

SITUATION ANALYSIS ON EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN TWO PROVINCES OF NORTHERN LAOS

A REPORT



Couples who married under 18 in Huaphanh Province (Photo: Nouka Moua, 2019)

Researcher: Didier Bertrand, PhD Cultural Psychology

2020

Supported By:
The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)



Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	I
ACRONYMS	II
1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
1.1 IMPACT OF MARRIAGE ON YOUTHS' LIVES.....	2
1.2 KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.....	2
1.3 MARRIED YOUTHS' LEVEL OF SATISFACTION.....	3
1.4 UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION TO MARRY.....	4
1.5 THE DECISION WHETHER TO CONTINUE EDUCATION	5
2 RECOMMENDATIONS	5
3 CONCLUSION.....	6
4 INTRODUCTION	7
4.1 BRIEF DESK REVIEW ON EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE.....	7
4.2 LAO CONTEXT OF ECM.....	8
4.3 CHILD FUND LAOS AND ECM	9
5.1 RATIONALE	9
5.2 RESEARCH METHODS AND TOOLS.....	9
5.3 ETHICS	10
5.4 RISKS AND LIMITATIONS.....	11
5.5 DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE	12
6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS & ANSWERS.....	12
6.1 IMPACT OF MARRIAGE ON YOUTH'S LIVES.....	12
6.2 KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.....	14
6.3 MARRIED YOUTHS' LEVEL OF SATISFACTION.....	16
6.4 UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION TO MARRY.....	19
6.5 THE DECISION WHETHER TO CONTINUE EDUCATION	25
7 RECOMMENDATIONS	26
7.1 THE POTENTIAL TO CHANGE.....	26
7.2 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	27
7.3 MOBILISING VILLAGE AUTHORITIES, CLAN LEADERS, AND SHAMANS.....	28
7.4 MOBILISING YOUTH ACTIVISTS	28
7.5 EDUCATING YOUTH.....	28
7.6 EMPOWERING GIRLS	29
7.7 COMMUNICATING MESSAGES OF CHANGE.....	29
7.8 ADOLESCENT REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH	30
8 CONCLUSION.....	30
9 ANNEXES	33
9.1 SAMPLE	33
9.2 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA	34
9.3 CHARTS AND TABLES.....	34
9.4 RESEARCH TOOLS AND INTERVIEW GRID	36
9.5 KAP QUESTIONS.....	36

9.6	STATISTICS ON EARLY MARRIAGE IN LAO PDR	37
9.7	ETHNIC HMONG MARRIAGE TRADITIONS.....	37
9.8	PARENTS RECALL: CHANGES IN AGE AND DECISION MAKING FOR ECM	39
9.9	SHORT CASE STUDIES	39
9.10	HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MARRIAGE	43
9.11	GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON ELIMINATING ECM	43
9.12	SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	44
9.13	REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD LAO PDR, Nov 2018: ECM	45
9.15	GIRLS' AND BOYS' NARRATIVES RELATED TO KIDNAPPING	46
9.16	REGIONAL STATISTICS ON ECM	47
9.17	LIST OF SUICIDE CASES IN COMMUNITIES	47
REFERENCES		49

Acknowledgements

This assessment would not have been possible without the full support and participation of many people.

Special thanks are due to the district authorities, all of whom welcomed and organised our field work, as well as the health authorities at the district and village health centre levels and the representatives of mass organisations, who answered all of our questions.

We are very grateful to representatives of the district education and agriculture services, who came along with us all during the fieldwork and introduced us to the village authorities.

Many thanks are also due to all the village committee members, married children, and parents or grandparents of married children who gave their time to provide us with valuable information.

The enthusiastic Youth Monitors from the LECA project greatly supported us with data collection for this research, as well as organising meetings with informants and co-organising our agenda for the villages in Huameuang District.

I am also grateful for the sincere commitment of Senior MEL Officer Mr. Chasy Somwhang, who provided continuous and invaluable support while sharing his knowledge and understanding of Hmong culture. I would also like to thank the ChildFund project management team in Vientiane for their cheerful and expert guidance.

Thank you to Ms. Nouka Moua, junior Hmong consultant, who offered great support and insight in the field and facilitated relations with organisations & communities while also co-leading interviews and group discussions, all while translating from Hmong to Lao or English. This work would not have been possible without her.

Mrs. Phaivanh Changnakham, Program Quality and Evaluation Manager (PQEM) at ChildFund Laos, who provided constant and close support and advice to the team, and guided the writing process, enriching it with very interesting insights.

Finally, thanks to Ms. Casey Morrison (ChildFund Laos Senior Program Development and Inclusion Officer), who diligently and extensively revised and edited this report.

ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child/ Committee on the Rights of the Child
ECM	Early Child Marriage
EFCM	Early and Forced Child Marriage
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices
LSIS	Lao Social Indicators Survey
LWU	Lao Women's Union
LYU	Lao Youth Union
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child marriage or Early Child Marriage (ECM) occurs when one or both spouses are below the age of 18. Both international declarations (including CEDAW and CRC) and national law in the Lao PDR (Family Law 1990) declare that in most situations, marriage below the age of 18 is not permissible. Yet ECM in Laos remains at one of the highest rates in the region, with one in three adult Lao women having gotten married below the age of 18 (LSIS 2017). The median age at marriage for women in Laos is stable at 19.2 years, but differs by ethnicity, and drops to 17.5 years in the Hmong-Mien ethnic group¹.

Marrying at a young age has been found to put children at risk of multiple social and health consequences, including limiting educational attainment and economic opportunities, putting children at risk of violence and abuse, and increasing the chance of high-risk adolescent pregnancies². Such marriages may also violate certain rights prescribed for children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Yet in spite of these troubling social consequences, little research has so far been done on the topic of child marriage in the Lao PDR. Doing such research is especially important because there is reason to suspect that the context surrounding marriage in Laos could differ from that in other countries; for instance while most countries with high rates of early marriage show older men marrying younger women, the ages of early married children in Lao PDR tend to be quite close³.

The aim of this study is to provide an analysis of the situation of a group of youth in ChildFund Laos' partner villages who married early, and more precisely, to find out the processes by which ECM is happening and the causes and consequences of such unions.

Based on the research Terms of Reference (TOR), the goal of this situation analysis was to collect a breadth of information on ECM in the targeted villages, guided by the following objectives:

1. Collect basic demographic data on people in ChildFund target villages who married before age 18.
2. Identify how marriage both positively and negatively impacted the youth's lives.
3. Evaluate young married couples' knowledge, attitudes and practices on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
4. Determine the youth's level of satisfaction with their marriage and the decision to marry.
5. Understand who the most important decision-makers were in determining whether the youth would marry and why they made that decision.
6. Discuss with the youth the decision they and other involved parties took about whether or not to continue their educations, why they made the decision they did, and if they are happy with that decision.
7. Provide recommendations on how findings from the research can be used to help youth involved in ChildFund programs to make well-informed decisions about their relationships and future.

Methodology and data collection

This study relied primarily on qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in order to collect a wealth of in-depth information about a limited number of early marriage cases. In addition to allowing for the collection of a wide breadth of data, using qualitative methods was on the whole deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions (such as those about satisfaction and decision-making processes). A short KAP questionnaire was also used to collect information about married adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding sexual and

¹ Population Situation Analysis: LAO PDR: p 4.

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/14/q-child-marriage-and-violations-girls-rights>

³ World Vision International, 2019 Gender Analysis Report p 6

reproductive health and rights (SRHR). It is important to stress that it is a short exploratory study limited in time, space and number of informants.

The study was restricted to only two villages in Khouang District (Xiangkhouang Province) and three in Houaphan District (Houaphan Province) selected by ChildFund Laos staff based on number of married youth. Of these villages, four were ethnically Hmong, while the final village had a mixed population, with Lao, Phong and Khmu ethnic groups, as well as a few Hmong.

Sample

- 45 married youth (21 female and 24 male), representing 25 households, were interviewed for this study.
 - Average age at time of marriage was 15 years for girls and 18 for boys.
 - 2/3 of girls were married at 15 or 16, with only three married before 15.
 - Over half of boys married before 18, and four married at 14-15 years old.
 - Current age for girls was between 13 and 18, for boys between 15 and 28.
- The total number of persons met, including youth, was 109 (50 female and 59 male).

1.1 Impact of marriage on youths' lives

Trying to evaluate the positive and negative impacts of ECM lead to interesting discussion but positive impact still prevails in people mind. These positive impacts sustain the motivation that would push mostly school aged kids to drop out and to engage in parenthood usually without delays.

1.1.1 Positive impacts

- Boys and parents in particular often see early marriage as a way to start adult life early, which allows the couple to begin accumulating material goods, such as a house, a motorbike, a television, etc., earlier than their peers. Many youth described staying at school as a loss of time that would not lead to improvements in quality of life.
- Having more hands for work is a positive result for the husband's parents.
- Having children at a young age was considered positive by many interviewees because young parents have more energy to raise their children, and the children will grow up sooner and be able to help with their parents' work.
- After marrying, youth can be with the person they love.
- Although there is still a degree of dependence on the husband's family, early marriage provides an opportunity to have a degree of economic independence, and may also give youth new rights associated with becoming adults.
- There is a perception that marriage may prevent social evils such as drug abuse and alcoholism.

1.1.2 Negative impacts

- **Lack of income.** Though some couples had small savings, none were economically independent, and for the most part remained dependant on the husband's family.
- **Lack of skills and knowledge.** Parents asserted that young couples still lacked life skills and professional skills, leaving them unable to take care of themselves, and dependent on parents.
- **Loss of freedom and increased constraints** associated with new adult responsibilities and expectations, as well as a pre-mature loss of childhood.

1.2 Knowledge, attitudes and practices on sexual and reproductive health

Knowledge

In general, knowledge about SRHR was limited among the young couples, and particularly girls, and married girls' levels of knowledge varied even within the same village. Knowledge about contraception and prevention of STDs was higher for men (nearly 100%, compared to 60% for women), and many of the young women were not aware of laws that guaranteed them

protection from domestic violence. The couples and the community at large appeared to lack awareness of the health risks associated with adolescent pregnancy. Although SRHR is included in Lao secondary school curriculum, the scope of the curriculum is limited and may not be open to asking questions.

Attitudes

In the communities studied, having children during adolescence was generally not seen as a problem, and families were often supportive of couples having children when they were still young. Having children soon after marriage is traditionally considered important in Hmong culture, in part as a way for the wife to show her fertility. Though some adults noted that young couples are not yet emotionally mature enough to raise children, few expressed any concerns about the physical health of adolescent mothers.

Contraception was generally seen as a topic relevant only to older married women who already have enough children, and not for young women who have just started families. Indeed, young women who purchase condoms may be seen as immoral. This, in addition to the lack of service availability, severely limits the number of young couples accessing family planning services. Additionally, most of the young couples, both women and men, agreed that women should not use contraception without permission from their husbands (80%).

Practices

More than half the young couples had already had children within their first year of marriage, with the average age of becoming a parent being 16 for girls and 20 for boys. In general, both women and men agreed that husbands did not generally force their wives to have sexual relations against their will, and most women said that they would tell someone, in most cases their families, if they experienced domestic violence.

Based on the KAP survey, none of the 19 girls and only one of the boys reported using any kind of contraceptive, however, interviews revealed that couples might indeed use some method of contraception if they did not want to have a child, such as by referring to a menstrual calendar, or by having men use a condom or withdraw for ejaculation. Utilising formal family planning services did not seem to be a common practice for any of the couples, due to lack of availability and social norms that such services are not intended for younger women. Young men in the study noted that they would like to buy condoms, but that they are not able to access and afford them. After becoming pregnant, abortion is an unlikely outcome, as it is taboo in Hmong culture and not permitted at Lao PDR public facilities, but there was one case reported among the couples interviewed.

1.3 Married youths' level of satisfaction

The majority of the youth (60%) reported being moderately happy after marriage, while one in three (31%) said that they were happy, and only a small portion (10%) were unhappy. These numbers show some variation by gender, with girls being more likely than boys to be unsatisfied in their marriage, although the percentage of youth who were happy in their marriages was almost the same for both genders. Girls who expressed low levels of satisfaction were often those whose marriages were the result of forced kidnapping, who were married into families poorer than their own, who felt they were being pushed to work too hard, and/or were missing school and their family.

Some of the youth were happy with their marriages from the start, particularly at being together with their spouse and starting a family. In contrast, there were some youth who expressed unhappiness and regret, believing that marrying early had not been a good decision. In some cases, youth expressed changes in satisfaction over time, as girls who were initially unhappy after being forced into marriage came to accept their situation and expressed satisfaction after finding that their

husbands cared for them. However, this was not true in all cases, as some girls forced into marriage continued to express unhappiness.

Reasons youth gave for satisfaction in marriage included having a close and respectful relationship with their spouse and in-laws and having adult freedoms. Reasons for dissatisfaction included high workloads and greater responsibilities, causing increases in stress and worry, and decreases in time for relaxing and spending time with friends. Reasons differed slightly by gender, but also had a lot of overlap.

1.4 Understanding the decision to marry

Three main types of marriages were found during the research, though there was some overlap between categories that made it hard to define some of the marriages as belonging in any one category. These were:

- **Self-decided marriage** (represent around half of couples in the study). These were generally love marriages, and occurred when young people made their own decision to live together.
- **Forced marriage** (about 7 cases, or just over a quarter of couples, primarily in Homxay Village). In these cases, the boys acted as primary decision makers. After meeting a girl he liked and talking to her for some time, he would arrange to kidnap the girl without asking her to marry.
- **Arranged child marriage** (one case in Homxay Village). These marriages are defined by parents making the decision for marriage on behalf of their underage children.

1.4.1 Key actors in decision-making

Youth: Whatever the influences, in most of the cases the most important decision makers were the children themselves. In the twelve or so cases of self-decided marriage, the boys and girls made the decision collaboratively, while in the seven plus cases of forced marriage it was the boys who acted as sole decision-makers without the input of their brides.

Parents: While in the past, parents might have played a primary role in selecting their children's marriage partners, this was no longer the case, as parents were rarely consulted or played any significant role in their children's early marriages. Some parents saw youths' increasing autonomy in selecting marriage partners in a positive light, seeing new marriage patterns as an opportunity for their children to be with someone they loved. In many cases, however, parents were also unhappy with their own lack of involvement; in some cases they might only be informed on short notice that their son would be coming home with a bride.

1.4.2 Gender and Inequality in Decision Making

Patterns of mutual consent in marriage decisions

In the communities studied, the role of girls as decision-makers in early marriages, and the extent to which their rights are curtailed by those marriages, are widely varied, and must be examined on a case-by-case basis to be fully understood. Extreme cases do exist, such as one 15-year-old boy who kidnapped a girl he had met the same day without asking or informing her, or on the other end, a couple who worked together at a banana plantation for over a year, fell in love, sought permission from their parents, and then married. Between these two extremes, however, girls who marry early may have a wide range of levels of involvement in the decision to marry, and differing levels of information and familiarity with their husbands-to-be prior to marriage.

About kidnapping

Kidnapping for marriage can be defined as a group of men, including the groom, coming to pick up the bride at her parent's house or in the village, usually at night. The research revealed that this practice is still common (at least 12 cases out of 25, but probably more), and that the term captures a variety

of situations that differ significantly in terms of level of involvement on the part of both the bride and parents. In the past, kidnappings were generally organised by parents, but now it is boys who typically take the initiative with their friends. Kidnapping can be organised with or without the girl's consent, and indeed some young couples who wish to marry use kidnapping as a way to do so quickly. This has a blurring effect that makes it unclear which marriages were truly consensual and which were forced, especially since the assumption of most parents and village authorities is that most kidnappings are pre-arranged by youth who have already fallen in love. On the topic of how the couple met and decided to marry, narratives from boys and girls (and their respective parents) sometimes differed.

Suicide and decision making in marriage

Extreme cases in which girls, or sometimes boys, are denied the right to choose their own marriage partner can sometimes lead to suicides. Several cases of suicide related to marriage or kidnapping were reported by those involved in the study. These suicides may occur when youth's parents do not allow them to marry someone they love, or for girls, could follow an unwanted kidnapping. The threat of suicide has an important impact on how far parents oppose their children regarding marriage, as most of the parents we met said they would not dare to deny their children's choice of marriage partner for fear of suicide.

1.4.3 Reasons for marrying young

While reasons boys and girls marry young might vary, some key reasons are given below:

- **Love.** This reason was not always expressed directly, but was discussed indirectly as a desire to be together, or not to lose the chance to marry when they could.
- **Pressures from parents** for boys to marry soon after dropping out of school.
- **Lack of interest in school.** Some youth believed that studying is worthless, and that continuing their studies would not improve their lives in anyway. After dropping out, marriage often followed soon after.
- **Feeling that marriage is a good step to take at this point in time.** For many of the youth, marriage was seen as a natural next step to take at this point in their lives.
- **Belief in fated pairings** may make some youth feel their marriage was pre-determined and inevitable.

1.5 The decision whether to continue education

Of the youth interviewed, all of them had dropped out of school prior to getting married. Most youth said they dropped out for financial reasons (more than half of both girls and boys) or to support their families (about 40% for both genders). Only a small handful said their decision to stop going to school was directly related to their decision to marry. Thus, although there is a correlation between marriage and dropping out of school, it may not be a direct, causal link. It could be that the link between marriage and school drop outs is mediated by economic factors, with poverty contributing to both school drop outs and early marriage, but further research would be needed to confirm this.

2 Recommendations

ChildFund Laos should look at developing an integrated package of social protection, community and school-based education programming, mentoring, economic opportunities, and law enforcement initiatives in order to address the underlying causes of early child marriage. Inspiring change may be challenging, however, as most of the informants in the study had traditional perspectives and were not change-oriented, instead accepting the early marriage situation as it was. Key suggestions include:

- i. **Looking for drivers of change:** It is vital to empower youth, especially teenage girls and boys, with the information and services they need to mobilise young people against forced

kidnapping and early marriage. These changes should also be promoted by local authorities responsible for child protection. Initiatives need to be tailored with care to reflect Hmong realities as well as aiming for change.

- ii. **Empowering girls with role models** to encourage them to express themselves, raise their voices and make decisions for themselves.
- iii. **Reinforcing Parenting Skills**: Addressing challenges and disconnect in the relationships between Hmong parents and their children, especially around communication.
- iv. **Access to General Education**: Increasing access to scholarships, safe dormitories, and transportation, as well as advocating for girls to stay in school, especially after M3.
- v. **Vocational education at village level**: Explore the feasibility of proposing some vocational skills training, even if they are short-term, so that youth can gain the skills to support their families at the village or village cluster level.
- vi. **Increase awareness regarding SRHR** in partnership with health authorities and village health volunteers.

Regarding advocacy, three main options could be considered:

- Mitigate harmful impact on married girls by increasing access to resources such as social support, livelihood opportunities, and family planning and maternal health services.
- Mobilise girls, boys, parents, leaders and communities to challenge discriminatory gender norms, address root causes, and create alternative social, economic and civic opportunities for girls.
- Use role models (such as famous Hmong actors) and social media to spread short movies and information to disseminate information about the risks and drawbacks of early child marriage and early pregnancy.

3 Conclusion

In Houamouang and Khoun Districts, early marriage is still happening, with adolescents entering early marriages and unions for a range of reasons and in widely varying circumstances. In our understanding, this phenomena of child marriage is a result of the pressing need for a greater family workforce in Hmong families, many of whom, now being connected to modern services such as electricity, running water, and dirt roads, have greater need for a disposable income, and may therefore have extended the land area that they use for agriculture and planting crops. Some youth quit school early because they think that school will not benefit them, and once they have dropped out, they see that the next thing they should do to is to get married so that they can become adults, please their parents, and begin accumulating wealth. Pressure and social customs are part of the decision to marry, youth are also motivated by the desire to be living with the one they love, and the fear of losing their chance at marriage and being unable to find someone new.

Although parents no longer choose their children's partners, this does not necessarily mean that the bride and groom choose each other, at least not initially. Listening to the married girls speak, it is clear to see the complexity of their marriage stories, with multiple layers of constraints placed on girls, and to some extent, boys, that lead them to taking the decision to marry at a young age, in some cases against the girls' will. However, on the whole and in spite of the challenges that early marriage brings, most of the youth reported at least moderate satisfaction with their married lives.

In terms of child protection, this study shows that children from traditional ethnic communities living in isolated rural areas also need special protection. Girls who marry early are less likely to continue their education and more likely to bear children in their teenage years than those who do not marry. Reducing early marriage and adolescent pregnancy must be a priority, but is challenging in a context where traditional practices conflict with international understanding of child rights.

4 Introduction

4.1 Brief Desk review on Early Child Marriage

Definition

Child marriage or Early Child Marriage (ECM) occurs when one or both spouses are below the age of 18. Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, marriage below 18 is not permissible under exceptional circumstances, although never below 16 years of age. In Lao PDR, the Lao Family Law 1990 mentions that the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years. However, it also stipulates that individuals may marry at 15 years in certain cases, with mutual consent from both sides and without coercion from any party or individual.

Social Repercussions of ECM

Marrying at a young age has been found to put children at risk of multiple social and health consequences, including limiting educational attainment and economic opportunities, putting children at risk of violence and abuse, and increasing the chance of high-risk adolescent pregnancies⁴. Such marriages may also violate certain rights prescribed for children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including:

- Right to education;
- Right to health and quality health services; and
- Protection against violence and child abuse.

According to UNICEF, high rates of early marriage are linked to poverty and low levels of education. Girls with no education are three times more likely to be married before their 18th birthday, compared to girls with some secondary education⁵. Even children who are in school before marrying typically do not continue their educations after marriage. In a similar vein, it has been found that child marriage limits girls' skills, resources, knowledge, social support, mobility and autonomy⁶ and may do the same to boys. These restrictions to married children's social capital may limit their future economic and vocational opportunities, contributing to the link found in the research between poverty and ECM.

Another major risk involved in ECM is the risk to physical wellbeing, particularly in the area of reproductive health⁷. ECM can contribute to various risky sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) outcomes, including the following:

- Higher adolescent fertility rates and related health consequences (Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19).
- Increases in maternal mortality, morbidity and disability, as well as infant mortality and morbidity.
- Lack of access to contraception and related services.

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/14/q-child-marriage-and-violations-girls-rights>

⁵ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Child-Marriage-and-Education-Girls-Not-Brides-August-2017.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Child-Marriage-Toolkit.pdf>

⁷ https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf

A final risk associated with ECM is that of violence against married children, especially girls. Human Rights Watch reports that married adolescent women with little education are at much higher risk of suffering from domestic violence than women who are older and better educated.

4.2 Lao Context of ECM

Apart from general statistics, there has been little research done regarding early child marriage in Lao PDR, but the existing statistics make clear that marriages in the Lao PDR are still occurring frequently at young ages. Of persons aged 20-24 years, 59% of women and 36% of men are married⁸. This puts Early Child Marriage in Laos at one of the highest rates in the region (see Annex 15).

Moreover, early marriage rates in Laos do not show clear signs of decreasing. The Lao Social Indicators Survey (LSIS) from 2017 shows that the percentage of young women (20-24) who married before 18 matches that of the overall population of women 20-49 (32.7% versus 32.8%). Furthermore, almost one in four youth (24%) currently between the ages of 15-19 are already married.⁹

Within Laos, LSIS statistics show variation across social groups regarding early marriage rates. A smaller proportion of urban youth are married compared to rural youth, especially off-road rural youth, and rates of ECM also vary by level of education and wealth quintile. One of the most significant factors that correlates with rates of ECM in Laos, however, is ethnicity. For instance, the median age at marriage for women in Laos is stable at 19.2 years, but it drops to 17.5 years in the Hmong-Mien ethnic group¹⁰.

Table on early marriage in target areas and ethnic groups in Lao PDR (Source: LSIS 2017, full table in Annex 6.5)

Age	Gender	Laos	Xieng Khouang	Huaphanh	Lao-Tai ethnolinguistic group	Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic group	Hmong-Mien ethnolinguistic group
Married before 15							
20-49	F	8%	11%	12%	6%	13%	20%
	M	5%	3%	3%	4%	5%	26%
Married before 18							
20-49	F	33%	38%	42%	27%	42%	55%
	M	13%	12%	18%	10%	16%	26%

So far there has been little research on how early marriage in Laos affects the lives of married children, so it is difficult to know whether the same social detriments that result from early marriage in other parts of the world. There is some evidence that there are differences between early marriage in Laos and other contexts, especially in age differences between spouses. Globally, most cases of early marriage have significant age differences between child brides and older grooms¹¹. In the Lao context, however, the age differences in child marriages tend to be much smaller, and often both the bride and groom are still children when they marry. Indeed, Laos is among the top ten countries worldwide in prevalence of boys marrying before the age of 18¹². Moving forward, it will be important to examine whether the same negative consequences of child marriage exist in the context of ChildFund target communities in the Lao PDR as have been found in other contexts internationally.

⁸ The median age of first marriage among women aged 25-49 years is 19.2 years, a figure which has remained relatively unchanged in the last two decades

⁹ LSIS II (2017). pp 296-299.

¹⁰ Population Situation Analysis: LAO PDR: p 4.

¹¹ <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions>

¹² <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

4.3 ChildFund Laos and ECM

In the past, evaluations, case studies, and anecdotal evidence collected by ChildFund staff have affirmed that child marriage is common in ChildFund's partner communities, and that marriage often results in youth dropping out of both school and ChildFund project activities, yet detailed data on this topic have almost never been formally collected and organised. There is still limited information available about how the lives of children who marry young are impacted by their marriages and about their experiences of marriage, both positive and negative, especially related to sexual and reproductive health. Having access to such information could help ChildFund to better understand the risks faced by children who are considering marriage and may help the organisation to encourage children and parents to delay marriage until adulthood so youth may complete their educations, maintain strong physical health free from the risks associated with early pregnancy and domestic violence, and gain more emotional maturity and life skills before deciding to start a family.

5 RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Rationale

The purpose of the consultancy is to provide an analysis of the situation of a group of youths in ChildFund Laos' partner villages who married early.

Considering time and budget constraints, ChildFund initiated this research as an exploratory, qualitative assessment to better understand the situation of married children in ChildFund target villages, both in terms of why the children married in the first place and how their lives were affected by their marriage.

5.2 Research methods and tools

This study was done with a limited number of informants in only five villages in two provinces. Data collection was carried out through **semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and short KAP questionnaires with the married couples and other relevant parties** in order to get an overview of the ECM situation in these specific villages¹³. This particular mix of mostly qualitative tools was selected to enable researchers to gather a broad array of data in order to gain a full understanding of the actual situation of the married children in the targeted communities, and to be able to explore and fully report on multiple research questions in various topic areas (see Interview Grids in Annex 6.4).

The use of qualitative methods was also necessary for this study due to the nature of the research questions: impact of marriage on the children's lives, couples' knowledge attitudes and practices around SRHR, satisfaction with the marriage, the process of decision-making that led to marriage, and decisions around education. With the exception of the topic on sexual and reproductive health, for which a KAP survey was used (see Annex 6.11), the other questions are difficult to answer exclusively through quantitative means, as they focus on youth's individual experiences and perceptions, as well as stories of decision-making processes.

After reviewing relevant documents, field work was led for 12 days in five villages in the two concerned districts of Khoun (Xieng Kouang Province) and Huameuang (Huaphanh Province). Participants were asked which language they wished to speak, and all interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Hmong or Phong languages and were translated to Lao or English for the senior researcher. As this was a qualitative and exploratory study, not all the same questions were asked to

¹³ Phoumungmueang & Phaphueng Villages in Khoun District, and Naleng, Homxay and Nyothard Villages in Huameuang District.

everybody, the aim being to define research tracks and questions for an extensive research. The KAP survey on SRHR (Annex 6.11) was conducted by peer research volunteers, as the information was considered sensitive. Where possible, all data was triangulated from various surveys and discussed by the project team to ensure accuracy.

Gender perspective has been considered as at the heart of the study. Methodology and data collection and analysis took into account the gender perspective questioning gender relations. All data collected are disaggregated by sex, age and disability.

5.3 Ethics

Ethical considerations regarding data collection

Due to the sensitivity of the early marriage issue, especially related to sexual and reproductive health, and considering that data collection was carried out largely with informants under the age of 18 and from multiple at-risk groups, there were many ethical issues to seriously consider in carrying out this research. Ethical issues regarding this sensitive study were discussed with partners and relevant authorities, and the team upheld usual research standards on the topics of sexual and reproductive health and child protection, with a particular focus on do no harm and keeping confidentiality.

In order to reduce the risk that young couples were uncomfortable or felt the research was invasive, interviews were conducted exclusively on a voluntary basis. In all, about one third of the potential informants declined the invitation, either for themselves, or in some situations, with husbands declining on behalf of their wives. In addition, girls were only interviewed by the junior researcher, who was female and Hmong like most of the young wives in the study.

The senior and junior researcher were extremely vigilant regarding the risk that discussing marriages could bring up traumatic memories for the couples, and especially for the girls, so we tried to avoid asking any questions that would lead them to remember such experiences. If the situation arose that any cases appeared to be distressing to the interviewees, these would be referred to ChildFund. There was also the risk that couples would feel shame or embarrassment when they were picked out to be interviewed for marrying early. Although in some cases, the topic of the legality of child marriage was discussed, it was not raised during interviews, as this was not the time or place for it. The researchers listened to the children's and parent's stories with attention and without showing judgment.

The consultants read and signed ChildFund documents regarding Child Protection, and informed research volunteers of the key content contained in these documents as well. Consultants and volunteers ensured that any disclosure of violence by the participating youth would not lead to increased abuse or retaliation. When some of the young women reported that they had been kidnapped against their will, they were asked if there was anything they thought could be done for them in the present, and the information they shared was kept strictly confidential.

There was a small risk that village authorities or the local communities found the research to be invasive or inappropriate, which could have caused the local youth research assistants in the village to lose reputation as a result of their involvement. However, this was unlikely as the present research was not done with the intent to denounce child marriage, but motivated by a positive spirit to understand young couples and the challenges they are facing in order to support them to address any existing issues. Indeed, there is also the chance that volunteers who facilitated our research may have gained reputation in their communities.

Training to research team

Training was provided to all members of the research team, with a special focus on increasing the research skills and capacities of ChildFund's Young Researchers—young people in ChildFund target

villages tasked with collecting and sharing information about challenges facing youth in their communities. The Young Researchers and all other members of the data collection team were trained in topics including the potential ethical issues described above, and taught techniques to mitigate these risks, such as how to discuss sensitive issues, and standard practices such as informed consent, anonymity, interviewing minors, and keeping data secure.

During fieldwork, the consultants also trained members of the research team to identify any participating youth who may be facing pressing, immediate needs, especially related to safeguarding. These cases were to be reported first to the ChildFund management team, after which it would be decided if there was any way for ChildFund to help alleviate those needs, or whether it was necessary to report to concerned authorities.

5.4 Risks and limitations

This research was limited in a number of ways, both due to its small-scale nature, and due to the challenges presented by researching such a sensitive topic with a vulnerable population. Some of these limitations are presented below.

The research relied on a small sample representing only 25 households (see description of the sample) interviewed on a single occasion. Similarly, the interviews were conducted in only five villages in two provinces, and a disproportionate number of those interviewees came from only two or three of those villages. Furthermore, interviewees were selected primarily based on availability rather than on more robust sampling methods, and even of the prospective interviewees identified, many were unavailable due to farming activities or preparations for Hmong New Year celebrations. As a result, the data may not be representative of the overall population, and although some themes and conclusions can be drawn based on this sample, a larger group of informants will be needed to develop more general and representative models.

In addition, this research was not able to interview all of those whose voices may have contributed to a fuller understanding of the early marriage situation in the target communities. For instance:

- The vast majority of interviewees were Hmong, so there is a remaining need to better understand early marriage among other ethnic groups.
- In multiple cases, parents of early married children were not interested in joining in research discussions, saying they thought this was exclusively their children's affairs. Some of these parents may have been reluctant to discuss the issue of ECM, knowing it was controversial and not wanting the researchers to attribute responsibility to them.
- For the most part, the research team was only able to meet with the parents of the husbands, and not with the parents of the wives, who often lived in different villages.

Questions can also be raised regarding the reliability of the data collected, particularly as a result of the sensitivity of ECM. For instance, many of the interviewees may not have spoken honestly, instead saying what they believed their families wanted them to say or what they thought the researchers wanted to hear. Additionally, in some couples, husbands would not agree for their wives to be interviewed, leaving the research team with only a partial story of the couple's marriage. In some cases, participants may have been unwilling to share the full story of their marriages due to shyness (observed in women more than in men, who tended to be more talkative and confident), or as a result of cultural barriers, such as conservative attitudes that cause women to express their thoughts less

than men, or general wariness of outsiders. In addition, language barriers meant that some information could have been lost or distorted in translation.

5.5 Description of the sample

This assessment targeted two villages in Khoun District and three villages in Huameuang District, which were selected for having high numbers of married youth. Four of these villages were ethnically Hmong ethnic, and the remaining village had a mix of ethnicities, including Lao, Phong, Khmu, and Hmong.

The total number of persons interviewed for this study was 109 (50 F), including:

- 45 married youth (21 F and 24 M, representing 25 households)
- 53 parents and community members (24 F, with men being overrepresented on village committees, apart from Lao Women's Union representatives)
- 11 government education and health staff (5 F)

Ethnically, 41 of the 45 married youth were Hmong (19 F, 21 M), with the remaining youth being Tai Phong (2 F, 1 M) and Lao (1 M). The sample group included only one young man with a disability.

The average age of sample is 16 years for females between 13 and 18 and 20 years for men between 15 and 28. The men show a greater dispersion of age, and for only three couples was the wife 1-2 years older than her husband.

- The average age at time of marriage for girls was 15 years, with 2/3 of the sample married between 15 and 16 years old, only one at 13 and two at 14.
- The average age at time of marriage for boys was 18 years, but over half married before 18 years old, and four married at 15 years old.

Of the 25 households, all but two were male-headed, with the remaining two headed by widowed women. Four of the households, including the two female-headed households, identified as poor, while twenty identified as being neither rich nor poor, and one couple did not respond. Average number of people per household was large at 9.5 persons, which typically included the grooms' parents and/or grandparents and older and younger siblings, including married brothers with their wives and children.

In terms of education, most of the married youth, both male and female, had dropped out of secondary school, with most of them dropping out during M4, the fourth year of secondary school (9 F, 11 M). All of the youth attended primary school, but two of them dropped out before reaching secondary school. None of the girls had studied beyond M4. Of the boys, a few attended upper secondary school, but only three studied until the final year and only one continued his studies after secondary school.

6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

6.1 Impact of marriage on youth's lives

Overall, when discussing the impacts of early marriage, it was the positive impacts that were most prevalent in the minds of the interviewees. These positive impacts sustain the motivation that pushes school-aged children to drop out and begin families at young ages. Early marriage showed diverse impacts on the lives of married youth, but some of these impacts, such as impact on reproductive health and education, are discussed in separate sections.

6.1.1 Positive impacts

- **Boys and parents in particular often see early marriage as a way to start adult life early, which allows the couple to begin accumulating material goods, such as a house, a motorbike, a**

television, etc., earlier than their peers. Some participants expressed the idea that staying at school was a waste of time that may not lead to a significant improvement in quality of life.

- **Having more hands for work is a positive result for the husband's parents.** Many families expressed their appreciation of their child's early marriage because their son and his wife could help on the farm and contribute to the family economically.
- **Having children at a young age was discussed as a positive impact by some interviewees** for two reasons related to work and ageing:
 - When you have children at young age you still have plenty of energy and do not have the burden of raising them when you are older and have less strength.
 - **Young couples' children will be able to help with their parents' work earlier**, reducing the couple's workload, as they can share it with their children.
- **Being able to be with someone you love was another positive impact of early marriage** discussed by both girls and boys. As one married girl in Nyothard village said, *"We have our life together, we can understand each other, we help each other and we find some way to earn money. We have children and a warm family, we are happy, and our family takes care of each other."*
- **For girls who feel they are a burden to their families, early marriage gives them the opportunity to have a degree of economic independence**, even if they are in some ways still dependent on their husbands' parents.
- **Marriage is seen as a passage into adulthood, which for some girls, gives them welcome new rights.** One girl (16 yr. old) from Homxay described her satisfaction that she could "run her own life."
- **Prevention of social evils:** The Lao Women's Union (LWU) representative from Nyothard Village said that another positive impact of early child marriage was that early married boys did not take drugs or spend time with friends drinking alcohol, however whether or not this perception is true would need to be explored in further research.

6.1.2 Negative impacts

- **Lack of economic independence.** All couples interviewed were currently living in the household of the husband's father; none of them had economic autonomy as such. Some couples did have some small savings (always kept by the wife), and contributed to household expenses, but unless they raised their own cattle (a few were doing this) or cultivated their own fields (this was just an aspiration for most of them), their only income came from sharing the profits made from selling crops from the husband's family's fields. This negative consequence was usually reported by parents more than young couples.

As one young woman (17 yrs. old) from Naleng Village said, *"We are still children and we do not know about...how to build our life or how to earn money. All we can do [for income] is weaving."*

- **Lack of skills and knowledge.** In a similar vein, parents more than youth also discussed their children's lack of life skills and professional skills as a negative impact of marrying early that further reinforced their dependence on their parents. As one mother from Nyothard Village said, *"They do not know anything about how to raise kids or take care of themselves, so we always need to tell them everything...If they were over 18 they would know already and we would not need to teach them."*
- **Loss of freedom and increased constraints.** Both male and female youth, but especially girls, expressed that their new lives put more pressures and responsibilities on them that limited them in ways they had not been limited in the past. For example, as 16-year-old girl in Nyothard Village said, *"Sometimes I feel so sad because staying with [my in-laws] is not same as staying with my parents. When I lived with my parents I could eat as much as I wanted, but with [my in-laws] it is not as comfortable, and I'm afraid of doing something wrong."*

- **Loss of childhood.** After marriage, youth are expected to fill adult roles, causing them to gain more responsibilities and higher workloads, as well as higher social expectations. These losses of freedoms led many of the youth to lament the loss of their pre-marriage days, when they were able to spend more time with their friends and, especially for men, use their money as they wished. As one married girl from Phoumngmeuang Village said, *“After getting married we can’t behave the way we did before. Now we can only go out and have fun during Hmong New Year.”*

The LWU representative of in Huameuang District described similar benefits and challenges of ECM to the youth: *“The positive impact is that they have built a family, which might be good for the couple and provide the family with more people to help. The negative impact is that it has poor health consequences, and babies [of young brides] may not develop properly. Also, in some cases these married children are just a burden for the parents because they can’t earn income by themselves, and if they don’t have enough money, the couple might argue and fight.”*

6.2 Knowledge, attitudes and practices on sexual and reproductive health

Overall, married youth, and especially girls, were found through KAP surveys and interviews to have moderate to low levels of knowledge on reproduction and contraception, accompanied by attitudes that promoted having children and did not believe in birth control for young women. None of the couples had been active in seeking family planning services.

Knowledge

On the whole, the married youth, especially girls, demonstrated limited knowledge about the topic of sexual health and reproduction. Indeed, one 16-year-old wife showed a lack of basic understanding of human reproduction, reporting, *“About one year after marrying, I had a child. It wasn’t something I thought about; it just happened.”*

Communities also showed a lack of awareness of the health risks associated with adolescent pregnancy, which was not brought up in any of the community-level interviews with youth, parents, and village leaders. Only one woman, a health officer at the district hospital, discussed the idea that early childbirth could be related to health risks, but even she mostly discussed risks related to food taboos and poor maternal and infant nutrition.

Knowledge about contraception was unbalanced, with men tending to have greater knowledge than their wives, and women demonstrating varying degrees of knowledge on the topic, even within the same village. Based on the KAP survey, 100% of the men were able to describe methods of contraception, including using condoms and referring to a menstruation calendar, compared to only 60% of women. As one married 15-year-old girl in Homxay said, *“I am too poor and do not want to have [a child] yet, but I do not know how to prevent it.”*

School, specifically the secondary school in Naleng, was mentioned as a main source of information regarding reproductive and sexual health, as genital anatomy and contraception are now included in the curriculum. However, the fact that many of the youth dropped out of school early means that not all of them may not have had access to this information. Furthermore, even for those who were taught these lessons, the teachers at the school reported that these lessons were taught with little room for discussion or individual questioning, so the knowledge they gained may have been incomplete.

On the topic of domestic violence, level of awareness was mixed. Over half of the female informants (12 yes/ 7 no) answered that according to the law, a husband has the right to beat his wife if she disobeyed him. Men, on the other hand, mostly answered that men do not have the right to beat their wife (5 yes/ 18 no). On the whole, **women’s answers show that they have poor knowledge and**

understanding of their rights based on Lao law and international standards. This lack of awareness of rights presents concerns that women suffering from domestic violence would not believe they have the right to seek help.

Attitudes

In the communities studied, having children during adolescence was generally not seen as a problem, and having children even at a young age was supported by the family. This is often linked to concerns regarding ageing parents and grandparents. Grandmothers talked about their roles in transmitting their knowledge on child-rearing and caring for their great-grandchildren, which they would not be able to do as well if they are too old by the time their grandchildren become parents. Parents also described the benefits of having children early. As one father in Homxay said, “We are happy to have a daughter-in-law, because when we leave this world, our son will be settled in his life and not alone. They are going to have a baby to continue our family into future generations.” His wife added: “We do not think about having children too young, we are happy that they’re having them!” Indeed, one health centre staff discussed her concern that it was often older women who might be pushing young couples to begin having children from a young age.

The youth themselves are also likely to want to have children soon after marriage, which is considered important in Hmong culture as a way to prove fertility. Some of the young girls talked about their desire to have children or fears of infertility, which could even be linked to fears that their husband would take a second wife, as was once common practice in Hmong culture, though at present such practices are considered antiquated. However, though only one boy and one girl in the sample said that they believed such polygamous arrangements were still acceptable, informants did report that infertility of the first wife could still be considered a legitimate reason for a man to take on a second wife in the present. One young woman from Phatphueng Village described her concerns, “I want a baby but I can’t have one. I took some [fertility] medicine, but I’m worried because I feel that I’m unwell when I’m on my period.”

On the other hand, some community members did raise concerns regarding having children too early, calling into question to young parents’ lack of emotional maturity, knowledge of child-rearing, and economic ability to support themselves. Although adolescent pregnancy was not necessarily considered a health risk, some interviewees also expressed the belief that younger children were not yet strong enough to have healthy babies (i.e. sperm from adolescent men not being potent enough, or women under 18 not being able to push hard enough during childbirth). On the whole, however, such opinions do not seem to be a significant factor in dissuading young couples from having children.

For the most part, contraception is not seen as something that is relevant to recently married youth. One focus group reported that birth control is for older women who already have too many children, and interviewees also reported that it was considered immoral for younger women to buy condoms. When asked about use of family planning services, District Hospital staff shows this perception of contraception as exclusively the concern of older women, “Non-married or just married woman do not come ask for advice regarding contraception at hospitals or local health centres. Even at sessions in the village, they remain silent at the back. Only older women would participate once they have already many children. Men might join as a translator—otherwise they just stay outside.”

Local health staff and older women also expressed the idea that injected contraceptives could be harmful for health and make women weak. As a health centre director said, “Many people think that taking medicine to prevent pregnancy leads to headaches or dizziness, or weight gain or loss. If they get sick, they might say this is also due to the contraceptive.”

Even if young women did want to use contraception, the majority of married youth of both genders (80%) agreed that a wife should first seek approval from her husband.

Practices

More than half of young couples interviewed had already had children within the first year of their marriage. In all, 14 of the 24 couples either already had children, or the wife was pregnant. All 14 of these couples had gotten pregnant with their first child within the first year of marriage. Among the sample, the average age at the time of becoming a parent was 16 years for girls and 20 years for boys.

Based on the KAP survey, none of the 19 girls and only one of the boys reported using any kind of contraceptive, which fits with the national data showing that the prevalence rate of modern contraception among adolescent girls aged 15-19 is low. In spite of these findings, however, interviews revealed that couples might indeed use some method of contraception if they did not want to have a child, such as by referring to the calendar to decide whether it is an appropriate day to have sexual relations, or by having men use a condom or withdraw for ejaculation.

Accessing formal family planning services or contraception did not seem to be a common practice for any of the couples. Women in the FGDs reported that there was no access to family planning services or contraceptives for teenagers and unmarried women in their communities, or that they did not know of such services. Although such resources existed at district hospitals, not only are these far from the couples' home villages, but healthcare staff reported they were almost never utilised by younger women. Young men in the study noted that they would like to buy condoms, but that they are not able to access and afford them.

After becoming pregnant, it is unlikely that a young Hmong woman will get an abortion, as it is traditionally taboo in Hmong culture¹⁴ and is not permitted at public facilities in the Lao PDR under most circumstances. Though it is not easy to collect reliable data on this topic, health staff reported that some girls might seek an abortion at a Chinese clinic, or take Chinese medicine, or even attempt an at-home abortion. One of the youth interviewed did report a case of abortion, in which his wife had gone to Phonesavanh to get an abortion without telling anyone.




In terms of domestic violence and marital rape, although there is a chance that such taboo topics were underreported, on the whole, the young couples did not describe situations that would be cause for significant concern. The majority young women and men agreed that men did not force their wives to engage in sexual relations when they did not want to, although some did report that such forcing occurred "sometimes." Furthermore, when women were asked if they would report the situation if their husband beat them regularly, a significant majority (17) said that they would, mostly to their own family, while only two said they would not. It is worth noting that in the Lao context, such occurrences are likely seen as internal family affairs, which could lead many people to refrain from reporting and/or getting involved.

6.3 Married youths' level of satisfaction

Youth's satisfaction with their marriage was evaluated through both interviews and the use of smileys to measure overall level of satisfaction. The results of this second method are presented below.

¹⁴ [Health Care Women Int.](#) 2003 Mar;24(3):230-41. Abortion--it is for some women only! Hmong women's perceptions of abortion., Liamputtong P.

Table: satisfaction after marriage using smileys

Satisfaction after marriage		F (19)	M (23)
	Not Happy	3	1
	So-So	10	15
	Happy	6	7
Average ¹⁵ score of happiness on 100		57.89	63.04
Total average score		60.46	

We can see that the majority of the youth (60%) reported being moderately happy after marriage, while one in three (31%) said that they were happy, and only a small portion (10%) were unhappy. These numbers show some variation by gender, with girls being more likely than boys to be unsatisfied in their marriage (16% versus 4%), although the percentage of youth who are happy in their marriages was almost the same for both genders (32% of girls and 30% of boys). Girls who expressed low levels of satisfaction were often those whose marriages were the result of forced kidnapping, who were married into families poorer than their own, who felt they were being pushed to work too hard, and/or were missing school and their family. Unfortunately, we do not have any data to compare with other couples who did not marry early, or to see how this satisfaction changes through time.

The average satisfaction is at 60/100, which shows just a moderate level of satisfaction. On the whole, girls are a bit less happy than boys.

In their interviews as well, youth expressed differing levels of satisfaction in their married lives. Some of the youth were happy from the start at being together with their spouse and starting a family. As one 15-year-old boy in Phoumngmeuang said, “I have a wife and I am going to have a child. My wife makes my life better... [she] gives me hope and happiness.” A 17-year-old girl, also in Phoumngmeuang, agreed, “Since getting married my husband has always been kind and smiling, so I am happy.”

In contrast, there were some youth who expressed unhappiness and regret, believing that marrying early had not been a good decision, and often saying they wished they had listened to their parents and waited until they were older before marrying. In one case, a young girl and boy felt tired of going to school and over the course of only a couple of days, they decided to marry, and co-planned a kidnapping together without telling either of their parents. In the end, however, both of them ended up regretting their sudden decision to marry.

Other cases demonstrated a more moderate level of satisfaction in marriage more in line with the sentiment expressed by the majority of youth during the activity with the smileys. Indeed, some of these cases even showed a change in satisfaction levels over time, as girls who were initially unhappy after being forced into marriage came to accept their situation and expressed satisfaction

¹⁵ The average score per genre or as well as the total average scorer are calculated by attributing 1 point for so and 2 points for happy (the total is then divided by the number of persons) and multiplied by 100 and divided by 2 in order to have a score on 100. We did not calculate a % of person per answer as the number of person is too small and it could be a gross exaggeration.

after finding that their husbands cared for them. However, this was not true in all cases, as some girls forced into marriage continued to express unhappiness.

Such cases are a strong example of the importance of understanding the role of gender, and how differing levels of involvement in decision-making and different expectations after marriage can create differences in marriage satisfaction between men and women. Obviously, girls who are forced into marriage with little say are more likely to be unsatisfied, especially just after marriage, but gendered differences in experiences of marriage do not end there, as girls continue to meet with differing expectations from their husbands. According to interviews, many traits are expected of both husbands and wives, including working to help the family, loving their spouse, parents and children, and keeping calm without arguing. Gender-specific traits for women put more emphasis on housework and respect or even obedience for their husbands, while men are expected not to drink beer or take drugs, to stay with their family and not to flirt with other girls. These expectations can affect the satisfaction of married women and men in different ways, as wives can feel stressed under their heavy work burdens and responsibilities for housework and caring for guests, while husbands may feel unhappy at the restriction of their free time to be with friends. These and other sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction reported by the young couples can be found in the table below.

Table: reasons for happiness or unhappiness after marriage

	Wives	Husbands
Reasons for happiness/satisfaction	Good relation with in-laws Husband listens and respects Husband does not speak loudly Husband helps Husband does not drink alcohol or take drugs Can run one's own life	Love and respect each other Show good face to each other
Reasons for unhappiness/dissatisfaction	Miss freedom had before marriage No time for socialising with friends Must work hard to support family Worries about future Dependent on others Too many new things to learn	No time for enjoyment or rest Sometimes argue Have to work a lot to support family

The reasons youth expressed for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in their marriages can be seen in the table above. We can see that these reasons differ by gender, with a wider range of factors at play in determining whether or not girls are satisfied in their marriages compared to their male counterparts. Nonetheless, there are some key commonalities between both men and women, both of whom tend to find satisfaction in having a close and respectful relationship with their spouse, and dissatisfaction due to the increasing amount of work and decreasing amount of free time that accompanies marriage and movement into the adult world.

Most of the reasons given by the young couples for satisfaction in marriage are straightforward or have already been examined elsewhere, but a few would benefit from further discussion:

- **A new wife's relationship with her in-laws**, and especially her mother-in-law, was found to be an important factor in her satisfaction after marriage, and a leading cause for either happiness or unhappiness depending on the quality of that relationship. This relationship is typically one that must be built, as in most cases the bride never met her husband's family before the marriage. After marriage the new couple must share the intimacy of the husband's family, and the girl's mother-in-law will usually pay special attention to her son's wife, trying to teach and model for

her the skills she needs to learn for married life. The relationship between a new wife and her mother-in-law may be good, but in many cases is characterised by some degree of tension or conflict.

Mother, Nyothard Village: *“We need to teach about many things but sometimes my daughter-in-law complains, as she does not like to be told.”*

- **Difficulty of domestic labour** was found to be a leading cause of dissatisfaction, particularly among girls, since women in Hmong households are typically expected to take on a disproportionate share of household work. Although these young women had worked in their own families even before marriage, the work generally intensified after they married and fully entered adult life. Girls in Phatphueng Village described their increased workloads as a source of dissatisfaction that was also linked to the loss of childhood and their own parents’ care and protection, since before marriage their parents had usually shielded them from taking on the heaviest and most difficult work.

As one girl summarised, *“Before [marriage], I was thinking only about my husband, and I didn’t imagine what my life would be like. It is much more work than before, and sometimes I have to do work that my parents would not ask me to do because it is too difficult or too heavy for me.”*

Some girls had so much work they even felt their husband’s families might be taking advantage of their labour.

“I don’t know what my mother-in-law is thinking, but maybe she thinks that because I am the daughter-in-law, she can rely on me to do some work that used to be hers, so she can use me for that. I can see it happens like that.”

6.4 Understanding the decision to marry

“IF YOU WANT GET MARRIED, YOU HAVE TO MARRY WHEN YOU ARE YOUNG. IF YOU WANT TO BECOME an OLD BUFFALO, YOU HAVE TO WAIT TO MARRY UNTIL YOU ARE OLD”

Thai Phong saying

Understanding why the young couples decided to marry and who were the most important decision-makers and influences in that decision requires an examination both of the individuals involved, and of the broader cultural context in which those decisions were made.

This research met with diverse patterns in marriage decisions, mostly regarding the extent to which girls and parents were involved in the decision-making process. The different types of marriages found in the study, organised by decision-making pattern, are outlined below. Note that not all of the 25 cases were clear enough to be placed into the following categories. Indeed, these various patterns are not mutually exclusive and may overlap.

- **Self-decided marriage** (represent around half of couples in the study). These were generally love marriages (or cohabitation without formal marriage) and occurred when young people made their own decision to live together. This process was defined by mutual agreement between the bride and groom, but sometimes differed in the process leading up to the marriage itself. Sometimes such marriages included a clear courtship period (occurred with only four of the 25 couples, including both non-Hmong couples), but just as often was a decision made by the couples quickly after meeting because they had a good feeling about it without taking the time to get to know each other (an additional four couples). For some of

the Hmong couples, a self-decided marriage might also take the form of a co-planned kidnapping.

- **Forced marriage** (about 7 cases, or just over a quarter of couples, primarily in Homxay Village). In these cases, the boys acted as primary decision makers. After meeting a girl he liked and talking to her for some time, that could range from a few hours to a few months, he would arrange to kidnap the girl without asking her to marry.
- **Arranged child marriage** (one case in Homxay Village, in which the parents of the bride and the groom agreed to marry their children mostly against their will because they did not approve of their children's chosen significant others). These marriages are defined by parents as the primary decision makers in arranging marriages for their underage children.

In addition to these marriage patterns, there were a few other types of marriages that, although not observed directly, were reported by village authorities and community members:

- **"Circumstantial" marriage** may occur when a girl becomes pregnant out of wedlock to counter the social stigma associated with premarital sex, and may occur with or without the girl's consent¹⁶.
- **International marriage of child brides** was reported in a Khoun District in cases that may be considered trafficking. Multiple girls were married to Chinese men, while the parents received a substantial amount of money. It is not clear whether or not these marriages were forced or what kind of pressure was exerted on the girls themselves. This finding matches a recently reported phenomena of increased trafficking of young women to China¹⁷.

6.4.1 Key actors in decision making

Youth. As seen in the examination of the types of marriages above, in the great majority of cases, including both love marriages and forced marriages, it is the children themselves who are making the decision, although the boy and girl may or may not play equal roles in making that decision.

Decision-making tended to be shared and agreed upon among the twelve or so couples who were married through self-decided love marriages. Although the couple often agreed together, only more rarely were the families involved. It is likely that the involvement of parents and family members in this process differs by ethnicity—both of the non-Hmong couples had gone through a pattern of courting, falling in love, and then formally requesting a marriage, followed by traditional rituals and offerings to spirits and ancestors and a dowry paid by the groom's family. These traditions involving the family are different from Hmong traditions observed through the research and discussed by Hmong colleagues, and indeed in only two cases were Hmong brides able to come to the groom's house to meet his family before the marriage.

In the cases of forced marriage, on the other hand, decision-making was not shared, but was controlled by the boy. Even for some couples in which the two young people were in love before marriage, the final decision may have been a unilateral one, with the boy taking the girl as his wife before they discussed marriage or decided on a date for it, and the girl was surprised when the boy came to kidnap her, even against her will.

Parents. Although parents, relatives, or other match-makers may have served as guides or influencers in decisions about marriage, the final decision in almost all cases fell to the children themselves. According to the parents interviewed, this was not the same as in the past. Although most of the parents had also married at a young age, when they married, there was more adult involvement, compared to the present, in which it is a process decided and organised by youths themselves.

¹⁶ Reported in a previous study with ChildFund Laos in Nonghet District, Xiengkhouang Province

¹⁷ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/laos-human-trafficking-china-brides-01152020172424.html>

For some parents, the increasing autonomy of young people is seen as a positive. These parents expressed the viewpoint that children are now freer and can make decisions around love by themselves. Men in particular described this romanticised idea of modern romance. As one father from Nyothard Village said, *“In my generation, if we saw a girl and we liked her, we would just invite our younger relatives to help us kidnap her. Now the new generation uses a more modern way. They use their phones and YouTube and they can connect to each other, and if they love each other they can agree and decide together.”*

On the other hand, other parents see the trends towards youths’ independence in marriage decisions in a more negative light. Apart from the four couples who had met before, usually the parents’ approval, consent or advice was not sought as such. For only one of the couples studied was the marriage arranged primarily by the parents (because both the boy and girl were already in love with someone else whom the parents did not like). In most other cases, Hmong boys only informed their parents that they would be bringing home a bride soon. In extreme cases, the parents would be awoken in the middle of the night to organise a small ritual to the house spirits that would allow the bride to enter their home as a member of the family. One village leader (M) explained that it is very rare that the parents of the husband would consult the wife’s parents. If they do ask, the wife’s parents will usually agree, perhaps fearing that their daughter would become pregnant without a husband.

Many parents expressed frustration that their children did not involve them in decisions about marriage. While youth tended to listen to their parents on the topic of dropping out of school, parents say that feel dispossessed of their children’s marriage process. In interviews as well as group discussions, parents reported that schools have progressively brought into question the traditional authority. Whereas traditional authority was mainly held by elders or clan leaders, schools have emerged as a competing authority and as a symbol of progress. They have also brought about changes in the relationship between parents and their children. The appropriation of new knowledge and new values introduced not only by schools but also by the social media have produced tensions and misunderstandings between generations and given new power to the youth that they use to confront their parents’ ideas.

Another factor that gives children more power over their parents on their choice of spouse is the increasing prevalence of suicide as a threat when children are not able to be with the person they love. Cases of suicide rooted in frustrations around marriage and romance were well known in all the study communities in both districts, with a total of five cases reported (See Annex 16) resulting in six deaths.

Suicides have a very important impact on how far parents think they can oppose their children in regards to marriage. Most of the parents we met with said that they would not dare to say no to their children because they are afraid that it could cause them to commit suicide, so in the end they let the children decide. As one mother in Nyothard Village said, *“Now marriage depends on [the children]. They go to school and fall in love...and when they come back home, they are still in touch through their phones. They marry early because they want to be together, and if their parents don’t let them marry, couples might take medicine [to commit suicide]. This happened in my village about 5 years ago—the children said that if we did not let them marry, then they would commit suicide.”*

6.4.2 Gender and Inequality in Decision Making

It is clear based on the findings that men and women often have different roles and different levels of power in both the decision to marry and in the couples’ daily lives after marriage. Understanding the nature of these gendered power dynamics is vital to understanding decision making around early marriage in the rural Lao context.

6.4.2.1 *Patterns of mutual consent in marriage decisions*

Paths leading to child marriage can be classified and understood according to the degree of mutual consent, and the extent to which girls in particular, or in some situations, both children, are forced into marriages without the freedom of taking their own initiative. Degrees of constraint on one or both marriage partners found through this research include:

- Couples married by parents against the will of one or both spouses (1 case) or not
- Couples who knew each other before marriage (from living in the same village, studying at the same school, etc.) (12 cases) or not
- Couples who talked/flirted with each other for some time (12 cases) or not
- Couples who discussed marriage or not
- Couples who jointly defined a date for a kidnapping (not reported directly, but suspected) or not (7 cases of forced kidnapping¹⁸)
- Couples who informally met parents (4 cases, and potentially also the cases where youth married someone from the same village) or not
- Couples who formally asked parents on both sides for permission to marry (4 cases) or not

Each **Not** here means a degree of constraint exerted, mostly on the girl.

Taken together, these situations show that decision-making around early marriage is a spectrum rather than a dichotomy with consensual marriage on one end and bride kidnapping on the other. Extreme cases do exist, such as one 15-year-old boy who told his parents one day, “*tomorrow I will come back with my wife*,” and then kidnapped a girl he had met the same day without asking or informing her about the marriage. On the other end, one of the couples met while working together at a banana plantation for over a year, fell in love, sought permission from their parents, and then married.

Between these two extremes, however, girls who marry early may have a wide range of levels of involvement in the decision to marry, and differing levels of information and familiarity with their husbands-to-be prior. While some girls and their husbands made a joint decision to marry, others said they genuinely could not have guessed that a boy whom they had been talking with had such intentions, and were shocked when he came to ask her to marry the next day. Even in the cases when girls said they might be not be opposed to the marriage, they said they were not ready for such a prompt decision when they had different plans in mind for their futures, such as their studies or careers.

In light of the multiplicity of paths leading to marriage and the involvement on the part of girls, it seems clear that **in the communities studied, the role of girls as decision-makers in early marriages, and the extent to which their rights are curtailed by those marriages are widely varied, and must be examined on a case-by-case basis to be fully understood.**

6.4.2.2 *Bride kidnapping*

The subject of bride kidnapping is vital to understanding the role of early married girls in the decision to marry, particularly in the rural, predominantly Hmong communities studied, where it is particularly common. Thus, although the topic has already been discussed to some extent in the section above, this section will examine the topic in more depth.

Kidnapping for marriage can be defined as a group of men, including the groom, coming to pick up the bride at her parents’ house or in the village, usually at night. This practice is a common Hmong marriage tradition, and although it has been decreasing in frequency in recent times, it is still a common phenomenon that at least to some extent remains accepted in Hmong communities. Of the

¹⁸ Some would need to be better informed by crossing information from more than one informant

informants, about a fourth of them believe that kidnapping is acceptable (5/19 women and 5/23 men). Indeed, about half of the couples (at least 12 of 25) were married in a way that could be considered bride kidnapping.

Although the term bride kidnapping is often associated with images of men capturing girls they have never met to forcibly bring them home as their wives, and although such situations do exist, and even some of the girls in the study were taken against their will, there are also many cases of consensual marriages that are carried out through the means of kidnapping. Some of the married girls in the study reported that they were already in love with their boyfriend, and that kidnapping was an easy and fast way to marry each other. **Thus, we can see that the term bride kidnapping refers to extremely different levels of information and involvement in decision making for the bride and even for the parents.**

To further complicate the understanding of bride kidnapping among young couples in the study, **narratives from boys and girls (and their respective parents) would sometimes differ**, with discrepancies regarding the circumstances for meeting and deciding to marry, and regarding how far adults were present and involved in the decision. Additionally, there were a few cases in which husbands insisted their wives were too busy to talk to the researchers, leading to only a partial story, and perhaps even suggesting the possibility that these men did not want their wives to be interviewed for fear that they would tell conflicting narratives. An example of differing narratives can be seen in a case from Nyothard Village. In this case, the boy's father had been told that his daughter-in-law had been in love with his son, the boy said that after meeting the girl for a day, she had agreed to come with him, and the girl related a story of forced kidnapping, as she had not wanted to marry a boy whom she had just met (full narrative in Annexes).

Though kidnapping in the present day can refer to a variety of diverse situations, parents and children agree that it has changed since previous generations. **In the past, parents often organised kidnappings for their children, but in the present, young boys (14 to 16 years boys) typically take the initiative with their friends. For this reason, many parents think of modern-day kidnapping as a voluntary affair between young people who just want to marry without seeking their parents' approval**, or despite their parent's disapproval. As one male clan leader in Nyothart said, *"Nowadays, kidnapping is different. The girl just pretends that she does not want to marry the boy, but it is just pretending."* This study, however, found several cases of forced kidnapping reported by girls, although the strongest narratives of fear and trauma around kidnappings did mostly come from mothers in the older generation.

Once a bride has been kidnapped, it is difficult for her to escape marriage. The literature reports¹⁹ that the groom's family would tell a kidnapped bride that if she goes back home, she will disgrace her family. Traditionally, the couple will have sexual relations the first night, even against the bride's will, which can contribute to making the bride feel too ashamed to go back home in a culture that prizes virginity and frowns upon pre-marital sex. Since Hmong culture values family and reputation, the need to save face for one's family may be an important consideration for the girl, who may decide the best path is to marry the man who kidnapped her. In fact, in spite of the fact that many girls reported being kidnapped without their prior consent, a village leader in Homxay reported, *"We've never seen cases when the girl cried and said she was forced. If the girl is not happy, she doesn't have to marry, but we've never seen that."* This seems to show that even girls who did not want to get married will willingly move forward with a marriage after being kidnapped.

¹⁹ <http://txhawb.com/what-you-should-know-about-traditional-hmong-wedding>

The confusion behind consent and girls' roles in bride kidnapping makes the situation complicated, but it is important to investigate further, since differing narratives and social pressures could lead to missing genuine and severe cases of gender-based violence and child rights abuse. In extreme cases, kidnapped girls may even resort to suicide, which was reported by a young girl who attempted suicide out of desperation and was the only girl in the study who eventually left her marriage and managed to return to her parents' house.

6.4.2.3 Suicide in marriage decision-making

Extreme cases in which girls and sometimes boys, are denied the right to choose their own marriage partner can lead to suicides. Community members described several cases of youth suicides related to love and marriage difficulties, the full list of which can be found in the Annexes. These cases often occurred when youths' parents did not allow them to marry someone they love. For girls, suicides could also follow an unwanted kidnapping. Indeed, one girl met for the study attempted suicide after being kidnapped in a forced marriage. This was the only girl in the study who eventually managed to leave her marriage and return to her parents' home.

The threat of suicide has an important impact on how far parents oppose their children regarding marriage. Now, cases where parents force their children into arranged marriages is rare, but parents may also be unwilling to oppose their children's choice of marriage partner, as their children may threaten to commit suicide if they cannot be with the person they love. Indeed, most of the parents we met with said that they would not dare to say "no" to their children on the topic of marriage for this reason, and in the end, they let the children decide on their own.

6.4.3 Reasons for marrying young

The reasons boys and girls decide to marry early might vary, but a few of the key reasons are given below.

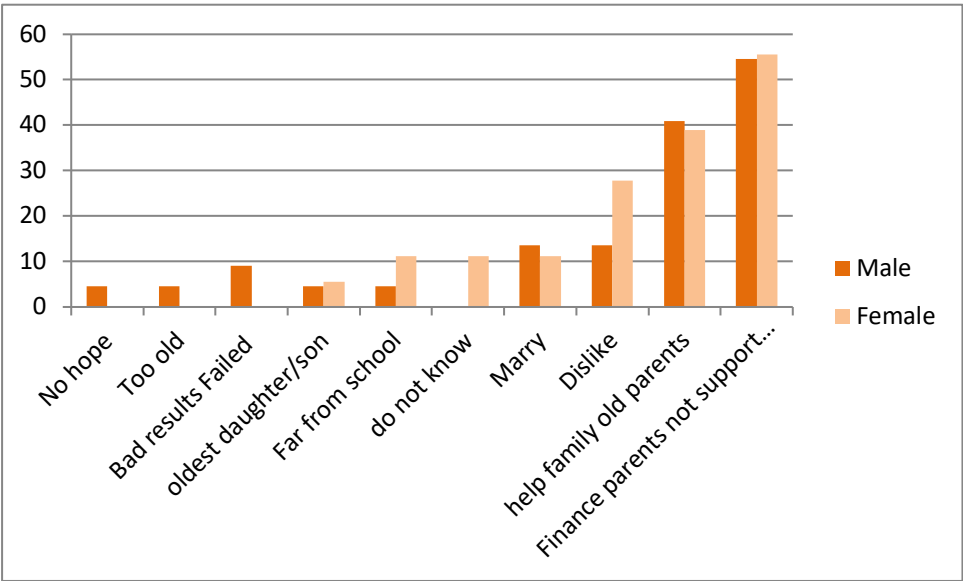
- **Love.** While this was a main reason to marry, it was not always expressed explicitly; instead, youth might say that they miss each other or they feel the need to be together as much as possible. Some girls also said they did not want to lose their chance, as it was so important for them to ensure they could marry. (*"If somebody loves us we should not let him go," 15-year-old girl, Phoumngmueng Village*)
- **Pressure from parents.** This was especially the case for boys after dropping out of school, as his parents would prefer to see them getting married and having children soon.
- **Lack of interest in school.** Some youth believed that studying is worthless, and that continuing their studies would not improve their lives in any way. Even parents who were supportive of school did not always feel it would benefit their children, as with one mother from Phoumngmuan Village who noted that even if their children finished their studies, they would still end up as rice farmers. Marriage might be an excuse for dropping out, or a natural next step once they have already left school. As one girl from Homxay Village said, *"I stopped to go when I met with my husband. I was just going to school to keep busy and I was thinking about leaving school as nobody was helping my family as older child had to quit helping them. I thought that I would help my family but [instead] I took husband."*
- **Feeling that marriage is a good step to take at this point in time.** Many of the youth were quite self-motivated to marry. A boy might choose a girl likes, even if he just met her recently, and the girl might follow him without thinking too much because she finds him pleasant or attractive and feels it is time, or because she does not dare to refuse. A girl from Homxay presents an example of this type of thinking: *"I did not know [my husband] for long. One afternoon we met, and the next morning he took me. I was thinking, in any case I have to marry, so better to do it now and not to lose time."*
- **Belief in fated pairings.** Traditional Hmong beliefs include the idea that everything that happens has been already decided upon in another world above, so it is vain to try to interfere with the

course of life²⁰. One 15-year-old girl from Homxay who decided to marry very quickly described how fate contributed to her understanding of her marriage: *“I used to like some other boys who would come and hang out with me, but [when my husband took me] I didn’t think about that much. Once arrived to his house I started to think about it, but it was too late. But even though I talked to many boys before, this one was my pair.”*

6.5 The decision whether to continue education

Of the youth interviewed, all of them had dropped out of school prior to getting married. The reasons for dropping out that the youth gave are shown below.

Table reasons for dropping school (% of girls and % of boys)



Based on this data, we can see that most youth dropped out for financial reasons (more than half of both girls and boys) or to support their families (about 40% for both girls and boys). Only a small handful said their decision to stop going to school was directly related to their decision to marry (2 girls and 3 boys, or 11%). This seems to show that although there is a correlation between marriage and dropping out of school, it may not be a direct, causal link. It could be that the link between marriage and school drop outs is mediated by economic factors, with poverty contributing to both school drop outs and early marriage, but further research would be needed to confirm this.

On the whole, reasons for dropping out of school did not seem to differ significantly by gender. The only factors showing moderate variation by gender were dislike of school and distance to school, both of which were reported by girls slightly more than boys as reasons for dropping out, and earning poor marks in school, which was reported by two boys but no girls.

These results are similar to the ones presented by Phetchanpheng Souvanxay (2018)²¹ on a much bigger sample, although marriage seems to play a bigger role than was found in the current study:

²⁰ An old shaman in Homxay explained, *“It is a belief of the Hmong people that the things in our lives are already decided, such as who we will marry. If a girl a one boy did not marry, or if they married and then they separated, it happened because it was not in their destiny (dia ta tzing keu) to become a couple”.*

²¹ Social Factors Affecting Secondary School Completion among Adolescent Females A research study in Hmong, Khmu, Phong, Lao and Lu Mien cultural contexts, Child Fund Laos, Vientiane.

“Financial burden (46%) represented by school and the need of workforce (31%) in the families are the main reasons explaining why OS dropped out school. Early marriage (20%) appears as a third reason.”

Although youth may not directly link their decision to drop out with their marriage, after dropping out, most youth married shortly after. Parents said that this was considered to be the best thing to do next when youth have no other clear path for the future. After dropping out and marrying, both boys and girls might feel some sense of loss, regarding their time in school, although more girls than boys talked about missing their school days while boys tended to accept it as a necessary step. As one boy from Homxay said, *“I was very good at school, but after I met my girlfriend, everything changed and I couldn’t study anymore...I’m not sad now because I have my wife at home and I can be with her; in any case, I had no money to support my education.”* Alternatively, a 15-year-old girl from Phoumngmuan said, *“I miss school. If I could do it again, I would want to go back and finish my schooling. If my husband were a good man, he would allow me to go back and I would go, but my husband is lazy and he never talks with me about this.”*

Alternatively, some of the youth who stayed in school for longer also regretted their decision, seeing the choice to continue schooling as a loss of time and money. The boys who studied at higher levels explained how they had lost time compared to their friends or young brothers who married and dropped out, and already managed to acquire assets like cattle, land, motorbikes, phones, or children. This feeling is reinforced by other youth who studied even higher degrees (e.g. university or teaching training college) but still came back to their village jobless to start the same kind of life as their siblings who did not study.

7 Recommendations

Findings from the research can be used by ChildFund Laos to help youth involved in ChildFund programs to make well-informed decisions about their relationships and futures. Although there are few existing examples to go off of for how to address this issue, especially in Lao context, this section examines some steps that may be taken to alleviate the issue. The recommendations in this section suggest methods through which change might be mobilised, but also involve inherent risks in a context in which tradition is engrained and those who present opposition could face backlash. If not undertaken carefully, actions could result in an even more harmful situation for women and further hinder future interventions in targeted communities.

7.1 The potential to change

Through the interviews and focus group discussions, three main issues emerged as the highest priorities to be addressed: forced marriage, child marriage, and early pregnancy. However, encouraging change is difficult, because although some of the informants expressed their opposition to these problems, none of them were ready to take a public stage to promote their ideas due to concerns about backlash in their conservative communities and the idea that, as family issues, all three are ultimately private affairs. This was the case, for example, with the Lao Women’s Union representative in Nyothart Village, who opposed child and forced marriage, but understood that they were not likely to be seen as abuses or violations of laws or basic rights within her community. *“If we speak too much on this topic in the village, they will hate me,”* she said.

Creating change is also challenging because at the village level, understanding of child rights is often not clear, with parents understanding that the children’s primary right in situations of early marriage was the right to choose to marry. As one village leader from Phatpheng reported, *“We as parents can’t separate them. According to the government, if they love each other we should not separate them; it is their life. It’s their right, so we can’t force them to do anything.”*

In spite of the strength of traditional thinking, however, some believe it is possible to balance a modern understanding of child rights. As one young bride in a forced marriage said, *“I choose both*

Hmong tradition and Lao law...Before I did not know about the law, and my husband did not know, so he behaved according to tradition...[but now I believe]we should forbid forced marriage because it is not happy time.”

On the whole, informants did not have very many strong suggestions when asked the question of how to confront the issues surrounding early marriage in the future. This may have been in part because the research took place during the harvest or preparations for the Hmong New Year—a busy time when families valorised having more arms to join the family. Yet although some families were unconcerned over the issue of child marriage, others were more progressive, and discussed wanting their children to attend school as long as possible, not wanting them to marry too young, and ensuring that girls could choose their own husbands. Some of the village authorities and clan leaders similarly expressed some progressive attitudes and understanding of international child and women’s rights issues. However, it could still be a challenge to find powerful people at the local level to work with to promote change.

7.2 Key recommendations

“An integrated package of social protection, community and school-based education programming, mentoring, labour market and law enforcement initiatives is required to address the unequal relationships and opportunities that face Hmong adolescent girls²²”

The most important recommendations in order to address the issues surrounding early child marriage in the context of the villages studied include the following:

1. **Looking for drivers of change** is challenging and it is vital that policy and programming be tailored with care to reflect Hmong realities while recognising the urgency of empowering the youngest citizens, especially teenage girls and boys, with the information and services they need to mobilise youths against kidnapping and any form of early forced and non-forced marriage. These changes should be promoted by youth, but also by local authorities responsible for child protection (including village leaders, village security, LWU and LYU). It is important to find community members committed to change who share some international values regarding child and women’s rights.
2. **Empowering girls with role models** to encourage them to express themselves raise their voices and make decisions for themselves.
3. **Reinforcing Parenting Skills**²³: Addressing challenges and disconnect in the relationships between Hmong parents and their children in terms of gaps in communication, mutual understanding and transmission of values.
4. **Access to General Education**: Increasing access to scholarships, safe dormitories, and transportation, as well as advocating for girls to stay in school, especially after M3.
5. **Vocational education at village level**²⁴: Explore the feasibility of proposing some vocational skills training, even if they are short-term, so that youth can gain the skills to support their families at the village or village cluster level.
6. **Increase awareness regarding SRHR** in partnership with health authorities and village health volunteers.
7. **Regarding advocacy, three main options could be considered:**

²² Early marriage among Viet Nam’s Hmong: How unevenly changing gender norms limit Hmong adolescent girls’ options in marriage and life Nicola Jones, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Tran Thi Van Anh p10

²³ Looking at activities implemented by Humanity and Inclusion toward positive parenting would be interesting in promoting child rights and improving gender relations.

²⁴ The LWU in Xieng Khuang province did organize such trainings with APHEDA funding some years ago.

- Mitigate the harmful impact on married girls by increasing access to resources such as social support, livelihood opportunities, and family planning and maternal health services.
- Mobilise girls, boys, parents, leaders and communities to challenge discriminatory gender norms, address root causes, and create alternative social, economic and civic opportunities for girls.
- Use role models (such as famous Hmong actors) and social media to spread short movies and information to disseminate information about the risks and drawbacks of early child marriage and early pregnancy.

7.3 Mobilising village authorities, clan leaders, and shamans

In most cases, local authorities in the rural communities studied do not have a full understanding of child and women's rights. They are caught in between Hmong traditions and national laws, as well as what they consider to be children's right to marry and the fear of suicide if they are not permitted to do so. Ideally, authorities should be involved in monitoring and controlling the age of marriage and to what extent children, especially girls, were forced. One option is that they could forbid registering marriages below the legal marriageable age, or they could impose a fine on early child marriage. However, most authorities are not ready to take such steps, likely because of the prevalence of traditional conservative values in their communities that are accepting of child marriages. Limited understanding of legal restrictions and commitment to addressing child marriage can make it a challenge to mobilise this population. In spite of laws outlawing child marriage, the research found no reports of enforcement of these laws, and no village is collecting fines from children who married early or their parents.

Although there are many challenges related to mobilising local authorities, it is vital to involve these local leaders in order to change local norms around early child marriage. A protocol could be defined involving district-level authorities in charge of child protection, such as Social Welfare officers and Police, as well as LWU and district health staff, providing a way for a girl or her parents to call for assistance (by phone) or report abuses around early and forced marriage. However, at this time, before any advocacy work has been launched, the chances that anybody would use this system are probably small, and face other resistance related to the fact that mostly Hmong families would be reporting problems within the Hmong community to outsiders.

7.4 Mobilising youth activists

Young people themselves must be at the heart of the solution. Change requires that youth can mobilise themselves to create movements for change around potentially harmful traditional marriage practices. Only young people really know what information they need and how to reach one another, including the best social media platforms to spread information. Projects must give the youth the chance to take on this work, not only in the planning and designing phase, but also in monitoring and evaluation.

However, this intervention also presents challenges in that most youth would not have the confidence to promote these ideas about early child marriage in their conservative communities, and there is also some risk of backlash from the community if youth do actively confront these traditions. Another barrier is related to gender, with girls involved in the study being less motivated to launch any kind of advocacy initiative, in spite of the fact that the majority of youth in the study said that they would tell others not to marry early. This may be because girls are not usually invited to or involved in the public sphere, but could also be related to fears of backlash from family or community members, or simply due to having too high a workload in their personal life to want to take on additional responsibilities in the public realm.

7.5 Educating youth

A crucial intervention should be planned in schools and communities that utilises educational activities to dissuade youth from marrying through abduction. Some of the youth in the study suggested

pushing for changes in traditions to allow youth to have more time for courting or dating before deciding to marry, and providing education on the benefits of these slower methods could be part of these education programs. Pushing for children to get engaged before marrying would also allow for parents to be more involved and give their blessings to a marriage and could ease the intergenerational tension that can emerge around this topic.

As suggested by researchers studying early marriage in a similar context in Vietnam, *“Boys need to hear that ‘kidnapping’ is never an acceptable way to find a wife, with messages emphasising that happier wives - older girls who can make their own choices - ultimately mean happier husbands. Girls (through schools) and their parents (through mass organisations such as the Women’s Union) need to be made aware that they need not be voiceless victims and that an unwanted marriage is always an illegal marriage—and that it need not limit their future marriageability²⁵”*.

7.6 Empowering girls

Empowering girls is about giving them opportunities to raise their voices, share their ideas and concerns, and provide spaces for them to talk and to be listened to, such as a special radio program or social network on which they can share ideas about how to challenge traditional systems when those systems do not respect their basic rights. Giving girls opportunities to express themselves and speak out at youth clubs would be the most important recommendation, as it would help them to realise and promote their rights. Meanwhile, men should be engaged in activities that promote positive masculinity and to help them learn to serve as allies to promote women’s voices and reduce backlash in cases when women and girls speak up about these issues.

It would also be valuable to build a WhatsApp network as alert or notification system. This network would include a number of committed professionals or authorities who could be mobilised in cases of possible abuse or rights violations, such as forced marriage, domestic violence and kidnapping. This network would need to be able to be activated quickly, as marriages tend to happen very soon after a kidnapping. In addition, due to cultural and social norms, victims of kidnappings or others closely involved in the situation may be too shy or unwilling to call a hotline. Still, having one available would be an important step, and might be integrated with existing resources, such as the Youth Line managed by the LWU in Vientiane.

7.7 Communicating messages of change

Several persons involved in the study mentioned the need for posters or other promotional materials to motivate youth not to leave school. Such materials could also integrate early marriage, using youth-friendly drawings to show examples of what their lives might be like if they quit their studies to marry too early.

Considering how connected people, and particularly youth in the villages are through mobile phones, the use of social media and social networks is a must. **Videos on YouTube could** promote messages dissuading early and forced marriages. If possible, it would be interesting to find out if there are any girls who managed to escape from a forced marriage situation and would be willing to share their story through such videos, both to serve as a role model for those in similar situations and to dissuade others from engaging in forced marriages. Parents of kidnapped girls, especially those who rescued their daughters from unwanted marriages, would also be good models.

In addition to showing real life stories, short movies on the topic of early marriage could also involve **famous Hmong figures such as actors or singers, political leaders, or male and female clan leaders** to speak about the importance of ending forced marriages and staying in school longer before

²⁵ Early marriage among Viet Nam’s Hmong: How unevenly changing gender norms limit Hmong adolescent girls’ options in marriage and life Nicola Jones, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Tran Thi Van Anh p16

marrying in order to encourage change. These movies could be uploaded to social media so they can be easily streamed on the internet by Hmong youth across the country.

Lastly, families who invested in upper secondary education for their daughters could be promoted as role models to demonstrate that education is attainable, and can have positive impacts for youths' lives, helping them to find paid jobs, or even to be appointed to official positions, freeing them from the difficulty and labour of subsistence farming. However, such efforts should also be accompanied by efforts to increase economic opportunities in target communities, since if opportunities for wage labour do not exist in the youth's communities, it would be unfair to promote them as if they did.

7.8 Adolescent Reproductive health

All members of a community, and especially boys and girls who married young, young mothers and fathers, their families (parents and grandparents), and village authorities should have access to informal education on sexual and reproductive health and rights so that they can be fully informed on this topic through comprehensive education that goes well beyond biological reproduction. This education should be provided to girls and boys from an early age both in and out of school, as well as in the community for people of all ages to ensure that young people are equipped with a solid foundation for life and love that enables them to make informed and responsible choices. Information should be provided in children's native languages using social media, and all newly married child couples should be referred systematically to the village health volunteers to discuss SRHR.

8 Conclusion

In Houamouang and Khoun Districts, early marriage is still happening, with adolescents entering early marriages and unions for a range of reasons and in widely varying circumstances. In our understanding, this phenomena of child marriage is a result of the pressing need for a greater family workforce in Hmong families, many of whom, now being connected to modern services such as electricity, running water, and dirt roads, have greater need for a disposable income, and may therefore have extended the land area that they use for agriculture and planting crops. Some youth quit school early because they think that school will not benefit them, and once they have dropped out, they see that the next thing they should do to is to get married, so they can become adults, please their parents, and begin accumulating wealth. Marrying is considered an important step in life, especially having children to continue one's lineage, as is expected by parents and grandparents.

Unlike other contexts where early marriage is not a choice for the young woman and her marriage partner is often much older than she is, in the Lao PDR, the age of marriage partners tends to be very close, and there are many cases in which children voluntarily decide to marry because they think that in their socio-economic and cultural context it is the right time to do so.

Maturity and being emotionally ready for the responsibilities associated with marriage are the main issues discussed around early marriage in the local context, with older generations also being concerned about whether young couples are economically ready to start a family. Some children themselves also share these concerns, but may still decide to marry at a young age. Pressure and social customs are part of that decision, but other motivations include the need they feel to be living with the one they love and being scared to lose their chance at marriage and being unable to find someone new (behind this seems to be the social pressure to be married). Parents and community members seem to be under the impression that children tend to marry earlier now than they did in the past due to meeting each other at school, after which they decide by themselves to get married because of love.

Parents no longer choose their children's partners, though this does not necessarily mean that the bride and groom choose each other, at least not initially. Listening to the married girls speak, it is clear

to see the complexity of their marriage stories, with multiple layers of constraints placed on girls, and to some extent, boys, that lead them to taking the decision to marry at a young age.

While trying to understand the complexity of the situation, this report is not saying that all Hmong women who marry young are victims and the majority of Hmong men are perpetrators of abuse, and although many such situations may exist. However, in the Hmong cultural context, we met with various patterns, some including serious child rights abuses with young Hmong wives being burdened with excessive workload and demands on their fertility.

Narratives from boys and girls sometimes differed, with discrepancies in couples' stories regarding their circumstances for meeting and deciding to marry. Nowadays, traditional kidnappings are organised by young boys and their peers only, and not by parents, as in the past. Kidnappings were involved in about half our cases, and in at least seven of those cases, were carried out without the girl's consent. This is a situation that must be changed. We are in a situation where genuine and severe gender-based violence and child rights abuses have occurred but were not addressed in almost any of the cases we encountered²⁶. Behind early child marriage, organised by children and not adults, there is a wide range of factors that need to be properly investigated in each case. What might be referred to as romance could in fact hide violence against girls, and in some rare cases, boys as well. Couples, and especially married girls, might be isolated and unsatisfied with their married lives in the husband's house; in some cases, far from their family, girls may have nobody to talk with and may suffer from what could be considered a form of child labour exploitation, although in the context it is not understood as such, as these married girls are now considered adults.

In this sensitive and complex context, the topic of ECM calls for many more research perspectives (see annex 7.10). It would be interesting to explore in depth sociocultural dimensions at the household level on certain issues, such as cultural (e.g. destiny and marriage) versus economic reasons as the causes for quitting school, or reactions and approvals of child marriages.

In terms of child protection, children from traditional ethnic communities living in isolated rural areas need special protections. Girls who marry early are less likely to continue their education and more likely to bear children in their teenage years than those who do not marry. Reducing adolescent early union and child marriage, as well as early pregnancy - key targets under the SDGs - must be a priority. However, this is extremely challenging in a context where abuses are perpetrated under the name of the tradition.

Any intervention should focus on finding positive masculinity role models for youth, especially teenage boys, and should look for the support of parents and authorities in understanding and communicating the consequences for health, education, rights, and happiness that can be associated with early marriage. In addition, this may mean reinforcing the law even when it goes against tradition. Interventions should also address young women's empowerment so that they can raise their voices and stand up for themselves in order to be able to develop their life as they wish to with the partner of their choice.

²⁶ Apart from the girl who ended in trying to commit suicide and was able to return to her family but not too marry the one she loved before being forcedly kidnapped.

"Education is for the next life; this life to be a damn man."



"I'm a damn man because of you. I'll leave good things for the next life."



This T-shirt was printed by a group of friends, but the text could have been influenced by adults.

**"IF YOU WANT TO FIND MUSHROOMS, YOU MUST LOOK ON DEAD TRUNKS,
BUT IF YOU WANT A GOOD SPOUSE, YOU MUST LOOK ON THEIR FAMILY TREE"**

Hmong saying (told by Clan leader in Nyot Hart)

You should investigate your significant other's family--Who are their parents and relatives? Are they good people? Do not blindly marry a person without understanding their background.

Translation from Hmong and explanation, Chasy Somwhang (ChildFund in Laos)

9 ANNEXES

9.1 Sample

Places	Phoumong Muang	Phaphueng		Nalaeng		Homsay		Nyothard		Total	Gender	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	People	F	M
FGD parents					2	2	4	2		10	6	4
FGD youths married			3	7			4	4	3	24	10	14
Interview youths married	3	3			3	3	3	2	2	21	11	10
Interview parents	2			1			2	1		7	4	3
Interview grand parents							1	1	2	4	3	1
Volunteers					1	1	1	1		5	2	3
Village Health volunteer shamans clan leader					1			2		5	1	4
School director						2				2	0	2
Village authorities	1	3	1	2	3	2	1	3	2	20	8	12
Total	6	6	4	10	10	10	16	16	9	98	45	53

The total for youth females met is 21 while the total youth males is 24 due to the fact that in Phaphueng village 4 female teenagers did not show as planned at the focus group discussion, only one young man with disability is included in the sample group.

At the community level, on 98 persons, females 45 and males 53, males are over represented in Village committees.

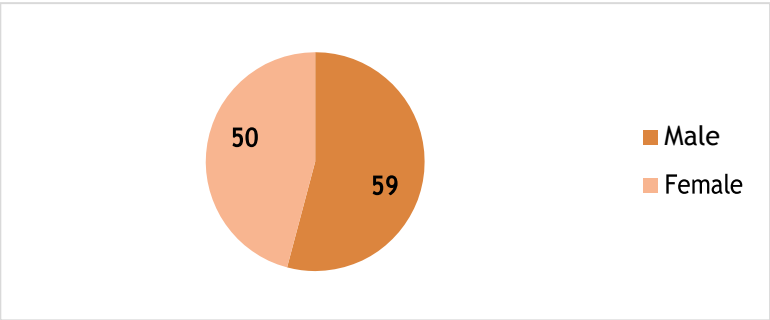
Authorities met at district level and health care centre staff

	Hua Mueuang District		Khoune district	
	M	F	M	F
DEO	2		1	
LWU		1		1

District hospital	2			2
Health centres			1	1
Total	4	1	2	4

We met also with 11 official staff (6 males and 5 females).

The total number of persons met is 109 (50 females and 59 males)



9.2 Demographic data

Changes in Hmong names made it difficult for volunteers to trace who should be our informants (some even being recorded several times under different names) and changes in Hmong names makes it impossible being in Vientiane to trace back who are all the informants we met with on the list. The information is not complete regarding number of children as well.

We miss the information from Phoumouang village, the empty form was given to village authorities and we just copied the names of couples we have been in touch with.

The information regarding the type of marriage love/kidnapped/arranged would need further checking as kidnapping are under reported by authorities who fail in their role to apply the law.



Demographic data
child married per villa

9.3 Charts and Tables

Table: education level of the sample of youth married (F21, M24): number per grade.

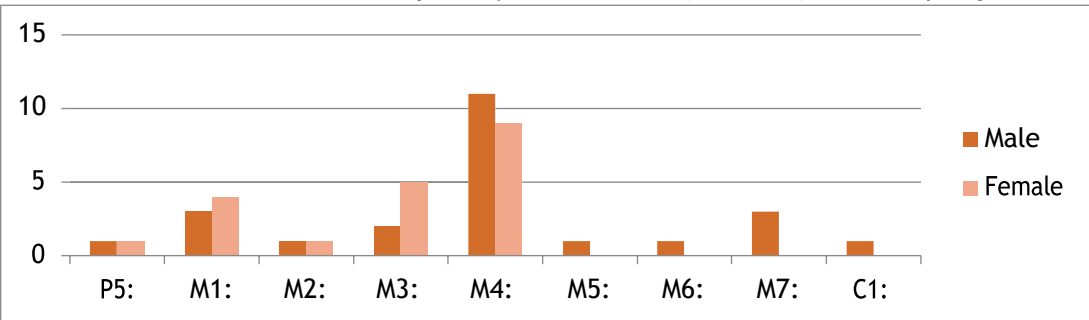


Table: Reasons for dropping out of school

Reasons	Female (21)	Male (24)
Bad results Failed		2
Dislike	5	3
Too old		1
Marry	2	3
Finance parents not support and do not allow	10	12
Help family old parents	7	9
Oldest daughter/son	1	1
No hope		1
Far from school	2	1
Do not know	2	

Table: Average age to be mother and father (F13, M10),

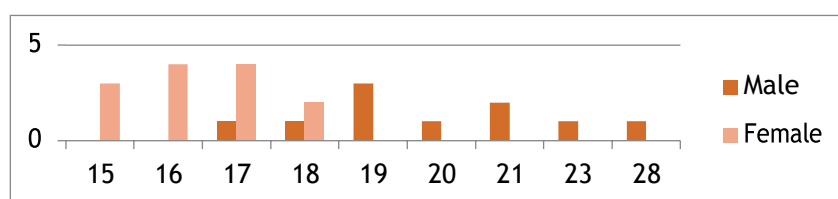


Table: knowledge about preventing STD/Hiv Aids

Do you know how to prevent STD/HIV/AIDS? Yes No (F21/M23) % yes no per age

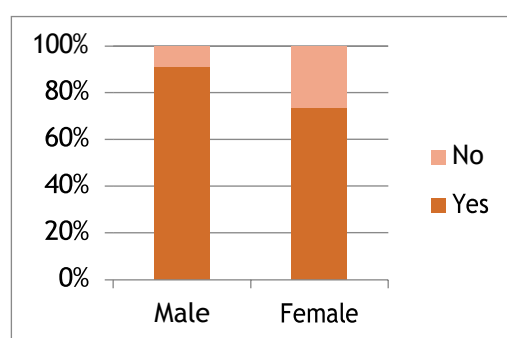


Table: Authorisation to use contraceptive

Do you agree that wife can use contraceptive only if allowed by her husband? (F19, M23), % yes no per age.

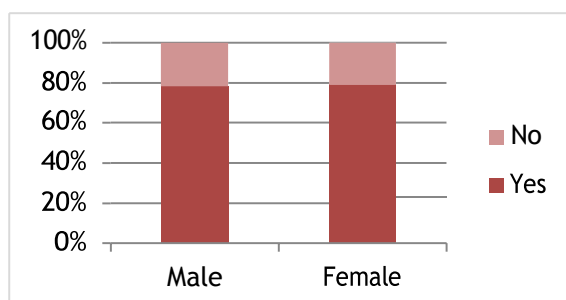


Table: Should girls be attending school as much as boys KAP: (F19, M23)

	Female	Male
Yes	15	16
No	4	7

9.4 Research tools and interview grid

- Extensive Interview grid with married children



Interview grid Health
care staff

- Interview grid with parents



Interview grid Health
care staff

- Interview with health care staff



Interview grid Health
care staff

9.5 KAP Questions

Answers: Yes, No, I do not know

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS

1. Do you know about how to prevent having a baby?
2. Do you know how to prevent STD/HivAids?
3. According to the law, it is husband's right to beat disobeying wife?

ATTITUDES: SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS

4. Girls should be encouraged to attend school as much as boys?
5. Wife can use contraceptive only if allowed by her husband?
6. Do you think some practices are acceptable?
Abduction for marriage?
Polygamy?

PRATICES: SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & Child RIGHTS

7. Do you Use contraceptive?
8. Female: I have sexual relation with my husband anytime he asks for even if I do not feel I like
9. Male: I have sexual relation with my wife anytime I want for even if I do not feel she likes.
10. Female only Would you report to anybody if your husband be was beating you regularly?

9.6 Statistics on Early Marriage in Lao PDR

Table on ages of marriage in Lao PDR (source LSIS 2017 p 296-302 **when available**²⁷)

Married under 15 years old							
Age	Gender	Laos	Xieng Khouang	Huaphanh	Lao-Tai ethnolinguistic group	Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic group	Hmong-Mien ethnolinguistic group ²⁸
15-49	F	9%	9.7%	12.1%	5.3%	11.7%	18.4%
	M		1.5%	1.3%	3.6%	4%	4.6%
20-24	F		10%	14%	4.1%	9.6%	18.3%
	M		4.3%	2.7%	1%	2.9%	3.8%
20-49	F		10.6%	11.7	5.5%	13%	19.7%
	M		2.7%	3.3%	4.4%	4.7%	25.6%
Married under 18 years old							
20-24	F	35% ²⁹	36%	45.7%	26.2%	38.9%	56.9%
	M		12.1%	20.8%	6.5%	13%	28.1%
20-49	F		37.9%	41.6%	27.3%	42%	54.9%
	M		12.3%	17.5%	10.4%	16%	25.6%
Married age 15-19							
15-19	F	19% ³⁰	25.5%	32.4%	18%	27.8%	41.3%
	M	6%	10.2%	13.5%	3.2%	7.9%	14.2%

9.7 Ethnic Hmong marriage traditions

The Hmong community structure is a clan based patriarchal one, with 21 clans (Saengxao) in each three original groups. There is a leader of the locality, the head of each clan, the head of each family and various healers and officials in charge of funeral ceremonies. Hmong boys and girls aged 14 - 15 or above, can marry. There are some girls as young as 13 who marry and cases where the parents betroth their daughters when they are aged less than 13. Aside from meeting minimum age requirements, in order to be eligible to marry, the bride and groom must not suffer from mental disability, must not share the same Saengxao, and must not be related, either vertically or horizontally.

²⁷ The data presents gaps because of the LSIS source is having incomplete data. For example the table lacks data on 15-19 married females and males...

²⁸ LISIS(2017) p 299

²⁹ UN Report on Sustainable Development Goals: Gender Equity.

http://la.one.un.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=200&Itemid=174

³⁰ UNFPA, Adolescent and Youth Situation Analysis Lao PDR, 2014

Marriages can be formed in 4 different ways in the literature that fit more or less with what was found in Northern Lao:

1- Tshoob Thov: proposal in which two parties already made an agreement.

“Marriage by **formal proposal** based upon - an official marriage request”. The man’s family (man and representatives from his family) do a formal house call proposes marriage to the woman and her family. They bring gifts and money and ask the girl’s parents for her hand in marriage. The woman has the option of refusing.

2- Tshoob sib caum: the man and the woman are a self-selecting love match.

The man and the woman are a self-selecting love match. The young couple move into the man’s family house and inform the bride’s parents of their planned union. When the woman arrives at the man’s house, the man’s side must quickly appoint a representative from their Saengxao, who will negotiate a wedding date with the woman’s relatives as soon as possible; i.e., within 3-5 hours of her arrival. When the husband visits the woman’s family, he must bring 12 bia (silver bars) of money. In the marriage ceremony, a contract is concluded between the two sides, outlining obligations for the new couple in building their family. If any party breaches the contract, the measures prescribed in the contract will be applied. The man’s family pay a bride-price to the woman’s family. During the wedding ceremony the couple will take an oath in front of relatives from both sides. The man’s representatives will vow to the woman’s relatives that, in order to secure the rights and interests of the woman, she will become part of the husband’s Saengxao and worship the spirit of that Saengxao.

3-Tshoob Zawj is where a woman is forced to marry a man with attempts to convince the parents that may include payments. If she resists, the man may make payments to the parents to apply pressure on her and convince her to marry him. Gently go and organize the wedding party, is the process of the groom and his family go to the bride’s family and hold the wedding party there. However, where a woman is forced to marry a man if she resists, the man may make payments to the parents to apply pressure on her and convince her to marry him.

4-Tshoob zij or nqug quas puj; literally, “to pull a lady/wife”, or bride-theft When a man is interested in marrying someone, he gives her a gift.

This common traditional approach is a way couples get married, it is for the man first to offer the woman a small present and then, if she accepts it, this is considered her tacit consent to the ‘theft’ it means she agrees to marry him. The gift isn’t necessarily an engagement ring; it could come in the form of jewellery, clothes, or simple trinkets. The groom will then “take” his bride, or she will “run away” with him, on a later date. This symbolic elopement is to “prove” to the guy that she loves him enough to leave her family. After the couple gets to the groom’s house, his family will send an envoy to the bride’s family to announce that their daughter is with them. Marriage then follows. However, often the practice involves no element of the woman’s consent. In short, the man kidnaps the woman and takes her to his house with the intention of marrying her.

5. **Tshoob nii:** literally means to ‘pull a lady’ or ‘bride theft’ and is effectively kidnapping the bride who may be as young as 12 or **Zij poj niam, bride-napping** This is a very abusive tradition. This happens when a man has no respect for the female’s feelings and decides that even if she doesn’t want to marry him, he will force her to. Sometimes the man will give her a gift (refer to above) and not let his intentions be known. He may come to her house when her parents are not home and literally carry or drag her home with the help of male friends or relatives. Sometimes girls as young as 12 or 13 are kidnapped from their families without warning. In the worst cases, a girl may discover that the man is already married with children and she, herself, is relegated within a new clan order, where she is a servant to the man and his relatives. In some cases, kidnapped girls or women may resort to suicide.

In this case, the man is responsible for bearing all expenses relating to her funeral and payment of the bride-price to her family.

Despite the great unhappiness this practice often causes to kidnapped girls (or women) and their families, marriage by theft are still considered acceptable.

A bride-price is commonly exchanged between the families of the bride and groom among ethnic groups. In some cases, a child might even be offered as a bride as payment to settle a dispute. Brides are often bound by marriage through the spirit of the husbands, as brides must denounce their own upon marriage. Furthermore, men in Hmong culture are permitted to practice polygamy and there is a relaxed attitude toward adultery committed by men in contrast to the severe consequences for women found to have committed such acts.

9.8 Parents recall: changes in age and decision making for ECM

While, there are various ways of being engaged and married in Hmong culture, several women's narratives (see Annex X) reminded the traumatising experience of distress and suffering they endured being assaulted and kidnapped by men they would not even know and sometimes with the agreement of their parents who are supposed to protect them. This kind of distressing narrative could be collected with probably many of the ladies in villages but what is surprising is how far, women and men in some regards keep some blindness toward some of the marriage occurring these days in the communities. Telling us so called old stories, informants tend to believe that past is past and that nowadays marriage process changed as mostly youths would know each other.

But there is a trend to shared ideas that things are nowadays different:

LWU (Lao F): *"It seems it is a new trend to marry early, more now than before and now girls want to have make up and they became fancy and follow fashion in order to attract males".*

Mother in Phoumouang: *"Nobody choose for children they choose by themselves. They start very early 15-16 for girls and it is 17-18 for boys but not much later. It is the same for boys and girls, they decide, and they are so young because it still be the time they go to school, and they want to marry."*

Mother in Phoumouang *"Before it was different youngest should be 17 or 18, I was 18 and my husband parents agreed they like me and they went to take me at my house, I just knew a bit about my husband They did not ask me if I agreed or not. We did not know each other with my husband but our parents agreed altogether. Regarding age of marriage in the past could be 17 but now as young as 12-13 they may go altogether and they want to marry. According to most of parents we do agree and we can't control the heart and usually they study far away so they do not stay with us. Now it does not happen that children are forced, boy and girls agree before and they do not even listen to parents they decide by themselves. It changed because they did not love each other before and life was not so good and it has been a lesson and if we forced some people they might commit suicide. For my son he was in touch with this girl by phone for long time, I knew, and I talked to him and I have 4 daughters in law, 2 I met before, and 2, I never met so it is changing.*

9.9 Short Case Studies

We present here some elements of cases studies as example because it has been difficult in the imparted time to conduct in deep studies collecting and crossing in deep information from various informants regarding one single case.

9.9.1 From Socio-economic constraints to love

Min Phoumouang, was 17 years old attending M3 when she married Y 15 years old who left M2. She is a typical case of girl who feels being a burden for her parents and ends in marrying as a way to ease them and allow others especially brothers to study. Decision to marry with this younger man that is

not usual in Hmong context was very sudden in some regards even if she was already thinking about it, he came to her village and the day after took her. Y himself was in a similar social situation having quit school, he was a bit lost and marrying was a way to develop his life and please his family by doing something that has to be done.

She is satisfied by her choice and her married life while he is moderately because he would like to learn new skills and feel overwhelmed by daily life work as a young adult with a family.

*"I do not know why I wanted to marry; I thought that if I still study until M7 I would spend most of my parent's money it would be better to marry. I was worried about my parents because they are so old and if I study more I will make them poorer. I am the last children and I have 7 older brothers: 3 got family already, 4 still study in Nonghet and study M4-5-6. My father has to support the ones who study in Nonghet already. I was alone but I was thinking that I should let them study as it makes too much money for my parents. I think that I would like also study a lot but in the end we have nothing, we are not sure to get a job. I hoped to become a doctor but I do not have money to support me; I studied and I had normal results but I think that I could do it but also I think that I could not do it because I have too many brothers. **My parents told me that as a girl I did not need to study long because they had no money to support.** He came to me and also came to my family before we marry and his aunt in my village came and he slept in her house. He told me that he wanted to marry and he came back home after, I thought that my parents have no money anyway so it is better for me to stop to study and to marry".*

9.9.2 Forced marriage arranged by parents

M studied to M3, she is 18 and married at 16, her story illustrates what happens when parents do agree to marry their kids without their consent. This girl insisted how she was deprived of choosing for her life and she explained how her life was destroyed and she expressed dissatisfaction regarding her life, while her husband who relates the story a bit differently as "he got whom he choose".

"My village is not here, and my husband went to play there, we did not study altogether, and we did not know each other, we met only one day and the parents of my husband came to ask for me while I was in my parent's house. At that time and after he forced me to go with that we went to my husband house and after 3 days there we came back to my house for the wedding party. My husband did not tell me that he would come to ask to marry me and I did not know that he would come. My parents did not ask me if I wanted to marry or not. I had another boy- friend I talked with for 4-5 months and we planned to marry but this one came first. I was studying it is pity that I had to leave school to marry i was not so good student but wanted to study sewing, all is lost now."

The mother had another explanation

"My son loved one girl that was our relative and we did not want him to marry, so we went to find another girl for him, with our son, and also we went 4 persons: uncle, son, son in law and brother in law but not the father, we went to another village where a girl was recommended by some relatives. We went to visit the parents of the girls at their house and said that we should take her because she had a boyfriend, she loved him a green Hmong in another village but we are White Hmong so her parents did not like. She did not want to marry my son and my son did not want also but we choose for them."

M is reporting a situation that is reminding about child labour exploitation in a family who organised a second kidnapping after the first bride (15 years old) tried to suicide to be able to be send back to her parents:

"They ask me to carry big bags of rice I can or I cannot they do not mind, I have to carry and if I was at my parents' house I would not do that. My parents-in-law love me, we never argued as I do all what

they ask me. I just work and they do not say anything. We share the work but the sister of my husband still go to school, I do not know her age but I feel jealous when I see one going to school she is probably my age. That family sold the rice and did not give us any money I did not ask my husband as If they gave him he would not give me....”

9.9.3 Young girl who attempted suicide, then left her forced marriage to return home

Pis young M3 student who intended to suicide and came back to her parents' house, 3 months after being forced married to a young man from her neighbourhood who kidnapped her at night and nobody assisted her when she claimed for help because she did not want to follow him. She did not mention her suicide as such but said that she took some medicine did not feel well and was sent back to her mother's house. She spoke with quite a strong voice and does not show to be so shy as some other girls we interviewed.

“I studied at school and Mony, the volunteer relative just came to pick me at night time. We know each other as we grew up in the same village but I never thought that we will get married or partners. They came 3 persons including his brother and the father of the female volunteer because the father is the brother of this boy. We never talked altogether as such. At that time parents were cutting the trees and they sleep in the rice field, only children were in the house and also my grandparents. My grandmother said “if she does not like you should not take her” but the grand-father said “the ascendance for my family is good and your family is good you could take her”. The boy side called my uncle on father side who said “you can take her”. I was crying, I cried and I begged them as I did not want to go but they did not listen to me. They pulled me and when I arrived to my husband house, I just cried so much. Then I had to be patient as I did not like this man. We opened the wedding and we closed the wedding. According to Hmong culture, the wedding is at the women house, we must pay for the costs and we killed one pig. The day that I went to stay with them in the morning my mum came from the field and she cried and I thought that I would come back with her, but also she wanted me to try to stay with him but it is not like that. This boy I do not even know how many years old he is. We slept altogether, some nights I did not want to stay overnight with him, we managed to prevent to have a baby but I do not know if he used condom, maybe date only. That day before I came back home a little girl stayed with and I asked the little to get some medicine and I took some and after that I just came. They knew that I took some medicine and they prepared some special drink so i vomited. I stayed at hospital just half day and after I slept again at my husband house for one night and then they talked to each other here and after they bring me here at my house. There was a meeting between many people some men and women and meeting with village leader as well. I was 14, I returned home for 5 months now. Now If we have money I would like to school but we have no money. I do not know what I want to be I can pass the exam, I study normally, I liked to go to school I enjoyed but sometimes I could not understand the lessons and it made me sad. I have a boy- friend in Ken Leng, he is studying M7, I do not know if he wants to study further, he said that he wants to marry me after M7. I think that I will not study more but I would like. I think that 15 years old is too young to marry 17- 18 is better but our life is like this. If I still young I do not think I want baby now because I do not know how to take care but I do not know about contraceptive. I did not like than man, I want a person who does not beat me and do not argue and speak hard. Now, I am happy I stay with my parents and I do not think anything else, I do not think about other people.”

The school director reported that after leaving her husband she showed back at school in September and she wanted to study in M4 but she could not be allowed and the previous year, she passed already the exam for the first semester only that does not allow to change the class as if one student is absent more than 30 days without explanation, he/she is cut off.

We interviewed the grand- father, who is a shaman and was present at the time of the abduction, but he did not intervene despite his grand- daughter calls for help.

“For my grand-daughter, our parents did not know, and the children did not know, nobody knew, they just came and kidnapped her so she ended in being unhappy and took medicine but as parents we were not happy as well. They were not a couple from above and they did not match. I did not know that they would come, I could see but I did not know how to say because she is not my daughter and she belongs to my son and daughter in law. I could not do anything. They informed me so that I know after night, I did not accept and I had to call her parents from the field so that they come quickly. My grand-daughter did not want to go but I could not do anything, during the kidnapping I could not see exactly because they did not tell me

*I tried to say them that if she is not happy to go you have to let her I could not beat them because it is illegal to beat. **If they come and kidnap your daughter you beat them they will beat us if anybody of my clan will come they will beat in return.***

I was in another room and I could not say anything, they did not ask me so I do not know how to do. For me if they come with older people as formally we would have negotiation and talk with her first but they did not talk with me and just went with her, it is not wrong according to the tradition but it is not the best way according to me.

After marriage she got sick and then us as grand parents took her home to make ceremony and she was better and decided not to return. She really did not want to get married really so she took medicine. When her family encouraged her to go, she just talked about suicide, so the spouse family just asked to return the dowry. It was an un matched couple.

They have ceremony to change the name and call for souls. We do not say the old name. Now she found a 3rd one, now she has a boyfriend just come to visit all time. We already gave the daughter to him. The boy is a student he invited her to his family and they will marry at the end of the school year. It is up to them and up to the sky for when.”

9.9.4 Old women’s narratives regarding their own marriages

One grandmother in Nyot Hart claim to be over 100 years old:

“When my husband came to get me I never met with him before as I remember he just came to see me 2 times and 3rd one he went to pick me to stay with him.

That time my parents also stayed there and said this guy is from a rich family he is for you”, I did not want to go but my parents said “go” and they pulled me. In the past if we do not really resist they take us. I was scared and not happy.”

F in Homxay (couple interview), this woman felt free to narrate the past in front of her husband, and their son repeated a violent kidnapping organised by parents.

“I feel very easy and happy to talk about this as I think people should know. Before I still was so young that I do not know if I would have family at this time and my husband came to pick me with many people, his friends. He just said: I will take care of you and I will love you. If they did not force me and attached me I would go back home, I did not want to go, it was not my idea yet. My parents see when they pulled me out and my mother asked to free me and let me come back. But some went to talk to father and asked to marry me.

Before, it was not the same as now. If men liked somebody they could take and not even ask. When I think about this, I did not know my husband he just went to visit my house and other said to him “take this one as she will be a good wife”. I did not know why they took me and one said: “I take you to be my wife”. I was so scared they wore Hmong clothes and even my clothes were pulled so I was nude and my parents gave me clothes to wear. And after I was so sad and I cried so much for many days as I

missed my parents so much. It was very far about 1 day to walk they took me at night and we had no clothes just one cloth and no bra. Now there is no more girl like this they must be agreed"

FGD, M, Hom vay.

"Before we have no documents if we like some girl, we just took some people just caught her and some people decided altogether. Before parents would agree and families just cousins or parents of the husband looked good at the girl and they would just take her. They would first kidnap and secondly engaged at the husband house and then fathers would talk altogether. But this generation now most of them go to school and meet at school"

9.10 Human trafficking and marriage

Child and forced marriages are a particular issue among some ethnic groups in the Northern provinces bordering China, with girls either sold by their families to marry across the frontier. We have been reported cases of children being non officially married to Chinese Citizens, non Hmong ethnic and went to China, a group of them returned in Phatphueng but some disappeared in a neighbouring village. American Hmong are also looking for youths but most often would marry a young woman who is over 18 years old while they can be much older.

Phatphueng, VDC M: *"Parents give girl to marry they do not inform village authorities. As far as we know in other villages some girl disappear"*

HCC (M) in Khoun: *"Some girls went to China with their Chinese husband and they came back because they could not stay in china, they can't speak Chinese and they can't stay with the family they can't cook sometimes they have too many people in the family to take care about. Mostly they were 14-15 years when they married and now about 4-5 came back with children and stay with their parents."*

LWU in Phoumeuang *"A 30 years Older Hmong American took a 16 years to marry they had no marriage party, they just went to America because maybe there are afraid it is not legal. We have also the case of rich people who come to marry young mostly Chinese and they came back already but we do not know why they came back"*.

While most of these cases can be labelled as early child marriage, they can be also categorised as human trafficking or cases of marriage with foreigners.

9.11 General recommendations on eliminating ECM

How to prevent early marriage?

- Use data to identify the girls most at risk and target geographic "hot spots"—sub-national areas with high proportions and numbers of girls at risk of child marriage.
- Improve & Promote girls equal access to good quality primary and secondary education.
- Develop stronger coordination among stake holders.
- Strengthen law.
- Social Action in Education, aims to encourage the participation of vulnerable groups in the education system
- Productive Social Action to ensure social inclusion through work
- To increase school enrolment in poor villages like this, residents need to be convinced that education brings real economic benefits.
- Improve education in ethnic communities, linguistic and cultural barriers must be overcome along with geographic challenges.

How to eliminate ECM?

- Changing perceptions and practices, including ensuring better child protection and child rights
- Improving the evidence base to make informed decisions
- Enact and enforce laws by ensuring understanding and collaborations with local and traditional authorities

Strong community messaging about the advantages of later marriage, specifically that older girls are better able to handle the workload of marriage and bear healthier babies, would be well understood as some persons carry them already.

Seek to collaborate with other in-country development partners eg PLAN, CARE, UNFPA, Save the Children, in developing strategies for addressing early marriage: drawing upon previous work to reduce early marriage for a number of years now, using a combination of education about the risks of early pregnancy to women's health and providing knowledge about and access to contraceptives to unmarried young women to prevent teenage pregnancy.

9.12 Suggestions for future research

- Scale up research to yield even more robust data on adolescent sexual and relationship behaviours and drivers that contribute to child marriage and look at sexual practices and first night as a rape.
- Consult with other organisations on innovative approaches to working in areas significantly affected by drug use and the potential impacts that this may have on the project activities.
- Investigate ways in which community savings funds might be of some help—if women earn money and can deposit it directly into the community fund, they may avoid the money being taken from the HH and spent on issues that they do not wish.
- Police should investigate on official and non-official marriage with Chinese who takes girls or young women to China.
- We need to better understand life choices for adolescent girls and the ambivalence they might be confronted with by being a good working girl and early mother to please their husband and parents or saving more time for their own personal development.
- What is the most interesting as well is that when it comes to school dropout - it is often the parents that have all the say and most of the power and children listen to their parents and would withdraw from school because their parents tell them. When it comes to marriage, parents say they have no power. It would be interesting to explore in depth the relationship or socio dimensions within the household on certain issues - cultural (destiny and marriage) vs economic as main reason for quitting school for example.
- Invest in improved data on monitoring and evaluation in order to strengthen programmes for girls at risk and married girls and boys.
- Need to scale up research on ECM in Hmong context to get an idea of the amplitude of the phenomena.
- The contribution of a senior anthropologist fluent Hmong speaker and specialist of Hmong and gender issues should be sought in the design of in-depth research.

9.13 Report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child Lao PDR, Nov 2018: ECM

1 November 2018, United Nations CRC/C/LAO/CO/3-6 Convention on the Rights of the Child Distr.: General

Original: English

24. The Committee is deeply concerned that although the minimum age for marriage is set at 18, child marriage remains highly prevalent, especially among girls in certain ethnic groups. With reference to the joint general recommendation No. 31 (2014) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014) on harmful practices, the Committee urges the State party to:

- a) Enforce the minimum age of marriage set in the Family Law at 18;
- b) Develop awareness-raising campaigns and programmes on the harmful effects of child marriage on the physical and mental health and well-being of children, targeting girls and boys, households, communities, local authorities, religious leaders, and judges and prosecutors;
- c) Encourage children to use helplines or village protection networks (child protection networks) for help when the marriage issue arises;
- d) Develop the capacity of village protection mechanisms, such as child protection networks and village mediation units, to protect girls and boys from marriage under the age of 18.

9.14 Report of the Special Rapporteur on child sexual abuse

Child marriage

13. As at 2016, the Lao People's Democratic Republic had the highest percentage of married children in East Asia and the Pacific. Even though national legislation prohibits child marriage, according to available data, more than a third of women were married before the age of 18. The Special Rapporteur was not provided with information on the application of the amended Penal Code promulgated in 2017, in which child marriage is criminalized under article 269. The lack of identity documents and birth registration, with a quarter of all children under the age of 5 unregistered in 2011-2012,⁵ and the relative ease with which the date of birth on an identity document can be modified (for example, in exchange for payment), facilitate child marriage.

14. There is a strong correlation between the proportion of young people who are married and their level of education and wealth quintile. A smaller proportion of young people in urban areas are married compared to young people in rural areas, and child marriage is more common among some ethnic groups. The country has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in the region, with 65 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2014. Figures from 2015 showed a gender disparity in child marriage, with over 62,000 girls and young women aged 15-19 married compared to 23,500 boys and young men of the same age range.

15. During her visit, the Special Rapporteur gathered anecdotal information and heard of numerous cases of girls being married to adults, in particular Chinese nationals who had travelled to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. She heard of cases of girls in the north of the country who had been lured or convinced by Chinese men to marry them and move to China. There were also instances in which families had forced their daughters aged 14 or 15 to marry Chinese men in exchange for money

or a dowry. These practices amount to sale of children and are prohibited by international law. The Special Rapporteur also heard of instances in which the local authorities were involved in and made profit from the trafficking of girls for forced marriage to Chinese men.

16. After the girl victims of forced or child marriage leave their homes, their families hardly ever receive news about them or know about their whereabouts. In some cases, the girls manage to escape and return to their communities, where there is no system in place to assess their needs and refer them for support and assistance. The lack of awareness about the harm suffered by those girls, and the lack of necessary care and support services, leads to their revictimization. This is a problem that is occurring in the northern provinces of the country, in particular in remote villages in the provinces of Oudomxay and Phongsali, where access is difficult. Even though there are no exact figures on the scope of the problem, it is seriously affecting the communities of origin of the girl victims. Therefore, comprehensive research and investigation is urgent in order to inform immediate prevention and protection policies.

9.15 Girls' and boys' narratives related to kidnapping

M, 19 years old, 16 years old at that time, reported:

"My husband came to play in my village and he liked me, we met 2 times in one day and he wanted to marry me but he did not tell me.

When my husband's uncle went to pick me up, I just came from the field where I worked with my parents to charge my phone. I saw them many times, they just told me that they would take me to marry that man and they forced me to join them, many men caught me, I was fighting back but they were so many 4 at least: 2 middle age men; one was my husband friend and my husband.

I asked them: "who are you?" and I said that I did not want to go but they did not listen to me

At my house there was my grand- mother (father's mother) but she was inside and sick and she could not see. During that time my parents were in the field. I knew where my husband's village is, but I never met with his parents. I was so scared as I saw that in TV only and I heard about that. They had 4 motorbikes and I went with my husband and me on the motorbike. I thought that I wanted to escape but it is night time and in the jungle. Once we arrived at my husband house somebody called my parents and they said that they did not agree but they did not come on the same day because they were angry and also they not say that they will come to get me back and they also called me. My parents said: *"why you did not listen to us? I told you not to go back home to charge the telephone and this happened now."*

For me I did not know that this should happen with me.

After I arrived they used the chicken around me and I had to sleep with my husband but just to sleep that first night I wanted to cry." I had a boyfriend already, we met at the time we studied and I decided to drop of school as we talked altogether and after one year we could marry.

MT, The boy related a story that is a bit different:

My wife studied until P5 and she left school already she was 15 when I met with her. My wife was in Santhai, and we went to Santhai to visit and we met her without anybody telling us. I met her and I liked her and I told her and the day after I called her and she said that I will marry her and she said: "OK I will go". We went there 2-3 times and the last time after about one month I took her with my motorbike she said it is OK. Before I met with my wife parents and talked to them and they agreed.

We collected also the story from M' father that is another version showing that the boy's parents selected M for him and advised him to look for her.

Because of poverty we could not support my son to go to school and we decided him to stop at M4, he was 16 years old. After that he came to help the family and we discussed about marriage; we agreed that as most of my children are girls, I decided that he should be marrying to have somebody to help the family. I had some cousins in Santhai and they know the girl and so for the Lao new year my son went to play there for the first time because I have a sister who married in that village so I have information regarding the background of this girl. He liked her and then a second time he went to pick her up. The first time they checked if the son likes the girl and her behavior to see if she is ok for me to take care of my family, they check not only her face but also her behaviour and also her ideas. We know that we like that girl and her family but we did not know that she did not like my son, my son came back and said that the girl liked him. So after marrying them, we visited the girl family and we love each other and respect each other between each party.

9.16 Regional statistics on ECM

Country	Married by 15 %	Married by 18%
Cambodia	02	19
Indonesia	1	14
Lao PDR	9	35
Myanmar	02	16
Thailand	04	23
Vietnam	01	11
East Asia and Pacific	02	15
World	06	25

9.17 List of suicide cases in communities

- i. One girl kidnapped at night from a dormitory in Naleang village managed to escape from her kidnapper/aggressor and was dropped along the path in the forest in the night, she took poisonous leaves from tree in the bush and she died.
- ii. One couple as reported by the aunty of the boy, passed away in the neighbourhood of the village. Their married being refused both took some poison and slept on the ground, the boy

head on his girlfriend knees. When the couple was found by this aunt the boy passed away already and the girl later on died in the village.

- iii. In Tha Leum (Khoun), parents opposing their marriage and sending them to different school to separate them, one young couple of 15 years students at Nampha college, used a rope to hang themselves at some tree in the mountains (or at school depending on informant), when they were found the girl died already but the boy survived after a long stay in the hospital but he got very depressed nowadays hanging around in his village. The girl was from Phoumngmuean village.
- iv. One girl was reported having recently committed suicide by the Khoun district health team because she felt not being well accepted by her family in law.
- v. In Pakkha as well one girl passed away early this year (2018-2019), while taking medicine, she was M3 student at Nam Ha secondary school and it seems that it was related to a love story but the case needs to be better informed.

REFERENCES

Ashley D. Jordana, Situational Analysis on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, World Vision.

https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/report_SituationalanalysisCEFMVietnamLaosMyanmarandCambodia-FINAL.docx-2.pdf

CARE, Child, Early, and Forced Marriage. CARE'S GLOBAL EXPERIENCE, June 2018,

https://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/care_cefm_capacitystatement.pdf

ChildFrontiers, "Report on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Lao PDR", 2011,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281244672_The_Commercial_Sexual_Exploitation_of_Children_in_Lao_PDR

Jones Nicola, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Tran Thi Van Anh, Early marriage among Viet Nam's Hmong: How unevenly changing gender norms limit Hmong adolescent girls' options in marriage and life September 2014.

<file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/Bibliography%20report/Hmong%20Vietnam.pdf>

Juliette Myers, Rowan Harvey. Breaking Vows: Early and Forced Marriage and Girls' Education 2011,

www.plan-uk.org

Keown-Bomar Julie, Kinship Networks Among Hmong-American Refugees LFB Scholarly Pub, 193 pages), 2004.

Lao Women's Union, Lao PDR Gender Profile 2005.

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAOPRD/Resources/Lao-Gender-Report-2005.pdf>

LISIS, [Lao PDR, Lao Social Indicator Survey \(LSIS\) 2011-12](#)

Liamputtong P, Abortion--it is for some women only! Hmong women's perceptions of abortion in

[Health Care Women Int.](#) 2003 Mar;24(3):230-41. , <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12746014>

LYU Adolescent and Youth Situation Analysis Lao PDR (2014) *Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union*, Vientiane, https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Eng_AYSA%20Report.pdf

Malhotra Anju, Warner Ann, Solutions to End Child Marriage, www.icrw.org/childmarriage

Mieke Nicole Lisuk, what is a good girl? The evolution of feminine identity in the American Hmong community, thesis for MA in History, 2015, [http://csus-](http://csus-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/138465/word%202003%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1)

[dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/138465/word%202003%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1](http://csus-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/138465/word%202003%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1)

Naebklang Manida, : *Unrecognised Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*, ECPAT, October 2015, [https://www.ecpat.org/wp-](https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Child%20Marriage_ENG.pdf)

[content/uploads/2016/04/Child%20Marriage_ENG.pdf](https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Child%20Marriage_ENG.pdf)

Phetchanpheng Souvanxay (2018) Social Factors Affecting Secondary School Completion among Adolescent Females A research study in Hmong, Khmu, Phong, Lao and Lu Mien cultural contexts, Child Fund Laos, Vientiane.

Plan International Asia Regional Office, Their Time is Now, Eliminating Child, Early and Forced

Marriage in Asia, 2018. [https://plan-international.org/publications/their-time-now-eliminating-child-](https://plan-international.org/publications/their-time-now-eliminating-child-early-and-forced-marriage)
[early-and-forced-marriage](http://www.plan-international.org/asia/their-time-is-now), www.plan-international.org/asia/their-time-is-now

PostlesDavis, A. C. and Rosa, G. A girl's right to say no to marriage: Working to end child marriage and keep girls in school. PLAN International, 2013. <https://plan-uk.org/file/en-a-girls-right-to-say-no-to-marriage-fullreport-web-32000722pdf/download?token=BE80wUIB>

Raj Anita, McDougal Lotus,, Effects of young maternal age and short interpregnancy interval on infant mortality in South Asia NIH Public Access Author Manuscript Int J Gynaecol Obstet. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2015 January 01., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4058333/>

Sexual right initiative (SRI), Analysis of the Language of Child, Early, and Forced Marriages, August 2013. <file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/Bibliography%20report/SRI-Analysis-of-the-Language-of-Child-Early-and-Forced-Marriages-Sep2013.pdf>

Social Institution & Gender Index (SIGI) 2019, www.genderindex.org

Stavenhagen Rodolfo, UN Doc. A/HRC/6/15/Add.3, 1 November 2007, paras. 26-72 2016, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G07/148/22/PDF/G0714822.pdf>

Sychareun et al. BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth (2018) 18:219, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-018-1859-1>

Sychareun V, Vongxay V, Houaboun S, et al. Determinants of adolescent pregnancy and access to reproductive and sexual health services for married and unmarried adolescents in rural Lao PDR: a qualitative study. BMC Pregnancy Childbirth. 2018;18(1):219. Published 2018 Jun 8. doi:10.1186/s12884-018-1859-17, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29884139>

Petroni S, Understanding the Relationships Between HIV and Child Marriage : Conclusions From an Expert Consultation, Journal of Adolescent Health 64 (2019) 694-696, [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(19\)30109-0/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(19)30109-0/fulltext)

UNDP Customary laws in Lao PDR, 2011, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/laopdr/docs/Reports%20and%20publications/Customary_Law_Laos2011_english_master1.pdf

UNDP Report on Sustainable Development Goals: Gender Equity 2019. http://la.one.un.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=200&Itemid=174

UNFPA (2013) "Teenage Pregnancy is Way of Life in Remote Laotian Villages", News, 30 October 2013, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/teenage-pregnancy-way-life-remote-laotian-villages>

UNFPA 2015, [[Population Situation Analysis Lao PDR, 2015](#)]

UNFPA 2016 Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy", 2016, <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013.pdf>

UNFPA, 2012 <file:///C:/Users/Utilisateur/Downloads/ECmarriage/UNFPA%20What%20is%20Child%20Marriage.pdf>

UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, Joint Evaluation Report May 2019 www.unfpa.org/evaluation , www.unicef.org/evaluation

World Vision International, 2019 Gender Analysis Report, <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/AHAN%20Gender%20Analysis%20FULL%20REPORT.pdf>

UNICEF, Ending violence against children in Lao PDR, A multi-sectoral response to the national Violence against Children Survey Priority actions 2018. <https://www.unicef.org/laos/reports/ending-violence-against-children-lao-pdr-2018>

Vue, L. & Lor, K. quoted in Christine Wilson Owens Hmong Cultural Profile, 2006, <https://ethnomed.org/culture/hmong/hmong-cultural-profile/?searchterm=food>

Walker Judith-Ann, Why Ending Child Marriage Needs to Be an Education Goal, Brookings Center for Universal Education, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/walker_girls_education.pdf www.brookings.edu/universal-education

Wilson Owens Christine, Hmong Cultural Profile, 2006, <https://ethnomed.org/culture/hmong/hmong-cultural-profile/?searchterm=food>

World Bank, Social Assessment for the Laos Reducing Rural Poverty and Malnutrition Project, September 2018.

Websites

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education at:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002607/260770e.pdf>

Materials related to the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_92681.html

Plan International's work to end child marriage in Asia-Pacific: <https://plan-international.org/asia/child-marriage-asia#>

Human rights documents CRC and CEDAW

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/LAIndex.aspx>

Human Rights Council Fortieth session 25 February-22 March 2019 Agenda item 3 Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development Visit to the Lao People's Democratic Republic Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse materials.

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/011/87/PDF/G1901187.pdf?OpenElement>

Ending the Terror of Bride Kidnapping

<https://blog.compassion.com/bride-kidnapping-ending-the-terror/>

[Because I am a Girl \(Plan international\)](#)

[Girls Not Brides](#)

[Sustainable Development Goals](#)

[Population Council](#)

[Coalition for Adolescent Girls](#)

Q & A: Child Marriage and Violations of Girls' Rights

14 Million Girls Marry Each Year Worldwide <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/14/q-child-marriage-and-violations-girls-rights>