

# **Expectations for marriage of young people in Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

Rapid social and economic changes in Vietnam has considerable influences on young people, including on their perception of and expectation for marriage. This paper investigates the expectation for marriage of young people basing on in-depth interview with 60 people aged not over 30 in a rural area and an urban area in Vietnam. The paper addresses the question: What do young people in Vietnam today expect to marriage? The findings show that in one hand, young people's marital expectation is influenced by market economy. They expect economic fulfilment in marriage and consider this a requirement for a good marriage. On the other hand, young people are influenced by traditional values, reflected in their desires to have harmony in marriage. They not only expect to have harmonious relation between spouses but also respect good relation between wife and husband's family.

Key word: Marriage; Family; Gender; Young people; Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

Vietnam has experienced significant changes in recent decades. The transformation to a market-based economy helps to rescue the society from economically low development lasting for some decades. Due to the expansion of the exchange with countries in the world, people in Vietnam have more exposure to culture and values of other countries. Among social groups, young people in Vietnam is thought to be "the most vulnerable" arising from exposing to foreign culture (Gammeltoft, 2002). Young people, in one hand, are influenced

by changes in a market-oriented society, and in the other hand, they are affected by values of older generation (Phuong An Nguyen, 2007). These has shaped their thinking of and expectation for marriage and gender relations. Marriage remains importance for young people in Vietnam (Earl, 2014; Thanh, 2018). Nevertheless, their thinking of marriage and gender relations differs from older generation (Minh & Hong, 2011; Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007; Williams, 2009). Studies in the world show influences of traditional expectation of gender roles on spousal relationship and inaccurate or unrealistic expectations might cause vulnerability for couples (see Barich & Beilby, 1996; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995). This paper investigates the desires of young people to a marriage in contemporary context of Vietnam and find the answer for the question: What do young people in Vietnam today expect to marriage? The article argues for the influences of traditional and contemporary values on the marital expectation of young people in the context of Vietnam. The analyses based on 60 in-depth interview with people aged not over 30 in Vietnam. Among them, 30 people (15 men and 15 women) live in an urban area in Hanoi capital city, where most of economic activities are non-agricultural, and 30 people (15 men and 15 women) live in a rural area in Thai Binh province, where is famous for its agricultural development. This article uses pseudonym to make participants anonymous.

### **Expectation for economic fulfilment in marriage**

The desire for an economically fulfilling marriage was significant to many people after marrying. Economic obstacles were the most common and crucial stress of young newlyweds (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). Young couples in Vietnam face difficulties from high consumption needs in combination with insufficiently high incomes or financial accumulation, associated with being in the initial period of marriage and career development (Tuan, 2004). A Vietnamese proverb states “*mot tup leu tranh hai trai tim vang*” [one grass tent with two gold hearts] and emphasises the love of the couple as much more important than wealth. Nevertheless, some young people in this research spontaneously mentioned this proverb to explain that it is no longer applicable. They seem to be more practical, with many discussing economic conditions as important. Trong - a

man (30 years old, completed senior high school) working at a door workshop in Thai Binh said: “Economic conditions shouldn’t be too difficult, because it may cause disagreements in the family... There hasn’t been any happy marriage that is consistent with the model ‘one grass tent with two gold hearts’”. Similar to Trong, Hai (bachelor degree, working as an accountant in Hanoi) also identified the grass tent proverb as no longer suitable, saying:

Some people say “one grass tent with two gold hearts”, but that’s for the past and it isn’t suitable for contemporary life. We have to adapt ourselves to the current situation. Particularly when we have children, if the incomes aren’t stable and sufficient to ensure the needs of the family, it will cause problems. It’s true that money can’t buy happiness, but in order to have and ensure happiness, money is critically necessary.

The young people recognised the differences in their experiences compared to previous generations. As Thien - a male worker in Thai Binh (29 years old, completed senior high school) Thai Binh) said: “In the past people could be satisfied with what they had, but today everything needs money, such as money for caring for the children”. Similarly, Nga (26 years old, post-graduate) who is a university lecturer in Hanoi indicates economic differences in her life compared to her parent’s generation, saying that:

Our parent’s generation was poor but they still raised their children well. But today, if we do as our parents did before, we couldn’t economically support our children because the needs for children’s learning and everyday life have increased.

The majority of participants considered economic issues as their primary concern after marrying. Some people report the changes in their marital expectation after marriage in which they place more emphasises on economic concerns. For example, Vien (26 years old, bachelor level, working as a receptionist for metro financial company in Hanoi) said that prior to marriage she had only expected to have a husband who would understand, love and sympathise with her, and had not thought about economic issues prior to marrying.

However, now she has many expectations in which economic issues are her first priority. She said:

Before marrying, my thoughts were simple. I thought that my husband would be the main income earner while I looked after the children ... At the moment I have many worries, for example, how to support my daughter, so I increasingly want to have money. Because our life isn't very comfortable, my thoughts have become more practical. I always think about how to earn a lot of money to support a better life for the children. If parents have money, the children will have a foundation to get a better life.

Similarly, Nga only had romantic expectations before marrying, but these changed after marriage:

I didn't worry too much about money issues because, from when I was a child, my parents provided me with full financial support. When I was single, there were some men in love with me, but I had never taken financial considerations into my decision about choosing a husband. I was very romantic and I thought that a happy marriage was a marriage in which the wife and husband could share everything. But it was just a dream.

After marrying, she changed her expectations and became more practical. Nga expressed it as follows:

I still wish that my husband and I can share everything with each other. I don't require my husband to earn too much money, but at least he should ensure the basic needs of the family, otherwise we will be miserable. I expect our family to not face too many economic difficulties and that we can afford to meet normal expenditures.

Rapid change in Vietnamese society along with the removal of subsidies by the government have put young people under pressure to find employment, earn a living and support their own family. It is thus probably not surprising that many young couples

reported economic difficulties. Only half of the couples in the current research had savings. The incomes of the remaining couples were usually only sufficient to cover family expenditures. A few couples could not even afford to cover the expenses of the family. This may contribute to economic fulfilment becoming a significant priority for young people, to the extent that many considered it a criterion of a good marriage.

Nevertheless, economic expectations were not always fulfilled. Economic problems presented the main limitations to marital satisfaction for rural women, who sometimes expressed disappointment with their marriage. Some participants talked about disagreements arising from money problems. For example, Thuong - a twenty-nine year old woman operating a grocery in Thai Binh (completed primary school) said that:

Marriage without money can't be happy. Money shortages can lead to quarrels and we sometimes quarrel about money. Life in the countryside needs money for everything. It's difficult to deal with something happening if we don't have money.

In some cases, unfulfilled expectations caused sadness. Ngoc, a twenty-six year old university graduate woman living in Thai Binh, had been unable to find a job during her two years of marriage. She then had a baby and stayed at home to breastfeed. She had no income. Her husband's salary was not enough to support the family. They were living with the husband's family. She sometimes received financial support from a small retirement pension from her parents-in-law. She felt sad about this. Ngoc said: "I wish that my husband was able to support our family so that we don't have to rely on our parents' help. Sometimes I feel sad because we can't afford to do anything and we have to live with our parents and depend on their support".

Some man in Hanoi also reported negative influences of economic difficulties on their spousal relation. Tin - a thirty year old tradesman in Hanoi (university graduate) also recognised that the harmony between spouses was weakened by economic difficulties. He said:

Obviously earning money to support the family is the most important thing. If the husband and wife can't earn money, they will probably have regular disagreements.

Having good economic conditions makes the marital relationship harmonious. People in the past said that marriage was like “one grass tent with two gold hearts” but I think it isn’t suitable for today. Now love and money go together. It’s not good to have a lot of money without having love, but having love while lacking money solves nothing.

Similarly, Hai (male, Hanoi) reported that economic difficulties made them despondent. He reported:

Last year when stocks fell, we didn’t get a return and we had to pay for previous debts; my family faced economic problems. If there were any problems happening at that time, I wouldn’t be able to deal with it because we had no money ... When the economic condition is insecure, both the wife and husband feel sad and say nothing to each other. I myself felt discouraged and sad. I wanted to say something to encourage her but we have the same sadness, so I didn’t know how to do so. Family life had many worries while suffering from an economic burden, so I didn’t know how to encourage her.

Young people adopted a range of alternative strategies to deal with unsatisfied expectations. In some cases, they adjusted their thinking, as in the case of Tam – a female hairdresser in Thai Binh (not completed primary school), who had been married for three years. Her parents divorced when she was very young and she lived first with her mother and then, when her mother went away, with her grandmother until she was thirteen years old, at which point she began to live with her father. Unfortunately, her father got drunk and sometimes beat her. She used to send the money she earned to her uncle, who kept money for her, but her father later came to her uncle’s house and asked the uncle to give him the money. Hence, she had no money before her wedding. She wished to have a better life after marrying. However, her husband’s family was also poor. When her husband was young, the father left, leaving his mother to bring up the family on her own. Tam said:

I lived in poverty before getting married and I hoped to have a better life after marrying. During the early months of marriage, I found my expectations couldn’t

be met, so I don't expect it anymore. I encourage myself by saying that we will gradually earn money and have a better life.

The emphasis on economic satisfaction in marriage revealed increased economic pressures in both regions, but it might also reflect changing values as young people place greater emphasis on economic fulfilment.

### **Expectations for emotional fulfilment in marriage**

#### ***Desire for harmony between spouses***

Harmony between spouses was a common wish of young people for their own marriage. A harmonious marriage, according to young people, is one with close-knit relations and little disagreement between spouses. Thien (male, Thai Binh) said: "I wish to have a marriage in which the husband and wife harmonise with each other. They have little conflict. Sometimes they may have arguments, but they should quickly solve them and share with each other". Another participant, Kien - a twenty-nine year old man working as a commune official in Thai Binh (college graduated) had a similar expectation: "Everybody expects to have a happy family. It's a family with harmony and not to have conflicts".

Apart from economic requirements (as mentioned above), participants also emphasised understanding and sharing between a wife and husband as a feature of a good marriage. Studies indicated that sharing was believed to promote understanding between spouses (see also Blagojevic, 1989). Participants across the two regions and both sexes said that sharing was part of an ideal marriage. Bao – a twenty-seven year old man in Hanoi, working as a reporter (university graduate), said: "A good marriage is when the wife and husband understand each other. They can share every issue relating to relationships with family or friends". Nguyen a twenty-one year old woman (completed senior high school) doing home duties in Thai Binh, agreed, saying:

A good marriage is one in which the wife and husband understand each other and share everything, including happiness and sadness. If they are sad and hold it

against each other and they quarrel with each other instead of sharing, it can't make the marriage happy.

Many participants in my research talked about harmony between spouses with few conflicts as important for a good marriage. Kien (male, Thai Binh) said: "Marital happiness is when the couple doesn't have disagreements. Actually it's not possible to have no disagreement in living together, but when somebody is hot-tempered, the other should be calm". Another rural man, Tien – a twenty-two man in Thai Binh (completed high school), who is duck raising farmer, had similar comments: "A good marriage is one in which the couples harmonise. Absolutely, it's hard to avoid disagreements when living together, but they shouldn't have serious disagreements about anything".

When the young people were asked to give examples of good marriages, harmony between spouses seemed to be the main criterion for their evaluation. When they gave examples of a marriage that they considered to be happy, it was usually an example in which the spouses lived in harmony. In some cases, harmony was associated with being economically comfortable. For example, Chinh - a male mason in Thai Binh (completed senior high school) explained:

I found the family of Mr Loan in my village very happy. They had good economic conditions and they rarely had any quarrels. They usually discussed everything with each other. The family of Ms Uyen living next to my house is also happy. They also had few disagreements and shared with each other.

For some participants, harmony was more likely to exist in couples when husbands contributed to the household work. For example, Dien – a twenty-eight year old woman accountant in Hanoi (university graduate), said: "The family of my uncle and my parents are happy, because they seldom have quarrels. I think the more the husband shares the housework with his wife, the fewer quarrels there are". For Tien (male, Thai Binh), harmony came from attentiveness between the spouses. As he explained:

I think my parents are a happy couple. They seldom have disagreements or quarrel. They care about each other very much. My father usually gave my mother little

gifts on special events such as women's day. They sometimes used to tell me about how they fell in love when they were young.

***Building harmonious relationship with husband's family: expectation and adaptation***

Harmony remains important in young people's ideas of a good marriage, not only between spouses, but also with extended-family members. When both men and women reflected on a good marriage, they not only mentioned harmony between spouses, but also the importance of establishing harmonious relationships with extended family, and in particular with the husband's family. Notably, young people emphasized the harmonious relation between wife and husband family. This could be influenced by the tradition of patrilocal-residence in Vietnam, in which a woman after marrying is typically considered to become a member of the husband's family and will usually live with them. About one quarter of households in Vietnam have more than two generations living together (Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, General Statistics Office, Institute for Family and Gender Studies, & UNICEF, 2008, p. 29) compared to only 1% in Britain (Jackson, Ho, & Na, 2013). While people in the West respect individual happiness in marriage, perspective on marriage in Vietnam also emphasise relation with extended family (Nguyen Minh Hoa, 2000).

Traditional values appear to be maintained through socialization as in the reflection of some women on what they were educated by their parents. Nga (female, Hanoi) recalled how her father emphasised a woman's role in ensuring her husband's family's good reputation, saying:

My father taught me that married women should bring good reputé to her family-in-law. He advised me not to let insignificant or uncomfortable things become serious problems... As a daughter-in-law, I shouldn't show my opinion, because my parents told me a daughter-in-law cannot become the boss of a family and it's better to follow the husband's family.

To help establish harmonious relationships with the husband's family, some women made preparations before marrying. For example, Danh, a twenty-six year old graduate

woman in Thai Binh, searched for information on the internet about marriage and asked other married women about their experiences before she got married. She explained: “It helps me learn how to behave with my parents-in-law in specific situations. I also came to know what issues I should participate in or what I should suffer when living with the in-laws when I became a daughter-in-law”. Others, such as Lien - a twenty-five year old women working as secretary for an airline company in Hanoi - actively learnt from the experiences of previous generations:

Since I knew I was going to marry and become a daughter-in-law, I became concerned about how my mother prepared and how she behaved with family members. I asked myself what I would do if I was in the same position of daughter-in-law as my mother.

After marrying, women had various strategies for developing a good relationship with their family-in-law. Some of them endeavoured to promote mutual understanding with family members, as in the case of Huong – a twenty-nine year old engineer in Hanoi (post graduated), who said:

When I got married, I mainly listened to and observed his family because I didn’t know how his family worked ... The most difficult thing in establishing relationships with my husband’s family members was how to encourage them to become open-minded with me and trust me. I usually talked with my mother-in-law and she then gradually understood me.

Lien - a woman in Hanoi, who lived together with her parents-in-law, also used talking with her mother-in-law as a strategy to ensure good family relationships, as she describes here:

I usually found chances to talk with family members to improve relationships with them. I was worried about whether my parents-in-law were satisfied with my behaviour. I usually asked my husband whether his parents were satisfied with me and whether they had any complaints about me. If there was anything that I

thought the parents felt hesitant to tell me, I suggested he ask them to tell me, so that I could adjust myself.

Lien was not the only woman who reported adapting and sometimes restricting their behavior in order to sustain their relationship with in-laws. As Ha - a twenty-seven women working as a ward official in Hanoi (university graduated) explained:

The lifestyle of my husband's family differed from mine but I adapted to it quickly. When living with my husband's family, I had to be careful with my words, attitudes and behaviour toward his family members unless they might notice and complain about it.

Similarly, Ngoc (Thai Binh) described the importance of demonstrating that she was responsible for the relationship by apologising when something was unsatisfactory:

When I had problems with the in-laws, I would apologise whether I was at fault or not. Because I was a daughter-in-law, it was better to assume that it was my fault so we wouldn't have the argument any more.

Men also respected a good relation between his wife and his family. Tin - the man in Hanoi said:

I expected to have a wife who has good behaviour towards my family members. It's important that when she comes to live with her husband's family she obeys the family's principles and she knows how to behave towards parents-in-law and other members.

Good behaving toward husband's family is also a criterion used by men to consider a good wife. Huy – a twenty-six year old photographer in Hanoi (completed senior high school) shared his opinion about a good wife, saying that:

A good wife is a person who behaves well towards her husband's kin. Because she is a newcomer and has less contact with the husband's kin, she should be thoughtful in communicating with them.

Tin (Hanoi) was emphatic that he expected his wife to be obedient in following the preferences of his family, and said:

I expected to have a wife who behaves well with my family members. It's important that when she comes to live with her husband's family, she obeys the family's principles and she knows how to behave towards parents-in-law and other members

Nevertheless, men seldom expressed concern about sustaining good relations with the wife's family, but expressed significant concern about how their wife would integrate into their family. This is reflected in a common proverb in Vietnam "*dau con re khach*" [a daughter-in-law is an inside family member, while a son-in-law is an outside member, like a visitor]. Tran Dinh Huou (1991, p. 42) wrote the following about the differences between a daughter-in-law and a son-in-law in Vietnam:

Daughters-in-law though of different blood, became members of the family, unlike sons-in-law, who were in a similar situation, but who were only considered as half-sons of family... There were family affairs which were hidden from the son-in-law, and the latter also avoid interfering in his wife's family affairs... A son-in-law has little relationship with the family line of his wife, and consequently, the family of the girl did not take much part in the selection of the son-in-law. Reversely, as a daughter-in-law had much relation with the family of the boy, almost all members of the 'blood' family took part in discussions concerning the selection.

Husbands also had a significant role to play in supporting the wife's integration into his family. The role of a husband is often likened to a bridge connecting his wife to his family. He needs to encourage his wife and family members to understand each other. As Hieu – a twenty-eight car driver in Hanoi (completed senior high school) described:

I'm in the in-between position and I shouldn't uphold either my wife or mother with the presence of the other. If my wife was wrong, I would tell her in private

and I would also do so with my mother if she was wrong. I found the bridge position difficult for avoiding disagreements. I love my wife but my mother might not love her so I had to balance it.

Some husbands clearly supported their wives in learning to understand their family. For example, Trung – a twenty-nine man working as official of the Youth's Union in Hanoi (university graduated) told his wife about his family's traditions and lifestyle so she would better know how she should behave. Trung said:

I wanted my wife to have a traditional concern about her parents-in-law. For example, I wanted my wife to get up early and prepare breakfast for the parents. It could be difficult for a young daughter-in-law to do so and it would be acceptable if she couldn't do so. We might keep an equal relationship between spouses, but we shouldn't do so with the parents because that was the traditional lifestyle of the rural area. She listened to my advice and said nothing.

Husbands sometimes also played a role in solving the disagreements between his wife and family members. Kien (Thai Binh) shared his experiences:

It's difficult to avoid disagreements when a wife lives with her mother-in-law and I think I'm the person in the position in-between. I would tell my wife if she was wrong and I would also tell my mother if the mother was wrong. For example, my mother had to look after the baby for a long time while my wife went to the hairdresser. My mother complained that my wife went so long that the baby cried. I told my mother that my wife had to stay at home for over a month since she had the baby and we should let her go out for a small pleasure. I suggested my mother should feed the baby with instant milk if she cried. However, I also suggested my wife should go out for only one or two hours and come home earlier.

Quoc – a thirty year old man engineer in Hanoi (university graduated) - used a strategy of praising both his wife and his parents in order to help support their relationship. As he explained:

I told my parents about my wife's virtues in her presence and I also told my wife about the virtues of my parents in their presence, although I know sometimes she or my parents weren't really good. I usually went to work, whereas she had more time at home with the parents. I think I should try to establish a good relationship between them in case I get in trouble.

While earlier discussions showed changing values among young people, who no longer consider love overrides all economic considerations, the traditional value of harmony in marriage is still respected.

## **Conclusion**

Participants' notions of a good marriage reflect a mixture of complicated criteria that are informed by changes in values associated with broader economic and social transformations. The expectation for marriage is influenced by the requirement for economic fulfilment and this is considered a criterion of a good marriage. In this respect, many participants acknowledged the differences in their ideas of marriage compared to their parent's generations. While they acknowledge that spouses in the past might still be happy in relatively poor economic conditions, they perceive the financial requirements in contemporary families as urgent, making it hard for spouses to maintain happiness without money. Some spontaneously reported that the values of marriage presented in the proverb "one grass tent with two gold hearts" was no longer suitable for life in Vietnam, which was now a market economy.

Economic fulfilment was reported to have become a crucial requirement in contemporary life. This was a common expectation of the young couples in both research sites, but seemed to particularly affect the marital satisfaction of rural participants where economic life might be more difficult and there were limited occupational opportunities and incomes. The requirements of living in a market economy and the growth of consumer lifestyles possibly led to the increasing emphasis on economic requirements for a good marriage. Young couples in Vietnam face difficulties from high consumption needs in combination with insufficiently high incomes or financial accumulation, associated with

being in the initial period of marriage and career development (Tuan, 2004). The meanings of a good marriage they expressed reflect a focus on material needs. Economic fulfilment as become a typical expectation and concern of young people after marrying, particularly those living in rural areas.

Harmony is particularly valued in marriage in Vietnam and considered as a criterion of a good marriage. The value of a harmonious marriage continues to influence the ideas of young people in Vietnam. They consider harmony as a criterion of a good marriage, and many of them expect to have a marriage with harmonious relationships both between spouses as well as with the extended family, in particular with the husband's family. Furthermore, the desire for harmony in the marriage extended beyond the relationship with a spouse to the extended family, considered important by both male and female participants in both areas. Establishing and retaining a harmonious relationship with the husband's family is a common marital expectation of both male and female participants, and is considered a wife's responsibility. Women reported various strategies to meet the expectation of building harmonious relationships with their husband's family, while men play the role as a bridge to connect the wife to his family. Young couples also respect harmony between spouses, emphasising mutual sharing and understanding. This is considered a criterion of a good marriage and many respondents cite it as a marital goal.

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