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THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MINORITY WOMEN IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is not only a violation of human rights but also a practice with profound and long-lasting consequences for young women's mental health and emotional well-being. It not only affects to individual but also the whole community in the long term due to negative spill-over effects. This paper explores the psychological impact of child marriage on minority women in Vietnam, a country where early marriage remains prevalent among ethnic minority communities. Through an analysis of cultural, social, and economic factors, the study examines how early marriage subject's minority women to emotional distress, social isolation, and a lack of educational and personal development opportunities. These factors often lead to anxiety, depression, and long-term trauma. The research has used survey question combining with interview of 10 minority people to find out the main reasons and address the psychological impact of child marriage, which is essential to propose solutions for this issue.

KEYWORDS: child marriage, psychology, women, Vietnam

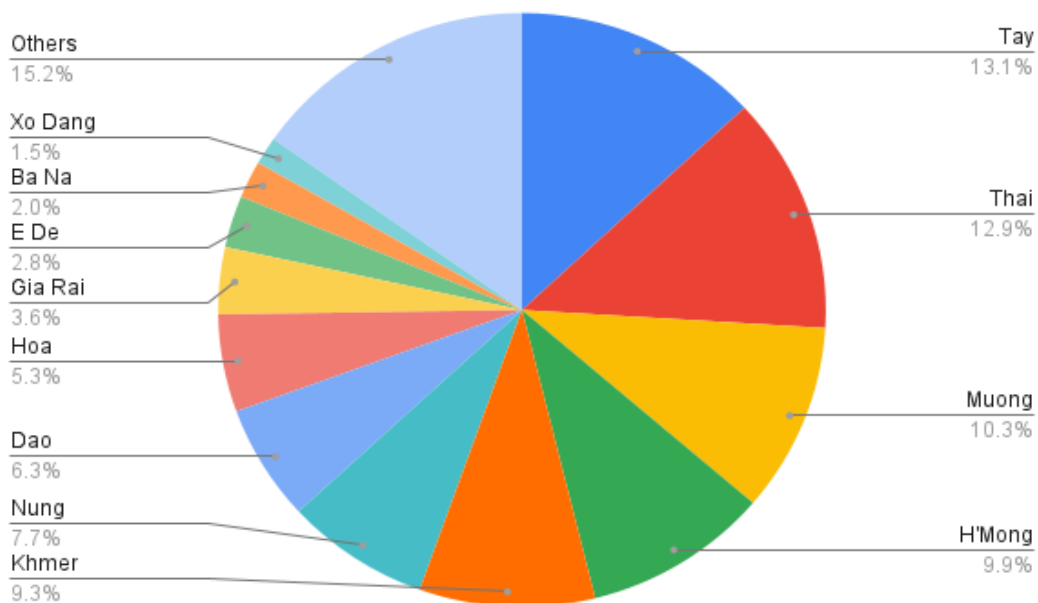
1. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, child marriage is "any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child" (CEDAW & UNCRC, 2014), which is considered to be a human rights violation and harmful to children's wellbeing. Regardless of the child marriage rate, girls are significantly more likely to be victims of child marriages because of high vulnerability. Many child brides have early pregnancies, which can be dangerous to them and their babies, as their bodies are not mature enough to bear a child. They are also at risk of suffering from sexually transmitted diseases and domestic violence because of the power imbalance between them and their husbands. After marriage, many child brides receive less education and employment opportunities as they are forced to be a domestic worker and to take care of their children. These consequences can lead to depression and anxiety, as well as other mental illnesses, in these child brides.

In most countries, including Vietnam, the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years or older. This age restriction is set to ensure a person entering a marriage with all rights such as free and informed choices, both in terms of entering and leaving the marriage. Moreover, this age restriction is also set to prevent complications in early childbirth, domestic violence from the age difference in a marriage, and other negative impacts to women’s health (Girls Not Brides, 2017). It also prevents other consequences of marriage below 18 to their personal development, just as much as it prevents poverty in their families, communities and nations.

Although the percentage of child marriage in Vietnam has declined over the years, this issue is still prevalent in certain areas and minority groups. Compared to urban areas, the countryside has a higher rate of child marriage, especially in Central Highlands, Northern Midlands and Mountainous Areas, where many minority people reside. With the complex terrain of these areas, economic activities are more difficult, which leads to a higher need for manpower. Many minority families have early marriages, especially with child brides who can work and give birth, which makes it more difficult for the government to enforce laws. There are 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam, accounting for 14.7% of the population of Vietnam (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). Tay people account for 13.1% of the ethnic minority population, followed by Thai and Muong people. These minorities contribute diverse and unique cultures and traditions to Vietnam.

Figure 1. Share of ethnic minorities in Vietnam



Source. Authors' calculation from GSO

Among these minorities, the Mong people has the highest percentage of child marriage (51,5%), followed by the Co Lao (47,8%) and the Mang (47,2%). On the other hand, the Si La women and the Hoa women have the lowest rates of child marriage with 0.0% and 1.1%, respectively. (GSO & UNICEF, 2014; GSO, 2019). Most Hoa people live in Ho Chi Minh City, which is a modern urban area, so they may be less affected by the living conditions that result in child marriage for minorities who reside in remote areas. There are a number of factors contributing to the prevalence of child marriage in minority women of Vietnam. The main cause is gender inequality, which does not allow women to study higher because of unhealthy and backward customs in minority communities. (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). Indirectly, gender inequality can result in the value of women being undermined and their family choosing escaping poverty over them and their development, which leads to minority women becoming child brides. Structural factors like ineffective enforcement of child marriage prohibition and propaganda on the effects of child marriage; early pregnancies and risks in the spread of social media... can contribute to this consequence (Bui Thanh Binh, 2024).

2. MAIN CONTENT

2.1. Historical and cultural factors contributing to child marriage

Northern Vietnam has traditional gender roles for women and men, which are heavily influenced by Confucian ideals. (Nguyen et al., 2015) These ideals stated that a woman's duty was strictly related to her family, especially her son and husband, while men were responsible for external affairs and considered to be more honorable. While these gender roles are no longer strongly influenced in Northern Vietnam with the feminist movement, the government implementing laws on gender equality and women having the opportunities to prove their capability, some remote or rural areas maintain these harmful ideals which can result in unhealthy customs and child marriages. For instance, the Mong people living in the Northern mountainous areas have a custom called, "bắt vợ" (meaning catching a wife). A Mong man captures a Mong woman in the middle of the night, keeping her at his house for three days, then he will go to her family's house to inform them about the marriage. While this custom is now mostly carried out with the consent of both parties, there are still cases where it results in sexual assault, domestic violence and the woman committing suicide. In both situations, there are girls who become child brides because of this custom.

On the other hand, ethnic minorities in Central Highlands are matrilineal. In these communities, women have to take care of their families and work to provide for them. Social interaction outside their community is limited, and many of them become dropouts because of gender prejudice from their parents. (Dang et al., 2022). While minority women in Central Highlands live in a different type of social system from their counterpart in Northern Vietnam, they also become victims of child marriage because of their traditional gender roles. 16 years ago, South Asia was the region with the highest rate of child marriage. Yet, it is also the area with the most significant decline in child marriage,

from less than 50% in 2008 to 30% in 2018. According to UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018, there have been little to no improvement in child marriage rate at Vietnam. From 2008 to 2014, the percentage of child brides between the age of 15 and 19 had doubled. One in every ten women from 20 to 24 years old was a child bride. However, the percentage of child marriage in 53 ethnic minorities of Vietnam has reduced from 26.6% to 21.9% in 2018, with 11.1% of the minority women are child brides (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018).

In 2015, the government approved project plan for “Reducing child marriage and incestuous marriage in ethnic minority areas from 2015 to 2025”. According to reports from many remote provinces, a number of departments in each province have gotten involved to implement this plan, such as education; culture, sports and tourism; women’s union... and achieved some improvements in the rate of child marriage. There has been a reduction of 4.7% in child marriage from 2014 to 2018 and this number is shown to be decreasing, this is only a gradual decrease with an average of around 1% per year. In areas such as Northern Midlands and Mountains, or Central Highlands, the rate of child marriage is still high, being 18.8% and 15.8% of the 20-49-year-old minority women investigated in the research.

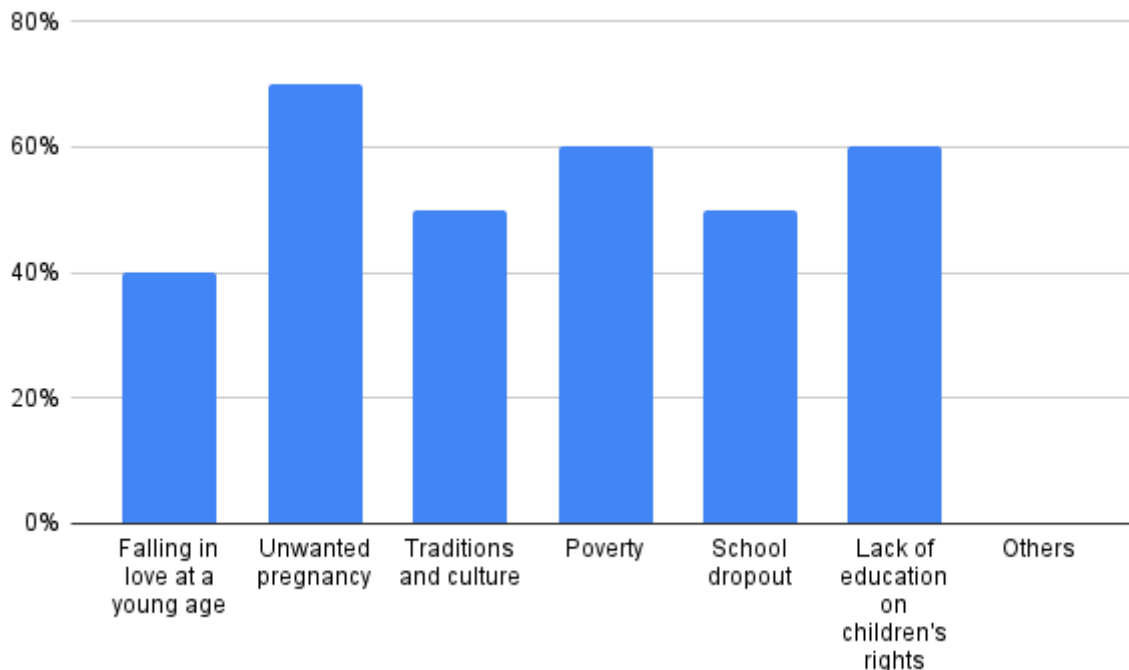
According to the survey, up to 4 people out of 10 believe that early marriage is part of their tradition, cultural norms, family expectations, or historical practices in their community. These individuals may view early marriage as a way to preserve cultural identity, maintain family values, or fulfill obligations passed down through generations. In some societies, early marriage is linked to factors like ensuring family honor, securing economic or social alliances, or even protecting girls from perceived threats to their reputation. This belief can be deeply ingrained, often connected to a sense of pride or duty to uphold traditions despite evolving social and legal norms that promote delaying marriage for education and personal development. However, there may also be tensions between these traditional beliefs and modern values, especially concerning the rights of individuals to make autonomous life choices. The challenge lies in balancing respect for cultural traditions while addressing the potential harms associated with early marriage, such as limited educational and career opportunities, health risks, and the perpetuation of gender inequality. Efforts to shift perspectives would need to be sensitive to these cultural dimensions while promoting alternative pathways that benefit individuals and their communities.

2.2. Socio-economic factors contributing to child marriage

In Asian countries like Vietnam, family reputation is highly respected. Women with a normal family including husband and children can be considered as the standard in the society. Several social and economic factors contribute to the prevalence of child marriage in minority women in Vietnam. One of the social factors was backward and misogynistic beliefs regarding women and marriage, which

shame women who don't have early marriages. These women are considered undesirable, as in areas with these beliefs, women's values are considered to be only in their domestic skills and their contribution to the in-law's family. These beliefs result in unfavorable rumors around women who aren't in child marriages, which deter them and other women from delaying their marriage (Nguyen, 2023). They are one type of the traditions and cultural norms that five out of ten interviewees believed to be the main cause of child marriages. Due to this cultural perspective, parents and the women themselves are under the pressure of fulfilling the duties as soon as possible in order to reduce the risk of being criticized and judged.

Figure 2. Main reasons for child marriage



Source: Author's survey

Besides outdated beliefs in some ethnic minority societies, some child marriage happen because of those who are in these marriages' own beliefs. Falling in love at a young age is also a cause of child marriages, for minority children who aren't properly informed of the problems and responsibilities that come with marriage. In some cases, even with their families prohibiting the union, they still insist on marriage and threaten to commit suicide if their families don't allow the marriage (Nguyen, 2023). This can both be a consequence of customs in certain minorities such as Thai and Mong people, which are more uncomplicated and open-minded towards love compared with other cultures, and a lack of education about love and marriage for adolescents. Teenage love also results in unwanted pregnancies

in adolescent girls, which can be traced to little access to contraceptives and safe abortion methods. According to our interview, this is considered the main cause by seven out of ten people in child marriages, which is more people than in other causes. Because of early pregnancies, these young mothers are under pressure from their family and communities to get married, in order to protect their family and themselves from stigmas around sexual relations outside marriage, which is another form of traditions that contribute to child marriage. (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018)

In 2019, more minority people received up to primary and lower secondary education than in other education categories. The amount of people who received further education than lower secondary education is significantly lower, especially in rural areas where access to institutions for higher education is limited. The percentage of minority people in rural areas who received below primary education was also higher than the figure for those in urban areas. Households in these areas had a lower income than in urban areas because of the unfavorable terrain for many economic activities and people receiving little formal education and career training, so education for children, especially girls, was less prioritized. Instead, minority children are expected to assist their family and their in-law's family with domestic work and economic activities. For minority women, they are also expected to get married, so that the in-law family can aid their birth family financially in the form of betrothal gifts. Therefore, child marriage is perpetuated, as a means to protect them from poverty, which was considered as the main cause of child marriage by six out of ten interviewees. Additionally, as minority children receive insufficient education, their knowledge on child marriage and related children's rights is limited, resulting in them being in child marriages without knowing the consequences.

Based on the interview results, half of the respondents (five out of ten) identified school dropout as the primary issue contributing to challenges in the community. Additionally, six out of ten respondents emphasized the lack of sufficient education on children's rights as a major concern. These findings suggest a strong correlation between educational gaps and the protection of children's rights. Addressing these two critical areas—preventing school dropout and enhancing awareness of children's rights—could play a key role in creating a more supportive environment for children's development and well-being. The data highlights the need for targeted interventions and policies that focus on improving educational access and promoting children's rights education, which could significantly impact long-term societal progress.

2.3. Legal framework

In 2013, 168 countries (88%) in the world had a general minimum age of marriage 18 years or older. With parental consent, more countries have an age restriction below 18, and the aforementioned number of countries drop to 99 countries (48%) When customary and/or religious laws can provide exceptions to the minimum age, 18% of the countries allow the marriage age to be under 18 or no age

restrictions. (Arthur et al., 2017) In Vietnam, the minimum legal marriageable age of over 20 for men and over 18 for women. Child marriage is defined as an illegal marriage where one or both parties do not meet the minimum legal age. The act of organizing a child marriage is also prohibited (Law on Marriage and Family, 2014). Violation of this law can lead to a fine between 1 million dong and 5 million dong, and reoffenders may face a fine between 10 million dong and 30 million dong, or non-custodial reform for 2 years. (Criminal Code, 2015).

In order to support the legal framework, government officers in areas resided by minority people have created campaigns to inform people of the law and provide further encouragement to avoid child marriage. Usually, these campaigns involve door-to-door encouragement, hosting conferences and talk shows about child marriage at schools and meetings, handing out information leaflets, setting up posters in public spaces, or informing the effects of child marriage on social media and television. Some areas have also tried to reduce child marriage through other creative ways, such as hosting competitions about laws on child marriage, stage performances about reducing child marriages during weekly markets, (Ninh Thuan province People's Committee, 2022; Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper, 2024; Ba To district People's Committee, 2020). Along with activities to improve minority people's understanding of child marriage, government officers in remote areas also improve quality of life for minority people, such as making healthcare accessible for women and reducing illiteracy and joblessness, to prevent the low quality of life from encouraging them to continue getting married too early.

However, reinforcing the prohibitions and punishment for early marriages can be difficult, as many minority people may refuse to obey because of their culture, resulting in conflict between law enforcers and minority people. (UNICEF, 2018). With the small proportion of officers from ethnic minorities, this conflict and disobedience of the law may be more likely to continue. This is why many places involve trusted people in villages, like the village chief or a renowned healer, in the incentive against early marriage. Even though the incentive allows much more people knowing about the effects of child marriage, without the law being enforced consistently, people may not be completely motivated to obey the law, and child marriage may still exist. Six out of ten interviewees are aware of the regulations, but only two interviewees claimed the regulations were reinforced in their community. Four interviewees didn't know about the regulations. Out of the ten individuals interviewed, six demonstrated awareness of the relevant regulations, indicating a moderate level of knowledge about the legal framework. However, despite this awareness, only two of these six reported seeing any actual enforcement of the regulations within their communities. This suggests a significant gap between legal knowledge and practical application. Meanwhile, the remaining four interviewees were entirely unaware of the regulations, highlighting a lack of widespread communication or outreach regarding these legal protections. The discrepancy between awareness and enforcement raises questions about

the effectiveness of the legal system in ensuring compliance and the mechanisms in place to educate and inform the public.

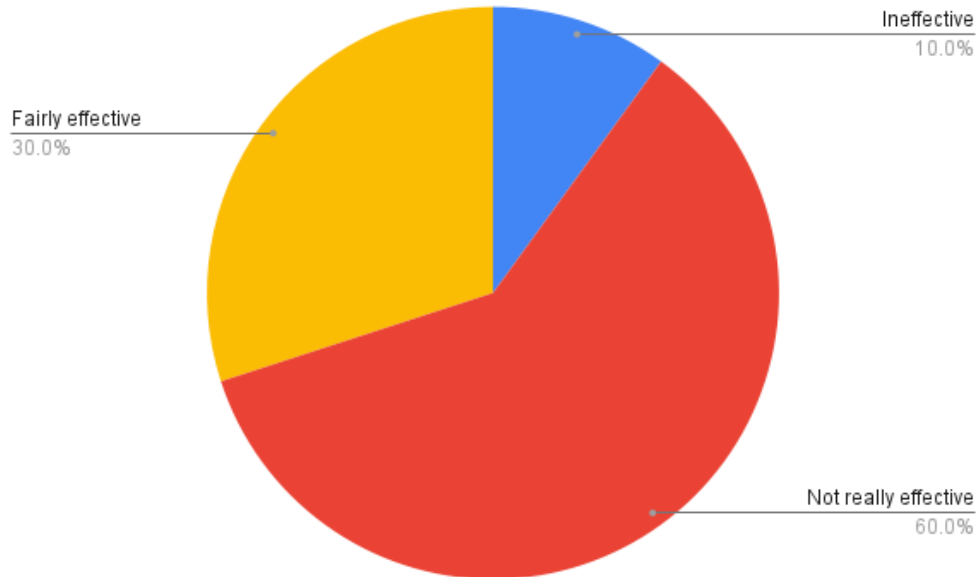
Figure 3. Acknowledge about regulations regarding child marriage



Source: Author's survey

In certain regions, educational activities aimed at addressing key social issues remain ineffective or only marginally effective. While some progress has been made in spreading awareness about the dangers of child marriage, it is crucial that these efforts not only continue but also evolve to become more impactful. According to our interview findings, six out of ten respondents described the informational programs in their communities as only slightly effective, while one interviewee expressed that these programs were entirely ineffective for their family and friends. This suggests that while awareness campaigns are in place, they may not be reaching their full potential in terms of engagement or practical influence. Given these insights, it becomes evident that the strategies used to discourage child marriage need further development. This could include revisiting the methods of communication, tailoring programs to better resonate with the cultural and social dynamics of specific communities, and ensuring regularity in educational efforts. By implementing a more localized, consistent, and innovative approach, these programs could be more effective in changing attitudes and behaviors related to child marriage. Additionally, engaging community leaders, improving accessibility to resources, and using modern technology to spread messages could further enhance the effectiveness of these programs in areas where they currently fall short.

Figure 4. Effectiveness of educational programs on child marriage

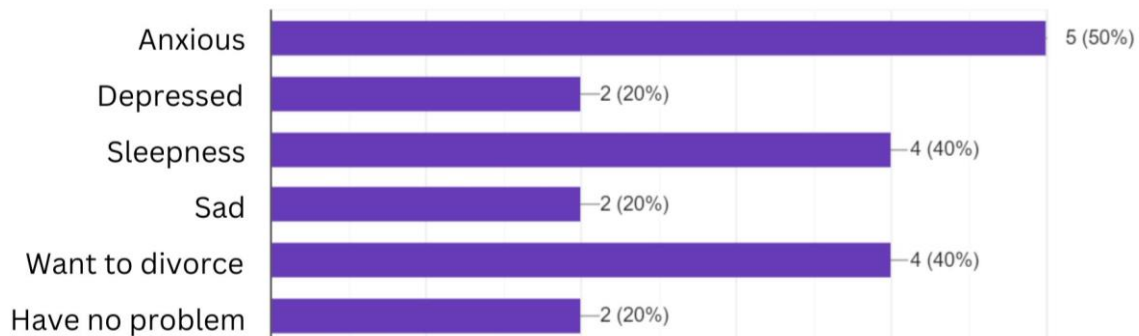


Source: Author's survey

2.4. Psychological Impact of Child Marriage

Child marriage can impact minority women psychologically in a variety of ways, one of which is negatively affecting their emotions in many aspects. According to our interview, half the number of interviewees experience anxiousness, along with four interviewees become sleepless after their marriage. After their marriage, many changes happen in their lives, which can cause much anxiety. For instance, there's a substantial increase in the amount of responsibilities, such as economic activities for the in-law family and domestic work, that child brides have to deal with at an age when they haven't had enough experience and knowledge to handle. This can be distressing, especially if these children's families experience poverty, which is one of the leading causes of child marriage. Changes can happen between them and their birth family, and their social relationships, with child brides having to spend more time with their in-law family. Moreover, child brides are likely to be victims of domestic violence (Burgess et al., 2021), which can lead to psychological distress.

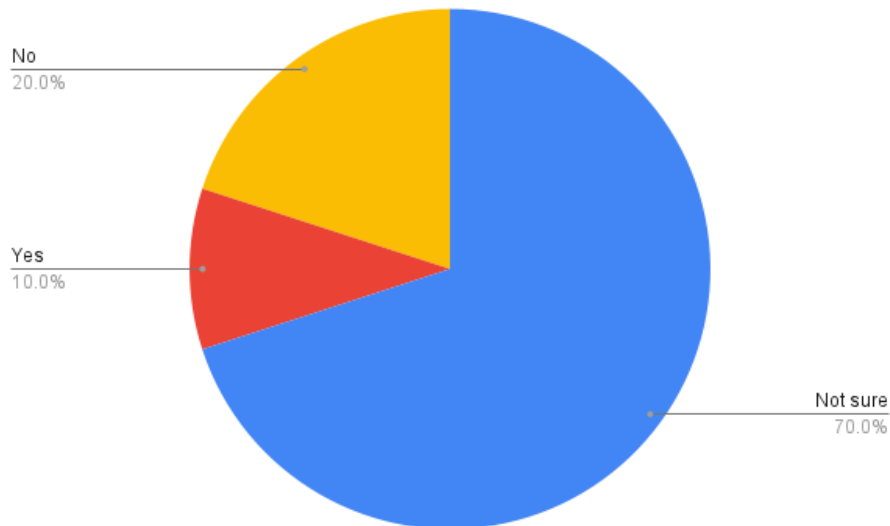
Figure 5. Problems after early marriage



Source: Author's survey

While only two of our interviewees mentioned sadness and depression as one of their problems, much research around the psychological impact of child marriage cite depression as the most common consequences. This feeling can be a result of a lack of freedom to study, work or socialize, which leads to isolation; childbirth complications, which are common for teen pregnancy and child marriages (Burgess et al., 2021). Overall dissatisfaction with their marriage lives can also be another cause for sadness and depression. Only one interviewee felt happy in their marriage, while seven felt uncertain about their feelings with the marriage. Half of the interviewees felt their lives worsened after getting married, and the other half responded that their lives remained the same. These results may explain the relatively high number of respondents who wanted to get a divorce, compared to the figure for other problems experienced after the marriage. It is suggested that the marriage at early age do not bring happiness to majority of participants and they are not satisfied with it.

Figure 6. Proportion of people who want a divorce after marriage



Source: Author's survey

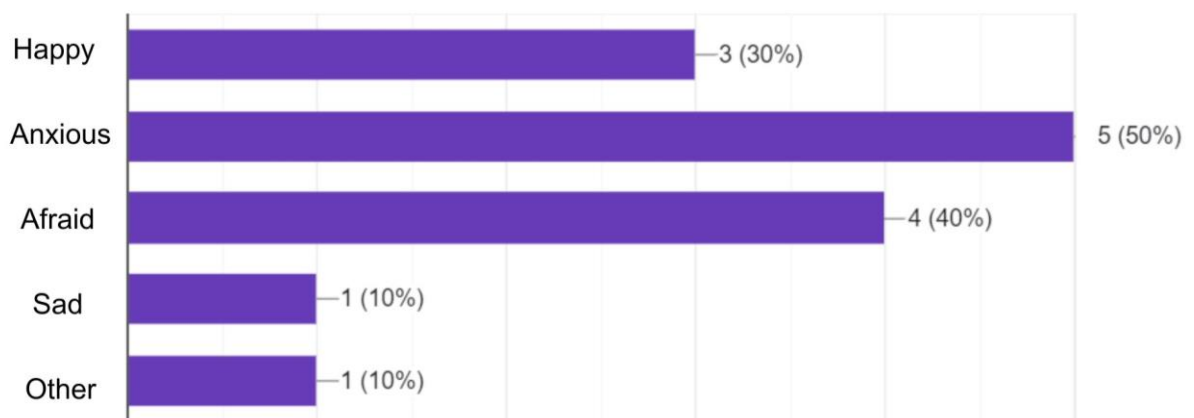
According to our interview, the psychological impacts of marriage can begin even before the union takes place, highlighting the deep emotional burden that many individuals carry as they approach marriage. Fear and worry are the two most common feelings, with five and four participants chosen as their feelings when informed of the marriage. However, joy was the third most common feeling, and only one person said to feel depressed at the prospect of marriage. Sadness most likely develop later into the marriage, as the stress about what would happen in the marriage reduces, while the reality of child marriage occurs to them, leading to a decreased feeling of joy. The predominant feelings of fear and worry suggest that for many participants, marriage represents not just a life transition but a source of potential threat or uncertainty. For some, marriage might signify a loss of personal freedom, particularly if the union is arranged or involves child marriage. The fear of losing control over one's future, decisions, and identity can be overwhelming, leading to a sense of helplessness or dread. Worry often arises from concerns about the unknown—what the marital relationship will be like, how roles and responsibilities will shift, and how life will change after the marriage. In cultures where marriage often leads to new expectations, such as becoming a caregiver or managing household duties, individuals may feel apprehensive about their ability to meet these expectations. The fear and worry may also be linked to societal and familial pressures to fulfill specific roles within the marriage. These pressures can include maintaining family honor, producing children, or adhering to traditional gender norms, which may weigh heavily on individuals who feel unprepared or unwilling to conform to these expectations.

The interview findings indicate that the psychological impact of marriage, especially child marriage

or arranged unions, is not limited to the moment of the wedding but evolves over time. The shift from pre-marital anxiety to post-marital emotional decline underscores the profound psychological burden many individuals face. As fear and worry about the unknown give way to sadness and depression rooted in the lived reality of the marriage, the emotional toll can be severe. The growing realization of a loss of autonomy, combined with unfulfilled hopes and overwhelming responsibilities, can lead to long-term depression. For individuals in child marriages, this is particularly concerning, as they may be deprived of opportunities for personal growth, education, or career advancement.

Fear, worry, and joy coexist in the anticipation of marriage, but as the initial stress fades, the reality of the union—especially in the context of child or arranged marriage—often leads to emotional decline. Over time, joy diminishes as the individual confronts the constraints of their new life, leaving behind feelings of sadness, isolation, and even depression. This underscores the importance of addressing emotional readiness, personal choice, and support systems in marriage, particularly in cases where societal pressures or external forces play a major role in the decision to marry.

Figure 7. Feelings of getting marriage early



Source: Author's survey

The anxiety expressed by 5 out of 10 interviewees and afraid by 4 out of 10 upon being informed about their upcoming early marriage provides a poignant insight into the emotional landscape surrounding this practice. This anxiety and afraid are not only a reflection of individual feelings but also embodies deeper societal issues and implications that merit further examination. Many cultures place a strong emphasis on marriage as a pivotal milestone. The pressure to conform to societal expectations can create significant anxiety for young individuals who feel they must meet these standards prematurely. In communities where child marriage is prevalent, the fear of social ostracism

for rejecting marriage can lead to heightened stress and anxiety. Early marriage often signifies the end of a child's education and independence. Interviewees may fear losing opportunities for personal growth, education, and self-discovery, which further intensifies their anxiety. The transition from a carefree childhood to the serious commitments of marriage can evoke feelings of grief over lost potential and unfulfilled dreams.

The reported about anxiety and afraid with high percentage interviewees regarding early marriage reflects a complex interplay of societal pressures, personal fears, and emotional challenges. Addressing this anxiety requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, support systems, and community engagement. By creating an environment that values the voices and aspirations of young individuals, society can work toward reducing the prevalence of early marriage and fostering healthier emotional well-being.

2.5. Recommendations:

Strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement

With a lack of education on children's rights being one of the main factors contributing to child marriage, it is important that access to education is enhanced for minority children, especially for girls. This will allow them to change their out-of-date beliefs that enable child marriage, which, over time, can substantially reduce those beliefs in minority communities, and the problem itself. Moreover, educated minority mothers tend to invest more in their children, and allow them to go to school and gain knowledge (Tran Quy Long, 2019). This will also reduce harmful culture practices and traditions that lead to child marriage, with one generation becoming more progressive, having more knowledge related to their business, and hopefully earning more than the previous generations.

Developing community awareness and engagement programs can also reduce child marriage among minority women in Vietnam. As many programs currently in use have proved to be effective, they should be continued and further improved to increase the effectiveness. Not only should these programs be about reducing child marriage. they should also address the factors that contribute to child marriage, specifically gender inequality and outdated customs.

As minority women have to deal with much physical, psychological and developmental impact from their early marriages, another recommendation is improving the accessibility of healthcare for ethnic minority women, especially reproductive and mental health. This also includes developing healthcare facilities in remote areas. Reproductive health care will reduce the complications of childbirth, or diseases involving reproductive organs, among child brides. With psychological support services, mental health professionals can help child brides handle anxiousness, depression, or other emotional impacts of their marriage, preventing these women from developing mental illnesses.

3. CONCLUSION

This research is carried out to gain insight to the psychological impact of child marriage on minority women of Vietnam. We interviewed ten ethnic minority people under the age of 21, with five Muong people, three Thai people, one Dao person and one Nung person on their knowledge and law on child marriage, its contributing factors and consequences on their development and mental health, the quality of their marital life, and the local government's efforts on reducing child marriage. After marriage, many child brides are no longer allowed to study and work as they did in the past, which reduces their opportunities for personal development, communication with their friends and family, and are at risk of experiencing childbirth complications. According to our interview, many victims of child marriage experience anxiety and sleeplessness, and only one of our interviewees reported to feel happy with their marital life. Available research on child marriage in Vietnam and other countries in the world also show that depression is also another common consequence. Over time, if these feelings go untreated, they can escalate and result in severe mental illness for child brides, potentially leading to self-harm and suicidality.

Hence, in order to prevent child marriage and its consequences, we propose that the legal framework is further reinforced to deter child marriage perpetrators from organizing the marriage. Through developing education programs to provide minority adolescents with education on the negative impacts of child marriage and gender inequality, the custom of child marriage can be gradually abolished, and at-risk minority girls can gain necessary knowledge to defend themselves. Moreover, it is important that the accessibility of reproductive and mental health care services is increased to assist victims of child marriage in dealing with the psychological impacts of their marriage and help them escape from their abusers if necessary.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted using literature review of existing research articles on child marriage, related legislations, population studies and policy application reports; surveying and interviewing ten minority people from under 15 years old to 21 years old, and analyzing data from the interviews.

- Data Collection Methods: Collect information about child marriage, related legislations, population studies and policy application reports to address the problems, facts and solutions for this issue.
- Policy Analysis: Studying of international and Vietnamese policies relating to child marriage focusing on their legal frameworks, enforcement, and cultural sensitivity.
- Compare and contrast methods: Conduct a detailed review of Vietnam and international regulation concerning child marriage to find the differences between these laws. Comparing the change of child marriage ratio from years to years to evaluate the efficiency of policies and implementation.

- Interview method was chosen as a key qualitative approach to gather in-depth insights on the emotional, psychological, and social impacts of child marriage. This method allows researchers to understand personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions that cannot be captured through quantitative means.

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