Socio-cultural Norms and Gender Equality of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam

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Abstract

Background Thirty years ago, Vietnam was a poor low-income country; since then, it has accomplished remarkable achievements in socio-economic development, not least in its high rate of poverty reduction. But cultural stereotypes remain a root cause of inequality for women and girls, forming a barrier to accessing opportunities in education, health care, and in receiving equal treatment.

Methodology This paper used a variety of methods, including a literature review of cultural stereotypes and gender equality and a survey of gender equality for ethnic minorities covering 2894 households by IFGS in 2019. It analyzed the correlation between different variables, including gender, ethnicity, family type, parents' perception about opportunities for ethnic minority girls for schooling, health care, and equality of treatment. In addition, this article uses material from qualitative data collected from 15 in-depth interviews and life stories.

Results Traditional gender stereotypes are a major obstacle to achieving gender equality for women and girls. Customs and cultural practices ground prejudices against women and girls in the perception of numerous ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Being perceived as the breadwinner for their family, ethnic women have to participate in the labor force, in addition to taking care of other family members. Furthermore, they lack opportunities to communicate outside their small community. Therefore, in some ethnic minorities, there is a high rate of girls experiencing child marriage, and early pregnancies are more likely; this significantly affects their development and results in negative consequences for nutrition and maternal and child health care. In addition, girls who have an early marriage to satisfy their parents' desire have to drop out of school and limit their social interactions. Different causes, such as limited awareness, attachment to traditional beliefs, and parents' prejudice (that schooling is prioritized for boys), have locked adolescent girls into a vicious circle of child marriage and school dropout. This is also the reason for the high illiteracy rate of ethnic minority women in Vietnam.

Conclusions Traditional stereotyped gender perceptions have become major barriers to the development of ethnic minority girls and women in Vietnam. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy stem from the notion that girls do not need to be educated, but should join the workforce as early as possible and take care of their families; the result is a wide range of negative consequences, including keeping girls away from school and social interaction. Ethnic minority women have a high rate of illiteracy and social communication constraints, leading to their poor access to health care services. The spiral of gender inequality toward ethnic minority girls and women in Vietnam is still ongoing as parents' perceptions have not changed. Ethnic minority girls and women continue to be marginalized by the barriers of gender stereotypes and traditional culture.

Keywords Gender norms · Reproductive health · Female adolescents · Child marriage · Ethnic minorities in Vietnam

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Introduction

Social norms are examined in terms of the difference between social beliefs and social expectations. Social norms are conditionally constructed based on social expectations in different cultures and maintained by expectations based on experiences and conditional rules in each specific society [1]. In research on gender inequality related to social norms, it was found that opinions or perceptions about female gender roles gradually become social norms and accordingly turned into the women's own responsibilities and obligations to their families. Therefore, social norms become informal rules which control behaviors in groups and society and are varied and diverse in different cultures [2]. The model of expected behaviors, possibly norms, may become rules of a social group that their members should follow. The rules particularly govern traditional opinions of local religions and customs.

Anthropologists who studied sources of gender inequality, under the historical, anthropological perspective, believed that women were always considered inferior to, dependent on, and servile to men due to the characteristics of the wealth production in which men had more important roles [10, 13]. In addition, women lost their role as major producers and control over the products of their labor, thus [becoming more dependent on] men and gradually losing their supremacy in the public environment [12: 629]. In many countries, most women and girls have inferior positions to men and boys, which can result in exclusion from social and political participation [12]. Thousands of years ago, women became economically and socially dependent on a wide range of social conditions and nations in various regions of the world. Therefore, women's position was idealized, and their responsibilities of caring for husbands and children were considered compulsory. Women's labor in the household was seen as a "gift" to the husbands and children, so women's labor was cheaply valued [14: 629–639].

Studying female adolescents, Mead believed that the stress of adolescence was caused by cultural factors rather than biological forces [14]. Such cultural factors can be seen in the customs and social prejudices that have become moral stereotypes for communities. These norms are harmful to children, particularly girls, where child marriage has severe consequences, not only in cases of compulsory marriage but also where marriage is voluntary, and even when there has been prior awareness of the situation. These social norms inevitably have serious consequences for children. Gender norms have wide-ranging significance for the concept of what a woman is and what a girl is, in a particular culture [2]. Such norms are deeply rooted and hard to change and are silently accepted by most community members. They commonly influence daily lives, serving as a basis for personal adjustment [11]. Research on the diversity and influence of social norms on health-related practices has included child marriage practices, healthcare interventions, and principles that have become standards of moral rules, traditional customs, and community rumors. All these factors seem clear to influence social norms [3, 4].

Vietnam is a multi-ethnicity and multi-cultural country that has only recently left poverty behind; people's lives remain difficult. Eastern cultural norms based on Confucian ideology have had a significant influence on the rights of freedom and decision-making for women and girls. In addition, ethnic minority men are considered to have the role of a superior within the family, while a woman's role involves responsibilities and obligations to care for all members of the family [6] . These roles have become norms or rules in many patriarchal communities. The ideology has strongly influenced the awareness and behavior of ethnic minority women and girls, depriving them of the confidence to integrate into society and enjoy access to social services, limiting their own development opportunities.

The gender perspective of social exclusion determines its influence on the development opportunities of women, boys, and girls. Also, root causes of social exclusion can be more clearly seen; this is particularly so over cultural reasons, such as the social standards and values of women and men [15]. It is very clear that gender-based discrimination will form socially excluded groups [16]. Cultural norms or cultural customs of some ethnic minorities seem to result in social exclusion, preventing community members, particularly women and girls, from participating in social activities during the course of their development; these have formed huge challenges to equity and development. Thus, given the context of Vietnam's recent rise from poverty, although incomes remain low, it would be greatly beneficial to resolve social and cultural factors that obstruct the developmental environment, particularly for poor households and ethnic minority children, who are struggling to meet social demands, and become left behind during the course of their development [25: 146–147].

Methodology

Data Sources

The first data source was from the census conducted every 10 years across Vietnam (2019) and from the national survey of 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam conducted in 2015. The second data source was from a household survey conducted by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies (IFGS) in Vietnam in 2018 and 2019. The survey allows

the Government of Vietnam to form appropriate policies to promote gender equality among ethnic minorities, as well as inform sustainable development in Vietnam.

Vietnam's ethnic minorities can be divided into two groups having traditional cultural characteristics of patriarchy or matriarchy. The second survey selected 10 ethnic groups, of which 6 are patriarchal, mainly residing in the northern mountainous region, and 4 are matriarchal, mainly residing in the region of Central Highlands and Southwest of Vietnam. The survey size was 2894 people. They are representatives of households in 8 provinces in the Northern mountainous regions, the Central region, the Central Highlands, and the Southern region.

The ethnic groups selected in the survey sample include Tay, Thai, Nung, Muong, Hmong, Dao, and Khmu, representing ethnic groups under the patriarchy system mainly in mountainous provinces in North and North Central regions, and Ta oi, Co tu, Cham, Khmer, and Ede, representing ethnic groups under the matriarchy system mainly in southern Vietnam.

Data Collection

We made contact with the participants, and if they agreed, the interview was carried out. The face-to-face interview was conducted at the respondent's house in Vietnamese or the appropriate local language. Interviews took place in participants' houses to help them feel comfortable and be more able to share personal information. In those cases where the participant only had their own ethnic language, a translator of the same ethnicity as the participant helped us by translating it into Vietnamese.

In-depth interview questions focused on issues such as decision-making in the family, relevant concepts, perceptions of the customs and habits of their ethnic group in the context of patriarchy or matriarchy, and the impact of these cultural dimensions on child marriage, and on marriage and the family.

Study Instruments and Measurements

The household questionnaire was designed to assess gender equality in Vietnam, including questions related to social-cultural norms and reproductive health behavior. The independent variables in the analysis included ethnicity, gender, and type of household. The dependent variables include marriage status, family decision-making power, and position in the family. Quantitative data were analyzed using "crosstab" multivariable correlation on software SPSS 20.0.

Table 1 Desire for child's gender at birth by cultural group

Ethnicity	Having a son is a must***	Having a girl is a must***	N
Patriarchy group			
Dao	56.5	14.5	200
Nung	25.7	10.9	175
Thai	44.0	29.6	250
Hmong	51.8	24.7	442
Kho mu	62.6	41.9	155
Ta Oi	30.6	12.9	124
Matriarchy group			
Xo Dang	27.3	20.0	220
E de	24.3	55.3	226
Cham	25.6	65.2	250
Khmer	29.6	25.6	250

Cells are in percentages, $N = 2894$. Source: IFGS, 2018, survey on gender equality in ethnic minority regions

*** $p < 0.001$

Results

Ethno-cultural Gender Stereotypes which Orient Child Education Within the Family

Ethnic minority children in Vietnam are disadvantaged due to difficulties in socio-economic and geographical conditions. In addition, the socio-cultural environment erects other barriers to their development in the form of customs, and of the customary laws or norms of their families and ethnic communities.

According to the customs of many ethnic minorities in Vietnam, each person in their community receives, from their birth, and throughout their upbringing, the teaching of all family members, but particularly so from the elderly, parents, and older siblings. There is clear discrimination in teaching methods for boys and girls, whereas boys are allowed to do specific chores such as getting water, buffalo herding, grass cutting, wood collection, or hunting; girls have to undertake a whole range of family tasks. Girls are taught at a very young age to do household chores, including family care such as laundry, cleaning, cooking, and family food production that may include pig or poultry breeding, gardening, and farming. This discrimination in teaching shapes girls' early awareness of their responsibilities to take care of family, even sacrificing their study or play to save all their time for household tasks. *Girls are normally taught by their grandmothers, mothers, or older sisters to do these chores and shown appropriate attitudes to adopt; their mentors also assign to them their daily chores.* During their housework, ethnic minority girls are taught to show the attitude of a hard-working person, who does not avoid

family chores. Table 1 below shows that ethnic minorities in Vietnam want boys more than girls.

The Hmong are typical of patriarchal ethnic groups in Vietnam with a clear ideology that fathers should be the heads of the family, responsible for shouldering family activities, particularly wedding and funeral ceremonies. Therefore, the man's role in the family is always pivotal, and the decision-making power belongs to the man. Following the Hmong belief that "man is the tower of strength for the whole family" with the implication that the man is always the breadwinner and has the highest decision-making power in all family activities, it follows that Hmong women are completely dependent on their spouse. There is a saying, "women-led families are poor," with the implication that a woman cannot be the family leader. The Hmong believe girls are only good for household chores, and when a girl gets married, she is no longer helpful to her birth family or maybe only helps her parents for a while, while a son helps his parents for a lifetime [7, 17]. Having given birth to a daughter, parents must teach her to be good at embroidery, farming, and cooking so that she can get married soon. Hmong people believe that "a fat pig looks good but an adult girl looks bad." Therefore, when a girl becomes an adolescent, Hmong people normally wish her to get married soon [8:33–36]. Hmong communities always highly endorse the social norms, which assume that girls must bear an excessive volume of household chores and farming activities; that they cannot finish high school even if they wish to; and that doing so would significantly reduce their social value in marriage and affect their mothering skills [25]. Adolescent girls, in particular, as the future mothers of the next generation, offer a unique opportunity for a double return on investment – the future well-being of their children, as well as themselves [25].

The Dao ethnic group also follows patriarchy which is clearly reflected in the ranking of family members. In a family, the husband has all the decision-making powers, while the wife normally follows his decisions, and children comply with their parents' decisions. Within family relationships, there is certain in interactions, and boys and girls are treated differently. In particular, a daughter-in-law must keep a strict social distance from other men in the family. In this way, she is expected to isolate herself and be obedient to all opinions and wishes of other men in the family. Female-initiated divorce is especially prohibited and, according to Dao custom, is considered a sin. Once married, women completely rely on their husbands and the husbands' families. Girls are only provided with jewelery for their dowry, after which they are considered the main laborers in the family and have no right to make decisions on family affairs. Being skilled at tailoring and farming are commonly key elements influencing opinion formation in the Dao community. Accordingly,

parents focus on inducing a work orientation among their children, particularly for girls [1: 210–217].

The Thai ethnic group is similar to other members of the Tay-Thai language group in Vietnam. They place relatively less emphasis on boys and make the teaching of girls a greater concern. Thai custom requires that women must take care of their households, which includes farming, weaving, and other tasks of family care, while also teaching their daughters. Adult Thai girls are expected to be masters of household chores, competent at embroidering and weaving, and have prepared a sufficiency of homemade gifts for her husband's family when she gets married [18]. From a very ea rly age, a Thai girl has to work hard to prove that she is a capable and skillful woman. Becoming a good, obedient, and hard-working girl requires the influence of her family's complex education method; this is a function of "seven-level relatives" whereby she is taught by her paternal grandmother, maternal grandmother, mother and aunts, both blood relatives, and in-law relatives. [5: 288].

Child Marriage, Early Marriage and Early Pregnancy as the Causes of Malnutrition in Both Mothers and Children; School Dropout; and the Loss of Developmental and Social Inclusion Opportunities for Girls

Although Vietnamese ethnic minorities have diverse cultural characters, they generally favor having sons and a large number of children; this leads to their desire for children to marry young. Additionally, in some cases, girls are forced into child marriage because of traditional customs; furthermore, men look down on women, consider them inferior, fail to respect women's rights, and always want to control their lives [24]. Early marriage is viewed as a way of having more labor to support family earnings. It is believed that a man should "marry a wife to have a laborer on the farm and to make clothes for his parents" or "choose a wife since she is a young girl, who is good at farming and making clothes" [7]. On the other hand, choosing a person for early marriage to avoid public ridicule is strongly preferred by various ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Thus, marriage of girls under 18 years old originated from gender discrimination, encouragement to early and continuous child-bearing, and the prioritizing of education and opportunities for boys is considered the social norm in certain regions [19, 20]. This kind of influence toward child marriage, by customs and socio-economic development level, is common among various ethnic groups [23]. The 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in Vietnam revealed a doubling of the percentage of girls, between 15 and 19 years of age, getting married, going from 5.4% in 2006 to 10.3% in 2014, showing an increasing trend toward child marriage [21, 22].

Table 2 Number and percentage of ethnic minority children (under 16) being married in 2014 by gender and ethnicity

No	Ethnicity	Ethnic minority children (under 16) entering marriage (number of people)	
		Total	Male
	Country average	2.991	685
1	Hmong	1.262	463
2	Thai	459	0
3	Dao	264	143
4	Khmer	189	4
5	Gia Rai	174	11
6	Ba Na	120	16

Source: Vietnam General Statistics Office, Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs, socio-economic survey of 53 ethnic minorities, 2015

minorities (including O Du, Hmong, Xinh Mun, and La Ha) showed over 50% of the couples married in 2014 were early marriages, and a further 12 ethnic minorities had 30–40% of their marriages as early marriages – most of these being in the Northern mountainous region. Son La province was among the provinces with a particularly high rate of young married girls; there were 608 out of 734 children (under 18) getting married in 2014 [9].

The early marriage resulted in an exceptionally high adolescent birth rate in ethnic minority groups, particularly in the Northern mountainous region. Vietnam's adolescent birth rate was 45/1000 women ages 15–19 in 2014. The adolescent pregnancy rate is much higher in rural areas than that in urban areas, and it is highest in the Northern mountainous region, where the rate is nearly three times higher than that of other regions [21]. This is a consequence of early marriage practices that still exist in local ethnic minorities. In the IFGS survey sample of 2894 households covering eight

Table 3 Age at marriage as a percentage of those currently married within each group by gender and ethnicity. Unit: % ($N=2894$)

Ethnic	N	Male				Female			
		Under 16 years old	16–18 years old	19–20 years old	Over 20 years old	Under 16 years old	16–18 years old	19–20 years old	Over 20 years old
Tay	59	0	5.1	13.6	81.4	0	13.2	25.3	61.5
Dao	134	0	20.1	29.9	50.0	0	31.8	34.8	33.3
Nung	92	0	18.5	22.8	58.7	1.2	26.5	25.3	47.0
Thai	118	1.7	13.6	21.2	63.6	8.3	43.9	17.4	30.3
Muong	138	0	2.9	14.5	82.6	0	13.4	28.6	58.0
Hmong	218	5.5	38.1	32.1	24.3	5.8	55.8	25.4	12.9
Khmu	75	9.3	29.3	25.3	36.0	33.8	48.8	12.5	5.0
Co Tu	49	0	6.1	20.4	73.5	2.2	24.4	26.7	46.7
Ta Oi	57	1.8	3.5	15.8	78.9	0	34.8	25.8	39.4
Xo dang	99	0	9.1	36.4	54.5	0.8	33.9	34.7	30.6
E de	98	0	8.2	19.4	72.4	2.3	32.0	28.9	36.7
Cham	114	0	5.3	12.3	82.5	0	18.4	30.1	51.5
Khmer	111	0	0.9	15.3	83.8	0.7	19.4	16.5	63.3

Source: IFGS, survey results in eight provinces, study on fundamental gender equality issues in ethnic minority regions of Vietnam, 2018

According to a national survey on Vietnamese women and children, early marriage has tended to be more common recently with lower marriage ages. Early marriage has been a significant barrier and challenge to the development of ethnic minority children, particularly girls. Ethnic groups with a high rate of early marriage are usually coupled with a high rate of poverty, and a low rate of girls enrolling at schools. The contrast in the rate of early marriage (under 18) for ethnic minorities (9.2%) compared to the Kinh ethnic majority (23.1%) is striking (Table 2) [8, 21].

According to a socio-economic survey of 53 ethnic minorities by the General Statistic Office, six ethnic

provinces in 2018, cases of relatively early marriages (under than 15 years old, particularly girls) were found in some ethnic minorities (Table 3).

The traditional custom of early marriage has significantly influenced the perception of young people at marriage age. According to some ethnic minority views, an unmarried girl at the age of 17 or 18 is considered unable to get married, and a boy has to look for a wife early so as to get a helping hand for his parents. In addition, households are now economically stronger, so preparing wedding presents no longer imposes the same pressure on

boys and girls of 14 to 15 years old wishing to look for a spouse. Therefore, early marriages are still occurring, with no sign of decrease, in many ethnic minorities in the Northern mountainous regions of Vietnam. The average age of child marriage among ethnic minorities in 2018 was 17.5 years old for men and 15.8 years old for women. Child marriage among ethnic minorities was reduced in 2018 when compared to 2014, but the rate of child marriage remained high in predominantly Ethnic Minorities areas [5: 18–19]. Girls are more affected by early marriages because they become mothers at an age when their bodies have not fully developed and when they may have inadequate knowledge to raise and take care of children. The burden of earning money has caused a relatively large number of girls in many ethnic minorities to drop out of school. This repeated cycle has made it impossible for both boys and girls in the ethnic minority to exit poverty, in particular preventing them from gaining the knowledge and understanding require to change work and to escape their current agro-forestry production activities.

Ethnic Minority Women and Girls Have not Had Full Access to Healthcare Services During Their Pregnancy and Birth Delivery

In healthcare, maternal and infant health in ethnic minority regions has attracted considerable research interest. A number of researchers have found that while almost pregnant Kinh women get at least four check-ups during. In addition to factors such as lower educational level, poorer living standards, access to health services, differences in the effects of psychological shame, and difficulties with the Kinh language have together contributed to hesitancy among ethnic minority females to go for pregnancy check-ups [19]. Home delivery has been the birth choice for a number of ethnic minority groups, with 30.7% of such women giving birth at home, compared with 0.5% of Kinh women [9, 23].

Due to ethnic practices and customs, birth delivery at home has commonly been found in some ethnic minorities residing in mountainous regions including Hmong, Lo Lo, Ha Nhi, Phu La, and La Hu. Twenty ethnic minorities record over 50% home delivery, and it was as high as 90% among the La Ha, La Hu, Si la, Lu, and Mang. The combination of missing pregnancy check-ups, failure of monitoring at health facilities, and home delivery has resulted in a remarkably high rate of maternal mortality during pregnancy and birth-giving among ethnic minority females. The average maternal mortality rate nationwide is 299 per 100,000 living births. The comparable rate in Northern mountainous provinces is Dien Bien 676, Lai Chau 459, Gia Lai 369, Son La, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai (estimated) 333 per 100,000 living births [15].

Malnutrition Significantly Affects Health and Development of Ethnic Minority Women and Girls

Due to many barriers during pregnancy and delivery, malnutrition among ethnic minority females was alarming, particularly during their pregnancy and nursing. The rate of low-weight births (weighing less than 2 kg) in ethnic minorities was 8.1% of living births, compared with 5.2% of births to Kinh mothers. Some ethnic minority mothers do not have the knowledge and skills to weigh their children during infancy (14.6% compared with 8.7% of Kinh mothers). In the Northern Midland, and in the mountainous regions, 6.2% of living births weighed less than 2.5 kg at birth, compared with 5.7% of all Vietnamese children [9, 23].

Malnutrition is prevalent in the Northern mountainous region and the Western Central region, where the malnutrition rate is highest. Survey data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2014 showed that the stunting rates among Northern mountainous children (30.7%) and Central Coastal region (34.9%) were still alarmingly high. Early marriage and pregnancy of adolescents have also contributed to increased maternal and infant mortality rates. Furthermore, low weight, stunting, and malnutrition among children have been quite common in ethnic minorities [9]. Child marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth among adolescents, a period when the mother's body is not fully developed, are associated with the lack of knowledge, experience, and psychological readiness to conceive and give birth. This affects maternal health and the normal development of the fetus and neonates. Child marriage has also led to an increase in the rate of malnutrition among ethnic minority children, an increased mortality rate among ethnic minority children under 1 year and under 5 years old, and an increased maternal mortality rate of Ethnic Minorities mothers [5: 20- 21].

Ethnic Cultural Norms Orienting Child Education in Families

According to traditional opinions of ethnic minority groups, the division of labor by gender is quite clearly determined; men have to do the heavier work such as chopping down trees, land clearance, plowing, building houses, forging tools, and hunting. Women take responsibility for important production phases such as sowing, land management, planting of vegetables, harvesting, preserving of harvested crops, and general chores. Adult girls may provide a helping hand to their mothers in getting water, tending buffaloes, collecting firewood, and babysitting. They participate in all fields of domestic and farming work which are unpaid or low-paid. In agricultural work, they are in charge of all steps, including plowing, and take key responsibility for livestock production as it is not considered commercial work, but rather a type

of "housework" or "extra work." Women also have to fetch water and collect mushrooms and vegetables in the forest to feed their families [7].

Thus, the traditional gender stereotype is clearly transmitted in the way children are educated on matters of labor and career orientation by their parents. It has always been believed that girls have to learn to work hard and master home production and caring for the family. Girls normally have to work harder than boys because boys have to do the "heavy" work, while girls do "light" work; succinctly, "men build houses, women build homes" (Table 4).

The 2019 Population and Housing Census[1] shows a high illiteracy rate among ethnic minority women in Vietnam. While the national illiteracy rate is 5.31%, the illiteracy rate for ethnic minority women is 26.56%. In some ethnic minorities, the illiteracy rate of women is even higher; for example, among the Hmong, it is 66.36%, and for the Gia Rai, it is 49.54%. There is a significant difference in illiteracy rates between ethnic minority men and women (Table 5). Illiteracy and inability to speak the common language (Vietnamese) lead to various disadvantages for ethnic minority women such as limiting interactions with society, poorer access to information outside their family, and a relative paucity of both general knowledge and child rearing.

Cultural stereotypes have become rules or principles in child education in the family. Gender-based and cultural stereotype-based education has formed children's characters, making girls shy and timid in communicating with people outside the community, and not daring to make decisions, even about issues related to their own areas of expertise.

"I has been taught by my mom and grand mom since I was small, that I had to know how to do farm-work, and to make nice clothes to get married early. I would have preferred to go school but my grand mom and mom said schooling did not help in teaching farm-work. When I got married, my husband told me stop going to school, and I had to stay home to help my parents-in-law with cattle and pig breeding" (depth-interview, Girl Hmong Ethnic, 14 years old, Ha Giang province). The patriarchal stereotypes held by people in ethnic minorities in Vietnam require that boys study more than girls, particularly at high school level and above. The main reason is that the household representatives think that girls only need to finish (at most) secondary school, and that learning farmwork, cattle and poultry management, and taking care of the family are more important matters. Boys are to become providers for their families and therefore need to learn more in order to more readily obtain jobs. In recent years, the view of parents who prioritize learning for sons over daughters has changed thanks to the impact

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[1] Population and Housing Census, Vietnam General Statistics Office, April 1, 2019.

Table 4 Orientation toward education considered by three independent variables: cultural norm, national language use, parents' educational level (cells show percentages)

	Degree of evaluation		
	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
Boys should study more than girls			
Cultural norm*			
Patriarchy	26.9	13.8	59.3
Matriarchy	32.9	12.2	55.8
Use of national language***			
Proficient	21.9	11.3	66.8
Relatively proficient	34.4	15.2	50.4
Not proficient	36.8	17.0	46.2
Education level***			
Illiteracy	37.2	16.5	46.4
Primary school	35.8	14.9	49.4
Junior high school	26.8	13.1	60.1
High school	16.1	10.4	73.6
Boys are more inclined to technical training			
Cultural norm***			
Patriarchy	47.1	13.4	39.5
Matriarchy	59.0	15.6	25.3
Use of national language***			
Proficient	45.6	11.4	43.0
Relatively proficient	56.9	16.3	26.8
Not proficient	48.6	18.3	33.1
Education level***			
Illiteracy	48.7	17.6	33.8
Primary school	56.9	16.3	26.8
Junior high school	50.1	11.8	38.1
High school	44.0	12.0	44.0
Boys have better learning ability than girls			
Cultural norm			
Patriarchy	19.1	12.8	68.2
Matriarchy	16.0	12.8	71.2
Use of national language***			
Proficient	13.1	8.9	78.0
Relatively proficient	23.0	16.3	60.7
Not proficient	26.7	19.0	54.3
Education level***			
Illiteracy	30.7	17.6	51.7
Primary school	22.1	16.8	61.1
Junior high school	16.4	11.0	72.6
High school	8.6	7.5	83.9
When families are in economic difficulties, priority should be given to boys' education			
Cultural norm*			
Patriarchy	28.2	11.9	59.9
Matriarchy	22.9	13.0	64.0
Use of national language***			
Proficient	21.5	9.0	69.5
Relatively proficient	30.9	16.0	53.2

Table 4 (continued)

	Degree of evaluation		
	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree
Not proficient	37.6	14.5	47.9
Education level***			
Illiteracy	38.2	16.2	45.6
Primary school	31.5	15.2	53.2
Junior high school	25.9	10.9	63.2
High school	15.7	7.9	76.4

Source: IFGS, 2018, survey on gender equality in ethnic minority regions

$^{*}p < 0.1$

$^{***}p < 0.001$

Table 5 Illiteracy rate of ethnic populations by gender (15 years old +) (%)

Ethnicity	Illiteracy rate	
	Total	Male
Total	5.82	3.56
Kinh	3.82	2.19
Gia Rai	40.93	31.60
La Ha	42.47	27.25
La Chi	42.48	29.05
Ra-glai	45.09	38.62
Lo Lo	45.18	34.88
Ha Nhi	49.07	34.48
Co Lao	49.82	37.39
Hmong	51.12	35.80
Brau	51.84	38.62
Mang	56.01	44.39
Lu	57.15	38.13
La Hu	65.20	55.93

Source: Vietnam General Statistics Office, Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs, socio-economic survey of 53 ethnic minorities, 2019

of development and significant levels of support from the Government. Today, more girls than ever are enrolled in school; however, there remains a significant proportion of girls who are at risk of school dropout, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy.

Conclusion

Gender inequality has deep roots in the cultural stereotypes of ethnic minorities. Gender stereotypes have become perceptions and habits in the daily life of ethnic minorities; accordingly, ethnic, cultural stereotypes have been associated with barriers to the development of ethnic girls and

women in Vietnam. Due to gender stereotypes in customs and traditions, ethnic girls and women are exposed to high pressures in their lives. In the ethnic parents' concept, boys are always in a position of being valued and given priority to develop over girls, regardless of their ethnic groups' social ideology – patriarchy or matriarchy.

Child marriage is still quite common among ethnic minorities. The rate of child marriage in minorities subscribing to patriarchy is higher than that of those favoring matriarchy. In this study, child marriage is more common among Mong, Khmu, Thai, and Xo Dang, as well as in the ethnic groups with very small populations. The essential reason for this phenomenon is the need to have an heir and the need for people to undertake the work involved in running a family. Child marriage not only has a great influence not only on the reproductive health of girls but also negatively affects the psychological and physical development of children in general.

A clear manifestation of cultural stereotypes and gender prejudices against women and girls is the prevalence of child marriage within certain ethnic minorities. In order to achieve their desire for the early marriage of their children, many parents force their children to marry at a very young age. Teenage girls have to marry when their bodies are physiologically immature, and they are not always psychologically mature enough to cope with pregnancy. As a consequence of child marriage, girls have to drop out of school and lose their future development. Moreover, the risk of malnutrition affects the reproductive health and physical development of both mothers and babies.

Opportunities for girls are strongly dependent on their parent's levels of understanding. The education level attained, and the use of the national language, by parents affect the parent's decisions about sending their children to school, or forcing them into adolescence marriage. The illiteracy that is passed down from mother to daughter leads to a significant proportion of illiterate ethnic women. The vicious cycle of gender inequality continues with girls who are still dropping out of school and are required to marry while still having children. These factors help us provide an explanation of why ethnic minority women and girls in Vietnam are still being left behind, living on the margins of development.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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