



## Expanding capabilities

How adolescent Khmer girls in Viet Nam are learning to juggle filial piety, educational ambition (and Facebook)

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### Abstract

Informed by the longstanding consensus that women play a unique role in consolidating development gains in the next generation – and building on the emerging understanding that adolescence, because it is a critical period in terms of capacity development, presents a unique opportunity to alter life trajectories – this report explores Khmer adolescent girls' understanding of the role that gendered social norms play in shaping both their current wellbeing and the realisation of their future capabilities. Part of a larger multi-country programme of research in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, this study draws on qualitative and participatory research methodologies to assess the key threats to gender justice facing Khmer adolescent girls living in Viet Nam's Mekong Delta region – and the types of programme and policy responses they believe would enhance the realisation of their full capabilities.



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# Executive summary

## Overview

Informed by the longstanding consensus that women play a unique role in consolidating development gains in the next generation – and building on the emerging understanding that adolescence, because it is a critical period in terms of capacity development, presents a unique opportunity to alter life trajectories – this report explores Khmer adolescent girls’ understanding of the role that gendered social norms play in shaping both their current wellbeing and the realisation of their future capabilities. Part of a larger multi-country programme of research in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, this study draws on qualitative and participatory research methodologies to assess the key threats to gender justice facing Khmer adolescent girls living in Viet Nam’s Mekong Delta region – and the types of programme and policy responses they believe would enhance the realisation of their full capabilities.

## Vietnamese context

The World Bank (2013a) notes that “Vietnam is a development success story,” having moved from one of the world’s poorest countries in the mid-1980’s to middle-income status in 2010. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been over 5% a year since 2000 (World Bank, 2012a) and nearly half Vietnam’s population escaped poverty in less than two decades (World Bank, 2013b). That said, however, millions of households have ‘incomes very near the poverty line and remain vulnerable to falling back into poverty as a result of idiosyncratic shocks... or related economy-wide shocks’ (World Bank, 2013b:1).

Minorities are particularly at risk. Their poverty rates are five times higher than the national average and the gap between Kinh (ethnic majority) and minority outcomes continues to widen. The Khmer, who originate in Vietnam’s most productive agricultural region, are increasingly fragile as they face not only landlessness, which has been growing for decades, but sharp recent rises in unemployment, as mechanisation has quickly eliminated a major source of jobs.

Vietnamese adolescent girls also face a variety of threats to the realisation of their full capabilities, many of which are related to the broader developmental context outlined above. Some of these threats, however, are social mores related to age and the tradition of filial piety, which leaves girls focused on their parents’ short-term needs rather than their own long-term futures. Other are related to gender relations—as Vietnamese families have traditionally preferred sons, barred daughters from inheritance and forced girls and women to shoulder the lion’s share of domestic work while excluding them from household decision-making.

## Study Sample and Methodology

Our research was conducted in Kien Giang province, in the Mekong Delta of southern Viet Nam.<sup>1</sup> Kien Giang, while having a relatively low income poverty rate – 5.73% in 2012 compared to a national average of 9.6% – ranks amongst the lowest of Vietnam’s provinces in terms of multi-dimensional poverty. This is explained in part by high levels of landlessness and land concentration, as well as geography – the region is criss-crossed with rivers and canals, which presents challenges in terms of education and health service access. How Kien Giang’s rapid economic success but simultaneous rise in inequality is affecting young people appears to be poorly understood. Interviews with provincial officials suggested that there is a general recognition that adolescents, especially 16 and 17 year olds, exist in a “no man’s land” as they are seldom the target of programming and overlooked in most policy. Moreover, very little attention is being paid to specific vulnerabilities experienced by adolescent girls.

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<sup>1</sup> Note there is also a second report for Viet Nam on Hmong girls in Ha Giang province which is part of the same broader study. See Jones, Presler-Marshall and Tran, 2013.

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Our primary research was sited in the Go Quao district of Kien Giang province in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam. The district has the densest Khmer population in the province – nearly two in three residents are Khmer – and a combined poor and near-poor rate of nearly 20%. In consultation with local authorities, we selected girls and their families living in the middling poor commune of Dinh Hoa with whom to carry out our research.

We employed a multi-layered participatory and qualitative research approach. Focus group discussions, conducted with groups of adolescents and adults, in both single-sex and mixed settings, allowed us to explore general community-level definitions, views and experiences surrounding gendered adolescence and the ways in which gendered social norms are both persisting but malleable. In-depth interviews, with younger adolescent girls, older adolescent girls – as well as a more limited number of their older and younger brothers – and key informants, helped identify how adolescents see their status, opportunities and challenges within the household and community. We also used life histories, case studies and intergenerational pairings to explore intra-household dynamics vis-à-vis adolescent girls by triangulating the views of adults and teens and paying particular attention to gendered themes. A variety of participatory techniques, including body mapping, rankings, timelines, and family drawings, were used to stimulate conversation and facilitate recall regarding the vulnerabilities that face Khmer girls and the opportunities they would need to realize their full capabilities.

### Capability deprivations facing Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa

Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa are, to some extent, reflecting the changing norms of the larger Vietnamese culture, but in other ways they are living lives of positive deviance. Despite the high poverty and drop-out rates in the larger Khmer community, a confluence of strong social and political institutions, combined with growing economic opportunities in Dinh Hoa commune, is giving the majority of local Khmer girls an opportunity to think outside confining gender norms, realise more of their full capabilities and plan their own futures. While concerns remain, these girls are benefiting from dynamic local governance that not only sees – but also responds to – the needs of girls; teachers who not only teach students – but also care about children; an ethnic community that is not only cohesive – but also has longstanding traditions that have emphasised the importance of education and fostered gender equality; and parents who not only want different futures for their daughters – but are also willing to make sacrifices themselves in order to help their daughters obtain them. By identifying the confluence of factors that is helping Khmer girls become the women they would like to be, it is hoped that we can begin to develop a road map that might help other vulnerable girls do the same.

The factors accounting for the positive deviance of Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa include:

- *Educational domain:* Although poverty continues to force many children in Kien Giang Province to abandon their educations, girls in Dinh Hoa are increasingly likely not only to attend upper-secondary school, but to plan for tertiary education. Parents are willing to “plough harder” to keep their daughters in school, teachers are largely kind and supportive, and schools work to find ways to retain students and make the educational environment one that supports not just students, but children. The impact of these actions is bolstered by ethnic traditions that encourage girls’ education and a local commitment to education that has roots in the past.
- *Economic domain:* Despite the fact that poverty, often instigated by bouts of ill-health and shaped by growing landlessness, continues to limit the lives of many of Dinh Hoa’s Khmer girls, most families have been able to diversify their incomes through small-trading and migration and are able to make ends meet. Girls benefit from the presence of a local company that prefers to hire female workers, inheritance patterns that are gender neutral, a cultural preference for daughters and local role-models of successful female business owners.
- *Physical Integrity and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) domain:* Taught by both their mothers and their teachers, Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa are relatively well educated about their changing bodies. They are rarely subject to early marriage, they are allowed to choose their own husbands and plan their families to reduce the likelihood of poverty, and, due to matrilineal residence customs, often remain securely embedded in family networks throughout their lives, which offers protection against domestic violence.

- *Psychosocial domain:* Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa, who are generally not burdened by endless household tasks but who do report significant academic pressure, have increasing time for relaxation and recreation. They have access to not only school clubs and competitions, in which they excel, but also community sports. Girls feel supported by both their parents and their siblings and are well-embedded in peer networks.
- *Participation domain:* Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa are very involved in the larger community and, within the constraints of filial piety, feel included in family decision-making. They not only shine academically, but hold leadership positions at school. They also take pride in their participation in Khmer cultural activities – singing and dancing in competitions that often take them to other provinces and offer them cash prizes.

## Policy and programme recommendations to promote gender justice

The overall positive situation of Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa notwithstanding, there remains considerable scope for new policy and programming to address the capability deprivations of those who are being left behind. While future actions should be informed by complementary forms of evidence, as well as a more systematic review of existing policy and programme interventions targeted at adolescents, we suggest the following:

- *Support that will enable girls to complete their educations* including, for instance, economic support (e.g. cash transfers or educational scholarships) to deal with the short-term actual and opportunity costs of education; evening classes that enable older students to complete their educations without embarrassment at being over-age in regular classrooms; information about tertiary education options; and better access to the internet as a learning tool.
- *More opportunities for income generation*, with vocational training that will enable them to secure well-paid, local employment and career consultations so that they can better understand what sorts of jobs are available outside of the commune and how they might prepare for them. Ensuring a larger buffer between illness and poverty (e.g., in the form of improved social health insurance or sickness benefits) would also prevent familial ill-health from limiting adolescent girls' economic futures.
- *School- and community-based SRH programming* that is developmentally appropriate, can be anonymously consumed (e.g., written materials and media programmes) and is practical in content. Girls want SRH to be taught in single-sex settings, by female teachers – but for SRH education also be available to boys.
- *Safe spaces where girls can discuss their concerns with respected, independent adults.* Girls expressed a strong interest in clubs where they can share their feelings and relax with one another after the pressured environment of school.
- *Dialogue with adults* who can help adolescent girls become the women they would like to become. Girls are aware of the fact that their world is shifting rapidly – they would like, according to one thirteen year old, for parents and teachers to “provide us more information about what is right to do, what is wrong”.

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# 1 Introduction

Adolescence is increasingly recognised as a critical period for capacity growth, which presents development actors a unique opportunity to alter life trajectories across generations. Adolescent girls, in particular, are seen as key. As the future mothers of the next generation, improving their lives offers a unique opportunity for a double return on investment. However, while progress has been rapid on some fronts, with today's girls far more likely, for example, to attend school than their mothers, gender discriminatory norms and practices, such as burdening girls and women with the lion's share of domestic responsibility, continue to limit the options open to tomorrow's women. By exploring girls' unique vulnerabilities – vis-à-vis gender, age and culture – it is hoped that we can identify nuanced solutions that will help them shape identities of their own choosing.

This study is part of a multi-year policy research programme funded by DFID, which explores gender justice for adolescent girls in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam. ODI, in partnership with national researchers, is exploring the key vulnerabilities that shape girls' well-being and future potential. By focusing on five capability domains —educational, economic, physical integrity and sexual and reproductive health (SRH), psychosocial development, and civic and household participation —the study aims to render visible the all too often hidden experiences of adolescent girls and identify how policy and programme actors can better respond to their needs.

This particular study focusses on Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa, a rural commune in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. With a poverty rate many times higher than that of the Kinh majority, and high school graduation rates many times lower, Khmer girls, on a national level, are struggling to keep up in a rapidly shifting economy and culture. Traditional Vietnamese norms such as filial piety and son preference are merging with modern realities such as the feminisation of education and migration to create both unique threats and opportunities for adolescent girls. Where social institutions can recognise those threats and opportunities – and work to mitigate the former and expand the latter – girls are able to make rapid progress that a generation ago would have been unimaginable. This has largely been the experience of Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa and speaks to a situation of “positive deviance” that may ultimately help construct models that can be used to improve the lives of adolescent girls in other communities.

The report begins by laying out the conceptual framework – which is similar across all four countries – and the Vietnamese governance structure, which is highly distinctive and shapes the experience of girls in our study. We first draw on academic and grey literature, as well as a variety of nationally and internationally collected data, to present the larger Vietnamese context vis-à-vis gender injustice. Where possible, we include information about the Khmer experience. We then briefly outline the study sites, sample, methodology and research tools, and provide an overview of the Kien Giang provincial context. Our primary research findings are presented in section 7. Integrating information from adolescent girls, their families and the leaders in their communities, we address each of the above mentioned five domains individually, identifying key areas in which gendered norms continue to define girls' lives – and areas in which they are beginning to shift. The report concludes with a discussion of possible policy implications, drawing on girls' ideas of what gender justice would look like from their perspective.

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## 2 Conceptual Framework

### 2.1 Social norms, attitudes and practices

Social norms, attitudes and practices, long codified though tradition, if not law, are increasingly recognized as key to shaping lives. As ‘shared expectations...regarding how people should behave’, social norms mould not only our actions, but also our attitudes and beliefs (Heise, 2011:13; see also Bicchieri, 2006). Tightly interwoven, these actions, attitudes and beliefs together form the continually contested, constantly changing social web that we call culture (Mackie et al., 2012; Rao and Walton, 2004). Boudet et al. (2012) make an important distinction about how that change occurs when they delineate the difference between “relaxing” versus “changing” norms. They note that the former exists in spaces where individuals are “challenging and perhaps crossing the boundaries” of traditional roles but are not fundamentally “setting a new standard” (p.51). Their actions, to use Bicchieri’s (2006) language, ‘violate descriptive norms’, but leave the ‘larger injunctive norms intact’. In comparison, genuinely changing norms involves the recognition of the legitimacy of that boundary crossing – how we believe individuals *ought* to behave must shift to accommodate how they are now behaving.

Due to the fact that they ‘permeate daily life and are the basis of self-regulation’, gender norms are both at the centre of the cultural web and particularly resistant to change (Boudet et al., 2012: 24). Children learn at a very young age ‘what it is to be a girl or a boy, or a man or a woman’ so, that the gender norms that shape social institutions tend to remain largely invisible (p. 25). Recent work developed through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) has focused attention on the gendered nature of social institutions. Grouped into five indices – “Discriminatory Family Code, Restricted Physical Integrity, Son Bias, Restricted Resources and Entitlements and Restricted Civil Liberties” (SIGI, 2013) – those institutions are considered key drivers of girls’ outcomes in regard to the five capability domains mentioned above: education, economics, SRH and physical integrity, psychosocial development and participation (Branisa et al. 2009; OECD 2010).

In the case of gendered experiences of adolescence, earlier work by Mensch et al. (1998) has emphasized that adolescent policy and programmes must ‘peel away the many layers of control over girls, challenge discriminatory familial and community norms, and confront male attitudes and behaviors that are damaging to girls’ (p. 80).<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they must also “‘invent” a value for girls by counteracting customary perceptions of girls (and the legal frameworks that often support them) and by promoting the “novel” concept of girls’ rights and capabilities apart from reproduction’. A recent attempt to apply the SIGI categories to an analysis of adolescent girls and young women in order to identify the role of discriminatory norms in perpetuating poverty and deprivation has highlighted, among other things, the need for a framework that can adapt itself to a specific focus on adolescent girls who find themselves subject to discriminatory social norms linked to both age and gender (Jones et al., 2010).

This evolving framework is in turn underpinned by thinking about the intimate linkages between discriminatory norms, practices and group perceptions of social identity, themselves driven by collectively agreed upon understandings and belief systems surrounding group membership (such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, religion) and power relations (whether they be patriarchy, age-based hierarchies, capitalist modes of production, etc.). The resulting norms, values and attitudes can have positive, neutral or negative effects; in their negative form, they can be discriminatory in nature. This discrimination results in exclusion and restricted opportunities to develop capabilities, the outcomes of which are unrealised potential, limited development and disempowerment. According to this framework, the overarching aim of policy and practice is to address both the manifestations – or outcomes – of discriminatory norms, values and attitudes as well as the driving forces that underpin and perpetuate them.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that this section and 2.2 draw heavily on Banteyba et al., 2013.

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## 2.2 Capabilities and gender justice

The conceptual framework that serves as the basis for our research draws on the ‘*capabilities approach*’ that has emerged over the last decade as a leading alternative to standard economic frameworks for thinking about human development, poverty, inequality and social justice. Based on Amartya Sen’s (1999) theory of ‘development as freedom’, this approach posits development as a process of expanding ‘freedoms’ or ‘capabilities’ that improve human lives by opening up the range of things that a person can effectively be and do, such as to be healthy and well nourished, to be knowledgeable, and to participate in community life. Development from this perspective is about facilitating the acquisition and use of such capabilities as well as removing obstacles (such as illiteracy, ill health, lack of access to resources, or lack of civil and political freedom) to what a person can do in life (Fukuda-Parr, 2003).

The capabilities approach has evolved over time as a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual wellbeing and social arrangements and the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. For some of the capabilities in question, the main inputs are financial resources and economic production, but for others they are political practices, such as the effective guarantee of freedom of thought, religion or political participation. For yet others, they are social or cultural practices, social structures, social institutions, public goods, social norms, traditions and habits. The capabilities approach thus offers a comprehensive perspective on enhancing human wellbeing and understanding the social arrangements that either foster or inhibit it.<sup>3</sup>

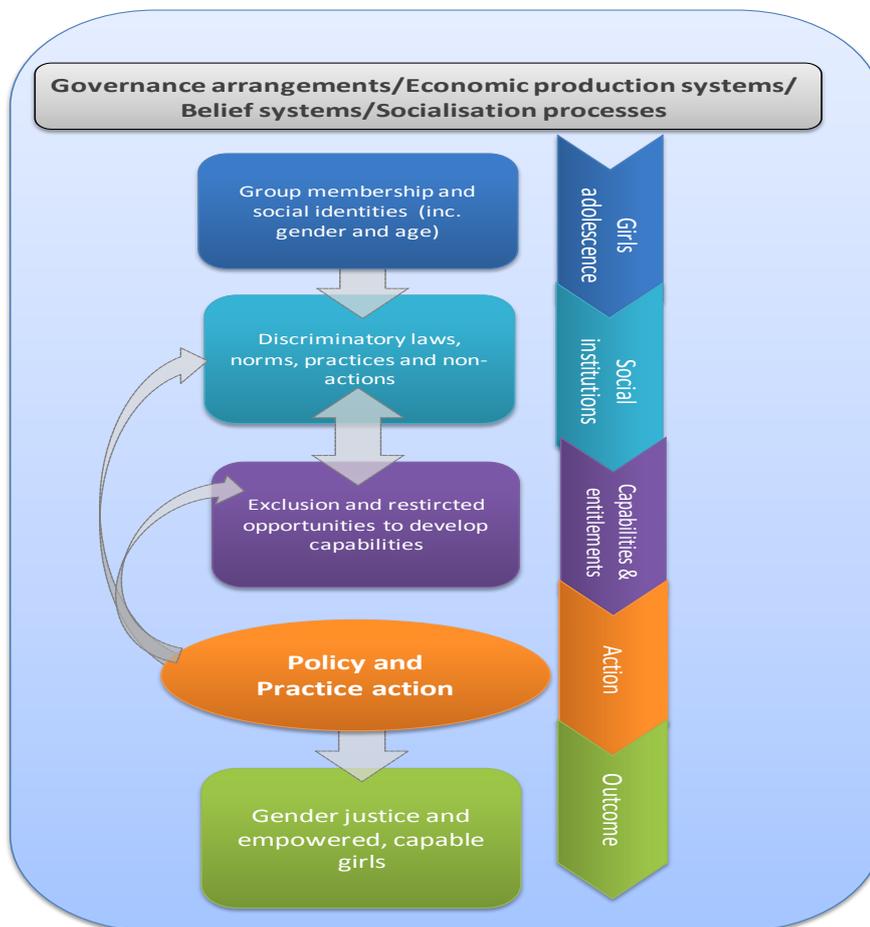
According to Fukuda-Parr (2003), the capabilities-based human development paradigm provides a more gender-sensitive agenda to public policy than its alternatives since gender equity is a central concern of the approach; it is sensitive to a range of inequities and discrimination that are important in women’s lives; and it has the scope to delve into complex issues that constrain women’s life choices, including discriminatory political processes, social institutions and norms that need to be tackled head-on. Through the work of feminist thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum, the capabilities approach has been used as a potent tool for construction of a normative concept of social justice and the promotion of ‘gender justice’ (Nussbaum 2000; 2003; 2011). For this reason, it is important to conceptualize adolescent girls as evolving citizens to whom rights and entitlements accrue and to consider, therefore, the full range of actors at various levels – including family, community and state – who bear responsibility for creating the enabling environment and providing the services required to nurture and enhance these capabilities.

In seeking to understand how the development of capabilities is restricted and how discrimination functions we need to go beyond recognition of compromised capabilities to understand the forces driving discriminatory laws, norms and practices. Discrimination results in exclusion and restricted opportunities to develop capabilities, the outcomes of which are unrealised potential, limited development, disempowerment, and, ultimately, a lack of social justice, particularly ‘gender justice’ (see Figure 1).

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.capabilityapproach.com/pubs/323CAtraining20031209.pdf>

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



As Table 1 illustrates, drawing on the literature discussed above the framework identifies five capability domains for attention: educational, economic, SRH and physical integrity, psychosocial, and civic and household participation. It should be noted that while the table below is adapted from our international framework, it was prepared with the Khmer context in mind. To that end, it is similar, but not identical to the frameworks used in other locations in the broader cross-country study on adolescents and gender justice.

**Table 1: Adolescent Girls' Capabilities and Entitlements Framework**



Framework capability domains	Norms and practices compromising capabilities and leading to exclusion	Non-actions compromising capabilities and compounding exclusion	Entitlements that underpin gender justice
Education	Gender-based school exclusion at secondary level Unequal care burdens Lack of choice over time use Bullying in school or community	Non-provision of accessible and affordable secondary education services Non-provision of quality child care Non-enforcement of decent work conditions or child work laws Non-provision of reproductive health services	Education Healthcare Leisure time Decent work
Economic/productive	Limited access to assets Exclusion from labour markets and decent work Occupational discrimination – Hereditary employment Effect of child labour – Exclusion from schooling	Weak implementation Non-enforcement of labour law Gender discrimination in equal opportunities Non-implementation of children act on labour Weak access to justice	Income-generating opportunities, skills, training Productive assets – land, credit, technology
Physical integrity/Reproductive health	Limited authority in family Limited control over physical body safety Gender-based violence—directed at girls or mothers Limited control over sexuality—in that girls are expected to be passive and asexual until marriage Unequal care burdens Lack of choice over time use	Limited safe spaces Limited protective services Limited access to justice Non-provisions of health services Non-provisions of reproductive health education Non-enforcement of national laws and policies, including on gender equality and gender mainstreaming Non-provisions of childcare Non-enforcement of laws	Bodily integrity Care and protection Decision-making power in household Balance of time vis-a-vis care/domestic/productive work and leisure Knowledge about health and reproductive health
Psycho-social and emotional well-being	Gender stereotyping Restricted mobility Time poverty Restricted access to education Limits on private roles Restrictions on associating	Lack of policy space for adolescents Lack of programming for adolescents Limited safe places	Inclusion in decisions that affect self Freedom of association Support and nurturing social life
Participation in the family and community	Restricted parental relationships Limit on private roles Limited authority in family Constrained marriage choice Stereotypes Control/surveillance Restricted mobility Limit on public roles	Lack of adequate childcare Non-provision of information Non-provision of justice services Non-provision of activities for adolescents	Inclusion in decisions affecting self Parental rights Voice within the community Access to nurture and support from adults in care-giving roles Voice/ representation Group membership Mobility

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It is also worth noting that unlike tables, which can be clearly delineated into columns of norms and rows of domains, the real world is messy. While we have separated the threats facing Khmer girls into the five domains mentioned above, which is requisite given that findings are meant to be comparative across countries, there are clearly multiple cross-cutting themes that lead to a great deal of overlap. Early marriage, for example, restricts girls' educational and economic opportunities and has a negative impact on their physical integrity and reproductive health. Similarly, girls' lack of inheritance rights affects not only their opportunities to pursue high school education, but also their time poverty and, ultimately, their loneliness. Thus, while the report is organised thematically – by capability domain – it is shaped organically, flowing out of the girls' stories and capitalising on the connections important in their lives. This at some points leads to redundancies – and at others forces us to overlay “artificial” sub-headings in order to contain “messy” spill-over. Research is inevitably an interpretive exercise; our aim here is to help the reader shed light on the experiences of girls who are very often invisible in public policy debates while still retaining as many of their unique voices and perspectives as possible.

### 2.3 Positive deviance

The concept of positive deviance is also key to understanding the threats and opportunities facing Khmer girls and the realisation of their full human capabilities in Dinh Hoa. Wells-Dang (2012) notes that the first application of this methodology was in Vietnam over three decades ago. Save the Children, working in a district with extremely high rates of child malnutrition, set out to identify why some children were well nourished – to ascertain how, in the face of endemic poverty, their families were able to achieve better results than their neighbours. These families were, observes Wells-Dang (2012), “positive” because they achieved good results without additional resources, and “deviants” because they practiced behaviours different from others” (p.6). Focussing not on communities' weaknesses, but their strengths, “(p)ositive deviance has now been used in dozens of countries to attack a wide variety of problems”<sup>4</sup> (Rosenberg, 2013).

The positive deviance approach has most recently been used in the Vietnamese context by Wells-Dang (2012), who was looking for economically successful ethnic minority communities. On the one hand, Viet Nam has made tremendous progress in terms of development indicators since Doi Moi (reforms starting in the mid-1980s that ushered in a ‘socialist-oriented market economy’) transforming itself from one of the world's poorest countries a quarter of a century ago to a middle-income country in 2010. On the other hand, however, its ethnic minorities are not only failing to make sufficient progress, they are falling further and further behind the Kinh majority on a wide variety of development outcomes. Long undifferentiated, in terms of both vulnerability and programming, according to recent evidence minority groups urgently require differentiated programming support if meaningful and sustainable development interventions are to be achieved. Wells-Dang (2012) notes that it is important to identify not only the drivers of extreme deprivation, such as those constraining the Hmong community, but also stories of positive deviance, where families and communities are doing better than might be expected given not only their inputs, but also the broader experiences around them.

In many ways, Khmer adolescent girls in Dinh Hoa typify that deviance. While the larger Khmer community is gripped by endemic poverty and suffers from extremely high drop-out rates, a confluence of strong social institutions in that commune is giving the majority of local Khmer girls an opportunity to think new thoughts and plan their own futures. Dinh Hoa is not a wealthy commune with outstanding resources. It is, however, a community that has been able to synergistically capitalise on “better” and turn it in to “good enough” – enabling a growing number of Khmer girls to begin to look like the “kids next door” in terms of their aspirations for their futures. By identifying what has helped these girls move ahead we hope to pinpoint key factors that might help other minority girls do the same.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see the Positive Deviance Initiative (<http://www.positivedeviance.org/>).

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# 3 Setting the context: overview of Viet Nam

## 3.1 Governance structure

The Socialist Republic of Viet Nam is a one-party state, led by the Communist Party, which despite economic liberalisation and increasing decentralisation retains tight national control over a wide variety of policy areas (Fritzen, 2006). There are four layers of government in Vietnam: central, provincial, district, and commune (Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder, 2008). There are 63 governments recognised at the provincial level and over 10,000 communes – each composed of several villages. Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder (2008) note that, while the Communist Party has the overall leadership role at all levels, the party itself is ‘functionally pluralist’, which, on the one hand, offers more space for decentralisation than may be immediately obvious and, on the other hand, leads to a certain fragility of power that often causes an overinvestment in maintaining credibility.

There is evidence across Viet Nam of increasing decentralisation – political, administrative and fiscal. Within the constraints of a one-party system, Vietnam’s “grass-roots democracy” movement has slowly been building space for political participation (Wells-Dang, 2010) (see also Box 1) while a need for efficiency has been encouraging the transfer of responsibilities to lower administrative levels (Fritzen, 2006). In addition, recent budget policy has ceded more and more fiscal control to subnational levels, leaving Vietnam, by some measures, as fiscally decentralised as the United States (Martinez-Vazquez, 2005; Painter, 2008; Fritzen, 2006.)

### **Box 1: A unique approach to civil society organising: Viet Nam’s mass organisations**

Mass organisations, including the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, Women’s Union and Youth Union were established in the last 1920s and early 1930s by the Communist Party as ‘the people’s front’ in the pursuit of independence from French colonization. The traditional function has been to mobilise citizens for various activities aiming to ‘protect, construct and develop’ the nation with a heavy focus on creating loyal citizens and cohesive communities. In recent years they have implemented many development-oriented activities to improve the health, economic and social wellbeing of their members and have provided supplemental public services that the government does not provide (e.g. housing loans, micro-credit for the poor, youth employment support, nutritional awareness classes for parents, intervention in domestic violence disputes). They remain however very closely connected to the government—cadres have public servant status and receive salaries from the national treasury. Moreover, while there are nominal membership fees, most activities are state funded. Mass organisations usually have a four-layered organisational structure from central, provincial, district to commune level in order to effectively transmit decisions and instructions made at the central level down to the grassroots. On the one hand this structure has distinct advantages, including being well placed to identify households in need based on locally contextualised knowledge. On the other, however, there are significant questions as to whether mass organisations really have the capacity to reflect the priority needs of the poorest and most excluded given the broader hierarchical political culture in which they operate.

Source: Sakata, 2005

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This decentralisation has been useful where it allows communes to target policies to their own needs – such as fining the families of truant children to encourage school attendance – but is hardly a panacea for development. For example, the elaborate system of tax-sharing, which is aimed at reducing inequality and ostensibly favours poorer provinces such as Ha Giang, is still ultimately more beneficial to wealthier provinces that have more capacity to raise revenue (Fritzen, 2006; Bjornstad, 2009; Beresford, 2008; Nguyen-Hoang, 2008). This leads Bjornstad (2009) to conclude that while ‘decentralization may contribute to poverty reduction outcomes’ it is not ‘inherently pro-poor’ (p.3). Particularly since subnational governments have no capacity to create or alter taxes, leaving them with user-fees as the only potential source of fund-raising, there is concern that decentralisation may ultimately contribute to local services becoming regressively funded (Nguyen-Hoang, 2008; Beresford, 2008; Fritzen, 2006; World Bank, 2005)<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, while pro forma decentralisation has grown significantly in recent years, (d)iversification of authority in key decision-making processes remains limited (Fforde, 2012). Because ‘the state share of economic output has remained relatively constant since 2002 at 37–40% of GDP’ (Gainsborough, 2010: 482) and Vietnam’s citizens are represented de jure, if not de facto, by a plethora of state-sponsored organisations such as the Women’s Union and the Youth Union, the central government remains monolithic in the minds of many. Policy tends to be top-down, rather than bottom-up, and once enacted, the ‘actors involved are then expected to be bound by it’ (Harris et al., 2011: viii). This tends to not only leave lower-level authorities in a holding-pattern, waiting for proclamations from above, but also stifle local innovation and targeted responses, particularly in areas where language and cultural barriers make it difficult for locals to make their needs known (Jones et al., 2012). For example, while there is, as will be discussed in greater detail below, a unified push to encourage families to have no more than two children, there is insufficient attention paid to the diverse drivers of fertility. Similarly, targets for poverty reduction are often set by the central government with inadequate input from local authorities.

### 3.2 Ethnic differences

There are 53 recognized ethnic minority groups amongst Vietnam’s population of 88 million people – representing approximately 15% of the population. Most ethnic minority groups are very small; only five have populations larger than one million: the Hmong, Khmer, Tay, Thai and Muong. The Khmer, who primarily live in the Mekong Delta, are amongst the few minorities who are not largely confined to Vietnam’s northern and central mountains (see Box 2 below). While Vietnam’s Constitution enshrines the rights of minorities to use their own languages and guard their cultural identities – at least in so far that ‘they do not pose a threat to the socialist progress of the country’ – policies designed to foster modernisation speak to a fundamental tension in that nation-building and development often struggle to adequately incorporate diversity (Michaud, 2010: 32, see also Mylonas, 2013; Messier and Michaud, 2012).

Recognising that poverty is not only endemic – but growing comparatively worse – amongst most minority groups, Viet Nam has enacted a plethora of policies and programmes to address minority disadvantage over the last two decades. Bonnin and Turner (2012) note that there were nearly two dozen such programmes in the late 1990’s and that while many have now been combined, the absolute number of programmes remains large – and diverse. Programme 135, for example, is aimed at infrastructure development in minority areas. Amongst other things it has built roads, schools and hospitals. Programme 134 has allocated land to and built houses for minority families. Additionally, Baulch et al. (2010) observe ‘by 2006, a higher percentage of the ethnic minority households were receiving social transfers for all categories except social insurance. For some categories, such as education and health assistance the improvement is very large indeed’ (27).

However, as Turner (2012b) concludes, ‘(g)overnment programs to reduce ethnic minority poverty are often built on the assumption that activities which worked well for the Kinh and Chinese majority should also work well for ethnic minorities. When they do not, lack of understanding can lead to the conclusion that the target beneficiaries are backward, or unmotivated, or lazy’ (p. 410). Minorities, on the other hand, mindful of the painful collectivisation campaigns of the past, are often distrustful of government development initiatives and fundamentally do not, as Scoones (2009) notes, see themselves in need of ‘rescue, discipline or transformation’ (184; see also Turner, 2012; Michaud, 2011; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner, 2009). Recently there have been

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<sup>5</sup> The World Bank reports, for example, that community contributions to road maintenance equal nearly 10% ‘of the annual poverty line in the relatively poor Northern Uplands, compared with 4.6% in the country as a whole’ (2005, p.91).

increasing attempts to disaggregate the category of ‘ethnic minority’ as evidence is highlighting that their development trajectories are often quite distinct, and this is indeed the case with the Khmer population as we discuss in more detail in Box 2.

### **Box 2: Positive Deviance among Ethnic Minority Communities: A Case Study on the Khmer**

Wells-Dang (2012), exploring positive deviance in minority communities, chose the Chau Thanh and Tra Cu districts in Tra Vinh province as examples of Khmer communities that were doing well economically. Tra Vinh, also in the Mekong Delta, is far poorer than Kien Giang. Its official 2012 poverty rate was 9.04% versus 5.29% for Kien Giang. While both provinces have large Khmer populations (the community in this and Wells-Dang’s study were both about two-thirds Khmer), those in Kien Giang are doing much better. Official 2012 Khmer poverty rates in Kien Giang were 11.6% – in Tra Vinh they were 28.44%.

Wells-Dang found that a wide variety of characteristics were associated with positive deviance – some unique to Tra Vinh itself and others common across his sample of deviant communities. Economic diversification, for example was found to be key to success, with those families and communities that were able to supplement agricultural incomes the most financially stable. Business ownership was an important element of this strategy in all communities – and migration, with its subsequent remittances – was key in Tra Vinh. Equitable gender relations, which enable women to contribute to the household cash economy, and improved infrastructure, which allows better market access, were also common to successful communities. Additionally, community cohesion was important; minority households living in areas with a high density of other minority households were more likely to be doing well. Wells-Dang (2012) specifically noted that that the “Khmer in Tra Vinh have high levels of cohesion through their villages and temples, large population, written language and status as the only significant minority group in the province” (p.30). Where that cohesion was able to be translated into local governance leadership it was particularly powerful.

The net impact of positive deviance in Tra Vinh was remarkable. While overall poverty rates for Khmer across the province were twice as high as those for the Kinh, “in the Khmer majority communes visited, there was little difference in reported poverty rates between Khmer and Kinh” (p.11).

Wells-Dang also noted that where families and communities were doing well, they tended to consolidate their gains in the younger generation – ensuring access to education that then enabled children to “get non-agricultural jobs to contribute to the family income” (p.36).

### **3.3 The importance of gender**

The Vietnamese government has a longstanding commitment to gender equality – with documents dating from the 1930’s proclaiming it a key party objective (Abjorensen, 2010; Knodel et al., 2004). The country has relatively strong gender machinery a solid regional track record in terms of women’s political and economic participation (Schuler et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2012). That said, however, there is significant space for improvement – both in terms of institutions and in terms of the widening gap between women’s public and private roles (Abjorensen, 2010).

Although Vietnam’s gender policy infrastructure is comprehensive, there is ‘considerable disconnect between these policy frameworks and their implementation at the provincial, district and commune levels’ (Jones et al., 2012: 13). Top-down policy making, combined with weak inter-sectoral coordination, poor capacity building and low budgets have left many institutions, particularly at the commune level, unable to fully integrate gender into programming, leading to tokenistic, generic interventions (ibid.). Limited gender awareness on the behalf of many leaders – as well as an assumption that the Women’s Union is responsible for all women’s issues – has further reduced the impact of high-level policy (ibid.), particularly given that the Women’s Union does not tend to encourage diversity in terms of gender norms (Schuler et al., 2006).

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Additionally, the government's post-*Doi Moi* emphasis on tradition and culture, intended to fight the "social evils" (see Box 3) seen as accompanying globalisation, has had unintended consequences on girls and women – particularly their private roles (Abjorensen, 2010). By pronouncing women 'the soul of the family' (Werner, 2009: 75), the government has placed women's domestic roles at the 'mythic locus of traditional cultural values and a production mode worthy of governmental support' –ironically limiting their freedom by placing them on a pedestal (Leshkovich, 2008:15). While women increasingly work outside the home and the gender wage gap has declined significantly, they continue to be almost solely responsible for domestic labour and have little access to household decision-making (Knodel et al, 2004), primarily due to their husband's strong beliefs that 'that a woman's important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family' (Nanda et al., 2012: 2; see also Jones and Tran, 2010). This is also supported by time use data: in rural areas Vietnamese women reportedly spend a daily average of 7.5 hours on household chores, compared to 30 minutes for men. In urban areas the differences was 6 hours compared to 90 minutes (Le, 2006 quoted in Jones and Tran, 2010).

### **Box 3: The Rise of the Concept of Social Evils**

Vietnam's increased integration into the global market economy has entailed rapid and dynamic changes and fostered new ways of acting, interacting and thinking. In the late 1990s, echoing similar campaigns begun in China in the 1980s, the Vietnamese government launched widespread public campaigns against "social evils" (*te nan xa hoi*), encompassing a range of behaviours from sex work to gambling, drug addiction, and a general lack of morality. Anthropologists such as Christophe Robert (2005) argue that the official language of "social evils" has been kept deliberately vague and "is an attempt to keep alive some of the keywords and practices of Vietnamese Communism, such as mobilization campaigns and moralizing language to build a civilized, unified People. Yet rapid economic development, urbanization, and rising gender and socioeconomic inequalities have created entirely new social phenomena. Because of its ability to play on anxieties about social chaos and its potential for endless reinvention, the language of "social evils" is an ideal disciplining tool in a time of political reorganization in Vietnam". Robert argues further that the "fight for the common good, against vaguely defined "social evils," is part of the reinvention of Vietnamese politics". Current Vietnamese leaders are drawing on familiar buzzwords to deal with new social problems "thus lending an aura of ideological continuity to the radical break they effected in politics and the economy". Rydstrom (2006) has argued that this broader transformation process is epitomised by the ambivalence and ambiguity with which female sexuality is imbued. Girls' and women's sexual behaviours have become "intertwined with anxieties about the forces of a global and 'poisonous culture' (*van hoa doc hai*)" that either require self-imposed or government-imposed control in order to avoid the transgression of moral boundaries.

Highlighting the importance of the concept in Vietnamese society is the institutionalisation of the concept within government bureaucracy at national and provincial levels. The Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs has a dedicated Department of Social Evils Prevention, which is responsible for dealing with policy and programming relating to trafficking, sex work, drug addiction and HIV. Similarly, social workers are also instructed within this paradigm and thus often take a moralistic and punitive approach rather than seeking to address the rights and social and economic deprivations that often underpin such behaviours.

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# 4 Setting the context

## Overview of gender and ethnic disadvantage among Vietnamese adolescents

Vietnamese adolescent girls face a variety of threats to the realisation of their full capabilities – some related to age, others to gender, some related to modernisation, others to age-old traditions. The threats facing Khmer girls are similarly diverse, but often unique. Where we have ethnically-specific information we highlight it in textboxes.

### 4.1 Education Domain

On a national level, among current school-age children, Viet Nam has made tremendous progress on education. Not only are enrolment rates steadily climbing, but the country ‘has closed and even reversed gender gaps in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling’<sup>6</sup> (World Bank, 2011a: 27). For example, net enrolment rates for Kinh primary-aged children are 97.1% for girls and 96.9% for boys (UNFPA, 2011b). Similarly, enrolment rates for upper-secondary school – across all ethnic groups – are 83.9% for girls and 81.4% for boys (ibid.). Even at college level, girls are now more likely to be enrolled in school than boys: 7.4% versus 6% (ibid.).

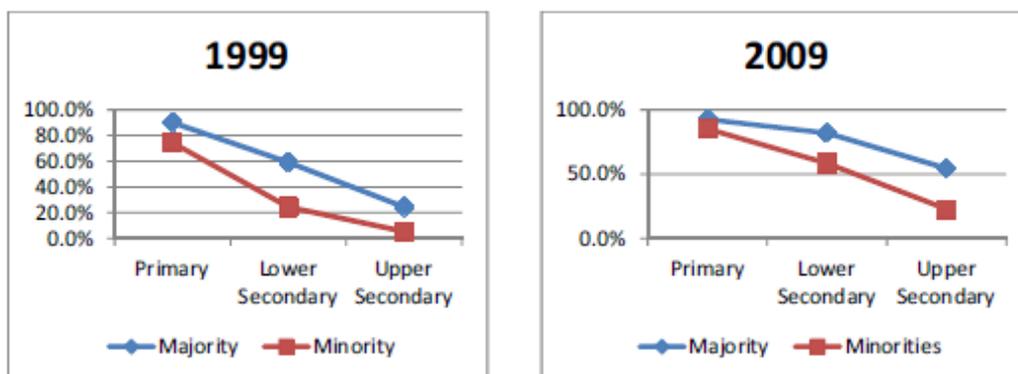
Despite this laudable progress in enrolment on a national level, however, significant gaps remain for minority students. While they are only slightly less likely to enrol in primary school, higher dropout rates mean that, ‘by the time they reach upper secondary school, majority pupils are more than twice as likely to be attending school as minority pupils’ (Baulch and Dat, 2012:5). The gap is already significant by the time children finish primary school. Virtually all majority students complete their primary education, versus less than 80% of ethnic minority children (GSO et al., 2011). Indeed, Chi (2011) notes that, in the Young Lives sample, ‘85 per cent of the drop-outs at the primary school level are from minorities, and this increases to 91.8 per cent in the three poorest mountainous districts’ (10).

Higher education tips the scales even further towards majority children. In 2009, for example, the net enrolment rate for upper-secondary school was over 57% for Kinh children and only 24% for minority students, with some groups, like the Hmong and the Ba-Na, having rates below 6% (Baulch and Dat, 2012). While some ethnic groups, such as the Tay and the Hoa, have enrolment rates approaching those of the Kinh, Figure 2 shows that, overall, the enrolment gap at upper-secondary level has grown over the past decade, as Kinh students have made larger gains than minority children (ibid.). Addressing this gap is clearly vital, given that Wells-Dang (2012) found that ‘improved education levels’ was a vital commonality (along with improved market access) in explaining why some ethnic communities were ‘positive deviants’ (37).

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<sup>6</sup> Enrolment remains highly gendered for some ethnic groups, such as the Hmong.

Figure 2: Net enrolment rates for rural areas, 1999 and 2009 (Source: Baulch and Dat, 2012)



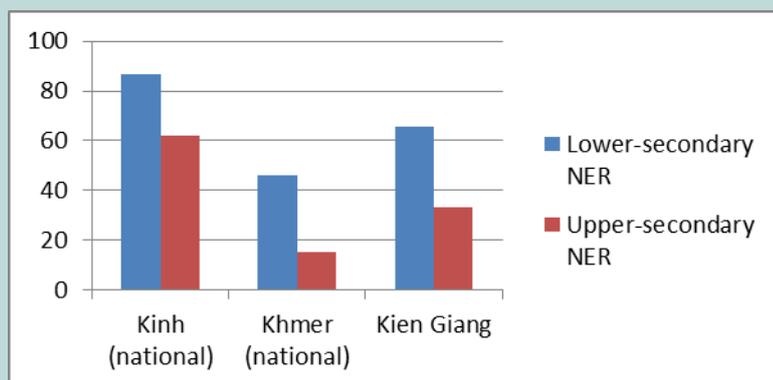
#### Box 4: Khmer Education

Khmer girls, unlike their Hmong counterparts, are not disadvantaged relative to their brothers in terms of education. Rather, like their Kinh peers, they are actually slightly more likely to go to school than boys. “Teachers often find female children more “diligent”, less “playful”, and thus less likely to drop out than male children’ and ‘parents, including those of poor households, did not express any distinction between their sons and daughters with respect to school attendance” (Oxfam and ActionAid, 2011: 45).

The problem is that very few Khmer children complete their high school educations. As can be seen below, enrolment rates for Khmer children are under 50% by lower-secondary school. By upper-secondary school, they are only 15%. Furthermore, while Kien Giang lags significantly in terms of education, Khmer children’s enrolment is lower yet. High drop-out rates are attributed to both push factors, such as a lack of instruction in the Khmer language, and pull factors such as the need for work (Oxfam and ActionAid, 2011; see also HRW, 2009).

UNICEF is currently working with the Vietnamese government on a small-scale pilot designed to use early mother-tongue instruction to improve Khmer (and Hmong and Jarai) educational outcomes. Nearly 500 children are currently participating. Results thus far are very positive—children’s attendance, confidence and test scores have shown significant improvement compared to peers who have not had access to the pilot (MOET and UNICEF (2012).

Figure 3: Net enrolment rate by ethnicity and school level, 2009 (Source: UNFPA, 2011b; GSO, 2011c)



## 4.2 Economic Domain

'Vietnam's record on economic growth and poverty reduction over the last two decades has been Remarkable' (World Bank, 2012: 1). Gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been over 5% a year since 2000 and the poverty rate dropped from nearly 50% in 1998 to less than 17% in 2008 (World Bank data, 2012). A key part of this success story is Vietnamese women, who have one of the highest rates of labour force participation in the world (UCW, 2009). On the gender front, now that Viet Nam has achieved middle-income status, care needs to be taken that girls and women are given the same opportunity to accumulate human capital as boys and men – and that they have access to segments of the labour market that offer both security and opportunity. On the ethnicity front, minority poverty rates are now five times those of the Kinh (World Bank, 2013b Chi, 2011). After decades of anti-poverty programming, the evidence increasingly indicates that minority poverty is driven far less by the endowments that such programmes were designed to improve (such as access to land and education) and far more by differences in returns on those endowments (Baulch and Dat, 2012; Baulch et al., 2012; H. Nguyen et al., 2012).

### 4.2.1 Gendered vulnerabilities

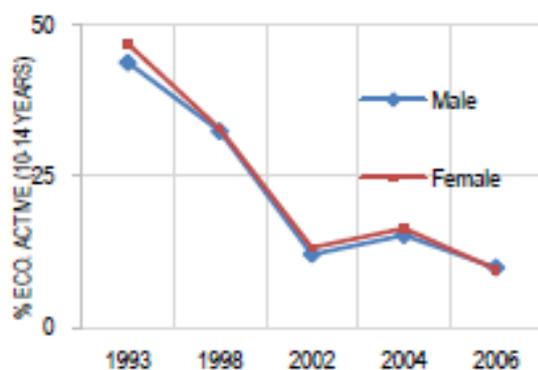


Figure 4: Trends in children's involvement in economic activity, ages 10-14 (Source: UCW, 2009)

As Figure 4 shows, rates of employment for Vietnamese children have plummeted over the past few decades. Furthermore, while MICS4 found in 2011 that, among children aged 5-14, 'relatively more girls (were) involved in such activities than boys (10.6 per cent versus 8.5 per cent)' (GSO et al., 2011d: 172), overall 'children's work does not appear to have a strong gender dimension' (UCW, 2009: 18). There are, however, several key gender differences that bear discussion.

First, starting in childhood, girls are more likely to have domestic responsibilities. They are more likely than boys to engage in housework – and they spend more time doing it. Nearly half (46.7%) of girls aged 5-11 years do household chores each week, compared with less than one-third of boys (32.9%) (GSO et al, 2011d). This gap grows larger as children get older and has ramifications for girls' schooling, in that housework takes up time they could be spending on their education. As Vietnamese children have noted, 'boys have more time to study' because 'girls have to do more housework' (Plan International, 2008: 22). While most working children are enrolled in school, they 'nonetheless lag 37 percentage points behind their non-working counterparts in school attendance' (UCW, 2009: 16).

Older children are more likely than younger children to work. MICS4 found that over a quarter of girls aged 12-14 were working for family businesses in 2011 (GSO et al., 2011d). Furthermore, nearly 12% were working for 14 hours or more each week (compared with 8% for boys) (ibid.). Adolescents are even more likely to be involved in economic activity; the 2009 Census found that 'over 40 per cent of the youth population aged 15-19 [...] participate in the employment sector' (UNFPA, 2011a: 32).

This introduces a second interesting gender pattern: young Vietnamese women are more likely both to migrate and to work in the formal sector (UNFPA, 2011a; 2011c). Not only is migration increasingly 'feminised', but also girls are migrating at earlier ages than boys – 'on average a year younger than their male counterparts' (UNFPA, 2011c: 30).

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### 4.2.2 Ethnic Vulnerabilities

Ethnicity is the primary driver of one of the largest barriers facing Vietnamese girls: poverty. Despite numerous government programmes targeted at minority groups, minorities account for almost half of Viet Nam's poor and almost three-fifths of its hungry – but only an eighth of its population (Baulch et al., 2012; Chi, 2011). Despite the fact that geography has long been presumed to drive many of these ethnic differentials, Baulch and Dat (2012) calculate a rural poverty headcount of just 17% for the Kinh-Hoa, compared with 51.5% for the Khmer-

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Cham and 82.7% for ‘other Northern Upland minorities’ (see Box 2). Indeed, Swinkels and Turk (2006) observe that majority households in remote, mountainous areas are nearly indistinguishable from their lowland peers.

What is more, because the poverty headcount for Kinh households has plummeted over the past decade, falling more than threefold, from 38.8% to 11.7%, between 1998 and 2008, and rates for minority groups have made smaller gains, dropping by around a third, from 75% in 1998 to 52.5% in 2008, the gap between the Kinh and minorities is steadily growing larger (Baulch and Vu, 2012; Dang 2010). One result of this growing gap can be seen in differential rates of child labour. According to MICS4, only 7% of Kinh children aged 5 to 14 – but nearly 24% of minority children – were involved in economic activities in 2011 (GSO et al., 2011d).

### Box 5: Khmer Poverty

The World Bank (2013b) notes that “ethnic minorities are not a homogeneous group” and that of minorities, “the Khmer and Cham have seen the largest increases in incomes and have the lowest overall poverty rates” (p.123). However, while Khmer households are far less likely to be poor than many other minority groups, their 2010 rural poverty rates are still more than three times as high of those of the Kinh – 51.5% versus 17% (Baulch and Vu, 2012). UNFPA (2011e) notes, for example that ‘(o)nly 37% of the Khmer...are living in permanent or semi-permanent houses’ (3).

The drivers of Khmer poverty are different from those of other minorities. For example, despite the fact that the government has introduced ‘various productive-land support policies for poor ethnic minority households in disadvantaged areas’ (Oxfam and ActionAid, 2011: 55), ‘(h)aving limited or no productive land is a specific disadvantage of the poor Khmer group in the Mekong river delta’ (ibid.: 94). N. Le et al. (2007) report that 25% of Khmer households in the delta are ‘functionally landless’. This rate has been increasing recently because of bad debts caused by usurious interest rates (ibid.; see also World Bank, 2009). Taylor (2004) notes that this is a consequence of the fact that many Khmer farmers ‘are locked into the small scale, low value, localised “end” of an economy in which the prices of their land and labour are declining relative to the other inputs that are needed for production’ (249). Reliant on borrowing in order to afford inputs such as fertiliser and pesticides, Khmer farmers, who farm smaller plots, are often forced to default when their harvests are not large enough. This means their families have to either rely on local wage labour, which is becoming scarcer as the government pushes for increasing mechanisation of agriculture, or migrate to urban areas (Oxfam and ActionAid, 2011).

Khmer children also migrate for work. DeJaeghere and Miske (2009), for example, report that young adolescent girls are often sent by their parents to cities to work as domestics. “Girls may go to work as housemaids in the cities, while boys may get hired by better-off households to raise ducks or guard shrimp ponds” (Oxfam and ActionAid, 2011: 44). One result of this early migration is that children leave school before they feel secure in terms of their fluency in Vietnamese. Oxfam and ActionAid (2011) note this is particularly problematic for Khmer women, many of whom ‘feel shy about speaking Vietnamese even though they can actually speak it (because they speak slowly, are afraid of making mistakes, and/or do not have a large vocabulary)’ (47). This both limits their access to good jobs and hinders their uptake of social services (ibid.).

Minority women, who face double discrimination on account of their gender and ethnicity, have particularly few economic options (DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009; Rockefeller Foundation, 2008). As McDougall (2011) notes, ‘(m)inority social customs commonly dictate that males control financial assets, livestock and land-use rights certificates, potentially creating difficulties for realizing the property and land rights of minority women’ (9). Authorities’ failure to recognise women’s land use and local leadership roles is evident even among cultures with matrilineal traditions, in part because of women’s lack of fluency in Vietnamese (ibid.; see also DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009). Language barriers constrain ethnic women’s options in other ways as well. For example, ‘large numbers of minority women reported being hesitant to go to markets for fear they will not understand prices or will be taken advantage of’ (World Bank, 2009: 22). Furthermore, because few programme materials are available in languages other than Vietnamese, even ‘access to a number of socio-economic development programmes such as credit, family planning, and agricultural extension’ can be limited for minority women (Chi, 2011: 21; see also H. Nguyen et al., 2012).

### 4.3 Physical integrity and sexual and reproductive health domain

While Vietnamese adolescent girls face few health threats beyond those to their SRH, SRH remains a considerable concern. For example, many girls, particularly those of ethnic minorities, are still vulnerable to child marriage – and adolescent pregnancy. Furthermore, with limited information about and access to contraceptives, unmarried girls are increasingly at risk not just of pregnancy but also of HIV. Vietnamese women, particularly the youngest, are also vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) and trafficking – both internally and cross-border.

#### Reproductive health

As the age of first marriage rises, Viet Nam, like many other developing countries around the world, is caught in the nexus of a demographic transition. While SAVY II found that less than 1% of single girls under the age of 18 who had ever had a boyfriend reported sexual activity – as did only 6% of young women aged 18-21 (GSO et al., 2010c)<sup>7</sup> – ‘data indicate that premarital sexual relationships have increased in Vietnam over the past decade’ (Kaljee et al., 2011: 269; see also Pham et al., 2012; Hong et al., 2009). Furthermore, while reported sexual activity rates amongst the unmarried are fairly low, so are basic knowledge about sexuality and contraceptive usage rates. Teerawichitchainan et al. (2007), for example, note that unmarried young people ‘appear to lack practical knowledge about puberty, safe sex, family planning methods, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases’ (vii; see also Hong et al., 2009).

#### Box 6: Khmer girls and SRH

Khmer girls are no more likely to marry early than their Kinh counterparts. The mean age at first marriage, according to the 2009 Census, is 23.1 years for both Khmer and Kinh women.

Unlike several other minority groups, they also have small families. The total fertility rate for Khmer women, according to the 2009 Census, is 2.0--compared to 1.95 for Kinh women. This is actually lower than the national average of 2.03.

Source: UNFPA, 2011b

This is not surprising given that attitudes towards sexuality education in Viet Nam revolve around concern, with adults worried that they should not ‘show the ways for the deer to run’ (Hong et al., 2009). Most sex-related parent-child communication is reportedly limited to simple messages such as “no sex” and “no boy/girlfriends until schooling is complete” (Pham et al., 2012; Hong et al., 2009). Similarly, classes at school are ‘traditional with imposing messages, which’ make ‘young people feel embarrassed’ and tend to bury sexuality itself under other content, such as biology or population control (WGNRR, 2012; see also Hong et al., 2009). As a result, young people’s knowledge and confidence suffers. For instance, in SAVY II, less than 30% of young people were even able to identify the fertile period in girls’ menstrual cycles (GSO et al., 2010c). Furthermore, unmarried young people reported that fear and shame kept them from purchasing and using condoms, with girls noting far more negative feelings than boys (65% versus 51% (MOH et al., 2010). This is because, note Pham et al. (2012) ‘(v)irginity is highly valued for women, creating situations in which women have a decreased sense of need for knowledge and decreased perceptions of vulnerability to sexual risk’ (2; see also Hong et al., 2009).

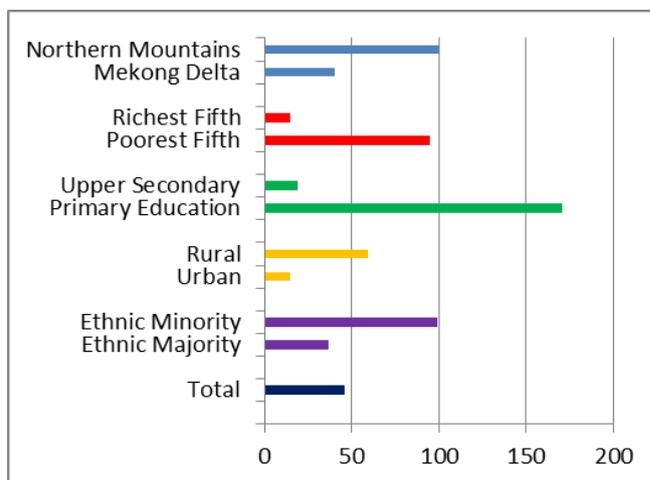


Figure 5: Birth rate, 15-19, 2011  
(Source: GSO et al., 2011)

Reproductive health problems are not limited to young unmarried women, however. Married girls are far more likely than their unmarried peers to become mothers while still adolescents. This is often true even when girls themselves have no immediate interest in motherhood, as they are ‘expected to get pregnant not more than 1 or at the most 2 years after marriage’ (Klingberg-Allvin et

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to ascertain how honest adolescents were in this survey—we acknowledge that it is difficult for young people to frankly discuss their sex lives with adults, perhaps particularly when those adults work for the government.

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al., 2008: 340). While contraceptives are free to the married, only 15% of young wives between the ages of 15 and 19 report using any modern method of contraception – far less than the 44% of women aged 20-24 and the 60% of women aged 25-29 (GSO et al., 2011).

Young minority women have ‘significantly lower status [within their own communities] than ... their Kinh counterparts’ and often ‘appear to lack bargaining power’ when it comes to contraception (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2007: 68). As they are also far more likely than their Kinh peers to marry as adolescents, minority girls’ need for sexual and reproductive health care remains considerable (ibid.; Amin and Teerawichitchainan, 2009). This need is clear from Figure 5, which shows that adolescent fertility rates for minority girls (99/1000) are nearly three times those of Kinh girls (37/1000) – and the rates of the least educated (171/1000) are more than eight times those of the most educated (19/1000) (GSO et al. 2011b). While the government’s National Strategy on Reproductive Health, published in 2011, aims to address sexual and reproductive health by emphasising the rights and responsibilities of both women and men, it has thus far not ‘had any great impact on ethnic minorities... as there are no specific, culturally-sound programs and guidelines for implementation among ethnic minorities’ (IWGIA, 2011).

Furthermore, while Viet Nam has met goals regarding prenatal care and maternal mortality at a national level, ‘the maternal mortality rate in the central highlands and the northern mountainous regions is four to eight times higher than that in the lowland plains’ (McDougall, 2011: 11). Nearly all Kinh women receive at least one antenatal check-up, compared with only 73% of minority women (GSO et al., 2011b). Additionally, while nearly 95% of adult women receive care, less than 88% of girls under the age of 20 are seen at least once (ibid.). Poverty seems to be a significant barrier to antenatal care; women from the lowest wealth quintile are far less likely than other women to receive care (78% versus over 95% for all other quintiles) (ibid.). As early marriage – and adolescent pregnancy – is associated with poverty, this leaves the poorest, youngest women at the highest risk. They are also the least likely to have a skilled attendant at birth. Only 86% of women under the age of 20, compared with nearly 94% of older women, have a trained birth attendant. Furthermore, while nearly 99% of Kinh women are attended, only 63% of minority women are (ibid.). Minority adolescents are the least likely to be attended; SAVY II notes that ‘(l)ess than half the young women from ethnic minority areas (47.4%) reported having a health professional in attendance’ (GSO et al., 2010c: 48).

Abortion rates are an increasing concern across Viet Nam – in part because data are difficult to come by and what evidence that does exist suggests that they are worryingly high. While the procedure is legal, is usually performed in a safe manner and seems to be less common in recent years than it was in the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing use of private providers, which offer greater privacy because they do not report to the government, means it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding either incidence or trends (Sedgh et al., 2011). Bajracharya et al. (2012), citing 2010 General Statistics Office (GSO) figures, give an abortion rate of 0.8%. Vijayarasa (2010) reports a lifetime prevalence rate of between 1.3 and 2.5 procedures per woman. The ICMMP (2009) reports between 1.2 and 1.6 million abortions per year. Pham et al (2012) note that it is ‘estimated that adolescent women account for at least one-third of abortions in Vietnam...and are more likely to wait past the first trimester to visit a medical facility out of fear of being stigmatized and/or poor knowledge regarding indicators of pregnancy’ (2). Teerawichitchainan and Amin (2010) conclude that ‘the prevalence of abortion is high in Vietnam, but not as high as previously reported’. Furthermore, rates vary considerably across groups, with abortion ‘more common among married women aged 20 or older, those with more years of schooling and those with one or two children, as well as among women from the Kinh majority’ (ibid.).

## HIV/AIDS

Not surprisingly, given the issues regarding condoms mentioned above, young women’s exposure to HIV/AIDS is increasingly problematic (T. Nguyen et al., 2008). While rates remain comparatively low by global standards, particularly for women, SAVY II found that the proportion of young people who had comprehensive knowledge about how to prevent HIV transmission was at only 42.5%. Rates were even lower for some groups: 36% for ethnic minorities and 30% for young women with only primary education (GSO et al., 2011). This lack of knowledge is reflected in incidence statistics; a 2010 report on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report found that the number of people in Viet Nam contracting HIV through unsafe sex rose from 12% in 2004 to 29% in 2009 (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2010). Furthermore, ‘(o)nce HIV is brought inside the home, women bear a disproportionate double burden: greater discrimination for contracting the disease, and greater sacrifice as caretakers for other infected family members’ (Pact et al., 2011: iv). Finally, ethnic minority women

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are particularly at risk. Of the 10 provinces with the highest HIV prevalence rates, 7 are located in the northern mountains, with migration patterns playing a large part in this trend (iSEE, 2010).

### Gender-based violence

A recent government survey on domestic violence found that nearly 60% of ever-married Vietnamese women had experienced at least one form of domestic violence: one-half reported emotional violence, one-third reported physical violence and one-tenth reported sexual violence (GSO, 2010a). These numbers match those of Nanda et al. (2012), who found that 60% of Vietnamese men admit using some form of violence against their intimate partner – and that ‘in Vietnam 90 per cent of men agreed that to be a man you need to be tough’ (Nanda et al., 2012: 2).

Younger women were more likely than older women to experience abuse; over 12% of women between the ages of 18 and 24 reported abuse, compared with only 6% of women aged 40-44 (ibid.). Younger women are also more likely to be injured by a partner, with the age groups of 14-17, 18-21 and 22-25 reporting injury rates of 5.9%, 2.2% and 0.9%, respectively (C. Le, 2010). Migrant women are also particularly at risk of GBV. One study found that nearly half had experienced unwanted sex and nearly 20% had been forced (Piper, 2009, in UN Viet Nam, 2010). Interestingly, minority women were less likely than Kinh and Hoa women to report domestic abuse – although this may of course reflect cultural sensibilities more than violence rates *per se* (Rasanathan and Bhushan, 2011).

There is a close relationship between GBV and child abuse. While one in four women in the GSO 2010 study reported that their children under the age of 15 had been abused by their husbands, ‘(w)omen who had a violent husband were twice as likely to report that their children were beaten’ (GSO, 2010a: 22). Furthermore, more than half of abused women noted that their children had witnessed the abuse, which is alarming, since abused women are twice as likely to have abused mothers, ‘and three times as likely to have a husband whose mother was beaten or who was himself beaten as a child’ (ibid.: 22).

### Trafficking

While Viet Nam has moved off the “watch-list” for trafficking, concern remains. Given the feminisation of migration, women and adolescent girls remain particularly vulnerable in provinces in which it is a common strategy for poverty reduction. In the Mekong Delta, for example, there is significant trafficking to Cambodia – for sex work. Internal trafficking is also an issue, with ‘women and girls, from poor, rural provinces [trafficked] to urban areas’ where they may be ‘sold into forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation’ (US Embassy, 2011: 371). Dang Bich (2012) reports that about 15% of the female sex workers in Viet Nam are under the age of 18. Of those, monitoring by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and UNICEF indicates that nearly half are under the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2010a). Given their high migration rates, Khmer girls are likely at particular risk for trafficking (KKF, 2012).

## 4.4 Psychosocial development domain

Vietnamese girls are in many ways caught between two worlds, both of which present psychosocial challenges. On the one hand, traditional Vietnamese culture, which is patriarchal and patrilineal, limits girls’ options (Nanda et al., 2012; Klingberg-Allvin et al., 2008; Schuler et al., 2006; UNFPA, 2010). Many families still value girls and women primarily for their ability to produce and nurture children (ibid.). Most minority girls are doubly disadvantaged. Despite policies that support ethnic diversity and self-determination, minorities are often perceived as backwards and uncivilised (Baulch et al., 2010). Wells-Dang (2012), for example, notes that there is significant concern that identifying minority populations as positive deviants “might be interpreted by Kinh informants as an “ethnic minority who surprisingly and reassuringly is just like us”” (p.5). Minority girls, who often start school late, with poor Vietnamese language skills, and who are isolated by both poverty and cultural difference, are particularly constrained (ibid.; DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009). On the other hand, as Viet Nam becomes more tightly linked to the global economy, its norms, including those related to gender and sexuality, are increasingly challenged. ‘As a result, both urban and rural Vietnamese adolescents and young adults are facing multiple and contradictory expectations and experiencing new stresses’ (Lerdboon et al., 2008: 385; see also Dang Bich, 2012).

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#### 4.4.1 Traditional Vulnerabilities

##### Early marriage

While Vietnamese law prohibits child marriage, 8.4% of young women between the ages of 15 and 19 were married in 2011 (GSO et al., 2011). Rural girls are twice as likely as urban girls to marry young (9.9% versus 4.5%) and the poorest girls are nearly six times as likely to be married as the richest girls (17.7% versus 2.8%) (ibid.). Ethnicity is also key, with 6.6% of Kinh girls but 19.3% of minority girls married before the age of 20 (ibid.). Furthermore, SAVY II found that marriage traditions in Viet Nam remain strong. Only one-third of married young people in the study chose their own spouse and three-quarters of all young couples lived with the husband's family (GSO et al., 2010c). For girls, this often means 'being subordinated to new extended family and having to adjust to their norms and values' (Klingberg-Allvin et al., 2008: 342). As mentioned earlier, it also often means familial pressure to conceive rapidly. Fortunately, as Oxfam and ActionAid (2011) note, the prevalence of child marriage is dropping across Viet Nam.

##### Son preference

Sons are seen as crucial to continue the family line and to provide support in old age; their birth improves the status of their mothers within the family and their fathers within the community (Nanda et al., 2012; Plan International, 2008). Son preference, while rooted in the past, is increasingly problematic because modern technology makes prenatal sex selection possible (UNFPA, 2011d). Since 2000 – and particularly since 2004 – there has been a growing imbalance in Viet Nam's sex ratio, with 110.6 boys now born for every 100 girls (biological equilibrium is about 105/100) (GSO, 2011a). While moderate regionally, particularly compared with China, this gap is seen as alarming given that it took only about five years to reach what took India two decades (ibid.; UNFPA, 2011d). Like India, the sex-ratio is particularly skewed in well-off, well-educated families, who are most able to access the technology that assures sons (GSO, 2011a).

##### Box 7: Khmer girls and traditional vulnerabilities

Traditional vulnerabilities are one area where Khmer girls are not only more privileged than most other minority girls—but are more privileged than many other Vietnamese girls.

As was mentioned earlier, Khmer girls are no more likely than their Kinh counterparts to marry as children.

More importantly, however, Khmer families have never had a strong preference for sons. As young married couples have traditionally lived with the bride's family—and elderly parents have traditionally been cared for by their youngest daughter--there has long been a slight preference in the Khmer community for girls (Derks, 2008).

Son preference is damaging to girls in other ways as well, particularly the poorest girls, whose families are the most likely to have overt sex preferences (45.5% of the lowest wealth quintile versus 26% for the highest) (MCST et al., 2008). It keeps them out of school, as families with limited resources typically invest in sons, places a too large share of housework on their shoulders and pushes them into the labour market in higher numbers.

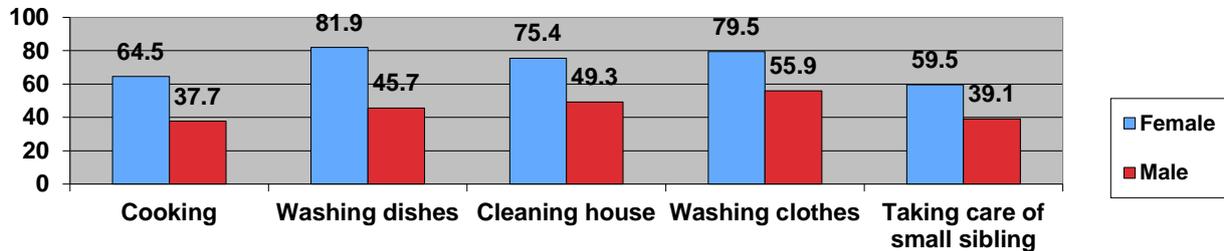
He (2006) notes that the "ancient practices of son preference and female subjugation were briefly interrupted by the rise of the centrally planned economy of the 1970s and early 1980s regime in Vietnam. Women, for the first time, were treated as indispensable human resources and equal partners to men in the public sphere' (17). Since Doi Moi, in 1986, however, pro-woman programmes and policies have been dismantled—leaving girls and women to fight against patriarchal resurgence (ibid.).

##### Household labour

As mentioned above – and as can be seen below in Figure 6 – girls in Viet Nam are responsible for more domestic work than boys. While boys are seen as 'clumsy, naughty and careless' (Plan International, 2008: 20) in the short term, they are considered good long-term investments (ibid.). Girls, on the other hand, are considered both more responsible and, as they most often leave their natal family on marriage, a less sure investment (Liu, 2004). Taken together, these gendered beliefs often mean that the lion's share of childhood chores falls to girls. Girls are also disadvantaged by their mothers' increased labour force participation, as

domestic chores still have to be done, regardless of whether women are at home to do them. As Jones (2009) notes, daughters and grandmothers increasingly fill this gap.

Figure 6: Male and female adolescents (14-17) involved in daily housework activities



(Source: MCST et al., 2008)

#### 4.4.2 Emerging emotional vulnerabilities

As mentioned above, culturally Viet Nam is in a state of flux. As its economy becomes more globally enmeshed – and its population becomes more urban, educated and ‘connected’ – young people are increasingly torn between two worlds – that of Confucius and that of Facebook (VH Nguyen, 2013; Dang Bich, 2012; Lerdboon et al., 2008). We Are Social (2013) reports, for example, that nearly all Vietnamese young people between the ages of 15 and 24 now have internet access and that Viet Nam represents Facebook’s fastest growing market (Kemp, 2013). On the other hand, VH Nguyen (2013) notes that even in the face of this increased connectivity, traditional roles – including gender roles ‘remain deeply embedded in Vietnamese society’.

That said, while youth culture is in many ways in a state of flux, there is little evidence that adolescents’ mental health is suffering. SAVY II, for example, found that ‘(o)verall young people felt valued by their families and were connected to them’ (GSO et al., 2010c: 28). Familial violence – at least that directed towards youth aged 14 to 25 – is fairly rare and is more likely to be directed at males (2.9% versus 1.5% for females) (ibid.: 70). These figures are markedly lower than those found by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST, 2008), in which ‘11.2 percent of adolescents at 15-17 years old reported being beaten by their parents’ for serious mistakes (in Dang Bich, 2012: 5). Both figures, however, stand in stark contrast with the child abuse figures mentioned previously – perhaps indicating that violence towards young people drops as they age and perhaps indicating merely that older children and adolescents are less likely to report violence than their mothers who are reporting on their behalf.

In SAVY II, boys and young men were also more likely to report that they had tried to injure themselves (GSO et al., 2010c). Girls and young women, on the other hand, were more likely to report being so ‘sad or helpless that they ceased doing their normal activities’ and to have had thoughts about suicide (ibid.: 85). Ethnic minority girls were particularly likely to report feeling ‘really hopeless about the future’ (ibid.: 85) and were the least likely to have positive views about their own personal futures. Despite this, however, most Vietnamese young people, including over 80% of ethnic minority girls, ‘expected that their lives would be much better than their parents’ (ibid.: 83). Furthermore, Amstadter et al. (2011) found that, despite the vast social change taking place in Viet Nam, adolescents were no more likely than US adolescents to have mental health problems. They also found that social capital had a protective influence, with poorer adolescents more at risk of mental health issues. Interestingly, ‘gender was not significantly associated with overall rates of mental health problems among Vietnamese youth, a trend consistent with data from China and other Southeast Asian countries’ (ibid.: 99), but markedly different from Western populations, where boys and girls present different mental health issues (99).

#### 4.5 Participation domain

Adolescent girls have limited capacity to make decisions in their families and communities. While youthfulness itself precludes voice in many contexts, girls are particularly disadvantaged given Viet Nam’s patriarchal culture. In many ways, the strict hierarchy of linguistic etiquette, where personal pronouns are determined by

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age, sex and relationship, captures girls' inferior rights to participation (UNICEF, 2010a). Isolated by poverty, geography, language and culture, minority girls remain the most disenfranchised.

#### 4.5.1 Age vulnerabilities

##### Family

In Vietnamese culture, youthfulness is a significant barrier to participation, as reflected in the saying 'Trung sao khon hon vit', which translates as 'How can the egg be wiser than the duck?' (UNICEF, 2010a: 282). Children are expected to do as their elders tell them. On the other hand, as children age, they often have more input into family decisions. For example, one study found that adolescents participated in family decision-making at least some of the time (MCST et al., 2011). One-third of respondents noted that they had been asked for their opinion about at least one common family issue in the past. Both girls and boys were equally involved – with the exception that girls were not asked as frequently about the division of property.

##### School

Traditional beliefs about childhood obedience still form the core of Vietnamese education. Research, which has not produced sex-disaggregated data, has found that children are punished without consultation and that schools have no formal grievance mechanisms (Michaelson, 2004, in Volkmann, 2005). However, Vietnamese children do learn about their rights in primary school (Save the Children Sweden, 2006) and research has shown that over half of adolescents are aware of the Law on Protection (MCST et al., 2008).

##### Community

While there has been growing acceptance of the notion of listening to children, there is little evidence that young people have access to decision-making fora. Children and young people are, however, often involved in a variety of youth organisations, such as the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Viet Nam Youth League and the Viet Nam Students' Association. It is unclear, however, whether girls have equal access to participation and leadership – or whether the organisation exists merely to exert top-down control over the actions and beliefs of young people.

#### 4.5.2 Gender vulnerabilities

##### Family

Girls' family lives, according to tradition, are bound by three rules. Before marriage they must obey their fathers, during marriage they must follow their husbands and after widowhood they must listen to their sons (Nguyen, 1995, in Volkmann, 2005; UNICEF, 2010a). Girls are supposed to be obedient and gentle; those who prefer to express their own opinions are often seen as rebellious and boyish, characteristics that are rarely appreciated, particularly in rural and ethnic families (UNICEF, 2010). Girls' activities also tend to be more heavily monitored than those of boys.

VH Nguyen (2013) reports that Vietnamese young people 'often held up as being very open and liberal, hold on to traditional gender roles' within the family. Young men between the ages of 15 and 24 report that they would prefer for their eventual wives to be skilful, hardworking and self-sacrificing. Young women, on the other hand, prefer husbands who are strong.

##### School

Gendered images and expectations are still common in Vietnamese schools. The World Bank, reporting on a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) analysis of textbooks, notes that 'boys are presented in mathematics textbooks, particularly in illustrations, as "strong, masculine, leaders, able to use modern technology, able to work hard, interested in challenging and competitive sports, while girls are presented as singing and dancing,

##### Box 8: Khmer participation

Human Rights Watch (2009) reports concerns among many Khmer that insufficient attention is paid to supporting their cultural and language traditions. Unified national curricula, for example, do not teach Khmer history and all classrooms, from primary school on, use only the Vietnamese language. While the Khmer have developed a parallel educational system, holding classes in Pagodas over the summer, there is broad consensus that outside of the tourism sector there is much scope for improvement in terms of programming and policy that supports minority heritage.

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folding origami, able to use household equipment and do housework”” (World Bank, 2011a: 28).

## Community

Given the constraint of youthfulness, girls’ participation in local and national affairs is more anticipatory than actual. However, to the extent that the political success of women shapes girls’ consciousness, it is important to note that Viet Nam is a regional leader when it comes to women’s political representation. For example, the 2012 Global Gender Gap Report notes that ‘Vietnam’s improvement in the 2012 rankings is the most significant improvement in the region’ (Hausmann et al., 2012: 27). However, while women’s representation is increasing, it remains uneven. As Oxfam and ActionAid (2011) note, only one of the ten communes it monitors was able to meet both gender-related participation targets; half were not able to meet either. They attribute this to women’s low educational levels and the fact that ‘women continue to be expected to assume household responsibilities and care for the children rather than participate in social activities’ (ibid.: 110). VH Nguyen (2013), however, adds that attitudes alone continue to be important—with only half of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 reporting that women ought to pursue government positions and most associating leadership characteristics with those of men (e.g. strong and decisive).

### 4.5.3 Ethnic Vulnerabilities

Often isolated by geography, culture and poverty, ethnic minorities face a variety of barriers to participation (Cotton and Pohlman, 2011a). H. Nguyen et al. (2012) highlight the particular importance of language, which not only leads to higher school dropout rates, but also, as noted earlier, often precludes minority uptake of government services. Furthermore, while the Vietnamese government has a variety of policies stipulating ethnic minorities’ rights to cultural and linguistic differentiation, and highlights those differences as a ‘national resource’, including vis-à-vis tourist promotion, it is also striving towards ‘incorporating these communities within the nation-state’ (ibid.: 1). This policy approach has, however, had a mixed reception among different ethnic minority communities (Taylor, 2004) and remains a source of tensions in some cases, including among the Hmong and Khmer (HRW, 2009).

Minorities are, nonetheless making progress towards political participation. Viet Nam had its first National Ethnic Minority Congress in 2010, with over 1,700 delegates evaluating minority affairs (Cotton and Pohlman, 2011b). Furthermore, while ‘local officials who are ethnic minority people are now inadequate in number and limited in capacity’ (Thuat, 2009: 2), at the national level representation is quite good (ibid.). In 2007-2011, there were 87 People’s Deputies representing ethnic minorities (17.65% of the National Assembly), while ethnic minorities were 13.8% of the total population. (ibid.: 1).

# 5 Gendered adolescence among Khmer communities

## Primary research overview

The Khmer, who number approximately 1.3 million in Viet Nam but who make up Cambodia’s largest ethnic group (GSO, 2009), have farmed rice in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta for millennia. However, recent increases in landlessness, coupled with growing urbanisation and migration, now mean that approximately one in six live in urban areas (ibid.). With their own language and a different form of Buddhism<sup>8</sup>, the Khmer, as Human Rights Watch notes, live ‘on the margins’ in Viet Nam (2009).

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<sup>8</sup> The Khmer practice Theravada—rather than Mahayana—Buddhism.

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## 5.1 Situating our research

### Kien Giang

In order to capture local understandings and experiences of gendered adolescence, trace impact pathways, and explore transitions in social norms across generations, our team interviewed a variety of Khmer adolescents and adults—as well as key informants (see Appendix 1.1 for details). Our research was conducted in Kien Giang province, in the Mekong Delta of southern Viet Nam, as shown in Figure 7. Kien Giang, while having a relatively low income poverty rate --5.73% in 2012 compared to a national average of 9.6%<sup>9</sup>-- ranks amongst the lowest of Vietnam's provinces in terms of multi-dimensional poverty. Indeed, the UNDP (2011) notes that the entire Mekong Delta, which “ranks third highest in terms of income, after the South East and Red River Delta regions that contain Viet Nam’s major cities...compares less well on social indicators” because of a history of both landlessness and land concentration (p.46). It further notes that the geography of the region, which is criss-crossed with both rivers and canals, “presents distinctive problems in education and health” (ibid.).



**Figure 7: Location of Kien Giang in Viet Nam**



Typical Delta landscape characteristic of Kien Giang

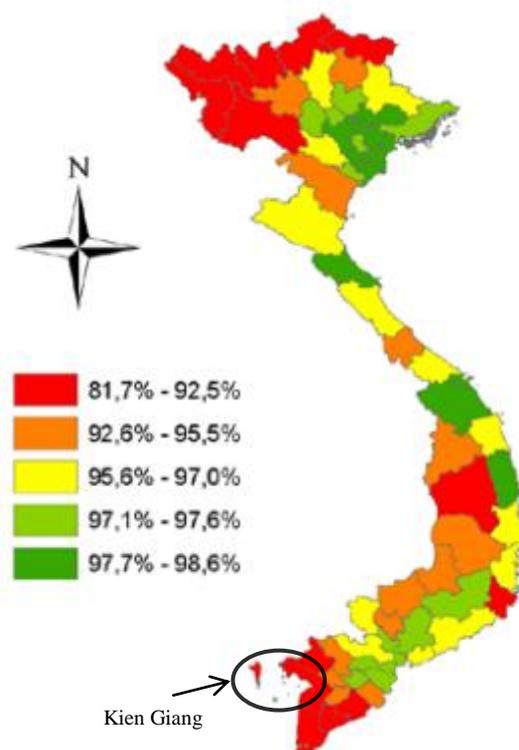
This is certainly reflected in school enrolment statistics. While KIs in Kien Giang are proud of their progress towards universal education, as can be seen in Figure 9, the province's enrolment rates are still amongst the lowest in the country. In 2009, according to the GSO (2011c), at the lower-secondary level only 63.1% of boys and 66.3% of girls in Kien Giang were enrolled in school (compared to national averages of 81.4% and 83.9% respectively). At the upper-secondary level enrolment rates were even lower—30.8% for boys and 35% for girls (compared to national averages of 53.1% and 60.6% respectively).

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<sup>9</sup> As reported in Decision No 749 QD-TBXH at 13/5/2013 on Results of Poverty Survey/Review of 2012.

**Figure 8: Poverty in Kien Giang**

<b>Multidimensional Poverty Index (M)</b>	<b>.1987</b>
MPI (out of 63 provinces)*	50
Intensity of deprivation*	40.4
Headcount*	49.2
National poverty line (2012)+	5.73%
Khmer population*	12.5%
Non-Kinh poverty rate (2012)+	11.6%



Source: \*Vietnam HDR 2011, based on VLSS 2008; + Decision No 749 QD-TBXH at 13/5/2013

Kien Giang’s economy is growing rapidly. Its GDP increased nearly 12% in 2012 and “its food output set an all-time record and ranked first nationwide in food output for a second straight year”<sup>10</sup> (Vietnam Business Forum, 2013). This is due, in part, to the rapid increase in the number of farming cooperatives. In 2011, Kien Giang had 173 cooperatives, more than any other province in the Delta (GSO, 2012). Increasing mechanisation is also driving output – though it is a double-edged sword in that it tends to “provide technical jobs for men” but “has also acted to limit employment opportunities for women” (GTZ and AusAid, 2010, p.1). FDI, which took off in the province in the late 1990’s (Malesky, 2004), also continues to grow – particularly in the areas of real estate and tourism (VietnamNews, 2009). According to the government, as of 2012, Kien Giang had 35 registered FDI projects – with the seven added in 2012 alone worth 28 million USD (GSO, 2012).

This rapid economic improvement requires several important caveats (GTZ and AusAid, 2010, p.21). First, non-Kinh<sup>11</sup> poverty rates in Kien Giang are twice those of the province as a whole--11.6% versus 5.73 % in 2012. While this puts Kien Giang’s Khmer population well ahead of calculated national averages, Baulch and Vu (2012) calculate a *rural* Khmer-Cham poverty headcount of 51.4<sup>12</sup>. Second, while GDP is growing and poverty rates are dropping, “a large proportion of the population remains vulnerable to poverty, with incomes just above the poverty line” (ibid.). The 2008 VHLSS reported an official poverty rate of 9.5% for Kien Giang. In the face of a global recession and declining remittances, the significant drop seen between 2008 and 2012 is difficult to explain except by noting that “Vietnam’s “basic needs” poverty line, agreed in the early 1990s, is very low by international standards<sup>13</sup>, and the methods used to monitor poverty since the early 1990s are outdated” (World Bank, 2012, p.1).

<sup>10</sup> Recent facts regarding progress in Kien Giang are pulled from available news sources, because government compilations are not yet available.

<sup>11</sup> The Vietnamese General Statistical Office does not collect poverty data by ethnicity. However, given that the non-Kinh population of Kien Giang is almost exclusively Khmer, non-Kinh and Khmer are functionally equivalent in Kien Giang.

<sup>12</sup> We acknowledge that this ethnic specific *rural* poverty rate is not directly comparable to the non-Kinh poverty rate for Kien Giang as a whole, because it includes both urban and rural areas. However, we consider the magnitude of difference to be more important than specific numbers and are limited to available data.

<sup>13</sup> The official poverty line is 400,000 VND/month/per capita in rural areas (about \$19) and 500,000 VND/month/per capita in urban areas (nearly \$24).

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The World Bank (2012) notes that a more realistic poverty line, “relevant to modern day, rising middle-income Vietnam” (p.1), better captures the reality of the tens of millions of households who “remain vulnerable to falling back into poverty as a result of idiosyncratic shocks, (such as job loss, accidents, or death or illness of a household member), or related economy-wide shocks, (such as the effects of climate change on rainfall and temperatures, human and animal influenza pandemics, and impacts of the 2008–09 global financial crisis)” (p.1-2). Using their figures, which set the poverty line at 653,000 VND/person/month (equivalent to \$2.24/person/day at 2005 PPP) the 2010 national poverty rate was not 14.2%, as indicated by the official poverty line, but 20.7%. Rates in Kien Giang jump to 24.02% using this methodology and underscore the fragility of many families in the province.

GTZ and AusAid (2010) note a further caveat in regard to poverty reduction in Kien Giang – “growing wealth has bought with it growing inequality” (p.21). While still lower than the national average<sup>14</sup>, inequality has been increasing in recent years in part because of the very mechanisation which is driving output – as poorer farmers’ yields drop on a comparative basis because they are unable to afford modern inputs. AusAid and GTZ (2010) report that landlessness throughout the Delta increased from 17% in 1993 to 28.9% in 2002, inversely mirroring the rise in use of chemical fertilisers and tractors.

Despite these caveats, Kien Giang’s recent economic success has enabled it to invest in a wide variety of infrastructure improvements that are improving lives. These include paved roads and concrete bridges, which are vital in low-lying areas; health centres, most of which have permanent doctors on staff; and a water treatment facility (Dan Viet, 2011; Vietnam Business Forum, 2013). The province’s educational infrastructure is also improving. It now has “four colleges, one university, one vocational education school and eight vocational training centers” (Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency, 2012). How this rapid economic success coupled with a simultaneous rise in inequality is affecting young people appears to be poorly understood. Interviews with provincial officials suggested that there is a general recognition that adolescents, especially 16- and 17-year olds, exist in a “no man’s land” as they are seldom the target of programming and overlooked in most policy.<sup>15</sup> This is evidenced by the relatively weak grasp of current conditions that some provincial leaders exhibited. For example, child protection staff at DOLISA claim that within Kien Giang “the drop-out rate is very low, and the education universalization rate is very high”. As was mentioned above, this is not the case – Kien Giang’s net enrolment rate is actually among the worst in Vietnam. This speaks to a crucial problem in the policy environment: limited capacities of provincial level staff exacerbated by poor access to research evidence, weak demand for evidence-based policy and programme design, and frequently insular officials who are more focused on bureaucratic detail than working to solve ground-level problems and challenges.

### Dinh Hoa

Within Kien Giang, we chose Dinh Hoa commune in the Go Quao district to site our research, primarily because approximately two-thirds of its 15,617 residents are Khmer. Most of the community (58%) is involved in agriculture, primarily cultivating rice and sweet potatoes and raising small livestock, with a further 24.5% engaged in trade and service. In addition, there is an electronics company located 10km from the commune centre which employs a large number of young women. By provincial standards, the commune is middling poor—with a poverty rate of 6.42% in 2012. Dinh Hoa’s poverty rate is higher than Kien Giang’s overall rate primarily because of the extremely low poverty rates of its urban areas. It is worth emphasizing, however, that Dinh Hoa, a rural commune that is nearly two-thirds Khmer, has a poverty rate that is a small fraction of the 2010 national-level rural Khmer poverty rate calculated by Baulch and Vu (2012), which was over 50%. This is a remarkable achievement and is one reason that the commune was taken off the Programme 135 list in 2010.

Recent improvements in infrastructure targeted toward the community due to its high Khmer population and “especially difficult” economic circumstances (Dan Viet, 2011) are a key driver of both its positive deviance and its remarkable income diversification. In addition to a plethora of new roads and bridges, which make it easier for children to attend school and adults to get to markets, since 2009 the commune has received several new pumping stations for rice irrigation, 38 pre-school and primary classrooms, nearly 500 houses for the poor and improved electrical capacity, with 98% of residents now “on the grid” (Bao Dien Tu, 2011). Furthermore, the

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<sup>14</sup> VHLSS 2010 reports that the ratio of monthly income/capita between the bottom quintile and the top quintile is 9.2 nationally and 8.3 in Kien Giang—up from 7.8 in 2004 (p.271).

<sup>15</sup> Vietnamese law defines children as under the age of 16. International convention, on the other hand, stipulates that adulthood begins at 18.

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commune centre has transformed itself into a dynamic business hub, opening up numerous opportunities for income generation. The commune centre not only has a daily market, but it is also undergoing a building boom as new offices and stores set up shop.

Finally, and again echoing Wells-Dang's (2012) findings regarding positive deviance, Dinh Hoa's social climate is cohesive and its political climate is quite dynamic. Hamlet leaders are almost entirely Khmer and very eager to help the commune's population move forward. The Vice-Head of the People's Committee is a young Khmer woman who is sensitive to concerns about ethnicity, gender and age. As evidence of this, the commune already has a wide variety of activities aimed at young people in general and young women in particular. Specifically, it has not only football and rowing teams, but football and rowing teams for girls. It also hosts a Khmer singing team and a Khmer culture club.

## 6 Methodological approach

Our primary research drew on a methodological approach developed in the first instance for the ODI global study on adolescent girls and subsequently tailored for the Vietnamese context, where we carried out research with Khmer communities in Kien Giang and Hmong communities in Ha Giang provinces. The Ha Giang findings are discussed in Jones et al. (2013) and cross-referenced in this report where appropriate. We used a variety of qualitative and participatory research instruments to explore the ways in which Khmer adolescence is gendered, drawing on a purposively selected sample. This is presented below in Table 2; details concerning the interview respondents are represented in Appendix 1.1.

**Table 2: Instrument type, purpose and sample**

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>Quantity Completed (n= )</b>
Focus Group Discussions (FGD)	To explore general community-level definitions, views and experiences of gendered adolescence; to identify areas of consensus and debate	Younger adolescent girls (11-14) Older adolescent girls (16-19) Mixed adolescents Mixed adults Women	5
In-depth interviews (IDI)	To understand individual girls' experiences of adolescence and its gendered dimensions	Younger adolescent girls aged 13-15 Older adolescent girls aged 16-18 Adolescent boys aged 13-18	6 3 4 13
Life-histories (LH)	To explore key moments in girls' lives present and past	Older adolescent girls aged 16-18 Adult women	4 5 9
Case studies (CS)	To explore intra-hh dynamics vis-à-vis adolescent girls by triangulating views of adults and children; and by gender; includes researcher observation for 24 hours	Family with 16-year-old girl Family with 15-year-old girl	2
Inter-generational pairings (IGP)	To explore key moments in girls' lives present and past; generational differences in adolescent experiences; could include examples of positive deviance	Family with 16-year-old girl, mother and grandmother Family with 17-year-old girl, mother and grandmother	2
Key informant interviews – provincial and local (KII)	To find out about adolescent girls' status, opportunities, challenges, and changes over time at the provincial and commune levels		18
Key informant interviews – national	To find out about adolescent girls' status, opportunities, challenges, and policy and programming at the national level		6
<b>TOTAL interactions</b>			<b>65 interactions</b>

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A variety of participatory techniques, including body mapping, rankings, timelines, and family drawings, were used to stimulate conversation, facilitate recall and build consensus regarding the vulnerabilities of Khmer girls and the opportunities they would need to realize their full potential. Of particular note, in order to elicit girls' opinions about the specific programming that they thought would improve their lives, we presented them with a list of possibilities and asked them to choose their top three options--as well as selecting two which they could not envisage working. That list can be found in Appendix 2.

At design and data collection stages, the field research team consisted of a team of four senior Vietnamese researchers from the Institute of Gender and Family Studies, a research institute housed within the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, and a research fellow from ODI. The team leader participated in a training of trainers in London after which there was a follow up training in Hanoi for the rest of the research team.

At the analysis stage, the research team leader, together with an ODI team consisting of a research fellow, a research consultant and a research assistant were involved. In order to ensure maximum consistency, following translation of the Vietnamese language transcripts into English, we used a common coding framework. The framework was designed to capture the key themes from our conceptual framework, while also providing ample space for additional sub-themes to emerge from respondent voices. This framework can be found in Appendix A2.8.

## 6.1 Caveats

We did not set out to look for Khmer girls who were positive deviants. We set out to look for Khmer girls who were growing up in a middling-poor commune that was primarily Khmer. Upon analysing our data, however, we realised that Dinh Hoa seems to be situated in a “sweet spot”—where the economic, political and social environments are working together to improve the lives of residents.

After considerable effort to ascertain why Dinh Hoa's Khmer girls are doing so well during the data analysis process, it emerged that it has recently been honoured as a “Model Rural Commune”. This distinction is offered only to communes that meet a wide variety of social and economic goals and is one way in which the national government has attempted to increase the participation of local governments and citizens in meeting nationally determined targets. While the designation is not accompanied by extra resources, and is in fact an attempt to get communes to do more with their own resources, the distinction is considered highly desirable and worth working for. Ideally we would have been made aware of this by provincial officials who helped with commune selection, but this was not the case and only emerged after data collection.

We also note that it is possible that even within the context of a Model Rural Commune we may have inadvertently sampled particularly earnest girls. While our respondents were chosen on the basis of ethnicity, age and poverty classification based on the commune's drop-out rate—with no attempt to locate positive deviants beyond the in-depth intra-household case studies—they stand out for their educational aspirations.

We do not therefore claim that our respondents represent typical Khmer girls. Indeed, we note that the experience in Dinh Hoa seems to be exceptional on a number of fronts. Instead, we note that the girls in our study are closer to representing what Khmer girls could be-- if they were regularly given opportunities to realise their full capabilities.

**Body mapping exercise with Khmer girls**

**Ears:** hear adults say that teens today are smarter than they used to be but that girls should not spend so much time going out with their friends—they should do housework or study instead.

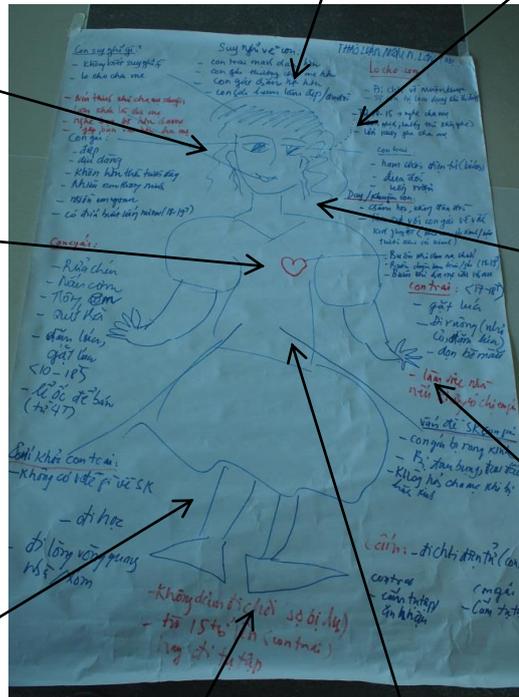
**Head:** studies hard and knows that girls and boys should do the same things, even if ears hear otherwise. Thinks that adults should consult adolescents more. Is learning from parents and teachers how to be a good adult.

**Eyes:** see young men and young women getting married when they are in love—and not when they are too young. See boys breaking rules and getting in trouble. See that girls are prioritised for learning.

**Heart:** is very worried about getting good marks in school. Loves parents. Has many good friends. Is worried about finding a good job. Feels that boys must wait until after career is established.

**Mouth:** tells parents which motorbike to buy and what foods are best. Reminds father to stop smoking. Sings. Talk to mother about happy and sad things.

**Legs:** can migrate to cities to work, but only after 18, as companies do not hire children. Have to work more if they are Khmer, because they are poorer.



**Feet:** go to school, the market and the fields. Enjoy Khmer dancing and trips to the cinema and karaoke with friends.

**Body:** knew about menses in advance and had good support from mothers and sisters. Would like to know more about SRH, even though there were school classes.

**Hands:** help cook, do laundry, chop wood and work in fields. Do homework every day.

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# 7 Gendered adolescence in Khmer communities

## Capability deprivations and opportunities

Judging from our respondents, the lives of Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa are less and less confined by traditional gender roles. This is a result of long-standing cultural differences, such as matrilineal residence<sup>16</sup> preference and equal inheritance rights; gender norms that have been shifting for at least a generation; and strong local institutions. While poverty continues to restrict the life options open to many – and girls and women still tend to shoulder the lion’s share of household labour and care work – Khmer girls in our study are in many ways a model of positive deviance when it comes to gender equality in Vietnam.



### 7.1 Education Domain

UNFPA (2011) notes that the “Mekong River delta... lagged behind all other regions in terms of the proportion of the population that had completed upper secondary or higher education”. While a sizable minority of adolescent respondents had left school – and not all drop-outs regretted their situation – the prevailing story amongst our respondents was that parents were willing to do anything possible to keep their children in school, and girls were dedicated to academic success. Given that few of the parents had more than a basic elementary education, and several had no formal education at all, families’ near reverence for schooling was noteworthy.



A Khmer girl at school

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<sup>16</sup> Matrilineal residence refers to the tendency of couples to live near the wife’s natal family.

### Box 9: Girls' views on education

Both my parents want me to study well-- they want me to have money and stuff some day, like other people. (16-year-old)

My mother said: try to learn, I will buy anything you like. So I tried harder. (15-year-old)

Our economic condition is the same as theirs [children who have left school], it's because my family wants us to go to school, so in the future it's not tiring for us. (13-yearold)

They say if I try to learn, they will try to provide for me. I try to study, study for my future.(15-year- old)

I wanted to quit school many times but he [her father] didn't allow me. I just wanted to drop out of school to help him but he didn't let me. (18-year-old)

My dad will let me study according to my ability. He'll support me to whatever level I like, it just depends on me, on my desire. (13-year-old)

### Box 10: Khmer parents' views on education

*We don't have much land, we want to provide for them to find jobs to live on and raise their families and themselves, so that they won't suffer from hardships. It's ok if we have to work hard.* (Mother)

*We spend our whole life on the field and taking the buffaloes to eat grass; we can't let our children tread in our footsteps.* (Mother)

*She will have knowledge. I don't have land to give her; if she has knowledge, she can find a job. I will plough harder.* (Father)

*I just plan to try my best to work to provide for them to study until the end. If they can study, I let them study.* (Mother)

*If we don't have enough, we'll sell some land, as long as they try to learn.* (Mother)

*Even if we have to work as hired labour, we must try to provide for her.* (Mother)

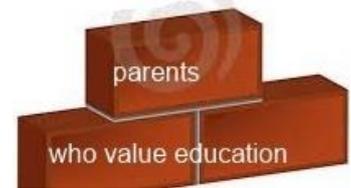
Dinh Hoa's educational environment is one key to constructing the model of positive deviance. The commune has its own schools for children enrolled in kindergarten through lower-secondary school (LSS), which draw children from the more distant hamlets within five kilometres of the school. School officials report that enrolment rates for children 6-14 are approaching 100%<sup>17</sup> and the student-teacher atmosphere appeared friendly to our research team. Nearly one-third of teachers at the LSS are female and almost 30% are Khmer. The school has recently received grants from Denmark that are enabling it to upgrade classrooms and toilets as well as build new IT and science facilities (VietnamNews, 2013; VIDAFSA, nd). Finally, there are three upper-secondary schools (USS) within motorbike distance of Dinh Hoa – one being a provincial boarding school – and, according to commune officials, nearly 80% of the children who graduate from LSS move on to USS. This is impressive given the “formal and informal costs of secondary education”, which in rural areas typically involves rent, food and fees for extra classes (World Bank, 2012, p.127).



<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that it is unclear what these enrolment figures mean given that the number of Khmer girls enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade is half the number of Khmer girls enrolled in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Beyond the pragmatic reality that there are now schools to attend – and paved roads to get there – commune officials saw two reasons for the local emphasis on education: economics and awareness. First, due to falling poverty rates more families can afford to send their children to school these days. Second, as one KI noted, parents are very aware of how important education is for their children, including their daughters. *“Now if you are ignorant, no one listens to you. You can’t operate a simple machine. What will you do if the machine breaks down and you haven’t read carefully about it? They are aware that education is important, they have to invest.”*

While KIs assert that parents are, in part, interested in maximising their children’s educational attainment in order to ensure their own retirement – *“if they invest in children now, their children will have professional skills, they won’t have to worry and if parents fall ill, children will care for them”* – parents and girls are in agreement that parents’ motivation is aimed at girls, not themselves. One 18-year-old, for example, desperate to drop out and help her widowed father financially, was told by him that she must stay in school in order prepare for her own independent future. He told me *“to study so that I can get a good job, then when I get married, my husband won’t scold me”*, she said. A father of a 16-year-old addressed the question directly: *“She’s a girl, if she stays here, she won’t be able to help me. If she passes the graduation exams, if she gets accepted in any professional area, we’ll let her go, so that she will have a job, we won’t need to worry about her when she has her own family”*.



On the other hand, from girls’ perspective, a major motivating force behind pursuing advanced education is their increased ability to help their parents. While school represents an opportunity cost in the short/medium term, as they must delay earning their own incomes, they largely recognize that this cost will pay off eventually in terms of better jobs and higher salaries in the future. One girl commented, *“I will choose a worthy job so I can help my parents in the future”*. Another said, *“I’ll try to study so that I can help my mum in the future. I would like to be a doctor”*.



Dinh Hoa’s lower secondary school

It is worth noting that despite our efforts to obtain a sample of typical Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa, it is possible that we inadvertently ended up with families with particularly high goals for educational attainment. School officials report that in 2012 there were 74 Khmer girls enrolled in sixth grade. By ninth grade, however, there were only 37 – a drop-out rate of 50% **even before the USS transition**. However, most of the girls in our sample, including all but one of the girls of LSS age, were still in school, which indicates a possible mismatch between the circumstances of the respondents in our study and those of the overall population. Even if this is the case, however, it is clear from the interviews with girls, parents and brothers, that even when children are not in school it rarely represents

the family’s ethos. We therefore have good reason to believe that our respondents’ outlook on education is broadly similar to that of other Khmer families in Dinh Hoa. Parents and children value school tremendously and attempt to ensure that at least some of the family’s children have the chance to make it through. Unlike the findings of a 2013 study on Hmong adolescent girls in Ha Giang (Jones et al., 2013), graduating from 9<sup>th</sup> grade was never seen by the Khmer families in our study as “sufficient”. One Dinh Hoa Khmer girl, who left school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, said of her own eventual children, *“I’ll adequately provide so that they can go to school. I won’t let them drop out of school because I am very regretful myself. I won’t let them quit school like me”*

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## Barriers to graduation

### Poverty

KIs at the YU note that the single largest barrier to children's academic progress is poverty. While tuition through LSS is free, there are, notes one KI, "*many other expenses*", in terms of both real outlays and opportunity costs. Provincial staff observe that entrance into secondary school is a financial hurdle that many children cannot overcome. One commented, "*it is difficult to reach the lower secondary school and it is extremely difficult to reach higher secondary school*". A LSS teacher in Dinh Hoa observes that a common stumbling block in that transition is a lack of a motor-bike, since none of the USSs are located in the commune itself, meaning that children either require transport or rent. He further notes that many families simply need their children's labour.

Girls – and their brothers – confirm the veracity of this belief. Amongst our respondents five of the six adolescents who dropped out of school did so because they needed to work in order to help their families make ends meet. One 18-year-old explained, "*I decided to drop out of school and work for the women in our neighbourhood, and they paid me some wage. And the wage was used to buy rice and fish for my family*". A 16-year-old boy echoed this theme, "*We don't have rice to eat, I quit school to help my mum and dad to relieve the strain*". An 18-year-old, still in school, said that most of her friends "*had quit school in grade 9*" in order to go to the city to earn money.

#### Box 11: Building a future through education

Thi Huong is a 13-year-old Khmer girl and the third of four children. Her parents, who only got to go to first or second grade when they were children, have a small farm and work very hard to keep their family fed. In many ways they are very traditional. They grow rice and raise animals. Her mother must chop fuel wood every day. TP says that her father makes all the major decisions in the household. Her parents are, however, looking to the future in terms of how they have worked to position their children. Her older sister is attending university. Her older brother is in the 11th grade. Her younger brother, 8 and in 2nd grade, is not given any chores at all, because her parents want him to "*have time to play and study well*".

Huong's family is not wealthy. They often have to pay school fees late or borrow money. She reports that she regularly lacks school supplies, "*I need exercise notebooks to study, but I lack too many of them, I don't have enough money to buy them*". Furthermore, while she would like to play badminton at school, she cannot afford to buy the equipment. "*I cannot participate because of the requirements, for example I'll have to buy the equipment to play badminton*".

Despite their poverty, Huong's family has already sent one daughter to university – and they are planning on sending the rest.

In addition to helping their parents by earning wages, adolescent drop-outs are very clear that they see their decision as facilitating the education of their siblings. Provincial staff note that this is common; "*if a family has 3 or 4 children, 1 or 2 of the oldest ones may have to sacrifice*". One girl said, "*I only think about my family, about having enough money for my brother to go to school*". Another, taking gender out of the equation, commented, "*I saw that he had to work hard and pay for my younger sisters' education, so I left school and let my sisters go to school*". Interestingly, roles were occasionally reversed, with younger adolescents leaving school so that their older siblings could stay, as their investments in education were seen as larger and therefore more valuable. One girl, who left school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, explained, "*she [her sister] was in grade 10 already so she couldn't stop going to school. I was only in grade 8 then, so it wouldn't be a waste if I dropped out of school*".

### Gender

While poverty is the key determinant for pulling children out of school and parental support is overwhelmingly key to keeping them there, several interviews also suggest that gender continues to play some role in girls' educational trajectories. While on a national basis Khmer girls are more likely to attend school than Khmer boys, enrolment numbers indicate this is not the case in Dinh Hoa. One KI notes, "*we can see that girls are more vulnerable than boys.... girls have fewer opportunities to study*".

Although there are mixed opinions about why this is so, the general consensus amongst our respondents is that it has less to do with gender per se and more to do with other opportunities that are open to girls but not to boys. Youth Union KIs, for example, note that while gender used to be a determining factor in allocating educational opportunities, parents increasingly “take children’s learning abilities into consideration and they give priority to the children who have the best performance in school”. None of the children or parents in our study indicated that gender was behind their educational decisions. A 15-year-old boy may have the most likely explanation; he commented, “There are more boys in the majority of classes. Most of the girls go to work. They work as telephonists for Coopmart company here”. Since, as will be discussed in greater detail below, this is a well-paid, local opportunity open to girls – but not boys – who have completed 9<sup>th</sup> grade, it may be that the opportunity costs of USS in Dinh Hoa are simply higher than some girls are willing to bear.

## Age

As a final observation about school-leaving, and standing in stark opposition to the experiences of Hmong girls, amongst our Khmer respondents it was clear that the final decision to drop-out of school was almost always made by the adolescents. While parents may have applied subtle pressure to their children, and the overlay of traditional filial piety often makes it difficult to disentangle teen’s agency from parents’ needs, both children and parents spoke of how hard parents had tried to convince their drop-out children to stay in school. One 15-year-old boy explained that his older brother had asked his parents for permission to leave school – and had grudgingly received it. A mother, dedicated to sending her 16-year-old daughter to university, had let her younger son leave school after eighth grade. She said, “I wanted him to study, but he wasn’t into that. I let him go to school, but he refused to, he did other things”. A girl, who left school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade herself, said, “my parents always advised me. They told me to go to school, entreated me to continue school”. Showing definite signs of emerging decision-making skills, she concluded, “I said once I decided something, it’s final, no one can force me to change my mind”.

## Barriers to a quality education

### Teachers

Good teachers add another piece to our model of positive deviance. Our findings indicate that teacher-student relations in the commune’s schools were generally positive and that open communication lines were conducive to a strong learning environment. For example, an LSS teacher said that local schools made a concerted effort to treat children well and motivate them solely through “sweet words”. Our research team noted evidence that these efforts are real. They observed that children and teachers behaved in a friendly manner towards one another and that when teachers sat in on interviews it did not seem to limit how forthcoming children were – even while discussing their teachers. Teachers seemed genuinely interested in what the children had to say – commenting that they were there as “friends” and not as “teachers”. Providing further evidence of local efforts to make school a good place for children, staff at the LSS in Dinh Hoa, having observed that poor children often get no lunch, is raising funds to ensure that hungry students are fed.



A focus group discussion with older adolescent girls

With a few notable exceptions, discussed below, the adolescents we interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their teachers. They felt that they were good teachers and kind people. One girl said, “Many times she also sits down next to me and asks about my studies”. A boy explained, “My teachers are very gentle; when I don’t understand something in the lesson, they wholeheartedly explain it to me”. The only married girl in our study, who left school after eleventh grade, reported that her teachers “told me that they would do everything to support me in my study as long as I return to school again”.

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Girls also report that the schools in Dinh Hoa do annual teacher evaluations – to ensure that teachers are teaching well. One said, *“in high school we give feedback about the teachers’ teaching methods. In primary and secondary school, we were still little, so we just followed our teachers’ teaching, we couldn’t raise our opinions.”* Girls also report that this exercise is not empty – teachers really do respond to students’ evaluations. One noted, *“I wrote in the piece of paper, and many friends also wrote the same thing, then the teacher has changed, he has been teaching more carefully”*.

Beyond good teaching, the children we interviewed had many stories that spoke to how hard teachers worked to connect to children as children – not just students. One girl said, *“when I’m nervous and I’m afraid that I won’t be able to pass the exam, I talk to my headmaster or my headmistress. ....They tell me to revise each part gradually and not to put too much pressure on myself”*. Another commented, *“They care about the pupils. They ask if my family has any difficulty”*. A third girl explained that even if she had something too sensitive to discuss with her male teachers, *“I can share with my female teachers”*.

Girls and boys freely discuss misbehaviour at school. Most commonly perpetrated by boys, for the most part children seem to believe that typical punishment strategies are reasonable. One girl said of her teacher, *“He will only say “you shouldn’t do that”. For some pupils that are too badly-behaved, he may make them clean the toilet or the school yard”*. Another commented, *“Multiple time offenders have to sign minutes of violation, write self-critics or their parents are invited to school”*.

Despite these largely glowing comments, some students reported teacher cruelty at the USS level. A 15-year-old girl, for example, commented, *“Both girls and boys are beaten. We are in grade 10, but very pitiful. She forces us, both girls and boys, to lie on the table for her to beat”*. She continued, *“school violence didn’t exist in my lower secondary school, but in the upper secondary school, students are beaten. The principal knows but he doesn’t do anything”*. A 15-year-old boy spoke of public humiliation, *“They said that I am a big boy, but I don’t try to learn; they said my father is old and weak but he tries to pay for my education”*. While most of the children we interviewed felt comfortable talking to their teachers – and even their principals – the students who reported abuse were loath to report it. One said, *“I fear that teachers will hate me if I report it. They may lower my conduct rank or rate my subject performance as weak”*.

## Gender

Our primary research provided mixed evidence as to whether gender interferes with the quality of education for Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa. On the one hand, our KIs indicate that *“girls are not as bold as the boys”*. Some girls also mentioned being shy in class. On the other hand, the majority of girls are very clear that they are far better at school than boys. One commented, *“No boys are good in studying. They are not interested in studying at all”*. Another, noting that her twin brother is now three years behind her in school, said that his struggles were *“because he doesn’t study at home. I tell him to, but he doesn’t want to. He prefers going fishing”*.

While girls are confident that they are stronger students than boys, some have concerns that this could change. One said:

*“I heard that when girls start to have their periods, they will study worse than boys. I heard that but I am not sure whether it is true or just a rumour.”*

13-year-old girl

Interestingly, and again indicative of Dinh Hoa’s positive deviance, teachers in the commune are specifically trained in gender sensitivity. An LSS teacher, for example, was selected in 2012 to go to a provincial level training session and then return to Dinh Hoa to *“rally other teachers in the school and convey what we learned to them”*. He was adamant that children learn that *“women and men equally bear important responsibilities, and carry out major works of the society”*. He made sure in his classroom, that both girls and boys felt included and had space for participation. *“I split them into groups”*, he said, so that *“all of them have to participate, including boys and girls”*.

## Ethnicity

Only a minority of respondents felt that ethnicity posed a barrier to their educational success. Most girls were adamant that there was no difference between Kinh and Khmer students, at least in the classroom. Several girls,

*Khmer classmates are often shy, they don’t dare speak.*

13-year-old girl

however, noted that out-of-classroom experiences benefited Kinh children. For example, Kinh students arrive at school already speaking the language and – most importantly – are less likely to be poor. *“Khmer people don’t know about many things, for example when they first enrol, they don’t understand much”*, said one girl. Another, who dropped out after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, noted that in addition to money, Kinh parents are also able to better help their children with homework. She said, *“their parents help them, and they have more money to provide them to study”*. Despite these differences, none of our respondents reported any discrimination towards Khmer students from either teachers or other students. One girl, 15 and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, said, *“I think other ethnic groups are just the same as mine. I make friends with people of other ethnicities”*.

For the Khmer students selected – on the basis of “excellent” school performance – to attend the ethnic boarding school, their ethnic status may bring some advantages. Not only is the school free, but it has resources that are not available at many other schools. A boy, who attended the school when he was in LSS and whose sister is currently enrolled, commented, *“There are projectors and computers for practising”*.

### Age

Finally, for girls who have left school, embarrassment makes it difficult for them to return. While teachers are clear that *“school doors are always open”*, girls report that going back to school as an older student in a class of younger children would be uncomfortable for them. One noted, *“If I came back to school to retake grade 8, I would feel so embarrassed because I was grown up already”*. Another girl, however, who left school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade but is still aiming to go to university, has already signed up for complementary education evening classes, which will enable her to reach her goal in the company of other older learners.

### Pagoda School

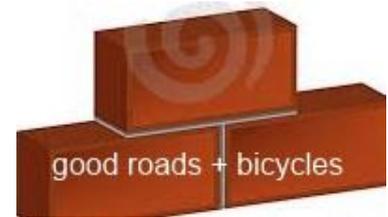
In addition to attending regular school, Khmer boys and girls have the opportunity to attend Pagoda school, which operate over the summer, when regular schools are not in session. Identified by Wells-Dang (2012) as another key determinant of positive deviance, particularly in Khmer Tra Vinh, Pagoda schools teach the Khmer language, reinforce religious and cultural traditions and serve as a foundation of community cohesion. Classes are free, run six days a week and, based on our respondents, are widely enjoyed. One girl commented, *“I’m very happy to know my ethnic minority language.”* Another girl, however, explained that she had not been allowed to attend classes last summer. *“I wanted to participate,”* she said, *“but there were so much work at home, so I didn’t join. I skipped it this year”*. She further highlighted just how unjust this decision seemed to her: *“My twin brother is allowed to continue his study even though he doesn’t do well at school. While I’m good at school but my parents don’t let me go”*.



One of many new bridges in the research area

## Changes over time

As mentioned above, very few parents in our study had completed more than elementary school – and many had no formal education at all. Poverty was the leading reason for this. “Back then”, said one thirteen-year-old girl, “My parents were quite hard up so my mum didn’t get education like other people”. Most of our adult respondents also commented that roads were not only bad, but non-existent, when they were children, leaving them to either slog across rice paddies or travel to school by boat – if they were brave enough to go. “It was very miserable to go to school. I rowed a wooden boat,” commented one woman, who continued by explaining that boating accidents were common and she and her peers frequently arrived at school wet. For children without boats, the lack of roads particularly disadvantaged girls, who were not able to “walk across water” like their brothers. Dinh Hoa now not only has roads – it has paved roads. Almost all of the adults we interviewed commented about the difference that this has made in children’s ability to access education – particularly when coupled with bicycles. One mother explained, “Back then there were all sorts of difficulties when I went to school; now when they go to school they also have bikes. I can’t hold a candle to them.”



Another key shift in regard to education uptake – and girls’ overall positive deviance – has been the move towards gender equality. While families of the past varied, like families today, in terms of how they prioritised girls’ versus boys’ education, the adult women we interviewed indicated that overall their brothers’ schooling was seen as more important than their own. “Because back then”, commented one, “my father said a girl shouldn’t study much.” She concluded, “now I see that it’s not right, girl or boy, they’re equal, without learning, they’ll be disadvantaged”. A commune official confirms this general shift in thinking: “I think that the old thought doesn’t exist, girls and boys have the same opportunities to study”.

Girls in the past were also handicapped by burdensome quantities of housework. While their brothers were able to come home and play and study, girls had many chores for which they were responsible. One mother of a 17-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl explained, “My brother didn’t care about the housework, he was a boy. He didn’t have to do anything after school, while we were so busy”. Girls today, however, largely know that school comes first – both for them and their parents. One explained, “Sometimes I say – I can’t do it, mom, dad, please do it for me so that I can learn my school lessons. They will do it for me”. While girls today do housework, and some help in the fields, none of the girls that we interviewed in Dinh Hoa felt that their chores prevented them from adequately focussing on their school work.

Comparing to my daughter, it’s now two times better for her than me.

Mother of 17-year-old adolescent girl

A few mothers indicate that Khmer students were also more disadvantaged in the past. One said, “Those students whose parents were rich and donated much money, the teachers favoured them and had regard for them. Meanwhile, to ethnic students who were poor and such, they used a bit heavy words and such. Back then we were really afraid of the teachers”. Other students, she said, also “hated us and picked quarrels with us and said that Mien (Khmer) people were dirty”.

## Roots in the past

While there have been many recent changes in the educational environment of Dinh Hoa, it is also interesting the degree to which families’ commitment to education has roots in the past. Two of the women in our study, both in their 40s, had graduated from lower-secondary school. This seems remarkable given their cohort’s overall low educational attainment and is indicative of norms that were already relaxing a generation ago. The mother of one adult woman, 81 years old at the time she was interviewed, was very clear that she had allowed all of her children to go to school because she had not been allowed to go herself. Speaking of her father, she said, “He said that’s what girls studied for. For nothing. People in the past were old-fashioned, back then”. She continued, explaining why she sent each of her seven



children to school, “Because I cannot read, I don’t want my children to be illiterate. I tried to provide for them to go to school”.

Adult women in Dinh Hoa also told stories about how hard their teachers had worked to get them to return to school when they dropped out. One, nearly 50, who left school after fourth grade, said that her teacher had come to her house twice to try to convince her to return to school, “when I dropped out, the teacher advised me to go back to school, but I saw that our circumstances were too difficult, so I quit; then he came for the second time, I felt so sorry”.

The long-standing importance of education to Khmer families is also evident in the history of Pagoda schools, which offer free summer classes, taught by monks, to local children<sup>18</sup>. A number of the women in our study indicated that they had attended Pagoda school when they were children, often well after they had already left regular school.

### Policy and programming

While KIs mentioned several small scholarship programmes for children in Kien Giang, including one targeted at girls, sponsored by the Kotex company, few of our respondents mentioned any sort of financial assistance in terms of their education. The sole current exception was a pair of siblings who were ranked “excellent” students and were selected to attend the ethnic boarding LSS, which is free. Another girl mentioned having received tuition assistance in the past because of Programme 135. However, while Jones et al. (2013) found that Hmong students were provided with tuition assistance at high school level, such support did not appear to be available to Khmer students in Dinh Hoa, despite the fact that poor students are at higher risk of dropping out.

### Explaining positive deviance

While it is clear that better economic and educational policy could help more girls stay in school longer, explanations of girls’ positive deviance revolve less around specific rules and regulations and more around the social institutions embedded in general community and family milieus. Parents care about girls’ educations. Not only do they see intrinsic value in more education, they also value girls’ education as much as that of boys. A strong tradition of Khmer education provided by Pagoda schools and a history of girls’ education also stand out as amongst Dinh Hoa’s strengths.

Schools and teachers also care about girls’ educations. The schools have initiated gender training, institutionalised student-teacher feedback, arranged to feed poor children lunch and provided bicycles to children at risk of dropping out. Teachers listen, use the word “friend” to describe teacher-student relationships, and are willing to make multiple trips to children’s homes to help keep them in school. Overall, girls in Dinh Hoa feel surrounded by adults who care about their educations.



### Box 12: Aiming high—for education

The educational aspirations of girls in our study were nearly uniformly high. Most remarkably, even girls who have dropped out of school and experience regular hunger still saw a university education as worth aiming for.

Danh Thi Hoa is an 18-year-old Khmer girl who lives with her parents. She had to leave school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade because her mother was sick and unable to work. Her family does not own land and her mother speaks Vietnamese poorly. The whole family now works for hire, doing agricultural labour for other families, which is seasonal and does not pay well. DTT says that while they have received loans for the government, to support their pig husbandry, they are still poor, “so I eat only a little”. She is planning on returning to complementary education this fall, and would like to continue through university. She is very worried, however, that “If the economic situation is not favourable, I will have to leave school once again”.

Note: Complementary education classes are provided in each commune, for free, for students up to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. After that point students must travel to the nearest town to take classes.

<sup>18</sup> Most Pagoda schools teach Khmer language and culture using curricula designed by the Department of Education, which also provides funding. A few also teach other subjects, such as English or chemistry, or offer vocational training. See <http://cema.gov.vn/modules.php?name=Content&op=details&mid=3513>.

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## 7.2 Economic Domain

While Kien Giang province has high rates of both multi-dimensional poverty and inequality, and Dinh Hoa's poverty rate is above the provincial average, the stories told by our respondents largely spoke of progress. Though some families were very poor, even battling hunger on occasion, most of the adults we interviewed spoke broadly of how much better things were today when compared to the past.

### Poverty

Roughly a quarter of the families in our study were very poor. While only one girl mentioned being on the poor list, and one other spoke of being officially near-poor<sup>19</sup>, it is clear from adolescents' narratives that even where families appear to be financially stable, they often skirt the edges of poverty. This makes sense given the extremely low official poverty line and is most clear in adolescents' explanations of school leaving. One KI, for example, noted that when adolescents leave school they *"stay at home and help their parents by cutting paddy, removing dead parts of seedlings or rooting grass. At the age of 16 or 17, they will migrate to the city to find jobs in the garment or shoe industry or headphone manufacturing"*. If adolescents work locally, noted a DOLISA KI, they can make up to 100,000 VND/day, which can make a significant difference for struggling families.

Echoing Krishna (2010), who found in his sample of 35,000 people in five countries (not including Vietnam), that poverty was only "one illness away", three of the six out-of-school adolescents in our study reported that the crisis that precipitated their family's hardship and their school leaving, was parental illness. One, who left after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, commented, *"My mom was ill. My dad had to work in the fields. The wage that I earn from doing the housework for the people every month is enough to buy the rice for us"*. While her family was able to take out a loan to help with the immediate crisis of illness, she noted that *"we haven't been able to pay off the whole debts yet, just the interests"*, because her mother had only recently been able to return to work. Another girl, who left school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade, told a similar story; *"After my mother's operation, my family couldn't afford my education, so I left school. She could not work for one year"*. A third girl left school after only 7<sup>th</sup> grade, as her father had an accident and was unable to work. While his company paid for all of his health care, and her mother *"said that I should go to school, that she wouldn't let me drop out"*, the girl explained, *"seeing my dad being ill like that, I dared not make it harder for my mum, so I dropped out."*

Although GTZ and AusAid (2010) found that Khmer landlessness was more problematic in other Delta provinces than in Kien Giang, a lack of sufficient land was also an important driver of financial distress and poverty amongst our respondents. For several families it was closely related to illness, as noted by one mother, who said, *"it's very hard, I'm sick all the time, so sick that we had to sell all our land"*. A 16-year-old boy pointed out how devastating landlessness can be. *"We don't have rice to eat because we don't have farms"*, he said. Forced into day labour for other families, he left school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade in order to *"tend ducks for other people to earn money for my mother to go to the market"*.

Other families were not technically landless but were constrained in different ways. Some, for example, had enough land to grow their own vegetables and raise their own livestock, but worried that their property was too small to eventually divide amongst their children. *"We only have a small area of land, we don't have much land to share with the children"*, noted one – who reiterated how that reality shaped her plans for her children – *"there's no better job at home than working for the Government"*. Others noted the cost of other farming inputs,



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<sup>19</sup> According to the World Bank (2012), the "near-poor lines are 30 percent higher than the official poverty lines—VND650,000 per person per month (US\$2.24 per person per day, 2005 PPP) for households living in urban areas and VND520,000 per person per month (US\$1.83 per person per day, 2005 PPP) for rural households" (15).

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which was mentioned above. “Now farming does not generate profit,” commented one, “We lost money in ploughing, seeds and fertilizers, the loss was heavy, everyone was at a loss that year”.

For the poor women we interviewed, poverty was a heavy emotional burden as well. Several spoke of feeling shame that they were “only” farmers, because they had left school early, or that they were unable to meet all their children’s needs. One, for example, who had been forced to drop out of school when her father ran off with his mistress, leaving her mother to raise seven children, said, “All my friends are teachers and I am the only exception. My friends have become doctors or economists. I don’t dare to look at them. When I go to the hospital, I don’t dare to look at them”. Underscoring again the determination parents in our study have to secure their children’s futures, she refuses to let her daughters follow in her footsteps; “we will try to let them enter university. Our capacity is short, but we will struggle for their future”.

## Economic success

While about a quarter of families in our study were struggling to make ends meet, another quarter had been relatively successful. Inheritance played a large role for the most well-off families. One woman said, “My husband’s family, he got 3000m<sup>2</sup>; I got 2000m<sup>2</sup>, so we have 5000m<sup>2</sup> in total. Now I’ve also bought more and rented more land, so now we’re having over 30,000m<sup>2</sup>. We have that land, and I also opened a grocery shop at home to earn a bit more”. Another woman noted “Because my husband’s family gave us 3000m<sup>2</sup> of farm, and my father gave me another 3000m<sup>2</sup>. And my mother gave me 3000m<sup>2</sup> of mountain field, and 100 bushels of rice so that we would have enough capital for the business”. However, even despite a generous inheritance, she still emphasised that she regretted having left school early (immediately after being admitted to USS) and believes that her life would be better if she had stayed in school and had had other job opportunities,

As both Wells-Dang (2012) and Baulch and Vu (2012) found, income diversification emerged as a key reason for economic success. Most families in our study evidenced significant ingenuity in terms of devising livelihood strategies—and were clearly committed to hard work as a means of securing their children’s futures. One woman, who grew up poor and is still classified as near-poor, was able to purchase a rice-drying oven, which enables her to make “a lucrative profit which is equal to 10 congs of land”.<sup>20</sup> Because she and her husband have found that paying for their children’s schooling is expensive, she recently started a new business as well. “I get up at 4. And then I cook a pot of porridge for sale.” Farming, notes another mother, is rarely sufficient to make ends meet; “Income from paddy is spent on parties. It would be very hard if I don’t have the supplementary job”. Many women take on sewing work to augment their family incomes. Comments one, “I earn 40,000 dong for sewing a pair of clothes. If a day I sew 2 pairs of clothes, I earn 80,000 dong. I spend 80,000 on many things such as electricity, lighting, water, children’s education”.



While most fathers primarily farm, some also take on wage labour such as woodworking or masonry. One woman noted, “He also knows some techniques, people call him from time to time to build houses or fix things”. Similarly, one girl notes that her father “makes tables and chairs for the house”. Another father owns his own motor-bike repair shop and has enough business that he employs both of his sons, who left school after 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Fathers are also, like their wives, willing to work as hard as necessary in order to keep their children in school. As one father bluntly stated, when asked what he would do if his conditions changed and it was difficult to keep his daughter in school, “I will plough harder”.

Infrastructure improvements have been key to much of this recent diversification. As noted above, the market, which is now open every day, has provided a new venue for women to sell a variety of food products, from cane juice to porridge. Improved roads have not only facilitated local job opportunities, such those found at the electronics company, but also enabled more distant migration. Increased traffic in the business district has made it easier for women to open their own shops and men to engage in trades such as motorbike repair.

Family ties are also important to the economic success of many of our respondents. The woman above who bought a rice dryer took out a loan from her sister, a teacher, in order to make that purchase. Another mother commented that she regularly borrowed money from her brother, who put himself through university in order to

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<sup>20</sup> A cong is 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> and is slightly smaller than ¼ acre.

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ensure that no one in his family would ever again be desperately poor. *“I was in need or wanted to borrow, I only asked him and he said yes to my request. He was not rich but he was good at calculating and he could help us”*, she noted. His recent death, from a traffic accident, has not altered her determination to send both her daughters to university, but it has made the path more difficult, as he had *“said that if I couldn’t feed my children to go to university, I would feed them one month and he would feed them the following month”*.

As is true for Kien Giang as a whole (GTZ and AusAid, 2010), and was seen in Tra Vinh by Wells-Dang (2012), migration related remittances are also important to the families in our study and help explain why they feel that they are making economic progress. While only one girl indicated that her parents had migrated, when she was six, many respondents indicated that older adolescents and young adults had left the area to find work elsewhere, primarily in Ho Chi Minh City or Binh Duong, both of which have large industrial zones. KI’s note that when parents migrate they rarely take their children with them. Instead, *“if the women have children, the couple leave the children in the maternal grandmother’s house and they send money home”*. This is what had happened to the girl in our study; she lived with her grandmother and saw her parents *“usually four times each year”*. Proving just how small the world is becoming, another girl mentioned an aunt who had migrated to California but regularly visited with gifts.

Many adolescents reported that their older siblings had migrated for work. Some were still away, but others returned to Dinh Hoa after an absence of several years. One girl said that her sister *“usually sends money home and buys stuff for my mom and my dad, like clothes or sandals or something, she has a mobile phone. She helps us a lot, like paying the debts or the interests”*. Adolescents do not see this situation as problematic. Another girl commented that her sister was *“happy there, her work is not hard”*. Though she said that her sister sent home nearly half of her 4 million VND monthly salary, our 18 year old respondent, whose mother had died and who had been told by her father that she was to stay in school, felt that the remittances were perfectly normal *“because she’s grown up and she earns money for my family”*.



Interestingly, all of the adolescents we interviewed were clear that migration was only an option for young adults over the age of 18. Many specifically mentioned that companies would not hire people under 18, and even several 18-year-olds had been told by their families that they were still *“too young”* to migrate, probably, as GTZ and AusAid note, due to familial concerns about *“the declines in moral behaviours of young women”* (2010, p. 37). Furthermore, while short-term migration was increasingly almost de rigueur, long-term migration was not seen by the families in our study as desirable. While they were not only willing, but eager, to begin work in order to help their parents, girls did not want to be separated from their families on a long-term basis. One said, *“It’s not good to be far from home, far from parents and teachers. And the good things are...no, nothing good at all”*. Parents felt similarly. Several said specifically that they preferred for their daughters to go into business for themselves, because *“Working for other people, she will be a worker forever. I don’t like it”*. Other parents mentioned how important to them that is was for their daughters to stay close so that they could see them regularly. One father said, *“I wish that she can work here. Working for a company, she will have to live far away from parents”*.

## Gendered Economics



Again echoing Wells-Dang's (2012) findings about positive deviance in minority communities, women's contributions to household incomes were significant amongst our respondents. While one commune official noted that this represents a significant change from the past – "*Gender discrimination is decreasing in part because of economic development and in part because people have learned new ways*" – AusAid and GTZ (2010) observe that Khmer families have long been more gender equitable than other Vietnamese families. Regardless, relative equity was certainly evident in the families in our study, many of whom rely on women's wage labour to supplement their farm incomes. One mother provided evidence that, at least in some families, gender discrimination has been waning for decades. She said that when she was young her father taught her how to do business. Despite the fact that she was initially shy and hesitant to talk to strangers about the wares that her family had for sale, her father had mercilessly taunted her until she could do business on her own. He said, "*You're so stupid, working for other people is very hard, you won't stand it. Making "dot" cakes you can make 50-100,000 VND you won't have to work so hard*". Now a successful business woman in her own right, she appreciates his lessons.

### Box 13: Aiming high—for a career

Danh Thi Thanh is an 18-year-old Khmer girl with plans for her future.

When she was younger she participated in the Khmer performance team, traveling and earning money doing ethnic dancing and singing. Because of her commitment to the team, she missed her high school entrance exams and was tracked into "middle school" (vocational secondary school), studying animal husbandry, instead of being allowed to attend high school. She hated it. While her parents begged her to stay and finish school, she left after 11<sup>th</sup> grade and took a job at the local electronics company.

Though she says the income is not high, "*The important thing is that it's earned by me myself*". She is also determined to learn all she can from factory employment. When she is told off at work, "*I think inside myself that I must not be weak, I must control myself, for example when I get scolded, I must try to be more proactive*".

She plans on working at the factory for two years—saving money to open her own business. She says, "*I've loved the hairdressing job since I was 10-11 years old, I told myself that when I grew up, I'd learn this job*". She also plans on learning tailoring, so that "*I can make my own clothes in the styles I like*".

The economic prospects of girls and young women in Dinh Hoa have also been altered by the recent addition of an electronics company that makes headphones<sup>21</sup>. One commune official noted that the "*company requires diligence, women are more diligent, men may abandon halfway. So only a few men are employed*". A KI at the health centre confirmed this, "*More boys are unemployed*". The company, which does not appear to hire young women until they turn 18 and, according to our respondents, requires girls "*to have certificate of grade 9 education*", pays well for the area. It should be noted that jobs at the electronics company are not an option for all girls. It is far enough from Dinh Hoa that it either requires a motorbike for daily transportation or for girls to rent houses closer to the factory. For the poorest girls, or those from the most labour constrained households, this is rarely an option. The only married girl in our study explained that she would very much like to work at the factory, but was unable to do so since she did not have a motorbike and could not leave her husband.



It should also be noted that the pull of the factory, while offering girls comparatively well paid, local jobs, may also work to reduce girls' educational aspirations. The company does not require USS graduation and it is possible that many girls who do not matriculate on to USS have left school because they know they have the option of working at the factory. As was mentioned above, while our girl respondents were primarily planning on completing their educations, the relationship between the factory and the female drop-out rate was clear to a USS boy, who noted that few girls continue on in school because they go to the factory. One girl respondent,

<sup>21</sup> Note that our young respondents refer to this company (Coopmart) in different ways. Several call it an electronics company. Several call it a headphones company. One called it a telephone company. Coopmart makes headphones and it is the only company in the area.

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who left school after 7<sup>th</sup> grade, knew that at 14 she was too young for a real job. Her plan, however, was that “*In the next 1-2 years, when I’m old enough, I’ll apply for a job in a company*”. While clearly beneficial in terms of relatively immediate income gains, the long-term implications of school leaving – even for factory employment – are almost certainly negative.

The division of household labour amongst our respondents, while far from gender equitable, also shows significant signs of progress. Most children reported that their fathers helped their mothers around the house, and one girl said “*if I were a boy, I would also learn to cook. My dad is an excellent cook*”. She further noted that she was trying to teach herself to cook by copying his recipes. Another girl, with a twin brother, reported “*Dad says that if mom cannot manage all the housework, both of the two kids have to support her, equally. It is not fair if one works while the other doesn’t*”. A third girl flatly summarised reality as she saw it, “*There’s no discrimination between boys and girls here, they help each other do whatever they can*”.

### **Equity: a work in progress**

This is not to say that there is no gender discrimination in terms of economics in Dinh Hoa. For example, KIs noted that women are often still paid less than men, even for the same work. One reported that on average for daily labouring work “*females get 80,000 dong a day, and males get 120,000*”. While this is illegal, it is widely acknowledged that men can do more and heavier work than women and are thus “*worth more*”. Girls also confirmed that boys tend to earn more. One noted that “*Their sons make more money than daughters*”, because they are able to work all day and then fish all night. A mother added that men’s work, in addition to being more lucrative, also tends to be more regular. She said, “*It’s easier for the men, women can only do seasonal jobs*”. She reported that she worked on rice paddies in the season—while her husband was able to build houses for people year round. The UNDP (2011) raises concerns that this trend may intensify with economic development. It notes that while Kien Giang has made significant progress in terms of poverty reduction, it is amongst the provinces that have also experienced “*widening gender gaps in GDP per capita PPP for men and women*”, largely because “*incomes are rising rapidly*” (p.57).

Attitudes about women’s capacities are evident in other places too. For example, while youth migration in Viet Nam is significantly feminised, with girls more likely to migrate – and at younger ages – than boys, this reality does not yet seem to have altered beliefs about women’s place in the family economy. Youth Union KIs, for example, note that “*females only stay at home and care for families, they are not paid*”. Boys, they say, can migrate to other districts and cities, because “*men are breadwinners*”. A father, who would prefer for his daughter to go to university, conceded that if she did not pass the entrance exam he would try to arrange for her to learn a “*girlish job, like hairdressing*”.

Task-allocation within families also tends to remain gendered, with a DOLISA KI observing “*of course the boys do heavy work to help fathers and the girls do housework to help mothers. It is the same as in the past. The sons follow fathers to the field to catch snails and crabs, and the daughters stay at home to wash clothes and cook*”. With exceptions, adolescents and parents confirm the veracity of this statement. For example, one mother, asked whether she had preferred that her first child be a boy or a girl, said, “*I preferred a first daughter so that I could ask her to help with cooking and washing and such, while he preferred a boy to help him with heavy work*”.

Many of our respondents felt that girls and women tend to work more – but that boys and men tend to take on heavier work. One 13-year-old boy, for example, said “*A girl works more than a boy; because a girl does the housework*”. A girl commented, “*the hardest working person is my mother, because she does the most* “. Girls, for the most part, believed that this difference grew organically out of the type of tasks best suited to men or women – a belief that cannot be discounted given the nature of rice farming. One explained, “*Dad usually does the farm work or things that require strength while my mom does housework like cooking and washing clothes*”. Another confirmed this reality, stating “*A girl cannot do heavy work, so a boy will do it, while the girl does the housework*”. Notably, however, this same girl followed up by saying, “*As for my two brothers, they often washed their own clothes; they didn’t make my sister do it*”.

On the one hand, these beliefs echo the findings of AusAid and GTZ (2010), who conclude that throughout the Delta, “*Gender roles...are highly segregated and gender relations characterised by male dominance. Men are associated with ‘heavy’ (việc nặng), ‘more important’, ‘main’ income-earning work whereas housework and home-based care activities are ‘naturally’ attributed to women*” (p.26). On the other hand, in our respondents’

stories the most pervasive “flavour” was of increasing equity. Women were still responsible for most housework and men were the main farmers. But girls and women repeatedly told stories of men and boys doing housework and women, thanks to their small businesses, were not chained to their homes. While it is clear that Khmer families have long been more equitable than Kinh families, modernity is clearly making good in-roads in Dinh Hoa in regard to gender roles.

Interestingly, where girls attributed differences in time and labour allocation to anything other than brute strength, they did so almost entirely along the lines of their own hyper-responsibility. One, for example, explained that she worked more than her **older** brother “*Because I’m a girl, I should work more. He is a boy but he’s still young so he can’t do the work like my parents do. The more I am grown up, the more I know and I automatically complete my daily chores*”. While the weight of tradition clearly works to shape girls’ beliefs about their responsibility to their families, it is also clear that at least some element of this pressure is internally driven. One mother commented that when she was a child, “*I was still small, but I had so many family responsibilities; there was little happy and fun thing, I had to worry about work all the time*”. She went on, however, to explain that “*My dad even told me to work less*”.

Today, at least for the adolescents we interviewed, overbearing parental pressure was more likely to be directed at children’s schoolwork than their housework. As was mentioned above, parents were often willing to do children’s chores so that they had more time for their studies. One girl, 16, said that she only did “*light*” work, while her parents and older brother worked very hard. Another boy said that his parents told him to “*stop working, go do your homework*”. Children today, explained one mother, have it made, “*they go home and just do their homework, and then go to school again when it’s time*”. Another girl, 13, explained that when her parents interrupted her school work, because they were “*busy with something else*” and needed her to do a task, she felt “*annoyed, because I haven’t learnt the lesson by heart*”.

### Inheritance, assets and money

Longstanding cultural traditions also play a positive role in shaping the deviance of Dinh Hoa’s Khmer girls. Commune officials note that while Kinh families may prefer boys and choose to live with sons – Khmer families have a definite preference for girls, primarily because they think that their daughters will be better caretakers. As one mother commented,

*My husband gives all his income (to me). He keeps nothing....My father is very gentle. He gave all the money he made to my mother. She made all decisions in my family, big or small. My father makes money and my mother made decisions.*

Married 18-year-old girl

“*When I’m old, my daughter will be more devoted in taking care of me than the son*”. Even some boys said that they would prefer to have girls, with one stating, “*I want daughters*” when I am married. In an interesting twist in a country with a long history of son preference, one girl commented that her father loved all his children equally, because he had always felt that his parents had loved his sisters more than him. She said, “*As for my father, I think that he resents his father, what he hates the most is that my grandpa only loves his daughters, he doesn’t love him. My father says he loves every child of his, he doesn’t love one more than the other, he loves each of us equally*”.



These preferences have significant implications for Khmer inheritance patterns – which show no gender preference. One mother reported, “*Boys and girls are equal. If they have land, they will give three congs to a daughter and 3 congs to a son. There is no disparity*”. Another, hedging her bets about which of her children she would ultimately live with, said “*I will give them equally, three congs to the son and three songs to the daughter. I will keep a share for me, when I pass away, I will give it to the child who lives with and cares for me*”.

Amongst our respondents, women also had access to land titles. One woman, for example, explained that she was able to establish a successful business because she inherited land from both her father and her mother: “*My mother had her own share in the farm land*”. A girl reported that her mother was officially listed as the head of household, because neither of her parents had wanted to take the time to register and her father “won” the

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argument. She explained, “*My mum wanted my dad to do it, but my dad also wanted her to do it. They suggested each other hold the position*”.

Finally, Khmer women also have access to money. As was also found by GTZ and AusAid (2010), most serve as the family bank and collect all wages from their husbands. While girls were mixed as to whether their mothers or their fathers held primary responsibility for household decision-making, which will be discussed in more detail later, all agreed that their mothers had primary responsibility for money.

### Changes over time

Parents and grandmothers in our study spoke broadly of how much better their families and their commune were doing economically. One mother commented that when she was a girl she “*stayed home to help my parents, there was no one else to help with the farm and the pigs*”. Another noted that while “*in the past, we only ate rice and drank water before going to school, now I see that children live a full and happy life, they are short of nothing in the material life*”. Girls were aware of these changes too. One commented that “*if my life is a 10 I see that my mother’s was only a 3 or a 4. My grandmother’s must have been even worse*”.

Parenting also provides an interesting metric in terms of measuring economic progress. One mother, for example, uses farming to scare her daughter into studying. Over the summer she makes her daughter work in the fields and help with the livestock just so that “*she’ll be afraid and will try to study*”. Another girl noted that her mother’s catering business is largely aimed at the poor, who are unable to pay much for her services, thus rendering the business less lucrative than it might otherwise be. She remarked that her mother “*often tells me that let’s do good deeds for poor people because they’re poor so they need us, while rich people already have everything*”. This sentiment is particularly poignant in the context of a minority family living in a country that only a few decades ago was amongst the poorest in the world.

### Policy and programming

There are a variety of government programmes that have reduced economic vulnerability in Dinh Hoa. For example, one KI notes that “*the State supports people with seedlings, houses and creates conditions for people to develop family economy, and thus children can go to school.*” Several adults in our study mentioned that they had gotten loans from the government to improve their housing. One woman related how this had impacted her family, “*I remember that some years ago in the old house we didn’t have a toilet, it was so miserable. Now it is more comfortable than the difficult past. When we didn’t have the toilet, we excreted into the river. Now we got it, the toilet and many other things and life is much better than before*”. Another girl, on the commune poor-list, spoke of the importance of state loans in helping her family develop their livelihood; “*the State supports our pig husbandry with a fund. We paid back all of the 4 million VND and are asking for new loan*”, she said.

Safety nets in Dinh Hoa are not, however, as strong as they might be. Access to credit, for example, is not universal. As GTZ and AusAid (2010) note, while wealthy families have collateral for bank loans – and poor families have access to government loans – the nearly poor often have access to nothing. Similarly, once families have received support for a new house they are typically taken off the official poor list, which means that they have access to few other support services. Finally, as noted above, Dinh Hoa has recently been removed from the Programme 135 list, as the main thrust of that programme is infrastructure, which is now considered well developed in the commune. While the commune still has access to other programmes, including the National Poverty Reduction Programme and the New Rural Development Programme, it is unclear what impact the loss of P135 status will have. Local officials have clearly worked hard to transform available resources into a commune that has received national recognition; it is hoped that they will be able to maintain that trajectory in the face of shrinking national programming.

Furthermore, while Dinh Hoa also appears to have a plethora of vocational training options, none of those options appear to be targeted specifically to involve girls, or even adolescents. KIs made much of the fact that “*we do not discriminate*” on the basis of gender or age, but while those are laudable goals it is all too easy for that lack of focus to slide into what other KIs observe, notably that “*teenagers from 16 to 18 years of age are excluded and reports of all kinds don’t include the age group*” and “*no one is taking charge of girls in that age*”. The Youth Union KI admitted, “*I usually see that participants of the training courses are men, very few women, only 1 or 2 women*”. This ratio is similar to that reported by GTZ and AusAid (2010), who note that “*There is*

generally a lack of coherent and feasible local job creation strategies, particularly for female labourers (p.46). Moreover, although ethnic minority women are eligible to be paid to undertake vocational training – receiving a “subsidy of 15,000 dong a day” – outreach efforts appear to be inadequate in Dinh Hoa as uptake is limited. In short, our findings indicate that both targeting and programme quality are problematic and require attention (see conclusions).

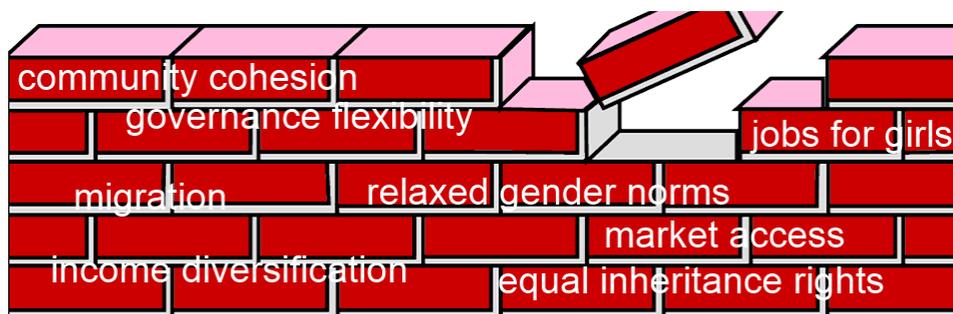
While there is a need for more policy and programming efforts aimed at poverty relief, the overall economic climate is favourable for creating the situation of positive deviance in which Dinh Hoa’s Khmer girls find themselves. Not only is local governance dynamic and flexible, but Kien Giang province has a long history of economic experimentation. Malesky (2004) notes that the province is a “spill-over” recipient in terms of early economic development, which has tended on a national level to encourage governance flexibility. Located next to Can Tho, which was one of the first provinces in Viet Nam to attract foreign direct investment, Kien Giang was receiving its own foreign money as early as the late 1990’s. With nearly 15 years of economic progress – built on concrete evidence that welcoming factories improves employment opportunities and cultivating Khmer dancing helps woo tourists – the province has had ample proof that thinking outside of the box can work.



### Explaining positive deviance

Overall, while Dinh Hoa remains a middling-poor commune in the provincial context, and Khmer families are twice as likely to be poor as Kinh families, the overall economic story that emerges from our respondents is one of progress and positive deviance. Closely matching Wells-Dang’s economically successful communes in Tra Vinh, and with a poverty rate many times lower than national averages suggest it “ought” to have, Dinh Hoa has a wide variety of differences working in its favour. First, at the commune level, minorities are actually the majority; nearly two-thirds of the households in Dinh Hoa are Khmer. They are well represented in local governance and are tightly bound as a community by their participation in the Pagoda school, Khmer Performance Teams, and festivals.

Second, women are very involved in money-making and money-holding. Traditional gender roles seem to have begun relaxing even before this generation, and although women may not have as many opportunities to earn as much money as men, with the addition of the local factory which hires predominantly young unmarried women this too may shift rapidly. Third, incomes in the commune are highly diversified, with both migration and good infrastructure playing key roles in providing a diversity of income generating sources. As a final point of similarity, Wells-Dang (2012) notes that deviant minorities attempt to consolidate their gains in their children, investing in further education as yet another form of income diversification. This path is being taken as frequently as possible by Khmer families in Dinh Hoa.



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## 7.3 Physical integrity and sexual and reproductive health (SRH)

While premarital sex in Viet Nam is widely considered a “social evil” and remains largely taboo, a recent survey undertaken by the Kien Giang Department of Health suggests that the situation may be shifting rapidly. A KI from that department told us that the survey, of 900 students attending one urban and one rural high school in the province, highlighted the need for more SRH education. He said that more than one-quarter of all students admitted that they had already had sex – and nearly 10% claimed to have become sexually active before the age of 14. The survey also captured students’ requests for more education; *“97% of the students in the city school said that they had the need for more information, while this number in the rural school is 86%”*.

Furthermore, while the health department official noted that rural students’ rates of sexual activity were markedly lower than those of urban students, which he attributed to less exposure to the internet, he said that rural children actually have a greater need for information, because their parents are less willing and able to talk to them about sexuality. He added that children need this information earlier today than they did in the past because, *“Life is much better, they eat a lot of food and substances, so they develop much faster”*.

### Menstruation and Puberty

A Health Department KI noted that, *“A lot of children panic when they have their first period”*. Again evidencing positive deviance, that did not seem to be the case for our respondents – most of whom knew in advance that menstruation was on the horizon and all of whom felt “welcomed to the sisterhood” when it happened. Girls reported that they received information both at school and from their mothers and sisters. One said, *“teachers gave me papers about menstruation and hygiene”*. Another commented, *“I often read the Kotex booklet, which provides instructions about menstruation”*. While girls report that space was provided in class for them to ask questions, teachers recognised that most adolescents felt shy and uncomfortable. As one girl put it, *“They [the teachers] distribute newspapers for us to read and understand more”*.



Girls do not report being worried about their periods and they are comfortable discussing them with their mothers. One commented, *“I think that every girl has to experience that [menstruation] so I am not worried. This is what I’ve gathered from books and from my mom”*. Mothers were also a source of practical information. Reported one girl, *“She said when a period came, I should buy sanitary pads and wear black pants”*.

Mothers report that things are very different for their daughters than they were for them. One said, *“Mothers in the past were rarely like what they are now. My mother was a person of the past; she didn’t care much about such things”*. Another commented, *“It is different now. My daughter said: mom, I have it. I asked: what do you have? She said: I have the reddish thing. Now she develops normally and she knows it. Children in grade 8 or 9 know everything”*.

Adult women, on the other hand, reported little instruction and considerable terror regarding menstruation. One said that her only advance warning came from a neighbour – and left her with far more questions than answers. *“I only saw a woman who lived nearby, she put 3 leaves down where she sat, I saw blood all over there. There was no sanitary pads. I was dubious, I wanted to ask but I didn’t say anything at all.”* Several others reported

genuine horror when they first began bleeding, because they believed that leeches had crept into their bodies. One woman related, *“I shouted: Mom, the leech crept into my body!”*.

Interestingly, even in regard to menstrual education, the seeds of today were very much present in the past. While mothers did not know about their periods before they had them, they all reported that their mothers were source of support and explanation after the fact. The woman above, so scared of leeches, said, *“My mother sewed panties for me”*. Another woman, also terrified that she was ill, reported *“I ran for my mother and she said I was having a period”*. Unlike Hmong families, who clearly have strong inter-generational taboos about discussing matters relating to biology (Jones et al., 2013), Khmer mothers and their daughters seem to have far more open lines of communication and have had them for a while.

## Love

The adolescents in our study – girls and boys – almost universally reported that they did not have time for boyfriends and girlfriends. Their outlook generally reflects Confucian norms that emphasise hard work—school is their highest priority and love is largely relegated to the amorphous future after their careers are established. One girl said, *“I think that at my age I should concentrate on studying, I shouldn’t fall in love now. I don’t like thinking about love now, just study and have fun”*. Another commented, *“A girl shouldn’t go with a boy. It affects performance in school, the girl will be busy sending text messages to her boyfriend and can’t understand what teachers say”*.

This is not to say that girls did not have both crushes and admirers. One, the target of a good friend’s affection, said that she had a hard time helping him understand that she was not spurning him per se, merely his timing. *“I said, ‘we can keep in touch, but we should try to study now, let’s think about that in the future when we have our careers’”*. She said that for a month after he admitted that he loved her, it was difficult for her to speak up in class, because she did not want to attract his attention. Another girl felt uneasy even discussing the topic with her friends. She commented, *“If I like someone, I’ll hide it; I do tell my friends, but I don’t say the name of the person I like”*.

Girls were mixed as to whether they could discuss love with their mothers. One did – and reported that her mother told her to take her time and try to understand her feelings slowly, *“My mum says I have to think myself, and after that I’ll be able to understand, gradually when I grow up”*. Another said, *“She only told me to deal with it because I was grown up, that I should do whatever I could. And to ask her if I had any question”*. A third, however, commented, *“Usually adults don’t care much about love feelings between the young people; adults often think we’re still very little, and so we have immature thoughts about it; if I tell her, I’ll be told off”*.

*My boyfriend didn’t like me dancing. One month later, he phoned me and said that he was wrong and wanted to come back to me, but I didn’t accept it, because that person was not worthy of me anymore.*

18-year-old girl



Showing clear signs of norms that have not only relaxed, but genuinely changed, mothers reported that Khmer adolescents today know far more about love and have far more freedom to make their own choices in that regard. *“Ethnic minority people were different, only after the families met and had a talk, we were allowed to go out; otherwise my mother would be afraid that I was spoiled. People would judge”*, said one mother of her own past. Another, summarising the feelings of the parental generation about just how much things have changed, noted, *“We followed the old way, the children now follow their ways now. Now the children, even since they’re little, they’ve known about love”*.

On the other hand, while the above mentioned provincial survey about adolescent sexual activity provides clear evidence of relaxing norms – at least for some adolescents – KIs note that parents still believe that their children do not need information about sex per se, as they are concerned that information will lead to experimentation. Noted the KI, *“If we bring it into school, they will think that we’re ‘showing the deer the way’”*. Mothers report that they also provide little sex education. One said, *“I did talk about hygiene, but not about sex”*.

## Marriage

As was noted earlier, nationwide, Khmer girls are unlikely to marry early. KIs observe that this is also the case in Dinh Hoa, where few girls are married before the age of 20 and few boys married before 25. Girls were certainly not interested in marrying early. One – neatly capturing the sentiments of her peers – said, “*I wish to get married when I have a lot of understanding, when I’m about 23 years old or more*”. Most girls expressed their desire to delay marriage in terms of either education or work. One, however, reflected more traditional values, adding “*If I get married too young, I can’t do anything. If I do anything wrong in my husband’s family, they will blame my parents*”.



Parents also saw early marriage as a disadvantage. One mother bluntly stated that only uneducated people would consider early marriage”, “*Uneducated people...get married early. Educated people find a job and try to work*”. Another mother, agreeing but framing the situation a bit differently, said “*If she gets married without a job, she cannot live like that with her husband. A job first, then when she has her own family, she can take care of her children*”. Parents also recognised that their children would choose their own spouses. A grandmother laughingly explained, “*Because parents in the past would marry their daughters to anyone they liked, now we can only marry them to people they love*”. A father of a 16-year-old went even further, observing, “*If she chooses a husband that I don’t like then I will have to accept.*”

### Box 14: Yesterday’s marriage

Marriage traditions have come a long way in recent years. A grandmother said that she had been married off by her father to a stranger. “*I didn’t agree, but my father agreed for him to marry me. He said marrying his daughter was like throwing a lump of blood for the crocodiles*”. She continued, “*he was such an alcoholic, I couldn’t stand it*”. A mother related a similar story. Her father chose her husband, but “*when I lived with him, we were not compatible*”, she explained. “*He insisted on not letting me go back home and threatened to kill me if I went*”.

Remarkably, the outcomes of both stories again highlight the ties between Dinh Hoa’s past and its present. Both women left their husbands in short order, one defying a death threat, and returned to their parents’ households. Commented the grandmother, “*they realized they’d made a mistake when marrying me to that guy*”. Both chose their own second husbands and lived, more or less, happily ever after.

Another mother said of her husband, “*My father chose him. I didn’t love him, but I didn’t dare protest. I was naive back then, I was only afraid of my parents*”. She enjoyed the wedding but when she got to the wedding night, about which she had not been warned, she “*got freaked out...and tried to find the way back*” to her parents’ house. She concluded, laughing, “*I was too scared, so my husband didn’t do it, he knew, he didn’t force me, he waited. Now my sisters still talk about that to make fun of him all the time*”.

Two young women, both 18, provide interesting bookends in terms of how girls see their own marriages affecting their natal families and how filial piety and tradition are intersecting with new realities. One — the only married girl in our study — married to help her family at her father’s instruction. She said, “*My father told me to get married and I did it immediately*”. She acknowledged that her situation is relatively unique, and that “*many couples get to know each other first. The majority does so*”. However, her mother had just died and her father needed help and her speedy marriage was the easiest way for him to acquire labour. The young woman expressed relief that her father had chosen a man who was “*gentle, rarely drinks wine, and never hangs around at night*”. She also noted that her husband’s labour was helping feed not just her father, but her grandfather, and that she was grateful that her husband was willing to work so hard on the behalf of her family.

The second young woman, also 18, remained unmarried in order to help her family. Her suitor wished to marry immediately and his family was eager to welcome her into theirs. However, she believed that by working a few years before her marriage – and giving her wages to her parents – she could help mitigate their economic hardship. She explained, “*He intended to come and propose to me. I said that it’s not the right time, it should be better to delay a couple of years because my family still has a lot of difficulties*”. She then went on to say that she had another suitor too, but that she preferred the first. “*His family is very wealthy, but they don’t look down on us even though we are poor. And his parents also love me*”.

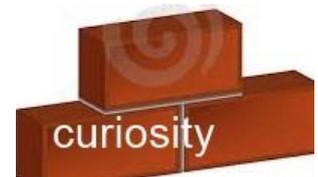


In contrast to most other Vietnamese families, Khmer families have long been matrilineal. Now, noted one commune official, "*It is more liberal. They can live with any family*". Our respondents confirmed this increasing flexibility. One of the boys, for example, said that while he preferred to stay with his parents, if he married a woman whose family owned land, he would move in a heartbeat. The girl above, who remained unmarried in order to help her family, explained that while her prospective husband's family was wealthy and owned land, she insisted on staying near her parents. "*His family said that once we get married we can choose wherever we'd like to live*".

## Contraception

The majority of the families we interviewed had only two children, with adults specifically mentioning that they limited their families because they understood that children are expensive. One woman, the mother of three daughters, said, "*My husband wants a son, but I said that we are too poor and can't afford. It is miserable to have more babies*". Girls themselves rarely mentioned family size, though the power of mass media was evident in one girl's comment: "*I only heard from TV, they say that 2 children are enough*".

Most of the Khmer girls we interviewed expressed interest in learning about contraception, evidencing that they had the cognitive and emotional space to be curious about their future. One stated, "*We are grown-ups and we should know how to prevent pregnancy*". Another said, we "*need to know it, because prevention is better*". While most girls mentioned that they had had brief classes at school, shyness seems to have significantly limited content delivery. One girl noted that her teacher had a difficult time with the content. She said, "*the teacher was quite reluctant and shy, he didn't dare teach much or focus much on that. He only explained very briefly*". Another said that she felt too shy to speak up, "*I want to ask my teacher whether a girl needs to abort the child if she is pregnant and what consequences this will cause to her future*". Both girls concluded, "*It would have been better if it had been a female teacher*".



Overall, few girls seem to have much information about contraception, which is understandable since they have been presented with little information about sex. Many girls have heard of condoms or coils – and know that they are available at the hospital – but are very low on specifics. When asked how couples might prevent pregnancy, one 16-year-old girl, for example, replied "*Using condoms, and going to hospital*". She continued, "*I know a little bit. But very few friends know. I'll ask (my mother) things she knows, but maybe there are things that my mother does not know*". She explained that she "*often entered reliable websites*" trying to find better information. Another girl, aged 14, was even more confused. When asked what she had been taught about family planning she replied, "*They say that we should wash our hands and feet before eating and to prevent hand-foot-mouth disease*".



While unmarried adolescents seem to have little knowledge about contraception, wives do appear to have control over their own fertility. In addition to the mother above, who said 'no' to fourth attempt for a son, the one married girl in our study reported that it was her decision not to have a baby, in part for economic reasons. She said, "*We talk about the fact that he wants to have baby, but I don't want and he said that our family will be happier when we have children. I said no, fearing that the baby will be miserable. I plan to have a baby when we have surplus money*".

Interestingly, while a Health Department KI noted that boys rarely come to health clinics – and when they do it is only to bring their girlfriends – girls thought that boys needed more attention with regard to family planning. One said, "*Males initiate female's progress of pregnancy, so they need to know*".



Norms regarding contraception appear to have changed rapidly once supplies were available. One grandmother said, *“I got pregnant and then I would give birth; I didn’t know anything.”* A mother reported that her oldest sister had echoed this pattern, having *“7 or 8 children”*, but she herself had only two children, because she had heard about contraception from other village women and went to the health centre to obtain it.

### Box 15: Brave new world

Thi Lan is a 13-year-old Khmer girl whose story highlights the clash between the old and the new when it comes to reproductive technology.

She has lived with her parents and older sister since her two brothers went away, one to study in Can Tho and the other, a university graduate, to work at the School of Cinema. Her parents are both farmers and grow several crops a year. She reports, *“Because my parents love my brothers and sisters a lot, they often work”*.

Lan is thinking hard about her traditional future role as a mother, but she is doing it in rather remarkably non-traditional ways. She says, *“I often think in my head that maybe I won’t need to marry a husband, maybe I can use the artificial insemination method to have a baby”*.

Her mother seems to be taking it all in stride. SY continues, *“My mum often laughs and says that I’m still a kid, so I shouldn’t think about that. She says that it’s not a good thought, because when I’m married to a husband, and then I have a child, I’ll know whose personality he/she resembles. If I use the artificial insemination method, I won’t know whose personality he/she resembles”*.

## HIV

Girls’ knowledge about HIV was mixed. On the one hand, many had good information about transmission. One said, *“I know that HIV is transmitted through sex, unprotected sex, and improper sex.... I learnt it in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade”*. While missing the routes involving blood, this explanation does hit the likeliest means of transmission for adolescent girls. A teacher reported that these thematic classes were taught annually and many girls commented that they supplemented their school lessons with information from *“reading and watching TV”*. Mothers were also involved in making sure their daughters understood STDs. One said, *“I must teach her even when she hasn’t got married. Disease prevention works better than disease treatment”*.

On the other hand, several girls mentioned that while they learned about *“the sexual transmission diseases at school”*, those classes were *“less than other lessons”*. One girl, clearly confused, said, *“HIV is something like, before we sneeze or something, we have to prevent, washing hands with soap”*. Another, with a bit more knowledge, added *“I didn’t know how it was transmitted through sex or mother to child, he didn’t explain very clearly”*. Knowledge about prevention was very low – with even the girls who had heard of condoms seeming perplexed and very shy about how they work.



### Gender-based violence (GBV), sex-abuse and trafficking

A DOLISA KI reports no cases of trafficking or kidnapping and a very low incidence of child sex abuse in the province. Dinh Hoa mothers confirm this, with one noting that rape does not happen in their community, which speaks volumes about the community cohesion noted as important to positive deviance (Wells-

Dang, 2012). She said, *“Around here people know each other very well, if such a thing happens, people will help, they won’t let that happen”*.

Perhaps reflecting women’s improving status, GBV also seems to be comparatively rare amongst our respondents. DOLISA KIs indicated that this is because women are more aware of their rights and are increasingly unwilling to tolerate it. One mother commented, *“it’s been reduced a lot, it doesn’t happen in these few years, while there used to be a lot a few years ago”*. Some girls report that their fathers and mothers often

engage in shouting matches, but most of these stories relate mundane occurrences such as wives haranguing their husbands about playing football even though their feet are injured. While these marital spats concern girls, particularly younger girls, the overall tone of most stories is very low key.

Other women, however, report real fear of their husbands. One said, *“If I talk back to him, he will beat me for real. I will stay quiet and won’t answer him”*. A girl noted that when wives are abused there is little recourse. She commented, *“it is their internal affairs so neighbours don’t dare to intervene and The*

### Box 16: A case of mistaken identity

Danh Thi Xuan is a Khmer mother with an adolescent daughter and a young adult son. She reports that soon after she married she and her husband had a fight. He, while lying in his hammock, threatened to *“beat her to death”*. She picked up a flashlight and threw it at him and told him to go ahead. Then she ran away.

Hearing footsteps behind her in the dark she was afraid that her husband had indeed come to kill her, so she ran to her parents’ house *“in panic shouting “Dad he’s chasing me, he’s beating me””*.

*“When I turned around, it wasn’t him,” she said. “It’s so funny when I recall it. We still talk about in once in a while”*.

*authority doesn’t intervene when the wife calls for help”*. The married girl in our study, who reported that her husband is kind and gentle, also hinted at the prevalence of GBV when speaking of her sisters. *“I worry that my younger sisters won’t be happy. If they get married with a good husband, it would be fine for her, but if she marries a violent husband, it would be scary”*.

## Policy and programming

Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa have reasonable access to SRH information. In addition to classes taught at school, KIs report that there are counselling centres for adolescents under all health centres, as well as a life-skills team that travels to poor communes throughout Kien Giang to teach children and adolescents about reproductive health. The team’s modest budget, however, allows it to reach only those communes where *“many social evils may happen among teenagers and young people”*.

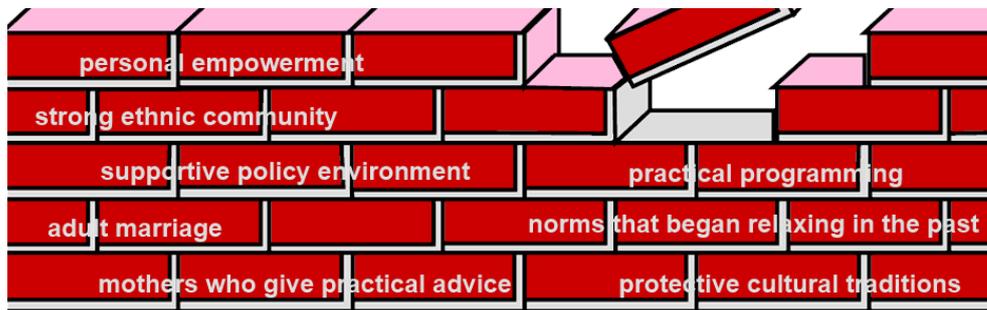
There are also two adolescent-oriented weekly broadcast media shows. A radio programme, *“Your Doctor”*, takes adolescents’ anonymous questions. A KI noted, *“Each time of broadcasting has a theme, for example, it is about whether teenagers should have sex. The host raises questions and children call there to give direct answers”*. The other, on TV, is called *“Teen Stories”*. In addition, a commune health centre KI reported that she had made her mobile number public and that adolescents often anonymously called to ask questions about puberty, for example. Finally, the Women’s Union reported that it held annual meetings in all communes – mandated by law – for local teens and young adults to learn about family and marriage law.

Despite these resources, KIs in the Health Department noted that there is a real need for more SRH education. Due to budget constraints, existing classes all come out of the education sector, not the health sector, and according to many girls, the classes are not specific enough. Many are targeted broadly at health in general, not SRH in particular, and the lack of training and social reserve of many teachers precludes in-depth conversation, a shortcoming also noted by our young respondents. Additionally, while the national government is unrolling a new programme to teach mothers better parenting skills, including how to talk to their children about sexuality, budget constraints have made it unclear when the programme will achieve a significant presence in Kien Giang.

## Explaining positive deviance

Evidencing both relaxing and changing norms, as well as building on longstanding cultural traditions, the overall milieu surrounding access to SRH information shines through as more important than any specific policies or programmes. While there remains significant space for improvement—with few specifics built into sexual education curricula and shyness on the part of both girls and their teachers frequently limiting uptake – Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa have reasonable access to SRH information and are able to express feelings of personal empowerment regarding their SRH. Their mothers are supportive as they progress through puberty, they get basic information at school and healthcare professionals and radio talk-show hosts are willing to deliver anonymous information. Furthermore, provincial authorities are sufficiently concerned about adolescents’ needs

to collect data on their experiences, they control their own love lives (and fertility where relevant) and do not seem to witness the incessant gender-based violence that Jones et al. (2013) found to plague their Hmong peers.



## Psychosocial Development

The stories told by both Dinh Hoa mothers and daughters in regard to girls’ psychosocial development mirror those of mothers and daughters in any developed country. Mothers are worried about peer pressure and are convinced that girls today are living in “*more dangerous*” times. Girls are worried about their grades in school. Mothers are worried that boys might take advantage of their daughters, and so they try to teach their girls to be strong. Girls research movie stars and decorating tips online. Mothers think their daughters text too much. Girls like to watch movies or ask questions on Facebook. And everyone agrees that girls enjoy spending time with their friends, chatting at cafes, singing karaoke or talking on the phone.

This is not to say that these adolescent girls face no threats to realising their full capabilities, but their stories are generally positive. Other than feeling pressured at school, in part out of a deep sense of filial piety, the girls we interviewed are extraordinary because of just how ordinary they are. They collect snails when they have no other way to make money—and use Google. Their parents spend their days in rice paddies to keep them fed—and yet they feel “*lucky born*”.

### Box 17: The Girls Next Door

*I want to know more about actors and actresses but the more I read about them, the greater I am disappointed because they have lots of scandals. I feel disappointed so I rarely go on to the internet to search because I’m afraid that my idols will become worse. (13-year-old girl)*

*Sometimes I watch films and see poor people and beggars, they’re very miserable, sometimes I think why I am so lucky-born. (13-year-old girl)*

*Many good children are constantly tempted by other children, and eventually they follow them. (Mother of 16-year-old girl)*

*When I want to make something to decorate for my study room, like some cloth apples or strawberries, I just go to Google, type the thing I’m looking for then the results will appear, showing me how to make those. (13-year-old girl)*

*I taught her that a woman should keep her personality and should be tough and not allow anyone to look down on her. (Mother of a 16-year-old girl)*

*Those skills, how to turn boys down without misunderstanding, often they’re on TV or the internet. There are people who often share their feelings; or on Facebook, I often follow and join that program, there are some people who help. (17-year-old girl)*

*I asked her: are you are busy sending text messages all day and night? Are you sending to your lover? She said: mom, you must be kidding? (Mother of a 16-year-old girl)*

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## Challenges to girls' psychosocial development vis-à-vis their larger communities

### Around the village

The only significant threat that girls mention in regard to their daily lives around the community is drunks. One said, *“sometimes they follow me, I have to find a house nearby and stay there for a while. Then I wait until they leave before going out”*. Another reported, *“I see some ones who get drunk lying on the roadsides, both boys and girls. I frequently see that”*. YU KIs confirmed that that more boys are drinking – at younger ages and more heavily. Health centre KIs added that they increasingly see girls beginning to drink as well. Commune officials noted that police are keeping an eye on the situation and that school children are rarely involved. Overall, mothers are not particularly concerned about the situation. One said, *“If they're drunk, they will fight each other; they don't tease or kidnap girls or such”*.

Parents are nonetheless generally worried about their daughters' well-being. One mother commented, *“I feel life was safer in the past than it is now. Now I see a lot of risks”*. Another added, *“the more she grows up, the more I worry, because she is a girl. I worry about sex assaults, I told her to go with friends, because it is complicated, drunken guys drive their vehicles crazily”*. Mothers were not alone in their concern; one father reported that he was also worried about his daughter: *“I worry that she may be stopped on the way. A girl has more difficulties than a boy”*. That said, no parents reported any actual incidents in which girls in their community had been threatened. While they had heard stories on TV or rumours on the grapevine, their concerns were more amorphous than specific.

Provincial staff noted that TV and the internet are beginning, at least in urban areas, to “open a can of worms” in regard to new social evils. Children are being exposed, at earlier ages, not just to sexuality, but also to vices such as online gaming. Girls repeatedly mentioned that they were not allowed to play games. They indicated that while their brothers were also forbidden, they were less likely to listen.

### At school

Other than the few children who mentioned teacher violence, girls reported no psycho-social threats at school. They universally reported that the boys in their classes treated them well, the developmental constraints of adolescence, with one girl specifically commenting, *“Some boys often hit the girls – just for fun, but it's because the girls often tease them”*. Several girls mentioned boys fighting amongst themselves and a few mentioned that girls were known to fight one another.



## Challenges to girls' psychosocial development vis-à-vis their families

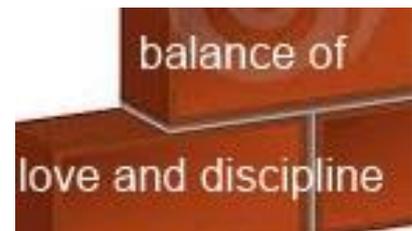
### Filial Piety

Evidencing norms that have not yet begun to relax, a strong sense of filial piety permeates all the adolescent interviews. Both girls and boys report that being able to help their families when they are older is **the** driving force behind their decisions, far trumping concern and planning for their own futures. For example, one girl said, *“I only think about my family, about helping my mom and my dad and having enough money for my brother to go to school, that's all. When I do those things to help my family I feel good, happy and comfortable”*. She reported that she was not worried about her own future family – she was certain that she and her intended husband would be able to provide for themselves and their children when the time came. Another added, *“My parents have been bringing me up and taking care of me since I was small, so I must repay them”*. Commune officials speculate that filial piety is particularly strong in rural communes like Dinh Hoa because children face on a daily basis the reality of how hard their parents work. In cities, where children have more diversions, they *“take less pity”*.

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## Academic Pressure

While Jones et al. (2013) found that Hmong girls reported feeling like there was never enough time to finish their housework, the Khmer girls in our current study often felt over-pressured in regard to their studies. Interestingly, peer pressure was clearly a driving force behind many girls' concern, which speaks to how thoroughly norms regarding girls' education have changed. One girl noted, *"I will lose my friends. They will laugh at me. They'll say I just want to play, not study"*. Another said, *"My friend.... burns incense and prays for both of us to study well"*. A third girl commented that her brother often took time off to play. However, *"For me, I'm a girl. So I spend time on my studies only"*. Though girls did not report that their parents directly pressured them, they clearly felt the weight of their parents' sacrifice. One said that she was worried about whether she would eventually find a well paying job; *"If I can't get a job, I'll waste all my efforts in studying and the money provided for studying too"*. While girls were concerned about their families vis-à-vis their studies, they also felt supported by them. A plucky 13-year-old explained to her mother, *"if I study too much... sometimes I can lose my spirit"*. Another girl, also 13, commented, *"My mother says try to study; without the bad, there would be no good; no one is a perfectly good student"*.



### Box 18: A mother's love

Danh Thi Tam is a 15-year-old Khmer girl who sometimes finds her mother's scolding very hard to take.

She said that her mother yells at her, *"You don't care about learning, you sleep and sleep like a pig, you sleep all the time. Or occasionally I forget to feed the pigs or concentrate on a music show on television and forget to cook, my mother says: it is the time to cook, you keep sitting there, I will cut off the television and won't allow you to watch."*

Tam continued, *"I got angry with her, she talked and I didn't respond. She called me to have dinner but I was angry with her and I didn't eat, I went to bed and slept until the next morning"*.

Tam's mother has reassured her that she is scolded because she is loved. She reported that her mother said, *"I gave birth to you, so I love you. If I don't love you, I aborted you"*.

Tam commented that she likes her mother's discipline because *"It is better than indulging me, which would definitely spoil me"*. She plans on raising her own children in the same way.

## Discipline

Girls and boys in our study report that their mothers – not their fathers – are responsible for scolding and meting out physical punishments to children when they do not behave. One 13-year-old boy explained that when he left home without permission he was beaten<sup>22</sup> and told *"Never do it again, you have to ask me whenever you want to go somewhere"*. Another boy, 16, reported that when his mother beat him he just stood still and took it, because *"I was afraid that my mum would tumble while chasing me"*. Mothers acknowledge the beating and scolding, but are concerned that children will not listen if they do not discipline effectively. One mother explained the dilemma, *"I scold fiercely so that they never forget my orders. I am sad. But I keep scolding, it is impossible not to scold. I think the better way to educate children is to use sweet and light words. Now I think that way works better than scolding. But I am not sure of that"*. Adolescents seem to understand the love behind the discipline. One girl noted, *"I think my mum cares more about her children than my dad does. I think when my mum scolds us she cares"*.

## Girls just want to have fun

Despite taking academics very seriously, Khmer girls do not lack for leisure time. *"In my free time,"* said one 13-year-old girl, *"I go out with my friends. I go to play shuttlecock kicking and rubber band skipping with my friends, and football"*. Another,



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<sup>22</sup> The word children used to describe their mothers' discipline was consistently translated as "beating". However, it is evident from the cavalier attitude with which children discuss their "beatings" that they are speaking more of being "spanked" than abusively "beaten".

also 13, shyly confessed, *“When I’m free, I often...it’s a bit embarrassing...In my free time, I often play with dolls”*. An 18-year-old reported that her happiest moments were singing karaoke with her friends: *“We sing together. I don’t know why, but inside me I felt very happy. Sometimes I pay, but sometimes we all feel very happy so we contribute together to sing for 3-4 hours”*.

Mothers reported that leisure time is a fairly recent phenomenon. Although they had friends when they were children, they were not allowed to go and do like girls today. One said, *“Now their friends ask them to go out here and there all the time, they’ll go out whenever their friends call them”*. Another, trying to stay in touch with her daughter as she moved throughout her day, commented, *“We’d be less worried if she used this phone to call us only. But she uses the phone to call her friends and arrange to go out together”*. Indicating just how far both attitudes and behaviours have come, another mother, whose daughter excelled at athletics and was being evaluated for a national-level volleyball team, said, *“She doesn’t know how to be girly like other girls. She doesn’t like to hang out with too girly friends. If they talk in a too girly manner, she won’t like them”*.

## Sources of support

While a Health Department KI believes that *“in the city the parents are more open”* and *“children in the remote areas tend to bottle up their feelings”*, we see little evidence of such bottling amongst our respondents. With a few exceptions, girls report that they have good emotional support.

In a context where most girls grow up believing that they will live with their parents as adults, it is perhaps not surprising that almost all girls report that they have good relationships with their parents, particularly their mothers. One said, *“When I have problems, I talk only to my mother”*. Another commented, *“I am closest to my mom because we are both women so it’s easy to talk and confide in her”*. Several girls also report close relationships with their fathers. While most thought that it was easier to talk to their dads about practical matters, such as motorbikes or math, one girl stated, *“My dad teaches me right things, not to lie, that I should tell the truth”*. Women in our study reported that girls’ close relationships with their parents are not new. One said, *“My parents always encouraged me. They didn’t say anything to make me feel self-pity”*.



Girls also report receiving good support from their brothers and sisters, which makes sense given the radical generation gap surrounding educational and career aspirations. Parents in our study are largely unable to help children with their studies, and they almost universally want them off the farm. Older siblings therefor serve as role models. For example, one girl said that she always turns to her older sister for help; *“For example, puberty, and studies, when I have difficult math problems, or something I don’t understand in my lessons, she always helps me”*. Others turn to their brothers. One commented that she and her oldest brother, now away at university, often talk on the phone to best encourage one another at their studies. Another said, *“I talk (to my brother) about what I feel sad and happy about, so that he gives me advice and such”*.

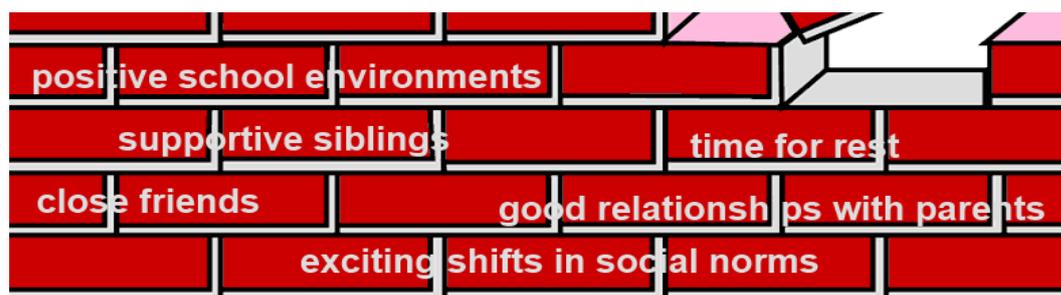
Friends are also vitally important to girls, particularly for discussing sensitive topics like boys. One girl commented, *“With my friends I can share my love feelings as well”*. Another, 15, eloquently described her best friend: *“I tell her all my sadness and she tells me all her sadness. It is like a machine that help to relieve my sadness. She encourages me. We are like one person. We tell each other everything. Mother scolds: you and she are like a boy and a girl in love, you stick to each other like a pair of king-crabs”*.

Despite the emotional support that most girls felt, we interviewed a few girls who felt isolated and alone. An 19-year-old noted that leaving school had cost her her friends. She said, *“I have few chances to make friends. When I was in school I had many friends and it was exciting”*. She continued, *“If I have something sad I only keep it to*

myself and don't tell anyone....even my mom, because she is busy, and my dad too, so there's no time to confide to them". Others girls also attributed their loneliness to their parents' hard work. A 13-year-old said, "My mum often does the housework, and she's very busy with her work, so she has little time to talk with me".

### Explaining positive deviance

Other than concerns about academic pressure, our girl respondents reported being happy and feeling supported. Their school environments are positive, they have good relationships with their parents, time for recreation and rest, close friends and encouragement from their siblings. While their parents report being concerned about the more dangerous times ushered in by shifting social norms, from the girls' perspectives, the changes are almost entirely positive. They have time to engage with their friends and enjoy using mobile phones, seeing movies and singing karaoke.



## 7.5 Participation at home and in the community

Despite prevailing Vietnamese norms that often work to limit the participation of young people – and particularly girls – the respondents in our study are remarkably involved, both in family decision-making and in their larger communities. While their age leaves them ultimately deferential to adults' choices, parents, teachers and community organisations are clearly working to ensure that girls have spaces to practice agency.

Worth noting, given the tendency to lump Vietnam's ethnic minorities together, is the fluency with which our participants were able to use the Vietnamese language. While several respondents mentioned that Khmer students often started school with little Vietnamese, by adolescence they are completely fluent. In fact, only two of our respondents – one grandmother who spoke no Vietnamese and one mother who spoke haltingly – struggled with fluency, which is consistent with a DOLISA KI's assertion that "*Khmer people in Kien Giang understand the popular language very well.*" However, other research suggests that language remains a significant barrier for this minority group. GTZ and AusAid (2010) found that Khmer women in their study areas – which included Kien Giang – were considerably "restricted in the roles they can play due to limited Vietnamese language ability" (p.49). Given that the density of the Khmer population in Dinh Hoa is at least four times that of the province as a whole, it ought to be easier for residents to avoid speaking Vietnamese. It is therefore puzzling why there would be such a high degree of observed fluency among our study respondents except by noting the locals' reverence for education. Regardless, this positive deviance has implications for not just for the educational success of children, but also for women's confidence in the market, service uptake and community participation.



### Girls' participation vis-à-vis school and the larger community

#### School

KIs at the Youth Union report that participation in school activities is highly gendered. "*Girls may participate more in the English clubs or always participate more in the literature club, and boys participate more in math or physics or sport clubs,*" they observe. Girls report that they are class presidents, vice-presidents in charge of studying and contributors to the HIV prevention team. They report that they do story-telling, play school sports and lead the Young Pioneers Group. They report that they win both singing competitions and chemistry competitions. For example, one girl said, "*I participate in all drama events in school*". Her father, she noted,

was very proud of her performance: *“He took me to a play in a show in the mid-autumn festival at night, he was very happy and laughed, he was kidding that I will have something to do if I am jobless in the future”*. Another reported entering writing and painting contests about *“Uncle Ho, environmental protection and the fight against tuberculosis”*. While most girls were happy with their level of involvement at school – including one who asked



her teacher to please choose someone else to be a class leader – poverty keeps some girls from doing the things they would like to do. A 13-year-old, for example, said *“I cannot participate because of the requirements, for example I’ll have to buy the equipment to play badminton”*. Another confessed that she was worried that perhaps she was a little “too much” at school. She said, *“At school I’m a little bit afraid because sometimes my friends may keep away from me because I’m a little bit of a tomboy, I’m not as gentle as other girls”*.

A LSS teacher in Dinh Hoa was incredulous at the notion of children’s participation in the larger community. *“I frankly, I haven’t seen any meetings held by the local authority or school to understand thoughts or wishes of the children. It is only done in lectures or class hours.”* That said, however, that same teacher takes great care to encourage children’s participation in his classroom, going out of his way to ensure that girls get a chance to speak up. *“I split them into groups. Group members keep changing so that every student has a chance to participate and contribute ideas. The group leaders and secretaries are rotating. It means that all of them are trained and have opportunities to contribute ideas about this or that issue.”*

### Box 19: Out to move the world

Danh Thi Phuong is a 17-year-old Khmer girl in her last year of high school, and she is out to move the world. She lives with her parents and her maternal grandmother, all of whom have given her tremendous latitude to make her own decisions. When asked how they envisioned her future unfolding, her mother said, *“I let her choose, because the children are quicker than us.”* Her grandmother added, *“She will decide herself; she will choose anything she likes.”*

Phuong has chosen to stretch her wings in a wide variety of contexts. She has participated in music festivals, story-telling contests and chemistry competitions. She also plays competitive volleyball. She said these competitions have helped her *“become calmer and more mature”*.

She is also the class president, which she believes *“has formed a lot of virtues in me . I have to solve some school or class tasks on behalf of the class’s head teacher or my classmates. That’s where my determined personality comes from”*.

Phuong has had several admirers -- for whom she does not have time. When she asked her mother how to handle boys’ affection, she was to *“deal with it because I was grown up, that I should do whatever I could. And to ask her if I had any question”*.

Phuong feels confident in her abilities. She concluded, *“I rarely hesitate in my decisions. I only make one decision. I’ve developed my problem-solving since I was small. After talking with my mother, it can only solve part of the problem, not completely, because for everything, it depends on myself, not completely on my mother”*.

Her mother, also a determined woman, noted that things are different these days in terms of the decisions that children are allowed to make. She said, *“Back then, I couldn’t go to Rach Gia if I wanted to, and I wouldn’t have been allowed to go. Now if she wants to go there, she just jumps on the bus and goes. And if she wants to go for something or wedding, if she wants to go anywhere, it’s all easy”*

## Community

Girls also reported that they participate in the larger community. Two 18-year-olds, for example, have voted in recent elections. One said, *““I went and chose the hamlet head”*. Given that CECODES et al. (2011) report that elections in Kien Giang are actually competitive, with only 56% of voters recalling casting votes for the eventual winner, these girls’ votes may have mattered more than one might initially suspect. Several younger girls also indicated community



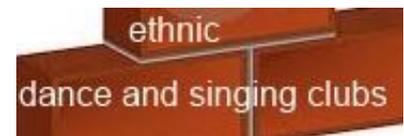
participation – they reported that they played on community sports teams. Another, 17 years old, clearly feels completely confident in her voice. Though she reported that prostitutes sometimes tease school girls, she added that she was safe from their attention, because “*I’m very fierce, so no one dares mess with me*”.

While most women noted that they had little time for the Women’s Union – and that the Women’s Union “*rarely called them to meetings*” – several women do, according to their daughters, regularly attend commune meetings. One woman, who said that at meetings we “*don’t dare to ask any questions . If they give us a chance to speak then we take it, otherwise we don’t*”, is clearly bolder than she thinks – as she “*met with the man in charge to ask for (a new house) because water leaked through the roof too much*”. She got it.

## Khmer community

The Khmer practice a different form of Buddhism than the Kinh and have their own temples, festivals and religious traditions. Girls report that these traditions are a significant part of their lives. In addition to Pagoda schools, many of our respondents also participated in Khmer performance teams, traveling around Viet Nam performing ethnic dances and songs, simultaneously embedding themselves in ancient traditions and exposing themselves to the broader, modernising culture. Girls felt very positively about their participation, which often earned them cash prizes. One, for example, said, “*I learned a lot and understood a lot about our tradition. I could travel far away*”. Another noted how her participation had helped her overcome her shyness. She commented, “*In my early days there I was new and shy. Now I am not shy*”.

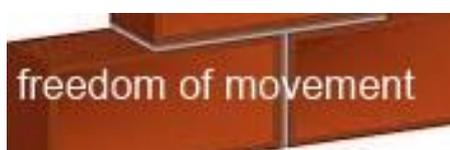
Dance team participation affected different girls in different ways. One, for example, was tracked out of high school and into animal husbandry because she missed high-school entrance exams while she was away performing. While she admitted that “*I performed dancing with my friends, I went to many places, and I felt really happy*”, she also wondered if perhaps she should have given it up earlier. Another girl reported that her parents were sensitive to the tension between school and dance. She said, “*My parents don’t let me do it anymore. My dad said, try to study, because when I went to performances like that, I wouldn’t pay attention to my studies, so my parents told me to stop*”. While she missed her friends and the dancing, she felt that her parents had been correct in gauging that she could not juggle both.



In addition to the performance team, families in our research were involved with Khmer traditions in other ways as well. Many boys, for example, still spend time as monks. Similarly, several girls mentioned that their grandmothers spent their days at the temple. Families also regularly attend festivals together. One boy noted, “*The Đôn Tà Festival is a very big festival of Khmer people. I go with my family to the pagoda during the day, then I go with my friends in the evening*”. A girl noted “*Sometimes I go there to worship the Buddha, if there are some events at the pagodas, we can help, for example washing dishes and receiving guests.*” Adolescent girls in our study, again similar to their peers around the world, appear to somewhat disengage from these traditions as they get older. Noted one 17-year-old, “*I’m a Khmer but I only go to the pagoda on festivals. I used to go to such festivals like Don Ta or Chon Cho Nam Tho May with my family but I’m now not a little girl so I don’t join them anymore*”.

## Girls’ participation vis-à-vis their families

Given the way both boys and girls spoke of the control that parents have over their lives, girls’ participation in family decision-making appears to be far more limited by age than gender. Both, for example, mentioned that they must ask their parents for permission to do anything other than go to school or do chores. One boy, aged 14, said, “*When I go out to play, I ask for their permission, and also when I go to work*”. A 17-year-old girl noted, “*I listen to whatever my mum tells me*”. This permission-seeking, while traditional, appears to be increasingly reflexive given the detailed stories that girls tell and a growing adult recognition that today’s adolescents know more than adults.

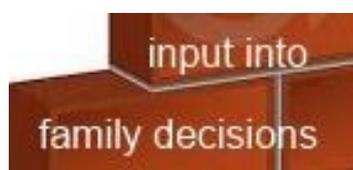


One girl, for example, 15 and in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, said, “*If he doesn’t allow me to go, I don’t dare*”. She continued, however, “*I have never been banned from doing anything*”. Other girls echoed this sentiment, noting that they were only banned from playing computer games and gambling or refused permission to drink. Parents overall seemed to give children –

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girls and boys – significant latitude to go and do, particularly given the strong cultural prohibitions under which they had been raised. One girl summarised the situation neatly: *“They say do whatever you like, as long as it’s a good thing, not a bad thing”*. *Good for us and for other people as well*”. Most mothers confirmed that while they liked to know where their children were, there were simply more choices available to adolescents today. Because their children have so much more education than they do, they also believed that their children were often more capable of making decisions. One mother explained, *“She is in grade 10. She goes to school, so she knows well about such things, I’d better give her the right to make her own decision.”*

With a few exceptions, girls also reported that they felt comfortable telling their parents what they thought. Their parents solicited their opinions and often followed them. Most of these opinions were child-centred and involved asking, for example, what bike a girl wanted or what clothes a boy preferred. Others, however, involved purchases for the whole family. One girl reported that her father had announced to her, *“I want to buy a TV and I want to discuss with you about it”*. Other girls said that their parents even asked for their input on business decisions. Speaking of her mother’s new porridge business, one 16-year-old said, *“she asked me to help and asked what I thought of it”*. Another reported that her parents asked for her opinions about when they should sell their rice crop in order to maximise profits.



While girls were very aware of their parents’ financial struggles – and attempted to minimise their monetary requests when they knew that their parents had no money to give – girls from better off families thought nothing of having and spending their own money. One said, *“I just say, dad, give me money for school, and then he’ll give me”*. Even girls from poorer families reported that when they had money they were able to make their own decisions

about how to spend it—even if their choices were comparatively frivolous, like karaoke.

Some girls also indicated that they were comfortable telling their parents what to do. One said that she lectured her mother about smoking, because she had studied health impacts at school. *“We tell her to stop but she keeps smoking”*, she explained. Another, only 13 years old, was upset with her parents’ bickering and told them to stop. *“I said that better a lean peace than a fat victory. You should handle it peacefully, don’t bicker with each other. It’s not the good way to solve the problem”*.

Interestingly, the one area where girls were very likely to worry about expressing their own opinions –much less defying those of their parents – was in regard to their future careers. Parents in our research wanted much for their daughters. They were almost universally aiming not only for high achievement, but also for long-term stability. Girls shared their parents’ overall aims, but differed in terms of how they wanted to accomplish them. For example, one girl, 13 years old, wanted to be a teacher. Her parents, however, wanted her to be a doctor because they thought the long-term employment prospects of doctors were better than those of teachers. She explained, *“They said that it is easy to get a job as a doctor while it is so hard to find a job as a teacher; teachers are not in demand, even redundant”*. She was really torn about how to resolve the situation and said, *“I want to pursue my dream but I also want to follow their wishes because they provide for me, they work hard to support me, and then I need to do the good things to them”*. Fortunately, she noted that she had a role model to help her make her decision – her older brother, who had also been aimed at medicine but had veered off and chosen business administration instead. Another girl, aged 17, had the opposite problem. Her dream was to become a doctor, because *“My maternal grandpa and grandma were sick, I told my maternal grandpa that I’d try to study to become a doctor to give injections to them”*. Her parents, on the other hand, wanted her to become a police officer because, as a government position, it enjoys good job security. When asked whether she would obey her mother, she said, *“I don’t know”*.

## Gender

Thanks to relaxing gender norms, gender plays a mixed role in women’s family decision-making. Some girls and women, for example, report that fathers make all major family decisions. One woman said, *“It depends on him, I don’t dare decide. He’s been working to raise his children, he’s the biggest person in the family”*. Similarly, a 13-year-old girl explained, *“My dad is the decision-maker. Because he’s senior and has power in the family.”* Other girls, however, were clear that their mothers made most decisions. One said, *“My dad rarely decides by himself. It seems like he never decides himself, he always discusses with my mom”*. Another reported,

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“My mum is a woman, so she’s more knowledgeable than my dad”. Overall, mothers felt that household decision-making was shared equally. One summarised the situation for most women, “Two of us will discuss, either we do it, or drop it, no one decides for anyone”.

There is also an element of responding as if by reflex in regard to women’s decision-making—as if norms are shifting too quickly for families to explain. Two women, for example, reported that their husbands made most decisions, but later explained that those decisions were often in their own best interest. One, a day-labourer who was sometimes not allowed by her husband to go anywhere, said, “When he knows that I am sick, he doesn’t allow me to go anywhere or do anything”. Another, noting that her husband makes all financial decisions, went on to explain that he had sold their land and spent-down their assets—all to pay for her health care. In short, gender norms regarding women’s participation are starting to relax but have not yet decisively shifted, and change is thus more evident in some families than in others.

### Explaining positive deviance

Dinh Hoa’s social milieu again shines through as key to girls’ success. Schools, for example, sponsor a wide variety of clubs and competitions in which girls eagerly participate. The commune not only offers community sports teams, but has sports teams just for girls. The Khmer performance teams not only anchor girls in the broader ethnic community, but also provide exposure to wider horizons and offer a chance for girls to practice agency and voice. Finally, parents, who see adolescents’ prolonged educations as evidence that they can be more knowledgeable than adults, are increasingly giving their children the space to make their own decisions as well as including them in household decision-making.



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## 8 Conclusion and future directions

Gender norms, note Boudet et al. (2012), ‘permeate daily life and are the basis of self-regulation’ (p.24). Because children learn so young ‘what it is to be a girl or a boy, or a man or a woman’, gender norms tend to be far more difficult to change — or even see — than most norms (p. 25). Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa — embedded in a culture of respect for women’s rights to both inheritance and household decision-making and situated in a community that began a generation ago to send its girls to school, teach them to run their own businesses, and allow them input into marriage decisions — are not only reflecting the changing gender norms of the larger Vietnamese culture but are also setting an example of positive deviance for other ethnic minority communities. Despite the high poverty and drop-out rates in the larger Khmer community, a confluence of strong social and political institutions, combined with growing economic opportunities in Dinh Hoa commune, is giving the majority of local Khmer girls an opportunity to think outside of traditional gender norms, realise more of their full capabilities and plan their own futures.

In terms of education, while some respondents indicate that girls are not as bold in the classroom, and are more likely to drop out of school, the evidence overall suggests that norms are just as likely to support girls’ education as boys’. Furthermore, there are indications that this has been the case for at least a generation, with some mothers reporting that they were able, when they were girls, to access both traditional and ethnic education, even in the face of difficult terrain.

The situation in regard to economics is similar – with women primarily in charge of household expense accounts, active as small traders and long the recipients of an equal share of familial inheritance. However, Boudet et al.’s ‘gender contract’ obligations, which reflect, for example, dominant norms about the division of labour among family members are changing more slowly (Boudet et al., 2012: 52). While girls report that they are not excessively burdened by domestic responsibilities, and that their brothers often help out around the house, it is clear that women and girls are still the primary caretakers of hearth and home.

In regard to SRH, psychosocial development and participation, the largest barriers facing Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa appear to be related to their age, not their gender. Girls are relatively well informed about their development and allowed, within the constraints of filial piety, to choose their marriage partners and contribute to household decision-making. They are well supported by their parents and siblings, have close relationships with their friends, are active leaders at school, participate in community and ethnic cultural events and have ample time for recreation.

Overall, while we find that the conclusions of Boudet et al. (2012) resonate with our findings regarding the lives of Khmer adolescent girls, we note, even in the context of a small country like Viet Nam, the importance of diversity and texture. Dinh Hoa’s Khmer girls are benefiting from dynamic local governance that not only sees—but responds to—the needs of girls; teachers who not only teach students—but care about children; an ethnic community that is not only cohesive—but has longstanding traditions that have emphasised the importance of education and fostered gender equality; and parents who not only want different futures for their daughters—but are willing to make sacrifices themselves in order to help their daughters obtain them. By identifying the factors that are helping Khmer girls become the women they would like to be, it is hoped that we can begin to develop a road map that might help other vulnerable girls do the same.

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## 8.1 What's working now

### Explaining why Dinh Hoa's Khmer girls are doing so well

With a few exceptions, the same strong social and political institutions mentioned above are behind girls' progress in each of the five capability domains. While their specific impact shifts by domain, the net impact is that they have together shaped a normative and material environment in which girls' potential is increasingly seen and their capabilities supported.

#### Families

- Are willing to work hard to keep girls in school
- Have diversified incomes to reduce shocks and lower poverty rates
- Recognise the importance of women's economic participation
- Provide practical advice and emotional support to girls
- Are encouraging girls to make their own decisions regarding education, employment and marriage
- Ensure that girls have time for rest and relaxation
- Allow girls a great deal of freedom of movement
- Model women's input into decision-making, particularly vis-à-vis their control of monetary resources
- Are planning their families to reduce the risk of poverty

#### Schools

- Have initiated gender-sensitive training for teachers
- Have significant numbers of Khmer and female teachers
- Undertake teacher evaluations and integrate the results into the classroom
- Are working to provide lunch to poor children to improve their academic performance
- Work to keep children in school by providing bicycles for those who do not live within reasonable walking distance
- Have a wide variety of clubs and competitions, all of which are open to girls
- Place girls in leadership roles
- Have ensured that Khmer girls are fluent in Vietnamese

#### Teachers

- Are generally approachable, friendly and kind at LSS level
- Work hard to keep children in school, visiting them at home when they drop-out
- Work hard to ensure that girls learn to speak – and ask questions – in class

#### Local leaders

- Have prioritised the infrastructure that has improved access to both school and work, e.g. roads, daily market and business centre
- Have welcomed companies that provide local employment
- Have supported the formation of community clubs for adolescents – and adolescent girls in particular
- Have been sensitive to adolescents needs for SRH information – e.g., by undertaking a survey of sexual health needs, developing radio programming and posting their mobile phone numbers publicly

#### Ethnic community

- Favours equal inheritance rights, in terms of both land and money, for girls
- Favours matrilineal residence, which ensures women have better support in cases of abuse and in their day to day lives
- Has long emphasised the importance of education, e.g. Pagoda schools
- Provides a key source of identity and community cohesion, e.g. Khmer performance teams and unique customs

- Does not favour early marriage
- Fosters cohesiveness that keeps girls safe from trafficking and sex abuse

Khmer girls are also benefitting from the fact that in some cases **gender norms** began relaxing years ago. This history forms a firm foundation for today's progress:

- Some families took advantage of education as soon as it was available – with a few mothers attending through LSS
- Some mothers watched their mothers develop their own businesses and were taught business skills by their fathers when they were children
- Some mothers – and even grandmothers – divorced abusive husbands years ago
- Some mothers – and even grandmothers – chose their own husbands years ago

## 8.2 Leaving the poor behind

Despite progress, Khmer girls – and boys – in Dinh Hoa continue to face a variety of threats to their well-being and realisation of their full capabilities. The largest of those threats – by a wide margin – is poverty (rather than restrictive gender norms). While poverty is declining, albeit, according to the World Bank (2012), not nearly as fast as government statistics would suggest, it continues to restrict the life options of many adolescent Khmer children in Dinh Hoa.

- Children in poor families leave school early in order to contribute to household income.
- Children in poor families are forced into low-paying work such as collecting snails and doing housework for other families.
- Poor families have fewer buffers in the event of illness – meaning that ill health often results in destitution.
- Landlessness drives not only poverty but hunger.
- Poor children are less likely to participate in school and community activities as they lack both time and money.
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## 8.3 Well begun but not yet done: policy and programming for tomorrow

Despite the overall positive situation of Khmer girls in Dinh Hoa, there remains considerable scope for new policy and programming to address the capability deprivations of those who are being left behind. While future actions should be informed by complementary forms of evidence, as well as a more systematic review of existing policy and programme interventions targeted at adolescents, we suggest the following:

### Educational domain

- Economic support (e.g. cash transfers or educational scholarships) to deal with the short-term actual and opportunity costs of secondary education.
- Evening classes that enable older students to complete their educations without embarrassment at being over-age in regular classrooms.
- Information about tertiary education options, including guidance on how to prepare for entrance exams, as well as access to financial support (low-interest loans, scholarships).
- Better access to the internet as they view it as an important tool for learning about everything from puberty to university and jobs.
- Early mother-tongue education given challenges girls' recall facing in the early years of primary school.
- Training programmes for teachers that will enable them to maintain control of their classes without resorting to humiliation or physical punishment (at USS).

### Economic domain

- Vocational training that will enable girls to secure local, well-paying jobs (not just sewing classes, which are the typical offering for girls) and that are well advertised so as to reach adolescent girls
- Career consultations so that girls can better understand what sorts of jobs are available outside of the commune and how they might prepare for them.

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- A buffer between illness and poverty – with families expected to shoulder a smaller share of health care costs so that children are not forced out of school in order to work due to a parent’s ill-health.

### Physical integrity and SRH domain

- School-based SRH that includes more practical, detailed information, where girls are taught in single sex sessions by female teachers in order to ensure more comfort in raising questions and engaging with the subject matter.
- Community-based SRH that is anonymous or can be consumed privately without embarrassment – more written information and media programming were identified as particularly key.
- Boys to have access to better information, as they too are involved in reproduction.

### Psychosocial domain

- Safe spaces where girls can ask questions of trusted adults.
- Clubs for adolescents where they can share their feelings and relax with one another after the pressured environment of school.
- A hotline to get help when their parents argue.

### Participation domain

- Dialogue with understanding adults. Girls are actively working on constructing their identities and would like to discuss with parents and teachers how they become the women they would like to be. As one thirteen year old girl explained, *“I think the parents and teachers should provide us more information about what is right to do, what is wrong”*.

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