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# Child Marriage Issue in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam: Current Situation and Solution

Nguyen Minh Triet<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Art, The University of Architecture HCMC, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Correspondence: Nguyen Minh Triet. Tel: +84 369945227. E-mail: Dotty3108@gmail.com

## Abstract

The paper introduces a study on the child marriage crisis in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam. A central research question identifies what sociocultural and economic components allow these practices to continue after numerous national-level campaigns against them. This study uses a qualitative research design that draws on secondary data sources (including policy documents, statistical reports, and community-based program evaluations). The key findings are that average child marriage rates remain alarmingly high, especially among the Hmong community, with 94% of all cases reported occurring within this group. The child marriages reported during 2021–2023 totaled 478. Of these, significantly fewer males (38) were involved compared with female child brides (74), with a predominant age between 14 and 15 years for girls and 18 and 19 years for boys. The study argues that a multipronged approach is necessary to combat child marriage in this state, which involves engaging communities by raising awareness, promoting sociocultural change, and emphasizing quality education. The study concludes that cultural change must be part of any long-term effort to ensure equal access for everyone, and achieving this will largely depend on what happens with educational funding and policy at all levels. By addressing these issues, stakeholders can eliminate the practice of child marriage, thereby reducing associated risks and promoting both gender equality and sustainable human development in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Child Marriage, Ethnic Minorities, Education, Socio-Economic Factors, Gender Equality, Lao Cai Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

In Vietnam, for decades, child marriage has been a persistent issue, especially among the country's numerous ethnic minority groups. Even though Vietnam has made giant steps in development and human rights, child marriage rates have not dropped. The situation of child marriage and consanguineous people in ethnic minorities and mountainous areas has been one of several issues that concerned researchers as well as managers at all levels of branch sectors to seek out solutions for solving the child marriage problem.

Early marriage is also portrayed as a kind of rite of passage or boost to social status in most minority ethnic communities. Women and girls in Vietnam are often subject to patriarchal discrimination, whereby a young girl is perceived as only a temporary member of her parent's family (Nui, 2024). This gender bias, deeply rooted in their system, stifles their ability to obtain an education or financial freedom and confines them to feeling like getting married early is a suitable option.

The research has provided scientific and practical documents that allow for combating child marriage risk, pregnancy, and consanguineous marriages by 2030 in Lao Cai. Lao Cai is a province northwest of Vietnam, a mountainous territory with an area of 6364.03 square kilometers of natural conditions. Lao Cai is a territorial area, and it was divided into high mountain ranges with steep slopes that were difficult to transport. In ethnic minority areas, there are 141,683 households with a population of 570.7 thousand people from 25 ethnicities. As of April 1, the population in the province was 730,420. The general population density is 115 individuals per square kilometer. The province comprises 25 ethnic groups who have lived and defended their forests for generations, and the way to settle up accounts for each qualitative period. The Kinh ethnic group accounts for 35.9%, the Hmong for 22.21%, and other groups, including Tay (15.84%), Dao (14.05%), Giay (4.70%), and Nung, make up the rest.

### *1.2 Literature Review*

In Vietnam, economic impoverishment, along with a lack of education and deeply ingrained cultural customs, drives child marriages. Families marry off their daughters at a young age out of poverty to reduce the burden or mitigate financial security. Education is another crucial issue, as the rate of child marriage goes down by 6.5% with each year a girl stays in school beyond five years old (Field & Ambrus, 2008). It is critical to support and empower girls to stay in school through the flagship scholarship program, which keeps them there until they complete secondary (and beyond) or tertiary education. Ingrained cultural and gender-related norms additionally contribute to a vicious cycle.

A study was conducted to present the situation of child marriage and consanguineous marriage, as well as discuss why the issue happens more often in the region (Bao & Trung, 2019). In Vietnam, poverty is among the leading reasons a child will be subjected to early marriage. Impoverishment forces girls to marry impoverished or older, affluent males who can provide financial security for their immediate and extended family (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018).

In Vietnam, girls remaining in education—particularly in secondary and tertiary-level schools—is a deterrent to child marriage (Nguyen & Cho, 2024). The elimination of education in early-age partnerships is perceived differently in the conceptual framework of young marital relationships (Dung, 2020). "Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage among Ethnic Minorities" has raised the alarm about child marriage among Vietnamese ethnic minorities in the province (Manh, 2017). The situation is dangerous to human development, causing an impact on areas' social-economic development.

Child marriage is also pervasive in minority ethnic communities due to entrenched cultural norms and practices. One such example is the Hmong ceremony of 'bride kidnapping' at 13 or 14 years old (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). However, child marriage is a problem that affects all communities, not just minorities. A high proportion of Kinh women (the majority ethnic group in Vietnam) were also married before they turned 18 years old. Tackling gender bias and ensuring education for all are universal keys to stopping child marriage, regardless of community.

While the drivers of child marriage are delineated in the case of females, there is a lack of research about factors leading to early marriages among males. Nguyen and Cho (2024) offered one such analysis of the depths to which polluting wealth extractivism can seep, with child marriage rates above 50% for Hmong girls in Vietnam's northern mountainous regions as a result. The study investigates factors affecting time spent in child marriage among both boys and girls, illustrating the importance of gender-specific intervention approaches.

Preventing child marriage by involving the community and providing schooling or economic opportunities to girls, also upholding legal sanctions against those who engage in such practices. UNICEF and UNFPA (2018) have already proposed a broad package of measures to prevent child marriage by tackling its social determinants as well as addressing girls' health and education. Solotaroff and Pande (2014) also emphasize the need to modify social norms so that girls can exercise their agency in marriage. Partnerships are a must to reach out to a broader audience, keep girls in schools with financial and economic opportunities, and enforce the laws; crucially, laws that make the minimum age of marriage 18 need to be enforced (Ton, 2020). If a multi-sectoral approach is implemented, the target to end child marriage in Vietnam by 2030 will be achievable.

The paper hopes to shed light on the myriad factors influencing child marriage in Lao Cai Province and suggest more plausible pathways. The study aims to bring attention to the sociocultural and economic roots of the issue, intending to further focus on policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders invested in preventing child marriages. The results of this study will provide insights into the barriers and enabling factors in tackling child marriage, which learners can utilize as a basis to work on eliminating child marriage in Vietnam.

### *1.3 Study Purpose*

The cohabitation era of minorities brings along the diversity and identity of a cultural backdrop in Lao Cai; however, outdated conventions hinder local sustainable development. Child marriage will be a burden on society in the days to come due to its health hazards and human resources having no quality among child marriages. In conclusion, assessing essential information to understand the current situation and causes of effectively graduating child marriage will help reduce and prevent this custom from being effectively practiced within Lao Cai Province.

## **2. Methods and Materials**

The study utilizes a qualitative research design mainly based on a review of secondary documents to address the child marriage problem in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam. It is meant to be a holistic approach, as it seeks a deep understanding of socio-cultural dynamics around child marriage and provides the best suggestions for its prevention.

### *2.1 Data Sources*

Multiple data resources were used to obtain sufficient information for the study. The research pools data from an extensive collection of secondary source material, including policy documents, laws, and policies at the national or regional level on addressing child marriage, legal frameworks, and mechanisms to implement these. The documents of the province-level (Lao Cai) government that are relevant to the research were scrutinized to comprehend the present legal framework and policy interventions. The socio-economically reviewed report's data on the socio-cultural characteristics of ethnic minority groups in Lao Cai were studied to recognize cultural traditions and customary practices that elevate child marriage rates. Statistics on child marriage rates in Lao Cai Province were used as primary data from the provincial ethnic committee and some national databases. The information serves as quantitative results, providing a more intricate understanding of this phenomenon. Several reports on experiences with child marriage prevention initiatives in Lao Cai were reviewed. These reports explore community-based programs, awareness campaigns, and education-related initiatives as strategies to reduce child marriage.

### *2.2 Data Analysis*

A thematic analysis process that identifies patterns or themes related to child marriage was conducted. The results from Lao Cai were compared with datasets and reports to highlight common problems and promote success stories in combating child marriage in Vietnam. The synthesis sought to add depth by developing a thematic and comparative understanding of child marriage and consanguineous marriage in the context and issues surrounding these practices more broadly in Lao Cai. This synthesis adopted the view that this issue is very complex as it is

shaped by many factors: socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and boundaries around the age of consent, which are exacerbating some existing interventions.

### *2.3 Limitations*

Although this study contributes a perspective on child marriage in Lao Cai, some caveats are worth mentioning. The biases within the sources could restrict the use of secondary data, and the findings might not encompass every experience or view of those who have been victimized by early marriage. Furthermore, social norms and policies are dynamic—changing over time—and the context for decisions about long-acting reversible contraception can be anticipated to shift as well. The process underscores the need for continued research that tracks trends in beliefs and policies related to long-acting reversible contraception so that interventions address current needs.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 The role of government levels*

Since 2015, the Vietnam Prime Minister has issued many decisions to address the child marriage issue in Vietnam (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023). Some of the crucial decisions are Decision No. 498/QD-TTg dated April 14, 2015, approving the proposal "Minimizing Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage in Ethnic Minority Areas for the Period 2015-2025"; Decision No. 1721/UBDT-DTTS on December 9, 2020, by the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, which was an essential step in implementing; and Decision No. 498/QD-TTg dated April 14, 2015, by the Prime Minister for the period 2021-2025 (Phase II). The crucial part of Subproject 2, Project 9, under the "National Target Program for Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas for 2021–2030".

From 2021 to 2025, Lao Cai Province has issued many policies, resolutions, and documents to minimize child marriage and consanguineous marriage. Decision No. 2278/QD-UBND on July 2, 2021, established the Steering Committee for the Prevention of Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage in Ethnic Minority Areas in Lao Cai Province; Decision No. 351/QD-UBND on February 22, 2023, changed the members of the Steering Committee for the Prevention of Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage in Ethnic Minority Areas (the Steering Committee consists of 23 members, with the Vice Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee as the Head, members are leaders of several relevant agencies and units, and the People's Committees of districts, towns, and cities); Plan No. 83/KH-UBND on March 1, 2021, to implement the Proposal to Minimize Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage in Ethnic Minority Areas in Lao Cai Province for the period 2021-2025; Document No. 988/UBND-NLN on March 18, 2021, to implement Decision No. 498/QD-TTg dated April 14, 2015, by the Prime Minister (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023; Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023a; The People's Committee, 2023)

The comprehensive data for Lao Cai Province through the end of 2023, recorded by the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs of Lao Cai Province, showed that the rate of child marriage in 2023 decreased by 30% compared to 2022 (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023a). Also, the rate of first-time childbirth by ethnic minority women under 18 years old in 2023 decreased by 20% compared to 2022, and from 2021 to 2023, there were no cases of consanguineous marriage in Lao Cai Province. However, the consequences of child marriage still negatively impact the health quality of the population and also increase the risk of poverty and backwardness in ethnic minority areas in the province.

### *3.2 Situation of child marriage in Lao Cai Province*

According to statistics from the People's Committee (2023), during the period 2021–2023, there were a total of 478 ethnic minorities involved in child marriages in Lao Cai (Table 1). The number of child marriages has fluctuated from year to year. However, consanguineous marriages have remained zero since 2021 (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023a).

In 2023 alone, the total number of ethnic minorities involved in child marriages was 112 (accounting for 2.87% of the total number of ethnic minority marriages and decreasing by 1.47 times compared to 2022), of which 74 were female (mainly aged 14–15), and 38 were male (mainly aged 18–19). There were 51 cases in which one person was underage and 61 cases in which both individuals were underage. The Hmong ethnic group accounts for 94% of the total number of ethnic minority child marriages (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023a; The People's Committee, 2023).

Table 1: Child Marriage in Ethnic Minorities in Lao Cai Province in 2023

City/ District	Child Marriage Situation				Child Marriage Age of Male, and Female						Categorization by Ethnicity					
	Total number of ethnic minorities getting married	Total number of ethnic minorities in child marriages	Child marriage when one person is underage (person)	Child marriage when both people are underage (person)	Male			Female			Mong	Dao	Giay	Tay	Nung	Other Ethnic ities
					From 13-14 years old	From 15-17 years old	From 18-19 years old	From 13 years old	From 14-15 years old	From 16-17 years old						
Lao Cai	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bao Thang	306	6	6	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	4	1	1	0	0	0
Bao Yen	438	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Sa Pa	432	37	17	20	1	10	3	6	12	5	37	0	0	0	0	0
Van Ban	581	6	2	4	0	0	2	0	1	3	6	0	0	0	0	0
Muong Khuong	358	12	7	5	0	0	2	0	3	7	11	0	0	0	1	0
Bac Ha	1040	13	4	9	0	0	5	0	3	5	10	2	0	0	1	0
Bat Xat	280	22	12	10	0	0	9	0	13	0	22	0	0	0	0	0
Si Ma Cai	462	15	2	13	0	3	3	0	7	2	15	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3897	112	51	61	1	13	24	7	40	27	105	3	1	0	3	0

Source: Report No. 360/BC-BDT, December 12, 2023 of the Lao Cai Committee for Ethnic Minority

### 3.3 Child Marriages in Lao Cai Province

Firstly, child marriage for females is always higher than children marrying off in the first few years and happens mainly at the age of 14–15 (UNICEF, 2021). It showed excellent gender disparity among ethnic minorities, demonstrating that the main access bottleneck is at work (households invest less in female education) and also not allowing women more time to pursue higher studies since the majority of girls stop their education upon graduating from lower secondary school in order to get married and start a family.

Secondly, the ethnic minorities living in remote districts in Vietnam are not alone in suffering from child marriage. On the other side of the region, close to Lao Cai city center and with better life conditions, the Sa Pa district (Bao Thang) also faces the same issues (UNICEF, 2018). The public awareness and understanding of population issues, reproductive health, and family law in relation to marriage remain low all around the region.

Thirdly, the tradition of early marriage is firm among the Hmong people, the second-largest ethnic group in Lao Cai (UNICEF, 2018). For them, the tradition is deeply rooted; outdated customs and traditions are in the lives of the Hmong community.

### 3.4 Reasons for child marriage in Lao Cai

Child marriage originates, first and foremost, from archaic habits (Parsons et al., 2015), then tribally. The traditions of minorities also have and are deep in human knowledge, becoming a religious force affecting people's daily lives and activities. Moreover, among the ethnic minorities, or at least Hmong people, for this matter, marriage requires

mere approval from village leaders (mainly men), and both family sides would agree to it without any reason for law enforcement issues or being tied by current laws. The belief is that more children recognize prestigious honors, and on the other side of the village, honorary guests approve the decision. This belief has allowed the child marriage issue to persist in Lao Cai Province (Hossain & Miah, 2016). Second, parental and school supervision of children has not been maintained routinely; many parents are light with their kids while supervising students in high schools or ethnic boarding classes is also loose (Field & Ambrus, 2008). This has come to bite the students as a result of information development, using social media, and having more exposure to foreign cultures, which tends to lead them to live experimental lifestyles filled with nonsexual experiences, leading students to drop out of school due to early unintended pregnancies and ending up married at their tender ages. Third is the inefficient or improper dissemination of information (Nguyen & Cho, 2024). Even though legal education about child and consanguineous marriages did exist, it needed to be more comprehensive and practical enough, particularly for adolescents.

### *3.5 Propaganda work*

From 2021 to 2023, the agencies, units, and localities in Lao Cai Province have carried out propaganda to prevent child marriage and provide legal education to officials, party members, civil servants, commune-level officials, reputable individuals, and ethnic minority communities. This has led to a clear shift in the awareness and actions of officials and ethnic minorities, increased awareness of combating and reporting crimes, fighting against outdated customs and superstitions, and reduced child marriage and consanguineous marriage.

Various diverse and rich forms of propaganda have been used with key and focused content, such as Organizing 4,706 propaganda sessions for 383,851 participants, including village officials, reputable individuals, youth, women, students, and the public; distributing 785 news articles on media platforms such as provincial radio and television, Lao Cai Newspaper, and district and commune broadcasting systems; covering topics such as Marriage and Family Law; the consequences of child marriage and consanguineous marriage; administrative and criminal regulations related to child marriage and consanguineous marriage; and solutions to help prevent and reduce child marriage and consanguineous marriage. More than 30,000 Vietnamese bilingual flyers on the harms of child and consanguineous marriages were prepared and printed for ethnic minority communities. Additionally, 231 training and dialogue conferences were organized for 14,545 participants on the skills and knowledge to advise and persuade ethnic minority communities to change their attitudes towards marriage, improve outdated customs, and promote gender equality.

Provincial agencies and units have developed 17 models, and district-level units have developed 70 models; all are managed by communes with 199 model programs having various names, such as "Say No to Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage," "Youth Say No to Child Marriage and Consanguineous Marriage," "Parents Support Their Children in Saying No to Child Marriage," and "Combat Child Marriage," which are implemented in communities with high rates of child marriage, contributing to a reduction in child marriage among ethnic minority communities.

### *3.6 Restrictions in Propaganda Work*

Ethnic minority populations mainly reside in remote mountainous areas. The natural terrain, with many steep hills in Lao Cai Province, is one factor causing difficulties in travel for implementing propaganda activities and accessing information for the people.

The effectiveness of propaganda work was low and is still limited because of several factors, such as language barriers (many people still do not know how to speak and read documents in standard Vietnamese), low literacy levels, limited participation from adolescents, and a lack of funding for organizing activities leading to an uneven understanding of the law and the consequences of child marriage and consanguinity marriage among ethnic minority groups across regions.

The attention and direction of the local authorities and coordination with political organizations at the district and commune levels are inconsistent. Local authorities' intervention and prevention regarding child marriage and consanguinity marriage are not thorough and lack decisiveness. The sanctions must be more robust and strictly enforced in some areas.

The work of inspecting and reviewing child marriage and consanguinity marriage in the localities also has many shortcomings. In some places, because of concerns about the recognition of clean and strong party organizations, they are reluctant to report complete data on child and consanguinity marriages.

#### 4. Discussion

The Study on Child Marriage in Lao Cai province contains lessons for ending child marriage, and it also illustrates essential achievements with the potential to be taken to scale by government mechanisms together with community engagement. However, despite these gains, the enduring problem of child marriage, especially among minority communities, suggests that more needs to be done, including in terms of sustaining and scaling up successful interventions. The sections discuss what these findings mean for the policy governments put in place and interrogate and intervene instead of merely describing the work. Efforts and a synthesis of lessons from programmatic effectiveness in child marriage work together to build on one final piece about what it takes concerning factors, including solutions for this issue.

In 2015, the Vietnamese government took some action to prevent child marriage and inbreeding among ethnic minorities with Decision No.498/QĐ-TTg on solutions for the prevention of ending child marriage as well as (preventing) endogamy marriages amongst the socio-ethnic groups. Starting from this decision, the Vietnam Government has made efforts directly through Decision 2278/QĐ-UBND, "Approved the Establishment of Steering Committee for Child Marriage and Consanguineous at Locality". The decrease of 30% in child marriage registered as an indicator that these programs were positively functioning (Committee for Ethnic Minority, 2023). The results echoed the call to support measures that address the root causes responsible for child marriage.

Legal frameworks were also underscored in research on the efficacy of laws and state commitment to address child marriage (Parsons et al., 2015). The policy's effective implementation to ignite positive outcomes would be tough if the local authorities and community leaders were excluded while shaping the policies. Despite notable policy initiatives, local culture and practices support early marriage, with the Hmong community accounting for 94% of child marriages in Lao Cai (Humanium, 2023).

For Lao Cai, a range of socio-cultural norms and beliefs, more generally amongst ethnic communities, have contributed to its refusal to relinquish child marriage in rural society. Early marriage enhances labor ability and family stability in many settings. This view is frequently confirmed by long-established burdens that provide family permission to precede statutory demands, making registration significantly looked over while child marriages pass without regard. (Nguyen & Cho, 2024) Additionally, the gender imbalance indicated by numbers underlines a more significant problem of lack of equality between sexes within this sector. This often comes at the expense of a girl's education, enabling them to perform only domestic duties, trapping girls into poverty, and restricting their career options from an early age (UNICEF, 2018). The results corroborate the literature on child marriage and education, showing that educational access can be instrumental in reducing rates of child marriage (Field & Ambrus, 2008).

Despite published reports on positive results, the implementation of child marriage prevention strategies faces several challenges. The geographically isolated, mountainous Lao Cai province also poses particular challenges for outreach and information access (Parsons et al., 2015). Language barriers are also a stumbling block since most policies, plans, and legal documents related to anti-child marriage are in the Vietnamese language, so many ethnic minority populations in Vietnam do not have much knowledge or understanding of the language (UNICEF, 2018). Low literacy rates and a lack of education funding have further reduced the impact of awareness campaigns. Not all sections of the population, particularly adolescents, are reached by programs disseminating information about child marriage (Hossain & Miah, 2016). The government and some local organizations conducted propaganda



sessions, however inadequate, as these ethnic minorities have been repeatedly documented to have an uneven grasp of laws and consequences, further suggesting a need for more culturally sensible targeted educational endeavors (Chuyen et al., 2008).

Future interventions recommended build upon progress and tackle the challenges of our community engagement, localized educational resources, promoting gender equality programs, and addressing socio-economic factors. Community engagement through key opinion leaders and other local influencers in awareness campaigns will enhance trust, foster discussion, and raise collective understanding of how child marriage harms children— involving knowledgeable figures within the Hmong society to dispute traditional beliefs and practices. Create educational material for ethnic minorities that is culturally relevant and translated into their languages. Including bilingual resources and traditional practices in educational content can provide translation to improve comprehension and help the message resonate. The increase in collaboration between local authorities and campaigning organizations promotes proactive law enforcement efforts by local governance and requires sustained monitoring and reporting systems that achieve compliance with national policies. The program implementation focuses on advocating for gender equality through the education and training of girls, as increased access to education can cut child marriage rates (Hoang, 2020).

The introduction of economic programs that provide financial support for families mitigates the economic burdens driving child marriage. Programs supporting sustainable livelihood initiatives can help reduce poverty and the perceived need for early marriage.

## 5. Conclusion

An analysis of the research paper on child marriage among ethnic minorities in Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, highlights underlying socio-cultural drivers as well as economic determinants. The results illustrate that, despite substantial governmental interventions and community mobilization to address child marriage, the issue is still salient among ethnic minority groups. The cultural traditions and economic factors within the region support early marriage as an initiatory practice, especially among ethnic minorities such as Hmong. The situation feeds into the pervasive generational poverty being maintained by intergenerational early marriage, in part driven by girls dropping out of school.

The study shows significant disparities between the genders, with girls more likely to be married early on and regarded as temporary members of their families. Meanwhile, patriarchal norms in these communities mean early marriage continues to be seen as a viable option for girls (or, at worst, their families), with the result that they are robbed of any opportunity to develop personally or professionally. The consequences of this gender bias—both in the lives of individuals and ultimately in community development and economic growth across the region—are detrimental.

Studies show that education has a significant impact on decreasing child marriage rates. Educational interventions in the form of girl-centric education and community-level programs intended to raise awareness of the importance of education have certainly become necessary. Such policy implications include enforcing existing laws, improving educational opportunities, and empowering girls economically. Longitudinal research and qualitative studies are needed to benchmark the effectiveness of interventions over time, especially with boys as well as girls affected by child marriage. It is important to understand why men marry early; then, it will help in developing gender-specific interventions that address the problem at its root cause.

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