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The Factors Related to Early Marriage of Ethnic Adolescent Girls in 3 Districts, 3 Northern Provinces of Lao PDR

¹ Ye Yang, ² Dr. Somchay Phaigavong, ³ Saiphone Khotsaigno

^{1, 2, 3} Master Program, Organizational Resources Management, Souphanouvong University, Lao PDR

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Corresponding Author: Ye Yang

Abstract

This study intended to investigate the factors that related to early marriage of ethnic adolescent girls among Hmong, Khmu and Akha in 3 districts of three provinces as Xiengnguen district, Luang Prabang province, La district, Oudomxay province and Mai district, Phongsaly province. Data and information were collected via semi-structured interviews questionnaires and questionnaires from October to November 2025, by using purposive sampling to target the groups with total of 136 people, including village authorities, local customary law leaders, parents and adolescent girls. The quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS and Kobo toolbox. Also, the qualitative information was consolidated and ranking from all responses.

The keys study findings found that a widespread of early marriage is strongly linked to inequality of educational opportunity, having low education as the primary contributor to early marriage. As evidenced 19 percent reach upper secondary school, 33 percent attend lower secondary school, 22 percent studied at primary school, and 26 percent of adolescent never go to school in their life time.

Domestic inequality that linked to culture as a secondary

driver, clearly through devaluation of daughters. Sons received preferential treatment, with 96 percent of parents encouraging male children to maintain traditional practices and providing them greater opportunity. This disparity prompted adolescent girls to pursue marriage as an economic advancement. The third determinant was attitude of adolescent girls, surrounding by their circles and society, evidenced by 74 percent marrying without parental consultation due to love attachment and 96 percent doing so voluntarily. Materialistic aspirations further motivated self-initiated early marriages, as girls perceived matrimony as a pathway to stability and prospects.

The findings reveal that low education $\beta=.681$, and $p<.000$, domestic gender inequality of the culture and tradition $\beta=.51$ and $p<.001$, and attitude $\beta=.23$, and $p<.004$ on autonomous decision-making as primary factors $R^2=.644$; $F(4,64)=28.98$, $p<0.001$, underlying early marriage. In contrary, majority of parents opposed the practice, with over 80 percent recognizing its inappropriateness, 93 percent rejecting parental exclusion from marriage decisions, and 60 percent acknowledging its legal inconsistency.

Keywords: Ethnic Adolescent Girls, Early Marriage, Influence

1. Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is centrally located in Southeast Asia, encompassing a total land area of approximately 236,800 square kilometers. shared borders with five neighboring countries: China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, and Thailand and Myanmar to the west. As of 2025, the population of Lao PDR is estimated at approximately 7,6 million people, with a total female population approximately 3.8 million (World Health Organization, 2024) [17]. The average annual population growth rate stands at 1.4 percent, with females accounting for 49.8 percent. Demographically, 79.8 percent of the population falls within the working-age group of 15-64 years, while 14.6 percent are under 14 years old. 63.4 percent of the population reside in rural areas.

The Lao PDR was *one of the highest rates of child early marriage in ASEAN* region, as 6.1 percent of girls are married before the age of 15, and 30.5 percent before the age of 18, whereas the corresponding figures for boys are 1.1 percent and 10 percent, respectively. The adolescent fertility rate among individuals aged 15-19 years stands at 83-89 births per 1,000 (Government of Lao PDR and United Nation, 2021) [2]. Among women aged 20-24 who had given birth before turning 18, the rate of preterm delivery is 17.4 percent. In addition, 26.6 percent of adolescent girls aged 15-19 is either married or in a union

(United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund, 2023) [16], with two-thirds of this group experiencing pregnancy in partnership and one-quarter or 27 percent facing pregnancy outside of a partnership.

Laos ranks among the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, where ethnic minorities represent between 30.3 percent and 46.3 percent of the total population. Pursuant to the resolutions of the Sixth Session of the National Assembly (Ordinary Session VI), convened on 14-15 August 2000, the country recognizes 50 ethnic groups, categorized into four principal linguistic families: Lao-Tai 62.4 percent, Mon-Khmer 23.7 percent, Hmong-Iu Mien 9.7 percent and Sino-Tibetan 2.9 percent. Each ethnic group preserves their unique languages and traditions passed down from their ancestors for centuries to form their social and moral foundation. Certain customary regulations serve as mechanisms for adjudicating internal disputes within the ethnic, disputes are often settled by a customary law leader, who leads religious rites and maintains communal unity. These societies are typically patrilineal, meaning men inherit the lineage, care for elders, and hold primary authority as wives join the husband's household with subsequent offspring adopting the husband's surname (Ministry of Justice and United Nations Development Programme, 2011) [14].

According to Article 35 of the Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (2015 Revision), all citizens are equal regardless of gender, belief, ethnicity, or social status. Under Articles 3 and 9 of the Family Law, marriage requires both parties to be at least 18 and enter the union voluntarily based on mutual affection. The state protects this right to free choice and prohibits any coercion or interference from families or organizations (The National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2008) [10]. Enforcements of the laws and regulations in eliminating child early marriage remains challenges. Early marriage not only against the law, but also violate fundamental human rights, as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bentzen, 2014) [11] and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 2020) [15]. Other studies from Nguyen Minh Triet's investigation (Triet, 2024) [13] in marital challenges among Hmong ethnic youth in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, it revealed that the primary contributors to these issues encompass ethnic cultural practices and family economic constraints, particularly poverty. Hence, this study seeks to explore the underlying factors precipitating early marriage within these communities, thereby affording a comprehensive elucidation of their root causes. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research will be disseminated through collaboration with relevant governmental and nongovernmental entities, enabling broad outreach to adolescent populations in these ethnic groups.

2. Materials and Methods

This study conducted a parallel mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Interview questionnaires and questionnaires were developed as the primary data collection instruments. The tools combined of open-ended and closed-ended questions, structured across two main parts, Part 1: General information about the respondents; Part 2: overview state of economic, education, culture and tradition as well as attitude towards early marriage, the questionnaires encompassed

over 60 sub-questions.

The study instruments employed in this study are grounded to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, the hierarchy organized into five distinct levels: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Trivedi and Mehta, 2019) [14].

2.1 Target Selection Criteria

The selection was based on demographic characteristics, geographical location, socio-economic status (The United Nations, 2025) [11], lifestyle characteristics, culture, beliefs and life-career experiences

2.2 Target population/sampling.

- 136 respondents, including 104 females participated the study, women accounted for 76 percent of the total target population in 6 villages within three districts of the three provinces.
- 69 ethnic adolescent girls aged 18 to 24 years who have married before the age of 18, with 35 percent as Hmong, 35 percent Akha and 30 percent Khmu.
- 67 adult participants, of whom 35 were women (45 parents/caregivers, 13 local customary law leader and 6 village authorities) joined the study, with 33 percent identifying as Hmong, 33 percent Khmu and 33 percent as Akha ethnic groups.

2.3 Validity and Reliability

The study instruments have been developed, and submitted to the Professor Assistant in consultation with the Assistant Professor, to verify the relevance and consistency of the content. In regarding to the feedbacks, the tools were revised to align with the research objectives.

In consultation with the Assistant Professor, the three senior technical experts have been identified and contacted per their specific professional expertise, the revised tools were evaluated, provided technical guidance to ensure the content validity, specific concerns addressed regarding the length and breadth of the questionnaires. The final versions were validated using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), result scored 0.67, which indicated that the tools' content validity for the field study.

The instruments were tried out prior the field data collection, through a small sampling (n=15), as 10 adolescent girls and 5 adults in Phoulethchaluen village, Luang Prabang district, Luang Prabang province. The resulting reliability coefficient of 0.95 (α -Coefficient=0.95) demonstrated that the instruments were reliable and valid (Table 1).

Table 1: Validity and reliability test

Measure	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Cronbach's	Number of Items
Valid Cases	16	100.0	.955	66
Excluded Cases	0	0.0	—	—
Total	16	100.0		

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to field research data collection, formal authorization obtained from three Provincial Lao Women's Unions to facilitate data collection and ensure smooth coordination with village authorities. Following the approval. The study was conducted between October 3 to November 22, 2025, across six villages in three districts. A total of 136

respondents participated including 102 female respondents. As 69 ethnic adolescent girls, 42 parents/caregivers, and 19 local customary law leaders, during the study, two KOBO toolbox forms were created based on the questionnaire and used for the data collection.

Before each interview begins, the researcher has introduced the study objectives and providing a brief personal introduction. Mainly emphasized on ethical considerations to ensure that all participants understand that their involvement was voluntary and all responses would remain anonymous to protect participants' privacy, all data would be kept confidential and used for the purposes of this research, any respondents can withdraw at any time during the interview if they feel inconvenient.

The interviews of the study were conducted individually, using multi local dialects to best fit for the target groups as in Hmong and Khmu dialects to ensure local context appropriate and clarity; however, Lao was utilized where participants demonstrated good in the language. To make sure accuracy, responses were recorded in real-time using the KOBO Collect platform. Each form took place in a safe and open space near the participants' homes, allowing an atmosphere of comfort and open dialogue.

2.5 Data Analysis

The KOBO Toolbox platform was applied during the research, from the initial design of the data collection instruments to the final data analysis as its ability to generate real-time visual summaries, summery in graphs by comparing percentage proportion, number and ranking, provided an immediate overview of the study's landscape. It can be exported into MS excel and SPSS, allowing for a detailed exploration of the participants' economic conditions, educational, cultural norms and attitude toward early marriage. Furthermore, SPSS (Version 2025) statistical analyses were used to calculate means, standard deviations, regression to identify significant factors influencing early marriage among adolescent girls. All the findings, qualitative insights were carefully consolidated and analyzed across four thematic aspects:

- a. Economic state of the family: Exploration of family well-being, emphasizing on the family income and expenses, food security, and the domestic power dynamics and asset control within the family.
- b. Educational condition: Comparative look at the support provided to sons and daughters, reflecting on how parents prioritize and encourage their children's educational opportunity.
- c. Culture and traditions: Examination of domestic equality and gender roles, specifically looking at how existing customary laws and cultural norms shape daily life of daughters and sons.
- d. Attitude on early marriage: Exploration on how adolescent girls' circles influence, girls' early marriage decision-making and study of the adults' attitudes on early marriage, alignment and prevention.
- e. Influence of the adolescent girls' circles, parents' view, adolescent girls' view, alignment and prevention.

3. Results

136 respondents engaged in this, comprising 69 ethnic adolescent girls and 67 adults, the target adolescent samplings distributed almost equally as Hmong 35 percent, Akha 35 percent and Khmu 30 percent respectively (*Table*

2). For the 67-adult cohort, 35 were women respondents, the representation from the 6 villages was nearly equally divided across ethnic groups as Hmong 34 percent, Khmu 33 percent, and Akha 33 percent.

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of Ethnic Groups

Ethnic	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Khmu	21	30.4	30.4	30.4
Hmong	24	34.8	34.8	65.2
Akha	24	34.8	34.8	100.0
Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Frequency and Percentages of Participants by Age Group

Age	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)	Valid %	Cumulative %
15-17	13	18.8	18.8	18.8
18-20	37	53.6	53.6	72.5
21-23	14	20.3	20.3	92.8
24-26	5	7.2	7.2	100.0
Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Frequency and Percentages of Participants by Number of Siblings

Sibling	n	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
1-3	8	11.6	11.6	11.6
4-6	47	68.1	68.1	79.7
7-9	13	18.8	18.8	98.6
10-12	1	1.4	1.4	100.0
Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Frequency and Percentages of Participants by (being) the Children in the family

Child Number	n	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
1-3	43	62.3	62.3	62.3
4-6	24	34.8	34.8	97.1
7-9	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
Total	69	100.0	100.0	

The findings revealed that the adolescent girls 'ages ranged from 15 to 24, the majority (n=37) were between 18 and 20 years old (*Table 3*). The family structures were large, the respondents typically having 6 siblings; as 47 girls reported having 4 to 6 siblings (*Table 4*). In terms of birth order, most participants occupied the first to third child in their families, with 43 girls being among the first through third-born children (*Table 5*).

The adult group, comprising of 67 participants aged 40-54 years (n=28), 42 percent. followed by the 55-69 age cohort, represented 22 percent (n=15), aged 27-39 accounted for 19 percent (n=13) and 70-80 about 17 percent (n=11) respectively. 96 percent (n=64) are upland farmers, followed by 3 percent as retired person, and 1 percent as local retailer. Respondents are from different roles namely 63 percent (n=42) of adult are parents, 28 percent (n=19) as local customary law leaders and 9 percent (n=6) as village authority.

3.1 Ethnic Adolescent Girls

An overview of family economic condition, the study findings indicated that 100 percent of the ethnic adolescent girls are farmers mainly counted on subsistence shifting cultivation, as rice plantation, following animal husbandry, and all stayed with their parents (husband's parents). The primary income earners in the family were parents which

stood at 46 percent, husbands as 23 percent, farther as 15 percent and couples was about 7 percent. 97 percent of family annual income is from selling their rice crops, and the 3 percent is from selling corn and animal husbandry. 93 percent of respondents stated that their annual family income was low, below twenty-six million Lao Kip and only 7 percent mentioned that their family income was medium below thirty-six million Lao Kip. and their average expense was high, it was above twenty million Kip, 75 percent of annual family income was allocated for food, while 20 percent spent on clothing for the family members and 4 percent as other grocery items. 78 percent of the ethnic adolescent respondents strongly confirmed that their family income was insufficient, and 22 percent of the respondents stated that their income was adequate to some extent. When financial needs arose, 52 percent of the respondents primarily borrowed money from consanguine, 20 percent from parents, 18 parents-in-law and 9 percent from affine. the expense decision-maker in the family mainly were parents which accounted for 59 percent in owing to their seniority and know what to need to be spent, following by 17 percent mentioned that was husband, couple 15 percent and wife 9 percent.

74 percent of adolescent girl participants confirmed that they have worked more than 8 hours a day, starting from 5 AM to 9 PM primarily involved domestic chores, childcare, and doing farming, and only 26 percent has mentioned that they spent less than 8 hours a day doing the housewife roles, 85 percent of respondents strongly confirmed that their family's status was poor. In the meantime, 15 percent mentioned that their family's status was in medium level. "Most participants (91 percent) strongly agreed that marriage serves as a pathway to financial security and a better life, while fewer respondents disagreed as 7 percent and 2 percent was undecided.

The findings revealed significant disparities in educational attainment among ethnic adolescent girls. 74 percent had accessed to formal schooling; and 26 percent had never attended school. Among those enrolled, 33 percent reached the lower secondary level, 22 percent attended primary school, and 19 percent at upper secondary education. The Akha adolescent girls remained in the highest illiteracy rate, with 67 percent having never attended school and only 4 percent reaching the lower secondary level. Following by the Hmong adolescent girls, with 8 percent did not have opportunity for schooling (Table 6). However, the Khmu adolescent girls demonstrated good educational outcomes, as none never go to school and 52 percent had attained the upper secondary level. Among those who attended school, 41 percent of the girls studied within their own village, while 33 percent traveled outside the village for their studying, by foot or motorbike. Some girls made some arrangements by staying with relatives living near the school or residing in school dormitories in order to continue their studies.

Table 6: Education Level by Ethnic Group

Ethnic	Never go to school	Primary school	Lower Secondary School	Upper Secondary School	Total
Khmu	0	1	9	11	21
Hmong	2	7	13	2	24
Akha	16	7	1	0	24
Total	18	15	23	13	69

Table 7: Multiple Regression Results for Predictors of the variable (early marriage)

Model	B	SE	β	t	p	95 percent CI [LL, UL]
(Constant)	-2.985	.556		-5.374	.000	[-4.095, -1.876]
Education	.788	.089	.681	8.894	.000	[.611, .966]
Culture	.384	.057	.509	6.685	.000	[.269, .499]
Attitude	.270	.091	.233	2.955	.004	[.088, .453]
Economic	.169	.098	.135	1.716	.091	[-.028, .365]

Note: R² = 0.644; or R² = 0.622; F (4,64) = 28.98, p < 0.001

Regarding perceptions of educational opportunity, the majority of adolescent girls (59 percent) strongly disagreed that they had received equal access to educational opportunity as boys within their families, while 41 percent felt they had been treated equally, reference to a quote from a-19-year old Hmong adolescent girl with two children from Phongsaly province, broke into tears as she shared her story " I was not permitted to go to school and I did not know why. Nowadays, I could not read and write and I will be regrated forever for my whole life". Similarly, a-17-year-old Akha girl with 3-month baby from Oudomxay province said that "I am the oldest daughter in my family, my duty was to take care of my younger brothers and doing house chores. Hence, I did not have chance going to school as my brothers, and nowadays, I could not communicate in Lao and faced challenges when I go out to buy utensils for my family and personal use".

96 percent of the girls viewed that education is very essential and 4 percent has viewed that education is important for their children's life. And All respondents strongly confirmed that they supporting their children to go to school as much as they could, also they belief that education will help their children to have bright life.

In term of culture and tradition, 96 percent strongly disagreed that daughters are treated as equals to sons. Only 4 percent of participants perceived any meaningful degree of equality between daughters and sons, and all of these respondents were from the Khmu ethnic girl group. Regarding customary laws, 96 percent of ethnic adolescent girls reported that existing traditions/customary law remained challenge for daughters, the remaining 4 percent expressed no sense of obstruction and want to preserve these customs in their traditional form and 70 percent strongly agreed that current customary laws require meaningful improvement, particularly in areas that fail to reflect domestic gender equality. Nevertheless, 30 percent of participants indicated a preference for preserving existing customs unchanged.

Attitude toward early marriage, the majority of adolescent girl respondents (77 percent, n = 53) got marriage between the ages of 16 to 17 years, while a proportion (23 percent, n = 16) reported married as 13 to 15 years of age. Among those who married between the ages of 13 and 15, Hmong ethnic adolescent girls considered as the majority, accounting for 81 percent of this earliest marriage cohort. Most adolescent girls (75 percent) married without prior parental consultation; 25 percent consulted their mothers. Marriage was mainly autonomous and voluntary (96 percent), driven by expectations of marital love and support; girls believed that their husband will love them, being with them and support them whatever when they need, only 4 percent of marriages were arranged by parents through formal proposals.

In conclusion, through the adolescent girl's data analysis by using multiple regression statistic to determine if Education, Culture, Attitude, and Economic factors predicted/contributed to early marriage as the results of the regression indicated that the model was statistically significant as 64.4% of the variance $R^2 = .644$; $F(4,64) = 28.98$, $p < 0.001$, Education was the strongest significant predictor/contributor ($\beta = .681$, $t = 8.894$, $p < .000$) following by culture and tradition ($\beta = .51$, $t = 6.69$, $p < .001$, Attitude ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.96$, $p < .004$, and the economic factor does not contribute much to the model ($\beta = .14$, $t = 1.72$, $p < .091$) (Table 7).

3.2 Adults' Attitude Toward Early Marriage

Adult respondents oppose the notion of early marriage, with 82 percent expressed that the practice increased a familial burden rather than a source of financial gain. Parents noticed that young daughters-in-law often lack the maturity to fulfill a wife's domestic responsibilities, necessitating parental guidance. Only 16 percent of participants accepted the practice, primarily in cases where it resulted from the couple's personal choice. 54 percent of adult respondents disagreed that having children at a younger age could be advantages for couples in their later years, despite the response that their children would reach maturity earlier and could potentially provide labor support to the family. 43 percent of respondents acknowledged this as a plausible benefit, while a small portion of 3 percent indicated they were unable to foresee whether such outcome was likely or unlikely. 84 percent of adults expressed disagreement with the notion that early marriage would leverage a young couple's economic prospects, whereas only 10 percent concurred with this view, and 6 percent remained neutral on the matter. An overwhelming 90 percent of respondents opposed encouraging their adolescents to marry early as a means of alleviating familial financial pressures. Conversely, 10 percent of participants indicated their support for supporting early marriage among youth, believing it would reduce parental responsibilities and concerns.

From the study findings revealed that 96 percent of parent respondents affirming that all children should attend school. While 88 percent of parents valued educational equity between genders at the family level, however, the field observations found that persistent disparities in Hmong and Akha communities, where adolescent girls faced more limited educational opportunities compared to their male siblings, reflecting a persistent preference for sons in some families. Which was reflected the 12 percent discrepancy, as girls have limited long-term benefits in equal education opportunity. Despite the disparities, 97 percent of parents viewed education as essential for their children's future career opportunities. Regarding early marriage, 75 percent of adult respondents acknowledged its negative impacts, putting girls' health at risks and the increased burden on parents to mediate young couple's familial issue and provide domestic guidance. Anyhow, 18 percent disagreed with these concerns, and 9 percent remained neutral.

The majority of adult respondents (87 percent) strongly opposed the early marriage, with only 7 percent finding it acceptable. Nearly all participants (97 percent) reported that parents experienced anxiety rather than satisfaction when daughters married at young age, primarily due to concerns about emotional and psychological preparedness. Most

respondents (81 percent) rejected the notion that early marriage fostered maturity, though 16 percent believed it could enhance the transition to adulthood, 76 percent disagreed that young couple have ability to handle conflict resolution, while 18 percent remained neutral and 6 percent acknowledged some young couple possessed adequate skills. On the health concerns, with 79 percent mentioned risks of maternal mortality and malnutrition associated with adolescent pregnancy, while 12 percent indicated there would be minimal consequences. Regarding cultural motivations, 76 percent of parents confirmed early marriage as individual choice rather than a preservation of traditions, while 15 percent viewed it as continuation of ancestral customs and 9 percent remained undecided.

88 percent of parents rejected early marriage, while 10 percent expressed consented and 2 percent remained neutral. Majority (85 percent) believed that adolescent girls lacked the maturity to make independent marital decisions, though 13 percent disagreed and 2 percent were uncertain. 93 percent of respondents opposed the notion that parents should not intervene in their daughters' early marriage decisions, whereas 7 percent supported girls' autonomous decision-making. Regarding social perceptions, 85 percent of participants disagreed that early marriage is common or respected in their communities, while 15 percent believed it gained some social respect. Views on future prevention strategies on early marriage were indicated that 76 percent agreed, 11 percent strongly agreed, and 13 percent disagreed. Concerning legal alignment, 54 percent perceived early marriage as inconsistent with the laws, while 25 percent viewed it follow the social norms/traditional practices, 15 percent remained neutral, and 6 percent held strong opposing the views.

The findings from this study revealed that consistent opposition to early marriage across economic, educational, culture norms and attitude on early marriage. Parents have concern about on their daughters' futures, plus with the additional responsibilities. The findings indicate critical intervention for policymakers/influencers, in particularly, raise awareness on promoting delayed marriage, income-generation initiatives, and educational equity in the communities.

4. Discussion

Regarding the perceptions of ethnic adolescent girls toward early marriage, they view it as a means to enhance family income generation, accumulate assets, and achieve independence at a young age. In the long term, the consequence of early marriage outweighs these perceived benefits, resulting in enduring challenges for these ethnic girls, particularly health issues and poverty, which may exacerbate domestic violence and inequalities in economic opportunities that were in line with findings from other studies the determinants of Child Marriage in Thailand (Taasilapasathit, 2024) [8] and Understanding child marriage in Vietnam (Poël, 2023) [6]. Drawing on key themes such as low education drivers, cultural influences, and gender dynamics impacts, and the underlying factors.

In terms of similarities, the study on early marriage of adolescent girls aligns with broader researches on early marriage in the region. For instance, the studies in Laos, such as those led by the Lao Statistics Bureau Report (The Lao Statistics Bureau, 2024) [9], as well as investigations in Thailand (Mathee *et al.*, 2023) [3] consistently identify early

marriage as a phenomenon triggered by low education as majority promotion of adolescent girls counted on subsistence agriculture, entrenchment to traditional and social norms, increased maternal health risks and limited educational opportunity. Findings from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam (Nguyen Thi Van *et al.*, 2024) [5] where early marriage is linked to household financial instability, Similarly, across all contexts, gender inequalities persist, with daughters often prioritized less than sons for education and opportunities, a pattern evident in the study's data, where 96 percent of girls pointed out that parents favored sons, and as in Thai hill tribe communities where cultural norms restrict women's roles, shared socio-economic challenges in Southeast Asia, including rural isolation, patriarchal traditions, and inadequate policy enforcement, which perpetuate cycles of vulnerability (Seungmin, 2022) [7]. Furthermore, a shared emphasis on the negative health and educational consequences of early marriage prevalence; the study's rejection of early marriage due to health risks and inequality in education opportunity and cultural respect and dignity for all, school dropout rates (Tran, 2022) [12].

This study diverges from other studies in two significant ways. First, it identifies domestic gender inequality specifically, daughter devaluation was as a driver of early marriage. While this phenomenon appears accepted, with male family members controlling decision-making and assets. In contrary, it compels adolescent girls to pursue early marriage as it was believed an economic opportunity without parental consent. This creates anxiety for parents-in-law, plus with parents (husband's parents) must provide guidance for immature daughters-in-law into adult roles. Second, unlike prior studies focusing solely on factor of adolescent girls' early marriage and its impacts, this research examined perspectives of parents, customary law leaders, and village authorities across Hmong, Akha, and Khmu communities in the three northern provinces. Findings revealed that parental opposition to early marriage, with over 80 percent viewing the practice as inappropriate and economically unbeneficial, 93 percent of adults rejected excluding parents from marriage decisions, 76 percent supported preventive interventions, and 60 percent recognized early marriage as legally inconsistent.

Limitation of data collection during field study, the researcher encountered fewer Khmu adolescent girls than anticipated and as from the confirmation of the village and district authorities, as many had migrated with their husbands for construction work in other provinces, and Khmu village in Xiengnguen district was notably lower rates of early marriage compared to Hmong and Akha populations. To address this 23-participant gap across ethnic groups, we adjusted our target sampling by redistributing two intended Khmu participants, as one each to the Hmong and Akha groups, this resulted in finalizing the target sampling of 21 Khmu (as 30 percent), 24 Hmong (35 percent), and 24 Akha (35 percent) adolescent girls. Despite this slight change, we believe the proportional difference does not significantly impact the data accuracy or the validity of our cross-ethnic comparisons.

This study found that during the fieldwork, more than half of the Akha adolescent girls and almost half of the Hmong adolescent girls and women were unable to communicate in Lao, even some very simple response to the questionnaires. Therefore, in Akha community local dialect translators were required to support during the research, In the view of

researcher, it would be very useful to conduct other studies on the challenges of speaking Lao in ethnic minority communities, including the gaps of primary school education in remote areas.

In conclusion, this study made important contributions to understand early marriage in the ethnic minority communities. It identifies poverty and other educational challenges drove ethnic adolescences to quit school during lower secondary school to upper secondary school, domestic gender inequality, particularly favors sons over daughters as a driver of early marriage in the contexts where male mainly was the decision maker. In contrary, this inequality compels adolescent girls to seek marriage independently as an economic opportunity view, leaving parents-in law in anxiety while parents (husband' parents) have to guide immature daughters-in law into adulthood roles. Autonomous decision-making of adolescent girls due to love attachment and voluntarily. Drawing on perspectives from parents, customary law leaders, and village authorities across Hmong, Akha, and Khmu villages, it reveals substantial opposition to early marriage: over 80 percent deemed the practice inappropriate and economically harmful, 93 percent rejected parental exclusion from marriage decisions, 76 percent supported preventive measures, and a majority of respondents recognized legal inconsistencies surrounding the issue.

5. Conclusion

The key findings aligned with previous researches identifying inequal educational opportunity ($\beta=.681$, $p<.000$), Culture that related to domestic gender inequality ($\beta=.51$, $p<.001$), and attitude of adolescent girls on autonomous decision-making ($\beta=.23$, $p<.004$) as primary drivers, particularly within rural ethnic minority communities where gender disparities remain pronounced, as evidenced by parental preference for sons' education over daughters. However, this research identified three primary contributions to existing study, as education, culture and tradition, as well as attitude, within patriarchal household structures triggering girls to persuade early marriage as economic opportunity rather than compliance with tradition practices, the study across Hmong, Akha, and Khmu communities shows significant adult opposition to early marriage practices, with parents, customary leaders, and village authorities collectively opposing parental exclusion from marriage decisions, supporting preventive interventions, and recognizing legal enforcement gaps.

The fieldwork faced significant language barriers among ethnic minority groups over half of Akha adolescent girls and women could not communicate in Lao, even for basic questionnaire responses. Local dialect translators were essential for data collection in Akha communities. These findings suggest the need for research examining language acquisition challenges in ethnic minority villages and investigating gaps in primary education provision in remote areas.

To address inequal education opportunity, sustainable interventions should focus on raising awareness on the importance of education in community level, prioritize and promote education in remote area for higher education, regarding gender inequality disparities, gender equality trainings targeting boys and men would enable them to advocate for gender equity within households and

communities. Addressing early marriage requires policymakers and duty-bearers to implement a multi-approach by raising community awareness of relevant legislation while providing law enforcement training to village authorities and customary leaders. Such interventions are essential for delaying marriages and reducing gender inequalities within ethnic communities.

6. Conflict of Interest

As the authors of this research, we affirm that all information presented in this thesis article is devoid of any conflicts of interest with any parties or entities and does not favor any specific group or individual, we uphold the integrity of our work and remain committed to maintaining the highest standards of ethical conduct. Furthermore, we will fully respond for any violations or breaches of this declaration.

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