



Implementing the Millennium Development Goals for all

Shifting the discriminatory gender norms that confront Hmong adolescent girls in Viet Nam

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Key messages

- A focus on national-level MDG achievement often overlooks key pockets of disadvantage, such as those faced by the Hmong ethnic minority in Viet Nam.
- A pervasive cultural preference for sons means that gender norms surrounding Hmong marriage practices are shifting only slowly and often in unexpected ways, despite legal changes and strong community education.
- Child marriage remains far more common among the Hmong than it does in the wider Vietnamese population; some of these marriages, particularly in more isolated villages, continue to be the result of abduction.
- Young Hmong wives are burdened with excessive work and demands on their fertility and are regularly exposed to gender-based violence fuelled by alcohol.
- 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 girls.

1 Introduction: Hmong marriage practices limit girls' futures



'I hadn't finished my schooling. I didn't want to get married; I wanted to finish my studies, but my husband dragged me away.' (Adolescent girl, 17)

'We liked each other; we talked to each other, and then got married.' (Adolescent girl, 18)

Viet Nam, according to the World Bank, has already met five of its ten Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and is on track to meet two more before the 2015 deadline.¹ It has, for example, already more than halved its rates of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG1), achieved universal primary education (MDG2) and closed the gender gap in education (MDG3). Indeed, Viet Nam is a regional leader in terms of girls' education and women's participation in both the labour force and politics (MDG3). It has also made huge strides towards meeting MDG5—improving maternal health.

Critical gaps remain, however, with national progress masking the disparities between overall averages and the situation among the country's ethnic minorities. This is particularly true for the Hmong, who, with a population of just over 1 million, are one of Viet Nam's largest ethnic groups. They continue to not only suffer from poverty rates as high as 80%, but to have the lowest average age of marriage and a fertility rate well in excess of double the national average. They are also the only ethnic group with a primary gender gap in excess of 10% and a high school enrolment rate in single digits. Hmong adolescent girls face deeply entrenched gender norms that limit their social value to in their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

Situated at the crossroads of childhood and adulthood, there is a growing recognition of adolescence as a vital stage in the consolidation of any development gains made in childhood in terms of nutrition, education and

¹ Viet Nam's poverty rate dropped from nearly 60% in the early 1990s to just over 20% in 2010 (using the World Bank's poverty line) (World Bank, 2013). As of 2012, nearly half of its labour force is female, as are one quarter of its National Assembly—and girls are significantly more likely than boys to attend high school (UN, 2012).

health. Adolescent girls in particular, as the future mothers of the next generation, offer a unique opportunity for a double return on investment – the future well-being of their children, as well as themselves. However, the very concept of adolescence as a crucial stage in a girl's life-cycle is relatively new in Viet Nam in general – and among the Hmong in particular.

Largely isolated, geographically by their mountains, and socially by their cultural distinctiveness, it is difficult for adolescents and their parents to imagine a shift in the gender traditions of their ethnic group, 'my Hmong ethnic', even when they are aware that their reality is markedly different from the broader Vietnamese culture. Indeed, there is evidence that shifting and persisting norms are heavily intertwined, with traditional Hmong culture introducing unintended – and surprising – consequences. Similarly, the impact of individual agency does not appear to be clear-cut; girls' who are leading the way on one front are often stubbornly quite traditional on others, even to their own detriment.

This country briefing draws on research from in-depth qualitative work undertaken in 2013 in Ha Giang province, northern Viet Nam, on what drives the shifting and persisting norms surrounding marriage practices within the Hmong community. It looks at how these norms are shaped by individual agency, socio-economic conditions, demographic factors and social institutions and the impacts they have on girls' capacities in terms of education, economics, decision-making, sexual and reproductive health and physical well-being. The briefing concludes with a short reflection on the policy and programming implications for the Government of Viet Nam and its development partners, given the growing recognition that progress towards the MDGs must be measured not just in terms of national averages but in terms of meaningful change for all social groups.

2 Research study and methodology



This study is part of a broader multi-country (Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda, Viet Nam), multi-year initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls. In this second year, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), in partnership with national researchers (the Institute of Family and Gender Studies in Viet Nam), used a common set of research tools adapted to the local context to examine the way in which marriage practices and related social norms limit girls' futures. Small group discussions with adolescents (SGDs) and focus group discussions with adults (FGDs), in single-sex and mixed settings, allowed us to explore common views

and experiences on marriage, gender, adolescence and social norms – and not only how these persist but also how they can be changed. In-depth interviews (IDIs) with key informants (KIs), including younger and older adolescent girls and their brothers, revealed their views on the status of girls and the opportunities and challenges they face in their natal homes, their marital homes and in the wider community. We used intergenerational pairings (involving grandparents, parents and adolescents) (GPs) to explore changes in marriage and gender roles over time and outlier case studies (OCSs) to examine in detail how some girls break the mould while others live lives that resemble those of their grandmothers rather than their peers.

Our primary research took place in Ta Lung commune, in the Meo Vac district of Ha Giang province, near Viet Nam's border with China. The district is recognised as the country's Hmong homeland and is one of its poorest areas. Ta Lung's residents (98% of them Hmong) are, for the most part, Hmong-speaking subsistence farmers and while they are beginning to use motorbikes for transportation, more distant hamlets are still inaccessible to vehicular traffic. Over the past two decades the commune has received various forms of support from national poverty-alleviation programmes, including Programme 135 (which invests in transportation, educational and health infrastructure) and fee waivers for minority students. However, the bulk of this programming appears to be tapering off as Government targeting shifts from all Hmong families to only those who fall below an artificially low poverty threshold.

3 Key findings: Hmong girls continue to be disadvantaged by marriage practices that are shifting slowly and non-linearly

3.1 Marriage

Hmong marriage practices continue to place a disproportionate burden on girls—both in terms of getting married and being married. Our respondents were agreed that some practices are shifting rapidly while others are more entrenched.

3.1.1 Getting Married

‘Children choose (partners) themselves. If I didn’t like him, I would just go away. My parents couldn’t force me.’ (Adolescent girl, 19)

‘The sister and brother wanted me to be their sister in law, so they told their younger brother to kidnap me. They liked me because I was an orphan; I worked harder than other friends who have parents.’ (Adolescent girl, 18)

While our respondents were very clear that these days ‘you don’t have to look for a husband for your daughter’, the only consensus they could come to about the typical age at which girls marry is that the law stipulates 18 (and 20 for boys). Some respondents felt that girls today are marrying later than in the past, primarily because traditional arranged child marriages to cousins have now died out. Others, however, felt that girls are marrying earlier, largely because they have more contact with boys now that they are in school and are not confined so strictly to the home. Triangulating the beliefs of our respondents with the actual ages of the married partners in the families of our respondents, it seems that while most girls marry between the ages of 18 and 20, a very significant proportion marry at 17 - and a handful continue to marry against their will as early as 14.



While there is broad consensus that parents no longer choose their children’s partners, this does not necessarily mean that the bride and groom choose each other. It remains unacceptable in the Hmong community for a girl to show any interest in a boy until he has actively pursued her for some time. Indeed, for her to do so would risk her being seen as a ‘bad’ girl.

Moreover, while boys are far less likely to kidnap their brides today than they were in the past, the youngest brides in our research all reported that they had been forcibly married. Some boys reported that beauty was

important, with girls in ‘nice dresses’ the most likely to be kidnapped. Most, however, reported that girls who were ‘skilful’ and ‘hard working’ were at the greatest risk.

Hmong tradition stipulates that once a girl has spent three days in a boy’s house she is married to him. Kidnapped girls told us that they saw no way around this tradition; ‘I thought that as a girl, if I entered his house and didn’t get married with him, the neighbours would say some bad things about me’, explained one 18 year-old married girl. Girls’ parents rarely have the chance to intervene as they often only find out about the ‘marriage’ after it has happened. Even boys’ parents, who are culpable in that they are typically asked for permission before a kidnapping, feel relatively powerless in the face of their sons’ desires. As one young man noted, ‘parents have to listen to their son’—otherwise he ‘may eat poisonous leaves to kill himself if she is allowed to go’, leaving them without an heir.

3.1.2 Being Married

The majority of Hmong girls marry voluntarily during late adolescence. Even these girls, however, find that their capacities and opportunities are limited sharply and abruptly by traditional marriage practices. Community consensus regarding what makes a ‘good wife’ or a ‘good husband’ (Box 1) explains much about why this is so— a good wife is defined almost exclusively in terms of the work she does for her husband and in-laws while a good husband is merely a man who avoids the worst vices. Young wives are often all too aware that marriage brings to an end any possibility of an independent life. One married 17 year-old girl noted, for example, ‘I was a daughter-in-law so I had to bear it, I had to endure hardship and unhappiness.’

Box 1: The ‘good’ wife versus the ‘good’ husband through the eyes of Hmong adolescent girls

- *A good wife should try to do housework to make enough for eating and wearing and then nobody can criticise her.*
- *A good wife knows how to wash her husband’s clothes, cooks three meals a day for him.*
- *For a good wife, when friends visit her house, her husband and parents in law may be all drunk, she will let them go to rest early, she will entertain the guest and won’t go to rest until all of them go home. That is a good wife.*
- *A good husband must try to help his family and doesn’t gamble so much his neighbours have to criticise.*
- *A good husband loves his wife, doesn’t drink much wine, doesn’t hang around too much, doesn’t have love affairs with other women, doesn’t gamble.*
- *A good husband knows to think for his wife and children. When he’s drunk, he sleeps, he doesn’t beat his wife. Such men are very rare.*

The lives of married Hmong women are also defined in terms of fertility. Girls are expected to have children quickly – and many are expected to continue childbearing until they have produced at least one boy. As one man explained, ‘for my ethnic people, if 1 or 2 years after marriage, you don’t have babies, you have to adopt children.’ Indeed, while Viet Nam’s overall birth-rate is hovering around replacement level (i.e. two children per woman), Hmong families continue, on average and despite a heavy top-down push for contraception, to be much larger. Among our sample, two families had eight children—with a youngest son. Given the combination of difficult terrain and customs that dictate when a new-born baby may go outside, the vast majority of Hmong women continue to give birth at home, attended only by their mother-in-laws and husbands; both ante-natal and post-natal care are very rare.

Pervasive gender-based violence also continues to threaten the well-being of Hmong wives, with some girls trying to delay marriage in an effort to put off being beaten and some unmarried boys already able to generate entire lists of reasons that would justify them beating their future wives. Noting that harmonious Hmong marriages are very unusual, girls not only *expect* their husbands to be violent, they see the violence as their own fault and as something to be borne in private. One 24 year-old woman, with a 12th grade education, said, ‘if he

raises his hand intending to beat, it is my fault when I am inattentive and speak too much.’ An adolescent girl in a SGD added, ‘You shouldn’t tell anyone, because it is the matter of husband and wife, if you tell someone, they will say that your husband is not good and they will criticise your family.’

3.2 Persistent norms, changing norms



Among girls, particularly those in the most remote rural hamlets, are located in a rather singular nexus in terms of norm stability and change. On the one hand, they are growing up in an isolated cultural environment that is unique even within Viet Nam. This works to maintain social norms. On the other hand, because Viet Nam is a one-party state, there is considerable scope for top-down change that has the potential to change actions, if not attitudes, almost overnight. This combination has resulted in significant, uneven and sometimes surprising shifts (Box 2).

Box 2: Uneven shifts in social norms

Sung Thi Dung is an 18 year-old mother of two whose life highlights the way in which norms are shifting unevenly, with kidnapped child brides unable to resist marriage, but finding unlikely allies in regard to family planning

A paternal orphan who was raised with her younger sister by her maternal grandparents after her mother fled to China to escape a violent second husband, Dung was unable to complete even lower secondary school. Her grandfather tried several times when she was a child to get the commune to support her education, as the family was so poor they were often hungry. Despite backing from the hamlet, however, ‘the commune didn’t do it’ and she was forced to leave school in 7th grade. It was only after she left that ‘the teachers asked why I didn’t go to school and my classmates said that I was an orphan.’

Abducted for marriage at 15, by a 17 year-old boy, Dung reported that her ‘grandparents told me that if I got married for two days only and became a soul in their family, if I abandoned the husband’s house ... I wouldn’t live long.’ She stayed, even though both she and her grandparents felt that she was far too young for marriage.

Despite its rocky start, Dung is happy with her married life. She and her husband don’t quarrel and, unusually, her husband supports family planning. ‘He said that our family was poor, so we should limit the children number, son or daughter, to two,’ she explained.

Dung’s main worry is her children’s future. Though they have little land and struggle to feed themselves, Dung reported that that they are ‘not listed as a poor household’ because ‘the [commune] investigation team is not in close touch.’ Unfortunately, with recent policy changes stipulating that only children officially designated as ‘poor’ are eligible, despite their ethnicity, for school fee waivers, it will be difficult for Dung to guarantee her children the full education that she has long valued.

3.2.1 What drives change?

*‘After grade 9, I will let her get married, so that the State won’t fine me [for early marriage].’
(Mother, GP)*

‘If dropping out at the 7th or 8th grade, will be punished. if the family doesn’t have money, they will pay with their labour – by doing construction work or carrying rocks or so.’ (Adult in FGD)

Respondents noted that legal changes that outlaw child marriage have had some – and they stressed only ‘some’ – impact on the age of marriage. While girls cannot marry before 18 and boys before 20, not all communes issue fines, in part because Hmong marriages are still considered a fait accompli once the girl has spent three days in her husband’s home. However, heavy community messaging about the advantages of later marriage, specifically that older girls (those 18 or 19) are better able to handle the workload of marriage and bear ‘larger and healthier babies’, appear to be well understood.

The uptake of education is also driving changes in norms – though the impact of those changes may be less clear cut and positive than initially hoped. The good news is that, while girls continue to be more likely to drop out of school than boys, and some girls still never get to attend school at all, the overwhelming pattern is that all children, girls and boys, now complete 9th grade – exactly as the law requires. This is a remarkable transition, given that nearly all of their parents are illiterate, and is due to a confluence of well thought-out policy. First, schooling has been, until this year, completely free for all children in the commune. Second, fines have been imposed on parents who do not send their children to school—with public labour taking the place of money for those families who are too poor to pay. Finally, the commune has carefully crafted messages, convincing parents that those ‘who don’t let their children go to school... they’re irresponsible.’ The evidence of genuine norm change in regard to the value of education was confirmed by adolescents, all of whom, without exception, reported that education was the key to a better, less poor, future where the sun ‘shines bright always.’

The less positive news is that while keeping children in school until they complete 9th grade also keeps the vast majority of the youngest adolescents from getting married, there is some evidence that schooling is encouraging the early marriage of 16 and 17 year olds. As pre-marital sexual relationships are strictly taboo, and marriage is a contract easily made, adults are concerned that some adolescents are choosing to marry school mates as soon as they leave school, particularly those who have been together in boarding schools.

Within the past five years, even the most remote Hmong communities have seen the erosion of their social and geographic isolation. While lower secondary schools remain distant from the homes of many children, requiring a walk of up to an hour and half each way every day, all villages in our study area now have both electricity and mobile phone services and are benefiting from improved footpaths that make it easier to reach not just the centre of the commune, but other communes.

However, this growing engagement with the modern world is also contributing to uneven shifts in the norms that guide people’s lives. On the one hand, better ties to markets mean the first-ever opportunities for wage labour among the Hmong, even for girls, who often sell wine and vegetables to make money to buy their own clothes. Several adolescents noted that they were delaying their marriage specifically because they were able to buy things for themselves only while they remained unmarried. Similarly, TV is showing girls a world very different from their own.

On the other hand, most girls are watching romantic dramas, which may well build up unrealistic expectations of married life, and mobile phones are giving them previously unheard of levels of contact with boys, feeding adolescent crushes. Additionally, better roads are giving them more access to the markets that serve as both the hub of Hmong social life and the venue for kidnappings.

Hmong role models, including men who want a different life for their daughters (see Box 3), are also encouraging change. A handful of families, for example, have invested in upper secondary education for their daughters. They not only demonstrate that education is attainable, but as their children take on wage labour and are appointed to official positions, they also model a way out of the hardships inherent in subsistence farming. Respondents noted that the few girls who had completed high school, even though they were unmarried at 21, were ‘well spoken.’ The community was certain that they would ultimately find husbands who would enable them to lead lives that were not centred on constant physical labour.

Box 3: Men: Overlooked agents of change

Vang Thi Mai is a 27 year-old mother of two whose life story, marriage and husband are role models for the commune. A paternal orphan, Mai was raised by her alcoholic uncle after her mother’s remarriage. Regularly locked outside at night, and forced to work in the fields for hours each day after she returned from school, she was left with no ‘time to review my lessons and do homework before going to class the next morning.’ Although she was aware ‘that I didn’t have my parents by my side, so I must study so that I would have a job in the future’, she was not allowed to attend upper secondary school.

When she was 18 she married a young man, now a commune official, who had already begun his tertiary education – and her life trajectory took a sharp turn for the better.

Mai and her husband have a remarkably equitable marriage; “I listen to whatever he says, and he listens to whatever I say,’ she reported. Because he is busy working most of the time, it falls to Mai to make the household decisions. ‘If I let him decide, he’s often out, he’s not home;’ she explained. ‘If I wait for him to decide, maybe it won’t be done. I just make decisions myself.’

Mai knows how lucky she is: ‘My life, compared to the neighbours, I feel happy.’ She and her husband ‘don’t fight and argue like other people in the village.’ Furthermore, when her husband has time off work, ‘he goes home to play with the two kids.’ Because they share decisions relating to their children, he even bought her a mobile phone ‘so that if the kids were sick, I would call him so that he would call home.’

3.2.2 What are the barriers to change?

‘My parents say that I am a girl, so I shouldn’t go to school more, the upper secondary school education brings nothing, so they let me stay at home.’ (Adolescent girl in SGD)

‘Without a son, later on when we grow old, we’ll be miserable; there will be no one to look after us. We must have a son, so that later on when we grow old and die, when a grave is built for us, a door is made outside the grave.’ (27 year-old OCS)

The reality of Hmong agrarian life plays a key role in maintaining gender norms and marriage practices. Hmong communities continue to be isolated not just from the broader Vietnamese (Kinh) culture, but from the influx of jobs that has transformed the national economy so rapidly. Jobs are nearly non-existent outside the informal economy in the highlands—especially for girls and women. What’s more, because today’s Hmong families farm in the same way that they always have, given that rocky soil and sparse rainfall restrict agricultural change, farming continues to be very hard work, best left to the young--and requiring as many hands as possible. As one father noted, ‘They’re most strong during this age, age 16-17; they only



have strength during this time; past 20, 25, they're older. They're old and weak then.'

Hmong culture, shaped by this harsh agrarian reality and the food insecurity that has resulted, continues to be the strongest supporter of the status quo –slowing norm change even in the face of top-down legal change. For example, an entrenched preference for sons continues to mould the lives of girls even before they are born: the largest and poorest families tend to be those who have the most daughters as parents pursue their quest for sons. Sons are also prioritised for education and given lighter workloads because, as one father noted, they are 'the breadwinner of the family who will take care of his parents when they get old.' In addition, added a mother, 'when dead, we're ghosts, when hungry, we will look for our sons.'

Girls, on the other hand, are destined to become members of their husbands' families, both physically and spiritually. As a result, they not only receive a smaller share of family resources (education, leisure time and inheritance), but are also more tightly bound by the notion of filial piety. Understanding that their biggest contribution to their parents' well-being is their short-term labour in their natal homes, girls leave school when they are told to leave school, work when they are told to work and do their best to shield their mothers from any emotional distress, even when that means they have no one with whom to share their dreams and worries.

One 20 year-old woman explained, 'I think my mother is working very hard at home already. Now suddenly if I bring more burden to her, I think it will be very hard for her.' This physical and emotional isolation, coupled with a diet of romantic movies, may, as mentioned above, lead some to accept early marriage when it is proposed. It also may encourage early fertility, as married women reported that the love of one's children is one of the few up-sides to marriage other than better food security.

Hmong girls and women are also acutely aware of the social pressures that encourage conformity with traditional norms and practices. Girls take 'pride' in being 'diligent'; as one in an SGD observed, 'we feel comfortable when obeying parents.' They understand that non-marital relationships are strictly taboo, particularly for girls, and that were they to break the rule that 'no girl is to like a guy first', they may find their marriage options limited by the court of public opinion, as their neighbours say, 'this girl is this and that, I won't marry her.' Because Hmong tradition stipulates that the spirit of a girl belongs to her husband's family after three days of co-residence, girls – and their parents – are worried that they will be seen as divorced, and totally unmarriageable, if they attempt to walk away from a kidnapping. They are also 'afraid of being criticized by the neighbours around my house' if they do not marry on time – or if they speak out on gender-based violence.

The continued social and geographical isolation of the Hmong people lies at the root of much of the stability of their discriminatory cultural norms. This is the first generation to have had formal education and even now it is extremely rare for any child, but particularly girls, to attend secondary school, which is expensive and necessitates boarding in Meo Vac town (for most villages another hour's journey past the commune centre). While some other ethnic groups in Viet Nam migrate regularly to earn the cash that is lacking in their home communities, migration from Ta Lung is almost non-existent, given its sheer remoteness, the mismatch of skills between its inhabitants and the needs of the larger economy and, most critically, the centrality of Hmong cultural identity. Furthermore, while local role models exist, they remain very rare. Importantly, there are no Hmong teachers in the hamlets in which we worked and most respondents seemed to have clearly delineated in their minds what was possible for Hmong versus non-Hmong people.

4 Policy and programme implications

The persistence of discriminatory gender norms continues to place severe restrictions on the lives of Hmong girls. Few have the opportunity to complete secondary school, even though many would very much like to follow in the footsteps of their teachers—becoming the local role models that are seen by our key informants as the key to moving towards an educational tipping point. Officials have gone out of their way to promote the political and economic participation of Hmong women, and indeed convinced one of our case studies (OCSs) to stand for election to the District Assembly on the strength of her intelligence and her ability to speak Vietnamese. Most women, however, are too trapped by their domestic responsibilities – and limited by their lack of fluency in Vietnamese – to take on the roles in the larger community that might promote more equitable decision-making at home. Traditional marriage practices continue to reinforce the gender inequality that permeates the Hmong culture and limits girls’ options. Whether they are married too young and against their will or voluntarily as young adults, the vast majority of Hmong women are unable to control their own fertility or keep themselves safe – let alone step far enough outside of their traditional roles to meet their own emotional and social needs.

Given the remarkably ‘sticky’ nature of gender norms – and the ways in which change is working, in some cases, to actually reinforce traditional marriage patterns – it is vital that policy and programming are tailored with care to reflect Hmong realities. Certainly, there is more space for top-down initiatives than there is in many countries, given the political structure in Viet Nam, but evidence suggests that without tailoring the fit between law and culture, uptake is likely to be at best fitful and slow. Based on our respondents’ stories, our research suggests that the following policy and programming priorities need to be considered if MDG achievement for all – including the most disadvantaged adolescent girls – is to become a reality.

- **Ensure continued and expanded support to attend school.** There has been a remarkably fast and thorough educational transition in Viet Nam to seeing the completion of 9th grade as the new ‘normal’. That said, this transition is at grave risk, according to key informants, with the Government’s new educational policy, which has taken fee waivers away from Hmong children who are not officially ‘poor’. Given that the poverty line in Viet Nam is extremely low by international standards, and that the line that separates poor and not-poor households is all but invisible in northern Ha Giang province, commune leaders are concerned that their hard-won efforts to get all children into school will soon be unravelled. This would be short-sighted, given that educating today’s adolescent girls through secondary school has, according to key informants, the potential to snowball throughout the Hmong community as girls return home to teach younger cohorts. Girls, unlike boys, very often expressed a strong desire to attend secondary school and listed the financial and opportunity costs to their parents as key barriers.
- **Incentivise and monitor better enforcement of national laws on the age of marriage.** Because of the way in which Hmong marriages are carried out, fines are rarely issued and young couples can easily avoid detection by simply not applying for a marriage certificate until they reach legal age. Given the sensitivity of Hmong parents to educational fines, if an age-related intervention point can be agreed upon, it seems likely that strict fines may help reduce the number of early marriages.

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- **Invest in employment opportunities that could capitalise on Hmong uniqueness and skills.** It is difficult to step outside a culture based so robustly on agrarian realities. That said, given the geographic isolation of the Hmong homeland, and the already growing tourism industry, it may be wise for the Government to invest more heavily in the infrastructure and advertising that could bring more opportunities – and cash – to Hmong communities. This could include environmental and cultural tourism initiatives.
 - **Encourage progressive role models for adolescents.** Both girls and boys need to see more of what they *could* be – beyond the movie stars they watch on TV. Key informants noted that the more remote hamlets have never sent a girl to secondary school or proposed a candidate, male or female, for commune office. While girls noted that their non-Hmong teachers are inspirational, most adolescents are unable to conceive that – as Hmong – their own lives could differ significantly from those of their parents. Initiatives could include educational programming, visits to university campuses in urban centres and girls clubs where role models could be invited to talk.
 - **Invest in sexual and reproductive health education for non-married young people.** Girls and boys have far more opportunities to interact with one another than their parents did at the same age; they do not, however, have access to any more sexual or reproductive health (SRH) information, as pre-marital sexual activity is strictly taboo and even adolescents believe that it would be inappropriate for them to understand the nature of marital relations. Given that the only solution, so far, is for parents to allow their children to marry at too young an age, better SRH information seems advisable, including written materials in the Hmong language that adolescents can read in private.
 - **Support victims of gender-based violence.** Given the pervasiveness of drunken violence and the shame felt by women who are caught in its web, it is vital that the Women’s Union and other mass organisations address more directly what girls and young women can do to keep themselves safe. It is also vital that men and boys learn about new forms and practices of masculinity, through awareness-raising and education initiatives led by professionals who have experience in working sensitively with boys and men.
 - **Promote educational programming in schools and communities to eliminate marriage by abduction.** 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. Boys’ parents need incentives to be steered away from condoning kidnappings, most successful would likely be fines imposed by hamlet or commune authorities. Girls (through schools) and their parents (through mass organisations such as the Women’s Union or Fatherland Front) need to be taught that they need not be voiceless victims and that an unwanted marriage is always an illegal marriage.

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Page 2: Adolescent girl carrying load in Ha Giang Province. Photo by <http://en.amica-travel.com/trips-collection/adventure/northeast-vietnam-trek>

Page 4: Adolescent girl with infant in Meo Vac District, Ha Giang. Photo by Dao Hong Le.

Page 5: Young Hmong family in Meo Vac District, Ha Giang . Photo by Dao Hong Le.

Page 6: Adolescent girl with child in Meo Vac District, Ha Giang. Photo by Dao Hong Le.

Page 9: Mountainous terrain in Ha Giang Province. Photo by <http://www.orientalbridge.com/trans-vietnam-en.htm>