



Gender justice: listening to the aspirations and priorities of Hmong girls in Viet Nam

Country briefing

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Key messages

- Progressive poverty reduction and sectoral policies are changing the lives of many adolescent girls from the Hmong minority in Viet Nam. Growing numbers of girls are completing lower secondary school, while child marriage is becoming less common and there is a growing preference for smaller families.
- But progress is uneven: upper secondary school remains a dream for most Hmong girls. Their chances of realising their full potential are undermined by gendered social norms centred around the preference for sons, as well as traditional views of filial piety and domestic responsibilities. Girls remain socially isolated and have few people they can trust to listen to their concerns.
- If adolescent girls are to reach their full potential, they need tailored educational and vocational training support, alongside school- and community-based sexual- and reproductive-health programming. They also need safe spaces where they can seek advice from adults they respect, and where they can share their hopes and fears with their peers.

1 Introduction: why focus on adolescent girls from ethnic minorities?



*'I want more information to open my mind, to learn more...
about which university to choose, about news, about other countries,
other societies – the world.'*
Adolescent girl, 16

Viet Nam has made tremendous progress in improving its development indicators; one of the world's poorest countries 25 years ago, it has now achieved middle-income status. The impact of this progress, however, has been very uneven. Ethnic minorities, who account for one-eighth of the population, also account for half of all those people living in poverty. This proportion soars among the Hmong ethnic minority, with poverty rates estimated to exceed 80%.

Hmong children and adolescents, and especially girls, face multiple disadvantages. Constrained by the traditions of family preference for sons and filial piety (deference to parents or elders), girls spend long hours on domestic chores with little chance to rest, play or socialise, let alone complete secondary education or vocational training. Indeed, only 4% of Hmong girls are enrolled in secondary school and their opportunities for paid employment in adult life are negligible. Rates of child marriage and total fertility are declining among the Hmong, but are still more than twice as high as the rates for the Kinh majority ethnic group. Hmong girls also face threats to their physical well-being, including inadequate access to sexual- and reproductive-health information and services, and a growing risk of abduction for human trafficking.

Situated at the crossroads of childhood and adulthood, there is a growing recognition of adolescence as a vital stage in the consolidation of the development gains made in childhood. Adolescent girls in particular, as the future mothers of the next generation, offer a unique opportunity for a double return on investment – the future well-being of their children, as well as themselves.

However, the very concept of adolescence as a crucial stage in a girl's lifecycle is relatively new in Viet Nam in general – and among the Hmong in particular – as stressed by the national and local key informants interviewed for this case study, including adolescent girls themselves. It is a concept that has, to date, been neglected by government and development

organisations alike. This neglect is also rooted in law: the Vietnamese legal code sets the age of majority at 16, even though Viet Nam has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets 18 as the age of majority.

Among the Hmong, where daughters are seen as ‘other people’s women’ from birth, the needs of adolescent girls have not only been neglected, but are ‘invisible’, even to the girls themselves. Trained from birth to accept Hmong feminine identity and largely isolated from the modernising world, the girls interviewed for our case study were rarely able to separate their own best interests from those of their families. Very often, girls struggled to imagine future lives that differed from the lives of their mothers.

This country briefing draws on research from in-depth qualitative work in Ha Giang province, northern Viet Nam, on the opportunities and challenges to gender justice for Hmong adolescent girls. Informed by a focus on the role of gendered social norms in shaping the realisation of girls’ full capabilities, it concludes with a brief reflection on the implications for the Government of Viet Nam and for its development partners.

2 Research study and methodology

This study is part of a broader multi-country initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls (Box 1), which uses a common set of research tools that is adapted to the local context. Focus group discussions with adolescents and adults, in single-sex and mixed settings, allowed us to explore common definitions, views and experiences surrounding gender, adolescence and social norms, how these persist and how they can be changed. In-depth interviews with key informants, including younger and older adolescent girls and some of their brothers, revealed their views on their status, opportunities and challenges both at home and in the wider community. We used life histories, case studies and intergenerational pairings (involving grandmothers, mothers and daughters) to explore intra-household dynamics related to adolescent girls by triangulating the views of adults and adolescents and by focusing on gendered themes.

Box 1: Gender justice for adolescent girls: a new research initiative

This study is part of a multi-year DFID-funded policy research programme on gender justice for adolescent girls. The programme examines four countries: Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam. ODI, in partnership with national researchers, is exploring the key capabilities that shape girls' current well-being and future potential. Focusing on economic, educational, physical, psycho-emotional and civic participation capabilities, it aims to shine a light on discriminatory social norms, make visible the often hidden experiences of adolescent girls and identify how policy and programme actors can better respond to their needs and priorities.

Our primary research took place in Ta Lung commune, in the Meo Vac district of Ha Giang province, in the northern mountains near Viet Nam's border with China. The district is recognised as the country's Hmong homeland and is one of its poorest areas. Ta Lung's residents (98% of them Hmong) are, for the most part, subsistence farmers. They receive support from various national poverty-alleviation programmes, including Programme 135, which invests in transportation, educational and health infrastructure, and provides fee waivers for ethnic-minority students.

The research took place in a 'frontier' province that is politically sensitive, with a high proportion of ethnic-minority communities. As a result, access was a challenge and many interviews were conducted in 'public' spaces such as school classrooms, where interviewees may not have been as frank as they might have been in a private space. This was overcome, in part, by longstanding connections to provincial-level authorities, but it remains an important caveat.

3 Key findings: uneven progress for Hmong adolescent girls



Overall, our findings paint a picture of rapid but very uneven progress in gender justice for Hmong adolescent girls. On the one hand, policies to improve educational attainment, including fee waivers for ethnic minority children and safety net programmes to reduce family poverty, have borne some fruit in expanding girls' opportunities and their access to services. On the other hand, however, their broader needs remain largely invisible to community leaders and policy-makers. Provincial officials in Ha Giang believe that parents are responsible for decisions about their daughters' lives, and that the role of the Government is merely to give advice. However, even this advisory role is seldom fulfilled, given the staff capacity constraints at commune level, limited budgets, and poor inter-agency coordination.

This is the backdrop against which we summarise the positive changes and the remaining barriers for the realisation of girls' multi-dimensional capabilities.

3.1 Missing out on school

There has been significant and rapid progress in educational attainment for Hmong girls, with most in Ta Lung now completing lower secondary school. This progress has been driven largely by the Government's commitment to expand education opportunities for minority students through subsidies, working in combination with local fines for families that do not keep their children in school. It is remarkable that parents in Ta Lung, most of whom are totally uneducated, are increasingly recognising the value of educating their daughters (to 9th grade, at least).

Even so, the overwhelming pattern is for girls to leave school – always reluctantly – at the end of lower secondary school. Nearly all of the girls out of school who were interviewed during our research said that they missed the learning and social opportunities offered by school, and recognised that leaving school undermined their future prospects.



Key informants confirmed that girls and boys usually leave school for the same reason – they must work to help their families make ends meet. Upper secondary school usually entails boarding elsewhere, which means parents paying for transport, food and other costs not covered by subsidies. It also means that children are not around to help with domestic chores and agricultural work after school and at weekends.

When Hmong families can afford both the opportunity costs and actual costs of sending a child to upper secondary school, that child is almost always a son. This is a region where son-preference prevails: sons have greater ceremonial value (remaining in the parental home or village and ensuring the spiritual continuation of the family line) and play a vital economic role in supporting their parents in old age. In contrast, the labour of an adult daughter is seen as benefiting her husband's family. Parents also worry about the safety of their daughters if they go away to school, especially in the light of growing fears about trafficking to China. Finally, even in families that place a high value on education – and have let one daughter reach 12th grade or have sent a son to university – it is often the case that another daughter is deprived of her rights to an education completely.

Those Hmong girls who do attend school face serious obstacles to learning, including lessons that are taught in the majority Kinh language. Their responsibility for domestic chores also puts them at a disadvantage, compelling them to wake very early to complete their chores and agricultural tasks before they go to school, with more housework after school cutting into their time for homework.

As highlighted in Box 2, our findings reflect uneven progress on discriminatory gendered social norms. Some norms have been relaxed, while others persist for generations.

Box 2: Persistent and changing gender norms in Ta Lung commune, Ha Giang province

Persistent norms

'I am always busy, so I don't think of anything. I don't know how to think. I think that I live with parents and work with them.' (Adolescent girl, 15)

'After my sister got married, I had more work to do. I became the only daughter in my family.' (Adolescent girl, 17)

'My daughter will finish grade 9 only and then she will get married. My son won't go anywhere, he will live with me, so I let him reach the high grade.' (Mother)

'My husband will abandon me if I give birth to two daughters.' (Adolescent girl, 16)

Changing norms

'I want more information to open my mind, to learn more... about which university to choose, about news, about other countries, other societies – the world.' (Adolescent girl, 16)

'I went to kindergarten on my own. My mom didn't allow me to go but I sneaked out. My uncle took his child to kindergarten and I went with him. My uncle registered me. A few days after, my mom knew.' (Adolescent girl, 18)

'I will let them reach grade 12 and try to send them to vocational training by any means, both of them. I am poor. We parents are illiterate – so I will grow the cows and pigs to pay for their education... by any means.' (Mother)

'I can choose my own happy life. My parents can't provide the life I need or afford it – they can't make me happy so I have to make my own choices, and treasure my happiness. I want to finish school.' (Adolescent girl, 16)

'My daughter puts many questions and exchanges many more ideas with me than I did in the past. She talks with her mother more than I did with mine.' (Mother)

3.2 Toil without pay

Hmong girls have very limited opportunities for economic empowerment. Most Hmong families in Ta Lung survive through subsistence agriculture. Despite recent improvements, such as infrastructure projects that have brought roads and some jobs to the district and poverty alleviation programmes that have reduced hunger, the lack of water and productive land accounts for persistently high poverty rates. Men work in the fields while women are responsible for livestock, field maintenance and harvesting, as well as managing domestic and care work. Children must fit their farming work around school (morning classes often run from 7 am until noon) and tend to be responsible for gathering fuel wood, feeding livestock, harvesting vegetables, cooking, and cleaning. While boys and girls do many of the same types of tasks, the research revealed that girls work harder, and from an earlier age, than boys – the result of gendered norms that see girls as less 'playful' and more obedient.

Wage employment in Ta Lung remains limited, particularly for women and girls. While men sometimes leave home to find work, mothers and daughters stay behind to take up the agricultural work that would have been carried out by the men, on top of their already heavy domestic and productive workloads. Girls also reported that they lack the social connections needed to obtain good jobs and that there is a disconnect between vocational training schemes and local job opportunities. For example, girls are taught sewing and weaving,

laboriously producing hand-made items that can, very often, be bought cheaply at the market.



3.3 Marrying later, but still lacking vital information

Progress is being made in supporting the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs of Hmong girls. Child marriage is being reduced by laws that prohibit the practice (enforced through fines) while awareness-raising campaigns on child marriage and contraception are changing attitudes about the ideal family size. None of the girls we interviewed wanted more than two children, as they have seen, at first-hand, the clear link between family size and poverty.

However, while rates of child marriage are declining – both nationally and in Ta Lung – it remains a cultural norm for Hmong families, with girls in the hamlet marrying as early as 14. Even though they may have some say in who they marry (and the practice of abducting girls for marriage is now rare), life is often very difficult for them after marriage, given the increased demands on their labour when they move in with their husband and his family. Most girls interviewed said they would prefer to delay marriage until they are well into their twenties.

Although access to contraception for married women is improving as a result of government efforts to reduce birth rates, adolescent girls (married or single) have little or no access to SRH information or contraception before marriage. Mothers rarely, if ever, discuss SRH issues with their daughters because of social norms that prohibit conversations on the subject between different generations. Schools cover puberty and reproduction only as one-off topics, and offer very little practical information. Community-based education – vital for reaching out-of-school girls – is essentially non-existent: local health workers are often male, which means that adolescent girls cannot approach them for advice. There is also a chronic lack of information on HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses.

Formal health-care services, though subsidised, are under-used by Hmong families, who tend to rely on shamans. Antenatal care and skilled birth attendants remain comparatively rare, with all of the births mentioned by interviewees attended by husbands or mothers-in-law only.

3.4 Family loyalties and social isolation



Gendered norms and notions of what makes a ‘good’ daughter place severe constraints on the ability of adolescent girls to realise their full capabilities. From early childhood through adolescence, girls in Ta Lung are socialised to develop the skills and traits they will need to become ‘good’ wives. While some norms are changing (with girls as well as boys now expected to be diligent students, and some women contributing to family income through paid work), others persist – most notably son preference. Not only does this preference shape a girl’s educational journey, it also contributes to her disproportionate work burden and determines her limited inheritance rights from her own family.

The research also revealed the often absolute nature of girls’ loyalty to their families – their very strong sense of filial piety. Those who said that they had left school against their will also described this as, ultimately, a positive experience as they could be of more help to their mothers. Those who said they had no free time and few opportunities to see their friends presented their lives as ‘normal’. Those who had dreamed of becoming teachers or doctors – and who were now taking weaving classes or working around the home – spoke first not of what *they* had lost, but of what *their mothers* had gained. Furthermore, while few girls report being abused by their parents, most had seen their fathers – fuelled by alcohol – beating their mothers on a regular basis. The intense emotions evoked by this gender-based violence helps to shape the piety that constrains girls’ futures, as they are often desperate to help their mothers in any way they can.

These family dynamics also reinforce girls’ social isolation – particularly in the case of those living in the poorest and most rural hamlets. Most girls reported that they hid any problems from their parents so as not to burden them. Friends – very important to school girls though almost totally absent from the lives of out-of-school girls – were seen primarily as good for ‘talking about small things’. Many girls noted that if they were facing serious problems, there would be no one in whom they could confide.

3.5 Exclusion from decision-making

Most Hmong girls in Ta Lung reported having little say in family or community decisions. Here, they face discrimination on the grounds of both their gender and their age, which limits their options when it comes to forming and expressing their own opinions. Although some Hmong girls are, for the first time, being encouraged to imagine and pursue a future that prioritises their own needs, most are either too busy or too bound by family loyalties to imagine lives that differ in any substantial way from those of their mothers.

Box 3: A study in filial piety and social isolation: Muh Tee's story

Muh Tee, 17, lives at home with her parents and 10-year-old brother, who is still in school. Her 15-year-old sister is already married and has moved away. She and her mother work in the fields and raise small livestock. Despite being 'a very good student' and wanting to continue, Muh Tee left school after 9th grade to help her mother, who is often too ill to work (she is possessed by a tiger ghost, but has never seen a doctor). Muh Tee explained, coughing heavily herself: *'She coughs, has lots of pain – can't work, can't eat.'*

Muh Tee is glad she is at home to help her mother. *'I don't feel sad about not going to school – the important thing is that I can help my mother... This means she doesn't have to work too much.'* She admits that *'Because I'm worried about my mother I don't have much free time'* and *'I can't talk to anyone – not to friends, not my sister, not my father – because I don't want to make them sad'*, she claims to be content with her life. Her father's carpentry job has allowed them to buy a corn grinder and other equipment, which makes her work less arduous. In what little recreational time she has, she watches TV shows about orphans and love stories.

She is concerned for her future, and that of her parents, as she does not know who would help them with the domestic workload and her mother's care if she could not. She would love to have a hotline to call for information about how to help her mother. She herself would like to have only two children, so that she will be better able to care for them and afford enough food and clothes.

There are only two community spaces that are, in theory, open to girls in terms of participation: school and government-sponsored organisations such as the Young Pioneers, the Children's Union and the Youth Union. Most girls expressed confusion when asked whether their teachers asked for their opinions, suggesting that schooling remains largely didactic – teacher-driven rather than child-focused. Some girls are active participants in the wider life of schools, but tend to take on the roles created for them by adults, such as classroom monitor.

Within the family, it is difficult to disentangle what it is that has an impact on the participation of adolescent girls in decision-making. Is it their gender, their age, or both? Some girls reported that their parents do value their opinions: a few have, for example, been allowed to choose their own educational trajectories. Most, however, felt that they had no say in decisions about their lives and could not even imagine a future of their own choosing. What's more, parents place stringent restrictions on girls' mobility – the result of a combination of domestic workload and concerns for girls' safety (including fears about risk of trafficking to neighbouring China) rather than any deliberate attempt to curb their mobility.

4 What this means for policies and programmes

As Hmong girls begin to stay in school – at least through 9th grade – and as they and their parents begin to recognise the benefits of delaying marriage, adolescence is emerging as a crucial window of opportunity to help girls realise their full human capabilities. During our research, our interactions with girls, parents and community leaders revealed important insights about how to address the policy and programming gaps related to gendered vulnerabilities in Hmong communities in order to promote gender justice. Our research highlights five key priorities.

- 1. Support for girls to attend upper secondary school** including, for example, the promotion of successful Hmong women as role models, the provision of educational stipends or other social protection support to compensate families for the direct and indirect costs of education, and measures to encourage equal opportunity by providing Hmong language instruction for younger students.
- 2. More opportunities to earn an income**, based on realistic market assessments and Hmong cultural preferences for local work that complements, rather than replaces, farming. Vocational training initiatives need to recognise the domestic workloads of girls and the strict constraints on their mobility, and should consult community leaders, families and girls to find solutions that work with, rather than against, the grain of local culture.
- 3. School- and community-based SRH programming** that is developmentally and culturally appropriate (including written materials in the Hmong language) and easily accessible to adolescent girls and boys – married or unmarried and in school or out – and that allows them to remain anonymous. Parents also need support to help them talk to their daughters about physical and emotional development.
- 4. Safe spaces where girls can discuss their concerns with trusted and independent (preferably Hmong) adults** and get practical information and logistical help (if needed) that acknowledges their cultural realities. Girls are particularly interested in advice on how to prevent and respond to domestic and gender-based violence.
- 5. More activities** for adolescents that meet their leisure and socialisation needs while helping them to forge their identity, find their voice and negotiate the growing tensions between their Hmong traditions and the changing world around them.

Government actors at national, provincial and sub-provincial levels, as well as their counterparts in mass organisations, NGOs and donor agencies, need to decide how best to address these five priorities and adapt and coordinate broader policies and strategies to help adolescent girls – and ethnic minority girls in particular – realise their full human capabilities.

Given the on-going national debate about how Viet Nam can best build on and consolidate its economic achievements, as well as the broader international debates on the post-2015 development challenges, now is the time to help ensure that adolescent girls – particularly those from marginalised ethnic minority communities – become more visible on the development agenda and receive the support they need to realise their full potential.



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