamese returning (education or labor targets) from countries with outbreaks of disease. At the beginning of February 2020, the government closed schools which helped to limit the spread of COVID-19 to children and young people. The number of older infections in Vietnam is very small compared to other countries. Against the risks of disease outbreaks, in order to protect the older people, the most vulnerable group with COVID-19, the Ministry of Health and socio-political organizations have continuously suggested older people need to stay home and practice the social distaining solution (Government, [2020](#_bookmark25)). In some big cities (eg., in Ho Chi Minh City), doctors and nurses come to examine at home and promote online medical advice for older patients.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese older people have received much interest as the most vulnerable and at-risk from the virus. There have been diverse social responses for older people in the fight the COVID-19 outbreak in Vietnam including actions of the government, socio-political organizations, entrepreneurs and private sponsors. Since the first infection case was reported, there were some strong slogans including “Fighting against epidemic like fighting against an enemy” and “No one was left behind in the fight against COVID-19” announced by the government. Because of many efficient

**Figure 3.** The model of social responses for older people in COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. Source: Author’s elaboration.



activities, unlike many other countries in the world, there is only 10% of COVID-19 patients are older people in Vietnam. Success in preventing the infection of older people is also part of the overall success of fighting against this disease in Vietnam (Pangescu, [2020](#_bookmark29)).

A coordinated social response is extremely important to successfully con- tain a dangerous pandemic such as COVID-19. As shown in [Figure 3](#_bookmark15), there are three main responses from society to the older people in Vietnam, including the responses of the government, social-political organizations, entrepreneurs and private sponsors. This model can be explained in more detail below.

The Vietnamese government responses are very efficient with short and strong emergency slogans to directly express to people, especially disadvan- taged older people. The COVID-19 pandemic is urgently informed by a variety of information channels such as mobile-phone messages, social media net- works (e.g., Facebook, Youtube, and Zalo), television, newspapers, and radio. The government developed websites to monitor the traveling history of citi- zens. There were some public policies issued to support disadvantaged groups negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Older people receive benefits (like all people) in free testing, free isolation, and free medical treatment. In blockaded areas, people are provided free foods during the time of isolation (e.g., Truc Bach ward in Hanoi). Some subsidies have been implemented such as direct cash payments and free essential foods. The Ministry of Health issued two documents guidelines regarding “Health management of the elderly group and people with chronic diseases in the context of an epidemic COVID-19” and “A guide to healthcare for preventing and fighting COVID-19 for the elderly in the community”. The national social security organization paid pensions and benefits for older people at their homes. The home health care program for the elderly group is performed in some provinces (for example, in Ho Chi Minh City).

Socio-political organizations have an important role to launch charitable and voluntary movements in caring for and supporting vulnerable people (for example, lonely older people). The Fatherland Front establishes charity funds to help with the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth Union provides free foods for the lonely elderly people and the disadvantaged people in some provinces and supports propaganda to households the good ways to prevent COVID-19. The Women Union gives essential foods to lonely elderly women in society.

There are many activities from entrepreneurs and private sponsors to support the disadvantaged people who have been negatively affected by COVID-19. The financial resource is funding by entrepreneurs and private donors in Vietnam. For example, the construction of equipment such as ‘rice ATM’ to distribute rice for free to vulnerable people in many provinces (Duong, [2020](#_bookmark19)). At some charitable places, besides rice, eggs and vegetables are freely distributed to the poor people.

The effective model for combating the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam is a successful example in the current context. With many strong and multi- dimensional solutions, Vietnam has maintained a low number of confirmed infections as well as a very small number of older patients. My paper presents a model that helps Vietnam not only prevent the spread of the COVID-19 but also ensure social security for older people (and vulnerable people in general). As a country with a high aging population, the Vietnamese social response model is built as a comprehensive platform efficiency merging the activities of many directions including the government, socio-political organizations, entrepreneurs, and private sponsors. Vietnam provides a good practice model for other countries (especially the countries that have limited resources) in order to successfully cope with the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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