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Teenage Childbirth Among Ethnic Minorities in Lao Cai Province, Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT: Childbirth among ethnic minority teenagers is one of the factors that affects health, learning opportunities, job opportunities, and the right to make decisions in life of children, especially ethnic minority girls in Lao Cai province. Teenage childbirth in ethnic minority groups in Lao Cai is influenced by factors such as age of marriage, age at first pregnancy, education level, occupation, knowledge of contraceptive methods, and local customs. Therefore, local authorities need to strengthen and renew communication and advocacy activities to reach and directly support this social group. This will help reduce, move towards ending, and empower ethnic minority women across the province.

KEYWORDS: Childbirth, Teenagers, Ethnic Minorities, Mu Cang Chai, Lao Cai

INTRODUCTION

The study *Vietnam Survey on Children and Women's Goals 2014* by MICS, GSO, and UNICEF (2015) shows that early childbirth among teenagers is a worrying issue in Vietnam and around the world. In 2014, 6.3% of women aged 15–19 already had children. By 2019, this rate had decreased to 3.3% (GSO, 2019). The *2019 Population and Housing Census* reported that teenage childbirth (ages 10–17) was highest in the northern midlands and mountainous provinces (9.7%), which is 8.5 times higher than in the Red River Delta (1.1%). Among ethnic groups, the Hmong had the highest rate of teenage childbirth (6.3%). Comparing the 2009 and 2019 censuses, teenage childbirth decreased in five socio-economic regions, but increased in the northern midlands and mountains, rising from 44‰ in 2009 to 82‰ in 2019 (GSO, 2019).

Lao Chai, Nam Khat, and Phu Luong in Lao Cai province are mountain communes where about 96% of the population are ethnic minorities, with the Hmong making up 91%. These areas have a high rate of child marriage. Although local, provincial, national authorities and organizations have carried out campaigns to raise awareness about the harms of early marriage and childbirth, the problem still exists. According to statistics from the former Mu Cang Chai District Health Center, in 2021 there were 60 cases of childbirth among girls aged 15–17, in 2022 there were 71 cases among ages 13–17, in 2023 there were 95 cases among ages 14–17, and in the first three months of 2024 there were 32 cases among ages 14–17. These figures show that teenage childbirth continues in Mu Cang Chai, even though the population sector, education sector, and related agencies have implemented many programs to provide knowledge about gender, reproductive health, and safe sex through models and clubs. These activities aim to improve knowledge, skills, and behavior of teenagers in protecting and caring for themselves.

Therefore, studying the situation and the factors that influence teenage childbirth in these communes of Lao Cai province is an urgent issue. Teenage pregnancy and childbirth not only affect the lives of mothers and children, causing health problems for the child, but also impact the future of the mother, her job opportunities, and her right to make decisions in the family and society.

2. CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Basic Concepts

Adolescence: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence refers to individuals aged 10 to 19 (Ministry of Health, GSO, UNICEF, WHO, 2005). Under Vietnam's *Law on Marriage and Family* (National Assembly, 2014), the legal age of marriage for women is 18. Therefore, in this study, adolescents (or minors) are defined as those between 10 and 18 years old.

Ethnic minorities: As defined in Clause 2, Article 4 of Decree No. 05/2011/NĐ-CP on ethnic affairs, "ethnic minorities" are groups whose population is smaller than that of the majority ethnic group within the territory of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

2.2. Research Methods

This paper employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

For the quantitative survey, the study analyzes data from 600 ethnic minority men and women in three localities: Lao Chai, Nam Khát, and Phu Luong. The dataset derives from the project *Analysis of Influencing Factors and Proposal of Solutions to Reduce Teenage Childbirth among Ethnic Minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province and now under Lao Cai Province*.

For the qualitative survey, the study draws on 12 in-depth interviews with parents of adolescents and adolescents themselves, aged 10–18.

3. CONTENT

3.1. The Situation of Teenage Childbirth among Ethnic Minorities in Some Communes of Lao Cai Province

Previous studies also show that the rate of teenage childbirth tends to be higher among ethnic minority groups, people living in remote areas, and rural communities (UNFPA, 2012). The age of marriage for ethnic minority women is one of the factors that influences teenage childbirth. Ethnic minority girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to give birth as teenagers compared to those who marry at 18 or older.

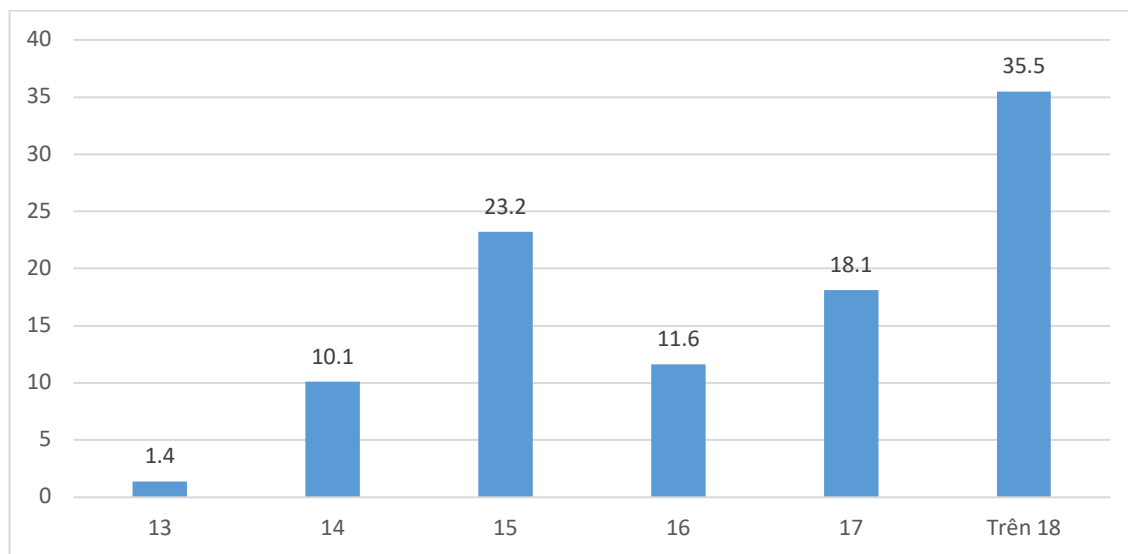


Figure 1. Age of Marriage among Ethnic Minority Women

Source: Survey from the project “Analysis of influencing factors and proposal of solutions to reduce teenage childbirth among ethnic minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province, now Lao Cai Province,” 2024.

Statistical analysis shows that the age of marriage among ethnic minority women is mostly under 18. Only 35.5% of respondents said they married at 18 or older. Among those who married between 13 and 15, the highest proportion was at age 15 (23.2%). Although the percentage of girls marrying at age 13 is low (1.4%), this number is still worrying because child marriage already appears among very young ethnic minority girls.

In-depth interviews also reveal that one reason for child marriage is unintended pregnancy among ethnic minority girls. Unplanned pregnancy is one of the factors that keeps child marriage continuing in some communes of Lao Cai province. As one local leader explained: “*Some girls already had children while still in school. Because they were pregnant, they had to marry even though their parents had not registered the marriage. When the husband turned 20 and the wife reached 18, then the wedding ceremony was held.*” (Interview, Party cell secretary, male, Lao Chai commune).

Furthermore, the age of marriage of both husband and wife is another factor influencing teenage childbirth among ethnic minority men and women in Lao Cai. The age at marriage is a key element affecting reproductive issues among teenagers in ethnic minority areas.

Table 1: Age of Marriage of Respondents’ Spouses (%)

Age group	Number	Percentage %
13 – 17	65	25,8
18 – 22	165	65,5
23 and above	20	7,9
Do not know	2	0.8
Total (N)	252	100

Source: Survey from the project “Analysis of influencing factors and proposal of solutions to reduce teenage childbirth among ethnic minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province, now Lao Cai Province,” 2024.

Statistical analysis shows that 25.8% of marriages happened at ages 13–17, which means teenage marriage. Meanwhile, 65.5% married at ages 18–22, and 7.9% married at 23 or older. Child marriage among respondents’ spouses is most common in the 13–17 age group. Marrying so early brings serious risks for the physical and mental health of teenagers, especially girls. At this age, the female body is not fully developed for safe pregnancy, which leads to higher rates of premature birth, malnutrition in mothers and newborns, and increased risk of maternal and infant death. In addition, young people lack maturity, experience, and knowledge about reproductive health, so they cannot manage it well. This often causes social problems such as interrupted schooling, low income, and poverty passed down through generations.

To better understand the group of ethnic minority teenagers in Lao Cai who marry early, the study looks at those who usually marry before 18. Statistical results show that, among 600 respondents, the largest proportion (35.3%) said ethnic minority women are ready to marry as teenagers. Next, 31.3% said they are not ready, and the lowest proportion (28.0%) said “it does not matter.”

Table 2: Groups of Teenagers Who Usually Marry Before 18 (%)

Indicator	Nam Co	Nam Khat	Lao Chai	Overall
Adolescents with stable employment	9,0	4,0	5,9	6,3
Adolescents with education level of lower secondary school or higher	13,0	16,9	26,2	18,7
Adolescents without employment	28,5	25,4	30,7	28,2
Adolescents with education level below lower secondary school	16,0	15,4	16,8	16,1
Parents/siblings who married early	4,5	5,0	6,4	5,3
Concentrated in certain ethnic minorities	4,0	10,4	4,0	6,1
Poor families	9,5	8,5	3,5	7,1
Others	7,5	2,0	3,0	4,1
Don't know / No answer	8,0	12,4	3,5	8,0
N	200	200	200	600

Source: Survey from the project “Analysis of influencing factors and proposal of solutions to reduce teenage childbirth among ethnic minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province, now Lao Cai Province,” 2024.

Teenagers who marry before 18 are most often found in the group without jobs (28.2%). Child marriage has serious effects on the lives of girls. It takes away opportunities and blocks their future, including the careers they want, and also affects their families deeply. Child marriage limits their participation in economic, political, and social activities, which reduces their ability to earn money or contribute to the family economy. In reality, girls who marry before 18 often have to leave school, losing chances for training and stable work. They also face higher risks of violence and discrimination (Nguyen Thi Huong, 2024).

Next is the group of teenagers with education at lower secondary school or higher (18.7%), and the group with education below lower secondary school (16.1%). Other groups have smaller percentages and are not significant.

In-depth interviews also show that low education and dropping out of school are reasons that increase early marriage and teenage childbirth. *“The group of young people aged 16–17. Mostly teenagers. Students finish grade 9, then they stop studying and stay at home to get married.”* (Interview, Justice officer, male, Nam Co commune).

“Usually it is the group who drop out of school and do not have jobs. They stay at home, feel bored, and when they see others getting married, they also want to.” (Interview, Head of health station, male, Nam Khát commune).

2.2. The Influence of Marriage Age on Teenage Childbirth

Table 3: First Marriage Age of Ethnic Minority Women and Men by Some Demographic Characteristics (%)

	Women married before 18	Men married before 20	Women married at 18 or older	Men married at 20 or older
Education level ($P=0,03$)				
Primary school or below	33,3	9,3	29,3	28,0
Lower secondary school or above	16,4	7,3	24,9	51,4
Age difference at first marriage among early marriage group	16,9	2		
Occupation ($P=0,02$)				
Students	0	0	0	0
Agriculture	27,1	6,1	27,1	39,8
Freelance labor	7,9	18,4	23,7	50,0
Other occupations	6,5	6,5	25,8	61,3
Income of respondents in the past 12 months ($P<0,001$)				
9 million VND or below	39,7	4,4	22,1	33,8
10 million VND or above	7,5	9,0	27,6	56,0
Don't know / Unable to determine income	34,0	10,0	28,0	28,0

Source: Survey from the project “Analysis of influencing factors and proposal of solutions to reduce teenage childbirth among ethnic minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province, now Lao Cai Province,” 2024.

Looking at the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the Chi-square test results show that education level, occupation, and income are all related to the age of marriage of ethnic minority men and women in Lao Cai province (with P values less than 0.05).

By education level, the statistics show that ethnic minority women with primary school or lower education are more likely to marry as teenagers compared to those with lower secondary school or higher education. Specifically, 33.3% of women with primary school or below married as teenagers, while the rate among women with lower secondary school or higher was 16.4%. Similarly, 9.3% of ethnic minority men with primary school or below married before age 20, compared to 7.3% of men with lower secondary school or higher.

“In recent years, there has been more communication, so families try to stop early marriage. This situation is more limited now. Local authorities also intervene. For example, in early 2024, we stopped one case here. Two students in grade 8 liked each other. We told them not to marry, but they still went ahead. Parents could not stop them. Even though parents said no, the children insisted and left to live together.” (Interview, male official, Phu Luong commune).

However, the gap between genders is clear. The difference in child marriage between the two education groups among women is 16.9%, while among men it is only 2%. This shows that ethnic minority women face more difficulties in reducing and ending child marriage and teenage childbirth compared to men in Lao Cai.

By occupation, early marriage among ethnic minority men and women is mainly found in those working in agriculture, informal jobs, or other types of work. Notably, no young people who are still studying and already married were found to marry before the legal age. This again shows that education is a key factor in reducing child marriage. Women who marry early mostly work in agriculture (27.1%), while men who marry early mostly do informal jobs (18.4%). The distribution of jobs between men and women who marry early is not equal compared to those who marry at the right age. This means that men and women who marry early have fewer chances to access stable and better-paid jobs.

By income, most ethnic minority women who married as teenagers had incomes below 9 million VND in the past 12 months, or could not define their income. Similarly, most men who married before 20 also could not define their income. In contrast, women and men who married at the right age were more likely to have incomes of 10 million VND or higher.

It can be seen that early marriage is one of the factors leading to teenage childbirth among ethnic minority women in Lao Cai. The cycle of early marriage – pregnancy – childbirth affects the lives, education, and income of both women and men. Early marriage means lower education, dropping out of school, and fewer chances to get stable, well-paid jobs.

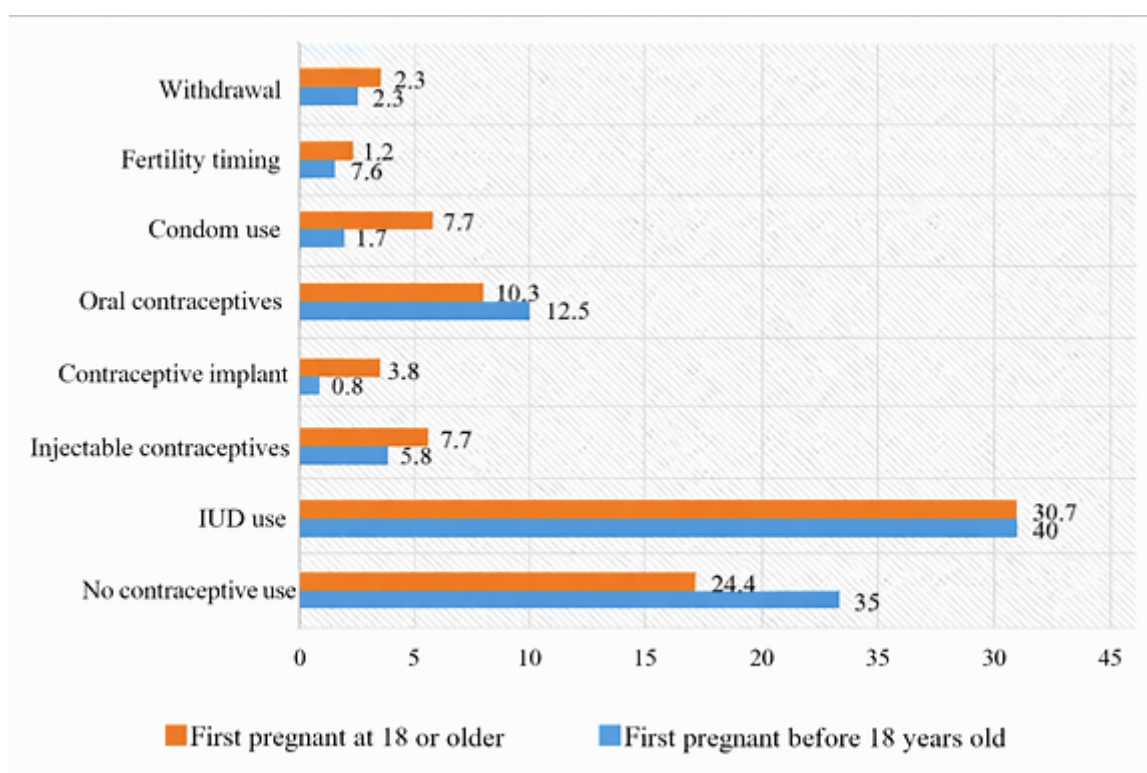


Figure 7. Percentage of Ethnic Minority Women Using Contraceptive Methods by Age at First Pregnancy (%)

Source: Survey from the project “Analysis of influencing factors and proposal of solutions to reduce teenage childbirth among ethnic minorities in Mu Cang Chai District, formerly part of Yen Bai Province, now Lao Cai Province,” 2024.

It can be seen that the percentage of ethnic minority women who do not use contraceptive methods is higher among those who had their first pregnancy as teenagers (35%). For women whose first pregnancy was at age 18 or older, 24.4% said they do not use contraception. The main reasons for not using contraceptives are that they want to have children (57.9%) and that they are breastfeeding (18.4%).

Statistical results show that the choice of contraceptive methods among ethnic minority women in Yen Bai province is quite diverse. Couples use both traditional and modern methods. Among modern methods, the intrauterine device (IUD) is the most common choice. The data also show little difference in IUD use between women who had their first pregnancy before 18 and those after 18. Contraceptives are often used once women have had the number of children they want, especially a son, following Hmong customs.

Besides the IUD, there are clear differences in contraceptive choices between women who had their first pregnancy as teenagers and those who had it at 18 or older. Women who became pregnant at 18 or older are more likely to use methods such as contraceptive injections, implants, condoms, calendar-based methods, and withdrawal. Notably, the use of implants and condoms is much higher in this group: implant use is 4.75 times higher, and condom use is 4.5 times higher compared to teenage mothers. Women who had their first pregnancy at 18 or older also used contraceptive pills more often. This shows that modern methods like implants and condoms help prevent unwanted pregnancies and allow better control of childbirth. Meanwhile, teenage mothers still face more difficulties in accessing modern contraceptives that are safer and have fewer side effects.

However, many teenagers still lack knowledge about contraception. “In fact, contraception has been promoted a lot, but at that age, the children often feel shy, so they don’t access or use it. Since both sides agree to be together, it cannot be stopped.” (Interview, male official, Nam Khát commune).

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Although communication activities about contraception have been carried out many times in Nam Khắt commune, teenagers often feel embarrassed and avoid using contraceptives during sexual activity. This is one of the main reasons for unintended pregnancies and child marriage among ethnic minority teenagers in Yen Bai province.

Education and communication about reproductive health are still limited, leaving teenagers without enough knowledge and skills for safe contraception. This leads to unintended pregnancies and early childbirth. Methods such as IUDs, pills, and injections are used to some extent, but economic barriers, geographic distance, and traditional beliefs limit access to health services.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, teenage pregnancy and childbirth are still happening and tend to continue in some communes of Lao Cai province. The main reasons are premarital sexual relations, age at first marriage, occupation, education, and the use of contraceptives among ethnic minority women. Early marriage and childbirth in the communes of Nam Khắt, Lao Chai, and Phu Luong mostly occur among children who have dropped out of school. Not continuing to higher education, having no stable jobs, and being influenced by customs of marrying before 18 for women and before 20 for men are factors that push child marriage, especially among ethnic minority girls in Lao Cai. This has existed for a long time and still affects child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and childbirth today.

Although communication activities have been promoted in all three communes studied, their effectiveness is still low, so teenage marriage and childbirth continue. Communication activities are mainly awareness campaigns, and although there are penalties for child marriage, there are no clear rules for punishing teenage childbirth. As a result, ethnic minority children often marry without registering and have children without birth certificates to avoid the law. This weakens efforts to reduce child marriage and teenage childbirth in Vietnam.

Therefore, to reduce and move toward ending child marriage and teenage childbirth, especially among ethnic minority girls, communication should be done through social media platforms such as Zalo and Facebook, which young people often use, instead of only traditional methods. Teenagers need direct education and communication, not only through families or parents, so they can understand and make their own decisions about marriage and childbirth.

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