



Early Marriage Situation of Ethnic Adolescent Girls in Xiengnguen District, Luang Prabang Province

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Abstract

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This study intended to investigate the situation of economic, education, culture and attitude of ethnic adolescent girls, parents, local customary law leaders and village authorities toward early marriage among Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups in Xiengnguen District, Luang Prabang Province, Data and information were collected via semi-structured interviews questionnaires, by using purposive sampling targeted a total of 44 samplings. The quantitative data were analyzed by using Microsoft Excel and SPSS program in percentage and the qualitative information was consolidated from all responses.

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The key findings revealed that most adolescent girls viewed early marriage as a way to pursue independence and a better life. Anyhow, getting marriage at young age has tendency to have many children, put girls' health at risks and trapped in poverty. evidence indicated that all ethnic adolescent girls in the two target villages relied on doing farming, their average annual income was approximately 27 million Lao Kip and was insufficient for the basic needs,

In summary, parents, customary leaders, and village authorities strongly reject early marriage notion, viewing it as an inappropriate practice that fails to preserve cultural tradition. Moreover, it was not aligned with with Lao PDR legal frameworks, the findings also highlighted that early marriage imposes significant burdens to the family and put substantial anxiety for both parents and parent-in laws.

Keywords: Two ethnic groups, Adolescent girls, Early marriage, Influence

1. Introduction

Child early marriage is a global issue that cuts across countries, cultures, and religions, Early marriage is considered a form of forced marriage as children cannot consent and it is not only a violation of a girl's rights but also puts adolescent girls at health risk. Girls are the primary target and the numbers are high (ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, 2024).

Laos was one of the highest rates of child early marriage in ASEAN countries, 6.1% of girls are married before the age of 15, and 30.5% before the age of 18, whereas the corresponding figures for boys are 1.1% and

10%, 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). Furthermore, among women aged 20-24 who had given birth before turning 18, the rate of preterm delivery is 17.4%. In addition, 26.6% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 is either married or in a union (United Nations Population Fund & Children's Fund, 2023) with two-thirds of this group experiencing pregnancy in partnership and one-quarter or 27% facing pregnancy outside of a partnership. A total female population was approximately 3.8 million (Laos Statistical Information Service, 2024)..

The average annual population growth rate stands at 1.4%, with females accounting for 49.8%. Demographically, 79.8% of the population falls within the working-age group of 15-64 years, while 14.6% are under 14 years old. 63.4% of the population reside in rural (World Health Organization, 2023). Laos ranks among the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, where ethnic minorities represent between 30.3% and 46.3% 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 % , Mon-Khmer 23.7% , Hmong-Iu Mien 9.7% and Sino-Tibetan 2.9% (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2022).

Each ethnic group maintains a distinct set of cultural practices, encompassing unique spoken languages, traditional attire, modes of living. These longstanding traditions, practiced generation by generation for centuries, constitute the foundational principles underlying the tribes' cultural norms, habitual practices, and codes of conduct. Certain customary regulations serve as mechanisms for adjudicating internal disputes within the ethnic community, typically mediated by the chieftain. For instance, in the Hmong and Akha tribes, leadership and representation are vested in a chieftain, who convenes assemblies to foster communal unity, resolve conflicts, officiate religious rites, and offer guidance and support during periods of adversity. Ethnic kinship structures emphasize patrilineal descent, wherein males are regarded as the primary inheritors of parental lineage and the custodians of aging parents. In the formation of family units, the spouse integrates into the husband's household, with subsequent offspring adopting the paternal surname; the male thereby assumes the authoritative role as the family's principal decision-maker (Ministry of Justice and United Nation Development Program, 2011).

Reference to Article 35 of the Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (2015 Revision), Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic (The National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2025) Article 9 (Revised) of the Family Law explicitly defined that individuals entering marriage whether women or men must be at least 18 years of age, motivated by mutual affection, and enter the union with the voluntary consent of both parties. Article 3 of the same legislation affirms the state's protection of men and women's right to marital autonomy; specifically, who have attained the age of 18 are entitled to select a spouse freely, guided by their own volition and emotional inclination, while adhering to the esteemed cultural traditions of the Lao people. The state prohibits any form of coercion or interference in such decisions by individuals, families, or organizations (The National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2008). In addition, Article 18 (new) of the Compulsory Education Law mandates that all citizens fulfill their obligation to complete education from the primary to the secondary level (The National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2024).

Despite the existing laws and regulations in eliminating child early marriage, their effective enforcement remains challenging. According to the most recent data reveal that certain regions or ethnic groups continue to exhibit the highest rates of early marriage prevalence. Early marriage is not only against the law, but also violates fundamental human rights, as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bentzen, 2014) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, it impedes adolescents' access to education and personal development, engenders health risks associated with early pregnancy, elevates the incidence of child and maternal mortality, and increases susceptibility to violence and abuse.

The findings from Nguyen Minh Triet's investigation (Triet, 2024) 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. Notwithstanding the insights derived from these and other studies, alongside available data sources, no research has examined the factors of early marriage among adolescents from the two ethnic groups in Luang Prabang province.

This study seeks to understand the Situation of Early Marriage Among Ethnic Adolescent girls within the Khmu and Hmong ethnic groups in Xiengnguen district, thereby could identify the root causes. The outcomes of this research will be shared with relevant governmental duty bearers, local power influencers, nonprofit organizations, in aiming to raise awareness of the long-term impact of early marriage on individual trajectories, potentially decline in its prevalence.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was qualitative research, aiming to focus more on qualitative information due to its purposive sample size and tools. The qualitative component investigates economic conditions, culture and tradition, preference and attitude to early marriage.

2.1 Purposive target samplings and Selection Criteria

The selection was based on demographic characteristics, geographical location, socio-economic status, lifestyle characteristics, culture, beliefs and life-career experiences. Ethnic adolescent girls aged 15-24, married before 18. parents of children married early, local customary law leaders, and village authorities, a total of 44 people (Hmong as 52%) including 33 women as the following detail.

- 22 ethnic adolescent girls aged 15 to 24 years who have married before the age of 18. 55 as Hmong ethnic group and 45% as Khmu ethnic group.
- 13 parents/caregivers, including 11 women. Who have children marriage before 18, 53% as Hmong and 47% as Khmu ethnic group.

- 7 local customary law leaders, 57 % as Hmong ethnic group and 43% as Khmu ethnic group.
- 2 village authorities, 50% as Khmu and 50% as Hmong.

2.2 Material to collect the data

The Interview questionnaires and questionnaires were developed based on the theoretical framework of child early marriage tools, (The United nations and Plan International, 2023). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Trivedi and Mehta, 2019) and Culture (Spencer-Oatey, 2021). The data collection instruments combined of an open-ended and closed-ended questions, covered two main parts, as General information about the respondents; and overview situation of ethnic adolescent girl groups. Each individual adolescent girl was interviewed in an open space where is appropriate and nearby their home for about 35-45 minutes.

2.2.1 Validity

After the tools (questionnaires and interview questionnaires) have been developed, and submitted the tools to three experts to check the relevant of each question with its research objectives and gave some commend and guidance to ensure the content validity of the instruments, specifically addressing concerns regarding the length and breadth of the questionnaires. The final versions were validated using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), result were between 0.66-1.00.

2.2.2 Reliability

The research instruments were pre-tested prior the field data collection, through a small sampling (n=6), as 3 adolescent girls and 3 adults in Phouletchaluen Village. The resulting reliability coefficient of 0.95 (α -Coefficient=0.95) demonstrated that the instruments were reliable, and the tools were deemed valid for the field data collection (*figure 2*)

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to the field data collection, a formal approval obtained from the Luang Prabang Provincial Lao

Women's Union and following by a notification of Xiengnguen District Lao Women's Union to the target population in the two villages.

The data collection took place from 8-11 October 2025 in two villages in Xiengnguen, Luang Prabang province, two KOBO (tools) forms were created utilized for for the data collection.

KOBO Toolbox is a free and open-source platform designed to streamline digital data collection and management. replacing traditional paper-based surveys/data collection with a secure mobile interface. the system facilitates integration with analytical workflows, as data can be easily exported to Microsoft Excel for advanced statistical analysis in programs like SPSS.

Before each interview commenced, the researcher has introduced the study objectives and providing a brief personal introduction. A primary emphasized on ethical considerations, ensuring all participants understand that their involvement was voluntary and all responses would remain anonymous, to protect participant privacy, all data would be kept confidential and used for the purposes of this research, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the interview if they feel inconvenient.

The interviews were conducted individually, primarily in the Hmong and Khmu dialects to ensure local context appropriate and clarity; however, Lao was utilized where participants demonstrated good in the language. To ensure 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, fostering an atmosphere of comfort and open dialogue

2.4 Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, the dataset was double checked for any missing values and outliers to ensure the accuracy and reliability. The field data were analyzed by using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The

analysis provided a comprehensive profile of the purposive population.

3. Results

3.1 Ethnic adolescent girls

22 ethnic adolescent girls participated the study; 55% identified as Hmong and 45% Khmu. Their average marriage age at 15 years old (to husbands aged 18 years), and their average age was 18 years old, each adolescent girl has an average of 6 siblings, and mostly being the third or fourth child in their families. All girl respondents primarily relied on subsistence shifting cultivation, which includes rice plantation, Job's tears plantation, and animal husbandry. Primary family income earners were mainly parents as 35 %, husband as 29 %, couples' 24 %, and parents-in law, 12 %. The primary family income derives 95% from crop sales, following by 4% from others as sale animal husbandry and weaving/needle work.

The average annual family income is 35 million Lao Kip, with expenditures 28 million Lao Kip (*table 4.1*). 54% of the expense allocated for food, followed by buying clothes 32% other groceries at 14% (*table 6*). Regarding financial status, 64% of girl respondents mentioned that their income is insufficient to meet their basic needs, while 36.4% (*table 7*) found it adequate to some degree. When financial needs arose, families primarily rely on borrowing from parents, parents-in-laws, and consanguine. Family expenses decision-making mainly was fathers as the head of the household in 33 %. Other decision-makers include husbands as 25%, couples jointly as in 22 %, wife's 14 %, and parents-in-law 6 %. In addition, food security remains a concern, as 59% of adolescent girl respondents indicated having only somewhat sufficient food, while 41% reported a lack of food security in the family.

Educational attainment among respondents varies as 36% completed primary school, 44% reached lower secondary, and 14% in upper secondary school (*table 9*). Despite these varying levels, adolescent girls are committed to support their children, with 100% of

participants viewing education as essential to their lives and 100% expressing a firm intention to support their own children's schooling in order to have a brighter future career.

Perspectives on gender equality and cultural norms, 65% of respondents perceive a degree of equality, while 35% stated that challenges persist. This sentiment is shared by one of the Hmong adolescent girls and said "daughters' obligations to marry and leave home." This domestic inequality is profoundly reflected in domestic life and shapes the girl's future, as the indication, 86% of respondents feel that parents favor sons over daughters; only 14% believe they receive equal opportunities to their male siblings (*table 10*). Moreover, 65% of these adolescent girls view current cultural practices in particularly some of the customary law pose challenges and as a barrier to their advancement and need for greater equality with boys and access to male sibling activities in the family for instance, enable to stay with parents after getting marriage as well as can venerate parents' ancestor.

Toward early marriage view (*table 11*), 68% of ethnic adolescent girls explicitly affirmed that they have never consulted with parents prior to the early marriage held, 32% have consulted and asked their close friends for the upside and downside of getting early marriage, and most of their friends shared that having a husband is good and can be helpful when support needed. 86% marriage due to match love, while 9% mentioned that their parents choose for, in addition, 1% has clearly indicated that due to necessity particularly premarital pregnancy, 91% were self-motivated due to romantic love; a portion of 9% linked to formal proposal marriage.

3.2 Parents, customary law leaders and village authority viewed on early marriage.

52% of the parents viewed early marriage as burden to the family, 67% of parents disagreed that early marriage allows adolescent girls to generate income for the family. 71% opposed the idea that parents should encourage early unions to alleviate domestic hardships.

Toward education perspectives, 71% of parents' respondents expressed strong support for their children's schooling, 71% of respondents indicated that they will support, 95% viewed that education is essential as a foundation for their children's future success. Moreover, 57% of the parental participants pointed out that early marriage has effect on adolescent girl's health. Said: *A 37-year-old mother from Phasaninh village said; "what parents concerned the most is about the young couple's future as uncertainty and challenges ahead that could not foresee in a short term, if they get alone well, considering it as a good fortune, but if it is not then parents have to shoulder the burden later on"*.

Culture, the findings revealed that 81% of parents strongly rejected that the practice of early marriage as inappropriate, notably, 100% of parents dissatisfied with their immature daughters marry, qualitative evidence further underscores the concerns. *One Khmu customary law leader pointed out that early marriage is inappropriate with our culture practice in the past. In my view it is the choice of adolescent girls not about the culture pleasure"*

96% of parents rejected the notion that early marriage preserves tradition, 90% opposed the girls' autonomy decision-making; 81% pointed out that adolescent girls should not decide independently. In the meantime, 95% totally disagreed that parents should not interfere, viewing the union as a significant life event. as 95% of participants denied that early marriage will gain social respect, and 55% pointed out that the practice was not compliant with the existing laws and regulation. View on reduction strategies, a quote from a village authority shared during the interview of the field study "we have disseminated relevant laws for villagers including adolescents in preventing early marriage. Anyhow, enforcement seems challenges ahead as adolescent girls decide indecently, even parents were not aware of, many young couple chosen to marry at very young age, have many children, faced family financial instability and domestic violence"

4. Discussion

From the findings, adolescent girls viewed that early marriage as a pathway to family economic mobility, anticipating that it will generate income, accumulate asset, and secure financial independence. Yet, this perception often masks a critical lack of right decision making, as these unions occur without consent or consultation with their parents. While the practice is rationalized by the belief that it alleviates familial financial burdens, premised on the expectation that early childbearing accelerates the arrival of a future generation capable of economic support, evidence contradicts this view as the reports (United Nations Population Fund, 2025), early marriage predominantly led to long-term adversity. Rather than offering economic relief, it entrenches poverty, exacerbates domestic violence and gender inequalities, and significantly heightens the risk of malnutrition and mortality and also this is in line with the adverse effects of early marriage (Nirwan, 2023).

A similarity with other studies and reports on early child marriage in Laos and in the region, as early marriage affects girls, their children, and the social development. early childbirths, reducing their lifetime earnings and economic opportunities. findings indicate that all adolescent girl participants mainly relied on shifting cultivation. Consistent with the adult respondents across two villages, over half of girls' respondents reported annual incomes that fail to meet basic needs. This financial strain is further evidenced by the fact that household expenditures are predominantly allocated to food, a trend that aligns with the Lao Poverty Profile (The Lao Statistics Bureau, 2024-2025). From a socio-economic perspective, Majority of parents shared that the arrival of young daughters-in-law, creates an economic burden for the family. as the added responsibility of supporting a young marriage diverts limited resources (Taylor, 2025), the findings showed that parents are often excluded from the decision-making process regarding early marriages.

In the aspect of education and health, the study indicated that all adolescent girl respondents in the two villages valued education as essential for life and intent to support their own children's schooling in the future. This dedication is aligned with the adult respondents in the same area; most of parents/caregivers affirm in supporting school attendance. As well as majority of adults advocate for equal educational opportunities for both daughters and sons (Phetchanpheng. & Charlet, 2025), The researcher also has learnt and noticed that not many parents/caregivers in the two villages have engaged in their children' daily study and even don't know how to support.

Gender equality Although more than half of adolescent girl respondents perceived a sense of equality, a significant almost of girls perceived that parents favored sons over girls within the family. Qualitative insights *"one Hmong adolescent participant pointed out that this domestic disparity is entrenched in traditional gender norms; daughters are viewed as temporary family members destined for marriage"*, whereas sons are prioritized for educational investment and long-term support. This preference is passed from the elders who regard male children as the primary future caregivers for the family. These adolescent girls' perspectives align with the experiences of adult female respondents in the two villages, high portion of parents advocate for equal educational opportunities for both daughters and sons, but favor sons over daughters. and are consistent with broader trends documented of the Facts and Details (Hays, 2022) as well as the Indigenous World Report (Mamo, 2025). Many girls viewed that existing cultural norms practices were challenging for them as adolescent girls for instance, in the past, girls could not worship their parents' ancestors, meaning that sons will be the one whom venerate the ancestors and being the family caretaker after the parents.

Difference from previous studies, this study extends its focus beyond two ethnic adolescent girl groups

by engaging the view of parents/caregivers, local customary law leaders and local authorities. Aiming to provides a holistic understanding on the early marriage perspectives of the two ethnicities in the areas, Indication of less connect between adolescent girls' actions and parental perspectives on early marriage. Most of parents viewed early marriage as inappropriate, and expressed concern over girls leaving home prematurely, in contrary with the pathways to adolescent pregnancy in Laos.

In summary, adolescent girls perceived early marriage as a pursuit of independence and preference, evidence demonstrates that many adolescent girls choose to marry based on affective ties and romantic love without parental consent, despite the fact that the majority of parents viewed the practice as an immature decision, both parents and parents-in law worried about adolescent girls (young couple) future.

5. Conclusion

The key findings highlighted a profound different view among adolescent girls, parents, local customary law leaders and village authorities in the areas, where adolescents prioritize individual autonomy for independence and preference over reasons without family consultation. While the majority of parents expressed concerned for adolescent girls' uncertain future and familial cohesion as creating a burden for parents in providing guidance for the immature adolescent girls (young couple) on making a living, most of local customary law leaders strongly opposed the notion of early marriage as not align with the past culture practices and legal endorsement. Moreover, all village authorities pointed out that getting marriage at young age tend to have many children, faced poverty and domestic violence as 9% of the adolescent girls participated this study was divorced.

This underscores the need for policies and laws dissemination for the groups to delay marriages, enhance educational equity, and address domestic gender disparities in ethnic villages. Promoting income

generation activity to eradicate poverty along with human resources capacity strengthening.

6. Conflict of Interest

As the authors of this research, we affirmed 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 ensure all participants' confidentiality, right and privacy in maintaining the highest standards of ethics conduct, all the articles cited in this article are kept in its original words and meanings. And we will fully respond for any violations or breaches of this declaration.

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Table 1: Validity and reliability test.

Measure	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Cronbach's	Number of Items
Valid Cases	6	100.0	.955	66
Excluded Cases	0	0.0	—	—
Total	6	100.0		

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	CV (%)	Interpretation
Ethnicity	1.55	0.51	33.0%	A balanced mix of Khmu (1) and Hmong (2) participants.
Child No	3.14	1.61	51.4%	Most respondents are "middle children" (3rd child).
Age	19.27	3.88	20.1%	The average age of participants was 19 years old
Family Size	5.91	2.31	39.1%	Respondents come from large households, about 6 siblings

Table 3: Ethnicity versus. Age Group

Ethnicity	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Khmu	10	45.5	45.5	45.5
Hmong	12	54.5	54.5	100.0
Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Summary of economic status (Likely Comparison)

Economic Status	Avg. Siblings	Typical Birth Order	Consistency
Poor Household	Higher (~7)	Later (4th+)	More Diverse (High SD)
Average Household	Lower (~5)	Earlier (1st–3rd)	More Consistent (Low SD)

Table 4.1: Comparing the adolescent girls' annual income verse expense

No	Description	Amount
1	Annual Family Income	₭34,954,545
2	Expenses	₭27,863,636

Table 5: Main family income sources.

Income Source	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Sell crops	21	95.5	95.5	95.5
Others	1	4.5	4.5	100.0
Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Financial allocation of the family.

Expenditure Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Purchase food	12	54.5	54.5	54.5
Purchase clothing	7	31.8	31.8	86.4
Others	3	13.6	13.6	100.0
Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Table 7: financial status of the respondents.

Sufficiency Status	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Sufficient	8	36.4	36.4	36.4
Insufficient	14	63.6	63.6	100.0

Total	22	100.0	100.0
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Table 8: Household status

Household Status	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Average Household	12	54.5	54.5	54.5
Poor Household	10	45.5	45.5	100.0
Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Table 9: Education of the adolescent girl respondents in two villages.

Category	Detail description	Frequency	percentage (%)
School Attendance	Go to school	21	95.5
	Never go to school	1	4.5
Educational Attainment	Never attended (.00)	1	4.5
	Primary school	8	36.4
	Lower Secondary School	10	45.5
	Upper Secondary School	3	13.6
View on Education	Very important	21	95.5
	Essential	1	4.5

Table 10: Adolescent girl respondent perspectives on domestic gender equality.

Child's Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Son	19	86.4	86.4	86.4
Daughter	3	13.6	13.6	100.0
Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Table 11: Consultation with parents prior to early marriage.

Category	Detail response	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Parental Consultation	Ever consult parents	7	31.8
	Never consult parents	15	68.2
Reason for Marriage	Due to love match	19	86.4
	Parents choose for	2	9.1
	Necessity	1	4.5
Nature of Marriage	Voluntary	20	90.9
	Formal proposal	2	9.1