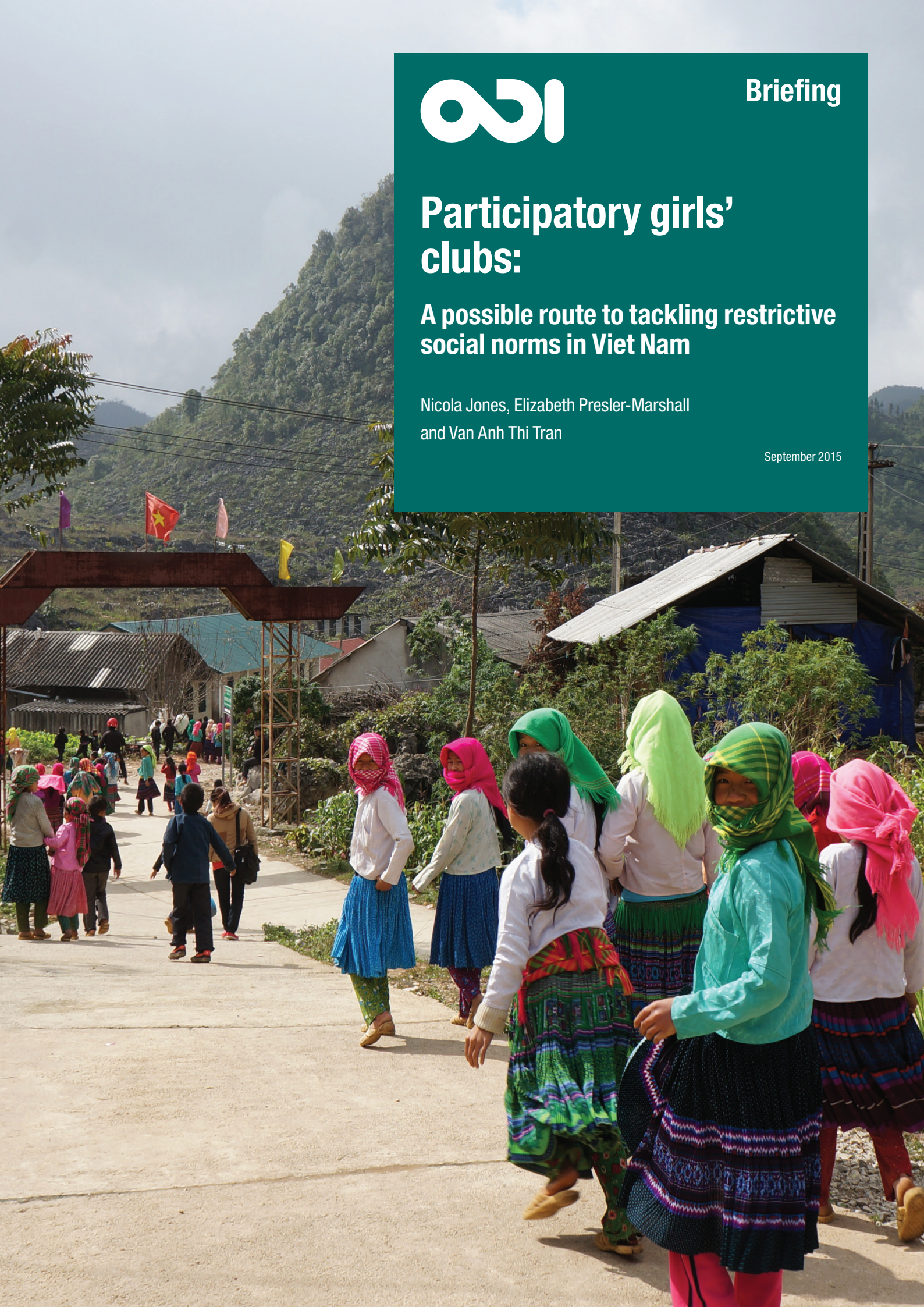

Briefing

Participatory girls' clubs:

A possible route to tackling restrictive social norms in Viet Nam

Nicola Jones, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Van Anh Thi Tran

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Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: info@odi.org.uk

www.odi.org
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Cover photo: After school at a lower secondary school in Can Chu Phin Commune, Meo Vac District, Ha Giang, Viet Nam © Dao Hong Le, 2014

Overview

Viet Nam has made tremendous progress towards its development goals in recent years. As the World Bank notes, it lifted nearly half of its population out of poverty in only two decades and managed to achieve a number of Millennium Development Goals early. Future progress, however, will depend not just on more growth but also on whether it will be possible to structure that growth so as to include the ethnic minorities that are, despite longstanding government efforts, falling further and further behind. Ethnic minorities currently account for only an eighth of Viet Nam's population but almost half of its poor, three-fifths of its food-insecure and two-thirds of its extreme poor. Although they represent only about 1% of Viet Nam's population, the Hmong are one of the largest of its 53 ethnic minority groups and have the highest rate of poverty in the country. Largely confined to the mountains near Viet Nam's border with China, and primarily subsistence farmers, their poverty headcount is over 90%.

This briefing summarises the findings of a three-year programme of work on adolescent girls and the social norms that prevent gender justice in developing country contexts. It builds on primary qualitative research, undertaken in 2012 and 2013, in which we mapped Hmong girls' intersecting capabilities – capturing the complex interplay between ethnicity, gender and poverty and its impacts on girls' educational, physical and psycho-emotional well-being – and identified son preference and filial piety as key to understanding Hmong girls' vulnerabilities. We also explored the social norms shaping girls' educational opportunities and vulnerability to child marriage, and identified the ways in which those that see girls as little more than future wives and mothers – and ultimately as the property of their marital family – preclude investment in their broader capabilities. For the third round of research in 2014, we undertook in-depth qualitative fieldwork in Ha Giang and Lao Cai provinces, with a focus on communication initiatives broadly aimed at shifting the entrenched social norms that restrict the lives of Hmong girls. Our intent was to ascertain the external and internal programming factors contributing to good practice and the extent to which such initiatives might be scalable. After presenting here the findings from three good practice case studies, we conclude the briefing by offering recommendations on how to enhance policy and programming efforts.

Source: Morning exercise at school, Hi Giang © Dao Hong Le, 2014

1 Engaging with theory

Recent advances in understanding the processes that drive changes in social norms in general, and gender norms in particular, indicate that both large-scale social and economic trends and smaller-scale programmatic activity can lead to change in social norms (Bicchieri, 2012; Boudet et al., 2012; Mackie and LeJeune, 2009). However, there is limited synthesised evidence on how different policies and programmes lead to changes in the social norms that affect adolescent girls' capability development as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. In particular, little is known about the effectiveness of different communication approaches to promoting more egalitarian gender norms (Marcus and Page, 2014).

In order to address this gap, as part of the UK Department for International Development-funded flagship programme on Transforming the Lives of Girls and Young Women, the Overseas Development Institute conducted a review, based on systematic review principles, of evidence on the effectiveness of communication programmes in terms of changing the norms affecting adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries. The evidence from the review showed communication programmes were an effective way to challenge gender-discriminatory attitudes and practices and had reached a variety of stakeholders with both broad pro-gender equality messages and messages on specific discriminatory norms. While no single approach was found to be clearly more effective than others, programmes with more than one communication component have achieved a higher proportion of positive outcomes (Marcus and Page, 2014). Impact pathways have included creating opportunities for reflection and helping people shift both attitudes and practices, face-to-face communication with target groups and the generating the ability to address issues of concern directly and to reframe local thinking. Even so, the review recognises no social change is linear or mechanistic: providing information or encouraging people to think about an issue in a different way does not necessarily lead to changes in attitudes or behaviour.

2 Study sample and methodology

Because the Vietnamese Hmong are a relatively small population clustered in a relatively small geographical location, identifying good practice examples of communication approaches aimed at changing gender norms proved a challenging task. Only one of our three case studies, Plan's *Because I am a Girl,* is aimed squarely at our evaluation target: tackling the risk of child marriage and the negative effects this can have on girls' schooling and broader capabilities. Of the other two, Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* has a stronger focus on social accountability between education professionals and the community, although it indirectly has a significant focus on girls' empowerment. Similarly, while Meo Vac High School's extra-curricular programming is not focused on tackling discriminatory gender norms *per se*, its life skills programming addresses these indirectly.

In terms of research methodology, our evaluation included a review of programme documents, including internal assessments where possible, and an array of interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including girls, their family members, their teachers and leaders in their communities. We also interviewed programme implementers at local and national levels.

Box 1: Plan's girls' clubs through the eyes of a participant

Vuong Do Va is a 15-year-old Grade 10 student at Meo Vac High School. She participated in Plan's girls' club for several years and feels it was instrumental in helping her reach high school. Va liked the 'dancing, singing and playing', but her two favourite activities were the quiz bowl and drama.

In the quiz bowl, Va said, 'Four commune teams competed with each other.' She continued, 'First they presented the questions, then they gave us a board and chalks, we wrote our answers there. For the quiz, they gave us answers in advance and we learnt by heart. Such questions as what is child marriage, what is "near blood" [consanguineous marriage], what are the consequences of early marriage and many other questions about family and early marriage.'

For the drama, Va explained, 'I and some friend wrote the script, then we cast roles and rehearsed.' It was 'about some school children and Mai was one among them. There were five characters in the drama, including Mai's father, mother, a commune officer, Mai's friends and character Mai. Mai's mother didn't allow Mai to go to school, telling her to get married early. Mai's father said he would beat her if she didn't return home. The commune officer told her father that, if he didn't allow his daughter to go to school, the commune authority would cut back all support. And Mai's friends talked with him about consequences of early marriage. Finally, Mai's father allowed her to go to school.'

3 Key findings

Overall our findings suggested communication initiatives involving school- and community-based opportunities for dialogue and reflection constituted important avenues to start shifting discriminatory gender norms, but that more strategic, multi-pronged approaches would be required to achieve more transformatory change.

Plan's Because I am a Girl

Part of a broader international effort to improve the lives of girls in developing countries, Plan's *Because I am a Girl* (BIAAG) was launched in Ha Giang province in 2011. BIAAG recognises that Hmong girls are deeply constrained by both their gender and their age, the confluence of which leaves them effectively invisible. It aims to support girls' comprehensive development by providing safe spaces and gender rights education for girls, but also to develop their broader communities more generally. While Plan's efforts to build schools and water filtration systems have been universally well received, we found that in Meo Vac girls themselves had effectively been lost in the community development strategy. With only two girls' clubs, one of which is in practice restricted to less vulnerable girls, no messaging aimed at the boys who instigate child marriage, no apparent girl-focused education for parents and little reported interface with the local power structure regarding the needs of adolescent girls, there is scope for improvement if Plan's BIAAG is to reach girls at scale. That said, for the few girls who have been able to participate in BIAAG clubs, the experience appears to have been genuinely transformatory – with girls rejecting child marriage, displaying a strong interest in high school and beginning to express their own needs and wants. Our key findings regarding BIAAG are:

1. Girls' clubs that encourage a participatory approach are effective and should be expanded.
2. Efforts should be made to teach parents about the specific vulnerabilities that face girls.
3. Programming should also proactively target boys.
4. Direct enforcement of the law is effective.
5. Care needs to be taken to balance community infrastructure investments with communication and awareness-raising approaches.

Oxfam's My Rights, My Voice

Oxfam's *My Rights, My Voice* (MRMV) works to help marginalised children and adolescents in a variety of developing countries understand and claim their rights. Launched in Lao Cai province in 2011, and building on a decade of collaboration with the provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET), MRMV is focused on improving Hmong children's access to quality education by empowering them to understand and express their needs, building local capacity to implement child-centred teaching and fostering cooperation between parents and educational actors.

Box 2: The importance of role models

Chu Thi Vang is 18 years old and in Grade 11. She is a year behind her classmates in terms of age because she sat out a year after Grade 9 – before being inspired by a commune official with stories of successful Hmong girls and the larger world. Her parents initially refused to allow her to go to school, but she insisted – and won.

Because 'I am the youngest child', Vang explained, 'my parents always said they would let me continue my education.' When it came time for her to apply to high school, however, they refused and told her she must stay home and work in the fields with them. After 'one year at home', she added, working and talking with 'my cousin and a friend living in the same hamlet', they all decided to go back to school. 'One day, we went to the commune office and asked the man if the school still had quota to enrol students or not.'

He told them many things. 'He told me about two girls in hamlets. After finishing school, one is an officer and one is a teacher. He told me to try to study and find a job.' He told them 'girls don't have to get married early'. Most amazingly, from Vang's perspective, he told them that, when they had graduated and found jobs of their own, they would have money and could travel.

'I insisted on enrolling,' Vang explained. 'I said I would go to the school definitely, I didn't want to stay at home, I wanted to study.'

Now her parents are resigned to – and even proud of – her choice: they 'indulge me and don't force me to get married'. She admits to treading carefully though: 'At home, I am very nice, do all the housework so my parents don't have anything to complain about.' Vang also works in the market at the weekends to make money so she has to ask for little. 'I don't want to ask my parents for money, because they are poor. I live in the dormitory and I don't spend much money.'

Ultimately, she concluded, 'I want to see all of my country.'

Source: Girls' club in Ha Giang © Dao Hong Le, 2014

We found that, while the rights-based messaging has often failed to resonate – in part because it appears to have been nearly devoid of local contextualisation and programme slots seem to have been allocated primarily to the least vulnerable children – the child-centred methods MRMV uses are thoroughly engaging children's interest in ways that are likely to have cascading ramifications for the development of their capabilities. Participant girls were more confident, reported better communication with their parents, teachers and peers and were more committed to completing their education.

Furthermore, adults in the community felt the programme, by developing local capacity and emphasising participation and dialogue, had altered the ethos of the community – with parents and officials working together to prioritise education. Our key findings regarding MRMV are:

1. Efforts should be made to aim programming at the nexus of gender and ethnicity.
2. Programme participants should include the most vulnerable.
3. Working with local partners is critical but requires adequate resourcing.
4. Hands-on, participatory activities that win children's hearts through play have critical spill-over effects.

Meo Vac High School's targeted programming

Our third case study highlights the awareness-raising efforts of Meo Vac district's high school, which we hypothesised could have spill-over effects on child marriage risks. The high school has seen a range of programming aimed at addressing child marriage, primarily focused on teaching children about the Marriage and Family Law and the health consequences of child and consanguineous marriage, although current programming is more *ad hoc* than systematic. We found that, while students understand the higher-level messages aimed at them, they want graphic and detailed information about reproductive biology and help in managing the conflicting emotions that adolescence brings – largely so they know how to exist alongside the opposite sex without becoming distracted from their studies. We also found evidence that girls' trajectories were being positively altered by officials who helped them voice and claim their rights, and that today's high school students have tremendous potential to serve as role models for their younger peers. Our key findings regarding high school programming are:

1. Students and teachers would prefer dedicated clubs or classes to learn about sexual and reproductive health-type issues.
2. Commune officials and teachers are well placed to help girls fight for their rights to an education and not to marry as children.
3. Hmong high school students could be important peer-to-peer mentors.
4. Recognising boys' role in child marriage offers new programming opportunities.

4 Conclusions

Based on our review of the literature and our own multi-year primary qualitative research findings, we have reached a number of thematic and sectoral conclusions, as follows:

With regard to education, we note that:

- **Access to and uptake of schooling have changed tremendously in a short timeframe.** Most Hmong children now complete Grade 9, because of a confluence of two factors: schools are now available and villages have begun to enforce attendance through locally agreed-on fines. Most Hmong families are now both committed to educating their children through Grade 9 and see it as the 'new normal'. Shame is increasingly attached to families that do not educate their children.
- **Most girls would like to expand their educational horizons and attend high school.** They appear to be more interested in doing so than their male peers and are far more committed to their education than their parents. Moreover, girls are largely seen – by children, parents and teachers – to be better students than boys.
- However, parents' capacity to engage with education/schools is limited, because of issues related to time poverty, illiteracy and language. Existing programming is doing relatively little to change this reality, and as such this constitutes a key gap.

With regard to child marriage, we note that:

- **Child marriage is becoming less common; most Hmong girls appear to marry at 18 or 19.** This is because arranged marriages are now uncommon and bride kidnapping is becoming rarer. There has been heavy messaging regarding both the law and the health-related consequences of child marriage.
- **However, child marriage remains far from rare.** While it is hard to obtain accurate data because Hmong couples do not register marriages until they are old enough to legally do so, the marriage of older teens (those aged 16 and 17) is not unusual, and there are still some girls who are married as young as 13. Moreover, in some families, girls are getting married younger than their mothers did, primarily because, with access to schools, they have more opportunities to interact with the opposite sex. Bride kidnapping has not been abolished and primarily affects the most vulnerable: girls from the least educated families in the most remote villages.

Source: A young mother and her son in Ha Giang © Dao Hong Le, 2014

- **Child marriages are driven less by honour than by a need for domestic and agricultural labour.** It is not shameful for girls to be unmarried, and girls of 20 are not seen as unmarriageable. This is important because it means girls who do not marry as children do not face social consequences.
- **Hmong boys also marry as children.** While in some cultures it is common for adolescent girls to marry older men, among the Hmong this is not the case. Hmong partners are nearly always the same age – meaning that, for every 14-year-old married Hmong girl there is almost certainly a 14- or 15-year-old married Hmong boy.
- **Child marriage is driven by boys.** Even in the case of 'love' matches, boys alone initiate contact, as it culturally unacceptable for girls to like boys first. Boys have many incentives to marry early and little reason to wait once they have left school. Bringing home a wife reduces their workload and their social status improves.
- **Girls have fewer incentives to marry early than boys**, as the work involved in being a daughter-in-law is typically far more significant than the work involved in being a daughter. Given any other option – especially going to high school – few girls would agree to marry young.
- **Fines for early marriage are rarely implemented** but often talked about as threatening and shameful. Local officials sometimes help 'hide' illegal child marriages to ensure married girls and their children are not further deprived of their rights. Because access to birth certificates, health care and schooling can be constrained for those in violation of the Marriage and Family Law, health officials omit the ages of girls they know to be too young to be married.

With regard to the constraints facing Hmong families, we note that:

- **Hmong parents are stressed not only by poverty but also by extreme poverty.** They have limited non-agricultural options, poor agricultural options and little-to-no 'spare' time. They are rarely literate and the women rarely speak Vietnamese. All of these factors work to prevent parents from imagining that their children's lives could be different from their own.
- **Hmong girls are deeply constrained by filial piety** and want to help their parents by working alongside them all the time. Only rarely do girls imagine disobeying their parents, even when they see that doing so might be in their parents' own best longer-term interests. Very few girls can see – much less voice – that their own interests might deviate from those of their parents.
- **Hmong boys, while less constrained by filial piety, also want to help their parents by marrying sooner rather than later.** This desire to help their parents does not, however, appear to translate into a stronger commitment to education or a greater willingness to take on more domestic work.

With regard to the commitment evidenced by the national government, we note that:

- **Infrastructural improvements have been critical.** The geography of the Hmong communities is difficult and yet roads and transportation infrastructure are improving in leaps and bounds, opening up new economic possibilities and reducing time poverty.
- **Government programming has meant hunger – if not malnutrition – is less common, despite continuing soil degradation and erosion.** This reduces families' fears, which may leave them more cognitive space to accept new ideas.
- **Villages' access to educational infrastructure has exploded**: more kindergartens are introducing greater numbers of children to Vietnamese earlier, and more lower-secondary schools are sparing greater numbers of young children from unsafe travel. The government has also done an exceptional job in providing ethnic minority children with ethnic minority teachers. Nearly half of all teachers in Ha Giang, for example, are ethnic minority. The dearth of Hmong teachers in Hmong communities reflects a real lack of supply, not a lack of sensitivity on the part of the government.
- **National-level leaders and policies are working to balance larger development goals with recognition of ethnic minority differences.** They are not blind to the tension inherent in protecting minority rights to self-determination and culture while simultaneously working to eliminate 'backward' customs that are damaging to people and the environment.
- **The government's messages regarding gender equality are mixed.** While equality is a longstanding national goal – especially with regard to women's public roles – the way in which policy often works to reinforce women's private roles dilutes overall impact. Moreover, gender equality initiatives are insufficiently tailored to address the specific realities of ethnic minority women and girls.
- **Government actions have highlighted its commitment to the inclusive growth that will be required for future progress**, for example Resolution 80 NQ-CP (Directions for Sustainable Poverty Reduction) and Decision 449/QD-TTg (the Ethnic

Minority Affairs Strategy).[1] However, these remain relatively gender-blind, reflecting a broader government tendency to pay inadequate attention to the intersection between gender and ethnic inequalities.

With regard to local capacity for innovation and implementation, we note that:

- **Law enforcement is effective to some extent.** Villages across Meo Vac district have implemented a system of fines for truancy and child marriage that has proven instrumental to reductions in both. While space for fines is limited by headmen's desire to be liked and families' ability to pay, the shame attached to violating the law is significant – and useful.
- **Simple social accountability mechanisms to improve education quality can have far-reaching effects.** Lao Cai's DOET's decision to scale up the mailbox project, whereby students can anonymously provide feedback on teacher performance and school culture, after it became clear it was fostering better communication between children and teachers is notable and laudatory.
- **Local leadership and vision can have transformational effects.** Where local leadership is committed to far-reaching change, as was the case in one commune in our study – Man Than in Lao Cai province – spill-over effects on adolescent girls' well-being can be significant. Local officials can play a key role in responding to girls' needs, inspiring them with regard to their futures, being willing to help them negotiate admission to high school and threatening to penalise their parents for non-compliance. There is also evidence that local officials can, and are, tackling norms head-on, teaching girls *not* to blindly obey their parents in terms of their education.

With regard to child development, we note that:

- **Programming does not pay enough attention to the basic precepts of child development.** Children are children, and their age limits their capacity to understand abstract concepts such as rights. This means care needs to be taken to make messages very local and very concrete. 'Right to participation' means nothing to a child. 'Right to go to school' does. To maximise uptake, care needs to be taken to embed all messages in the medium that best speaks to children: play.
- **Programming does not pay enough attention to recent advances in brain science,** which confirm thousands of years of adults' observations: adolescent decisions are products of their biological age (Steinberg, 2007, 2010). Increasing awareness of the opposite sex, their bodies and their desires leaves them vulnerable to snap decisions, shaped in the case of the Hmong community by a history of early family formation and a complete lack of information and contraception for the unmarried. Messages and programming need to be tailored not according to political goals, and not solely to cultural norms, also taking into account that adolescents are children too.

5 Policy and programming implications

Based on our research, the priority policy and programming entry points that we see as especially viable in terms of addressing Hmong girls' multiple vulnerabilities are as follows:

- **Foster future-seeking in all Hmong children** – not just those with the best classroom performance – through clubs that build on local realities, introducing Hmong role models and more exposure to the outside world. In this vein, as the number of Hmong graduates in the Women's Union slowly expands, look for opportunities to use them as role models to deliver messages more powerfully. They would be ideally situated to host girls' clubs, especially for out-of-school girls, and should be compensated for their work.
- **Promote future-seeking in Hmong parents by supporting them to develop non-agricultural sources of income** and by relieving their time poverty so their older children can be freed for further education. Better poverty programming, perhaps in the form of the conditional cash transfers that will soon be rolling out in Ha Giang province, ought to simultaneously incentivise parents to support their children's education and reduce poverty.

1 Decision 449 calls for accelerating poverty reduction in ethnic minority areas by prioritising them for investments in infrastructure, education, etc. Resolution 80 is aimed at strengthening and harmonising social assistance programming in order to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

- **Make education affordable – and productive – for all Hmong families.** This could include cash transfers and scholarship programmes for girls at secondary and tertiary levels. The government, with donor support, should consider following the lead of Mexico's *Prospera*[2] cash transfer programme and offer higher stipends to Hmong girls.
- **Enhance school quality.** For children to want to continue their education, schooling must be desirable. This means content must be seen as relevant and methods as participatory. Anecdotal evidence also indicates children are very responsive to good meals, warm bedding and time for recreation. Making boarding school an option for as many children as possible may help in the short term.
- **Ensure Hmong children, girls in particular, are mastering the Vietnamese language** early enough to get the most out of their schooling. This could include support to universal kindergarten classes offering earlier exposure to Vietnamese and full- rather than half-day schooling. This could be complemented by the training of local Grade 9 graduates as bilingual teaching assistants, as well as support to adult literacy classes, especially for out-of-school girls.
- **Reduce child marriage by teaching girls practical strategies** to protect themselves from kidnapping, by investing in programming for boys about progressive masculinities, by strengthening community messaging and by using local Hmong power structures to enforce the law. In this regard, school counsellors who help children proactively imagine longer-term educational trajectories and then assist them in making transitions could help more children feel supported to break with tradition. They would also ensure nobody is left behind because they do not have parental support to fill out paperwork. Hmong role models would again be ideally situated for this role – though non-governmental organisations could also play an important role.
- **Promote peer-to-peer education to help tackle the dearth of female role models for Hmong adolescents.** This could include offering Hmong girls already enrolled in high school the opportunity to show younger girls, through peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives, what Hmong girls can do. Building bridges between high school students and lower-secondary schools would foster leadership skills in older girls and provide younger girls with the role models they desperately want and need. In addition, we would suggest investigating the model used by the North Carolina Teaching

Source: A Hmong girl taking care of her younger brother, Ha Giang © Dao Hong Le, 2014

2 Formerly called *Oportunidades*.

Fellows (Henry et al., 2012) to increase the number of Hmong teachers: offer free university tuition in exchange for teachers working in disadvantaged communities. This ought to be especially practical given that many Hmong girls already want to become teachers and very few wish to live anywhere other than the communes in which they have grown up.

- **Strengthen national data collection to identify and support the most vulnerable adolescents.** A national database of children, currently under development, will make each child visible instantly – making it all but impossible to hide their age at marriage (World Bank, 2013). However, if this begins with the youngest children, its impact will not be fully felt for years. Care must be taken, as the database comes online, to ensure that, when Hmong children do marry, they and their children are not penalised through the withholding of necessary services such as health care and education. Similarly, a case management system that follows orphans carefully would help reduce child marriage significantly. Orphans are typically acutely aware they are a burden on their caregivers and are therefore the most vulnerable to filial piety – which drives them to leave school and marry as soon as possible.

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203 Blackfriars Road
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