

# Education level of ethnic minority women in Vietnam: Case studies in Lai Chau and Yen Bai provinces<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Educational disparity between Kinh and Chinese groups with ethnic minorities, between men and women has long been of much concern in Vietnam. In fact, ethnic minorities have low educational attainment, in which women account for a high rate of illiteracy and low rate of graduating from secondary and high schools or higher. Various factors can affect their opportunities to access education, namely, financial capacity, infrastructure, conception, culture, etc. Based on our survey results 2021, the paper explores and analyzes these factors in Lai Chau and Yen Bai provinces.*

**Keywords:** Education, Ethnic Minority, Ethnic Minority Women, Lai Chau Province, Yen Bai Province, Vietnam

## 1. Background

The mountainous region of Vietnam accounts for 2/3 of the country's total area. With 53 ethnic minority groups (EMGs) and 12.3 million people (14.3% of the national population), the mountainous region of the North in particular has a high ethnic minority population (General Statistics Office, 2020). EMGs usually concentrate in remote areas or border areas - regions

that are considered strategic in terms of national security and defense, yet are also less economically-developed, with lower per capita income, higher rate of poverty, lower education attainment comparing to the national average, and higher drop-out rates. There is still a big gap in educational attainment between EMGs and the Kinh (Vietnamese) group, and the rate of ethnic minority girls going to school is lower than both ethnic minority boys and Kinh girls (Baulch et al., 2008; Oxfarm, Actionaid, ISEE, Caritas, 2010).

There are many factors impacting the education level of ethnic minority women,

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some of them being economic gaps infrastructure, schools, lifestyle, culture, etc. The United Nations' General Comment No. 13: The right to education (1999) identifies these factors to be: facilities, education programs, quality of teachers and textbooks, ability to access education programs, etc.

**Table 1. Demographics of survey respondents**

	Sample size	Lai Chau (%)	Yen Bai (%)
<i>Age</i>			
16-25	50	9.2	10.8
25-34	154	28.8	32.8
35-44	150	34.8	25.2
45-54	66	12.8	13.6
55-60	80	14.4	17.6
<i>Marriage status</i>			
Not married	20	6.0	2.0
Married	435	83.2	90.8
Widowed / Divorced/ Separated	45	10.8	7.2
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Tay	19	0.4	7.2
Thai	231	38.4	54.0
Muong	19	0	7.6
Hmong	180	40.8	31.2
Kho Mu	51	20.4	0

Source: Survey results of the 2021 Study.

## 2. Research methodology

The quantitative sample is selected based on systematic random sampling, with a sample size of 500 ethnic minority women<sup>1</sup> aged 16-60 (the large age range is chosen to observe the diversity of the research subject in the community), controlled for age, ethnic group, and marriage status to analyze the difference between education attainment among sub-groups. At each of the two province, two communes are

selected (Phuc Than commune of Than Uyen district and San Thang commune of Lai Chau city in Lai Chau province; Suoi Giang commune and Son Luong commune of Van Chan district in Yen Bai province). At each commune, 125 women will be selected. The demographics of respondents are demonstrated in Table 1. Aside from using quantitative method, the research also applies in-deep interview as a qualitative method. A total of 20 deep interviews (10 interviews with representatives from the district departments of education and training, local authorities, teachers and local residents) in order to strengthen and clarify quantitative data.

## 3. Survey results and discussion

### 3.1. Education attainment of ethnic minority women

In recent years, the Communist Party and Government of Vietnam have put an emphasis on improving the quality of education and training for EMGs as the key to development. Our evaluation results based on the Study on Population Change and Family Planning in 2018 of the General Statistics Office show that for ethnic minority women over 15 years old, education attainment at secondary school level is 32%; primary and high school levels is 20.7%; university level is 11%; and college/vocational school level make up the rest. The rate of women with post-graduate qualifications is very low at less than 1% (Reference: General Statistics Office, 2019). Data from a survey on socio-economic conditions of 53 EMGs in 2015 show that 21% ethnic minority people over 15 years old are still unable to read and write Vietnamese well, while the rate of students attending schools in the grade appropriate to their age is only 70.2%. Literacy rate among ethnic minority

<sup>1</sup> The informants are women, but the questionnaire surveys information about the households (including men) so the analysis of certain indicators (such as gender and perspectives on gender equality) also have data on men (to provide a comparative view).

women is lower than ethnic minority men (73.4% versus 86.3%) (According to: Irish Aid, The National Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, and UNDP, 2017). This impacts the quality of workers in current and future generations. Data from the Lai Chau Statistic Office (2020) show that female school attendance in this province from 2016-2017 to 2019-2020 increases every year; however, female attendance in high school levels and above is very low (under 50%), despite the overall increase in female school attendance rate.

The survey result of the study on 500 women in Lai Chau and Yen Bai provinces shows that over ¼ (26.4%) of women in the sample have never attended school, 28.8% have attended primary school, almost 1/3 (31.6%) have attended secondary school, and only 13.2% have attended high school and above. Many ethnic minority women had been to school for a certain period; but since dropping out they have also stopped using Vietnamese, thus have forgotten the language over time and are no longer able to read and write. As a result, some communes have started literacy classes for women aged 25-40 in order to help them learn how to read and write. A commune officer in Lai Chau city, Lai Chau province shares that: “the ladies here cannot read and write Vietnamese, they don’t understand anything but a few words (...) The [literacy] class takes place over three months and is taught by two teachers. At every session, we only teach them to write the lesson of the day and spell each word like teaching first-grade students. We only hope that after three months they will be able to write their names, not much more than that” (informant, male, 38 years old, ethnic Thai, Vice-Chairman of San Thang Commune People’s Committee, Lai Chau city, Lai Chau province).

There is a difference in the education levels of ethnic minority women between Lai Chau and Yen Bai province. According to the 2021 study’s survey results, Yen Bai province has a higher rate of women who have never been to school than Lai Chau province (29.2% versus 23.6%). The rate of ethnic minority women who finish primary school and secondary school in Yen Bai province is lower than Lai Chau province (primary school: 24.8% versus 32.8%; secondary school: 30.4% versus 32.8%). However, the rate of ethnic minority women attending higher education levels is higher in Yen Bai than Lai Chau province (15.6% versus 10.8%). Overall, the majority of ethnic minority women in these two provinces only finish primary and secondary schools. The rate of women with high school level and above account for less than 20% of survey participants. This is one of the barriers to improving human capacity for women in these two provinces.

### **3.2. Ethnicity factor**

Ethnicity is a factor that impacts ethnic minority women’s access to education. According to the survey results, for, the rate of women who have never been to school is highest for Hmong ethnic group (19.9%), second highest for Thai ethnic group (15.8%), then Kho Mu (11.7%), and lowest among the Tay and Muong groups (under 10%). Primary-school attendance varies across different ethnic groups. Tay ethnic women with only primary school qualifications is the lowest (24.4%) comparing to the other four ethnicities (over 30%). The rate of women finishing secondary schools is the highest for Tay ethnic group (54.9%), and lowest for the Thai and Hmong groups (35.2%). For high school and above, the rate of women achieving this level is highest for Tay ethnic

group (14.6%) and lowest for Hmong ethnic group (11.2%), with no difference among the three other groups.

Therefore, the survey results of this study have demonstrated that ethnic Tay women have higher qualifications than the other groups; in contrast, there needs to be more support to the ethnic Hmong women to improve their education outcomes in relative to other groups in the region.

**3.3. Economic factor**

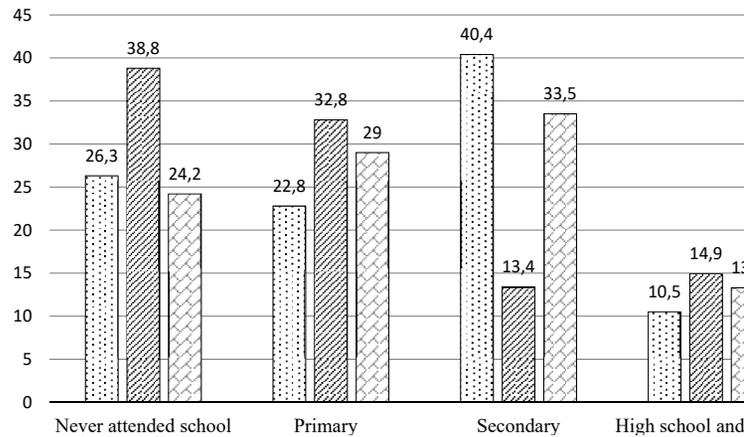
In recent years, Vietnam’s economy has achieved relatively good and stable development. The annual GDP growth has always reached 6-7% per year (General Statistics Office, 2021). With its international commitments, Vietnam has considered “gender equality to be both a goal and a foundation to promote economic growth and national sustainable development”, which has helped to shrink the gender gap. However, in remote and regional

areas where EMGs are concentrated in, there remains huge inequality in terms of access to employment, healthcare services and education. In particular, on education, women and girls of poor households experience more difficulties and barriers comparing to men and boys.

Chi-squared test ( $P < 0.02$ ) shows that there is a relationship between education levels and the quality of life for ethnic minority women at the two surveyed provinces. The survey results show that women’s education levels vary across different types of households. The rate of women who have never attended school is the highest

(38.8%) in near-poor households, second-highest in poor households (26.3%), and lowest among non-poor households (24.2%). The rate of ethnic minority women in poor households achieving high school qualifications (10.5%) is lower than non-poor (13.3%) and near-poor households (14.9%) (Figure 1). 21% of informants say that they left school because their families are too poor to pay tuition. 38.1% of informants say that they had to leave school to go to work.

**Figure 1. Education levels of ethnic minority women, categorised by household poverty (%)**



Source: Survey data of the 2021 Study.

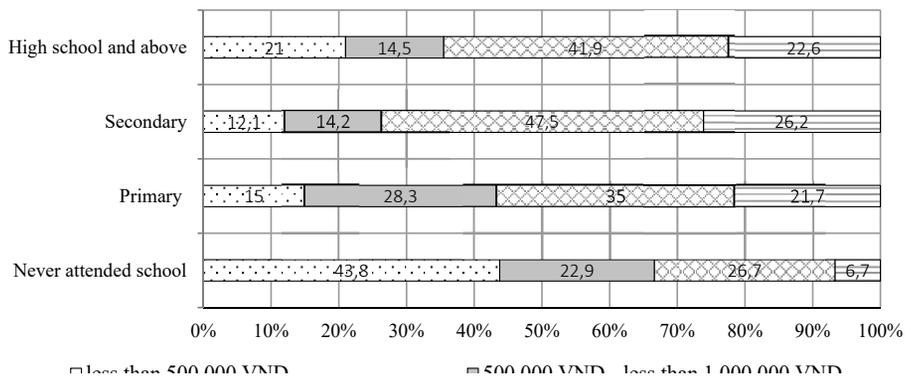
The in-deep interviews also give similar results: “When I was young, my family was very poor. My parents needed helpers so I only finished third grade and stopped. Other pals of my age who have lots of siblings cannot even attend school. Now I try to let my children go to school but only to ninth grade because high school is very costly, from uniforms, textbooks to meals (...). Only children whose families are government officials or well-off can attend higher education, even so very few can attend college/university (Informant, female, 38 years old, ethnic Thai, San Thang commune, Lai Chau city, Lai Chau province).

In reality, family’s economic condition is a critical factor determining the ability of ethnic minority girls to go to school. Households with good and above-average standard of living have lower rates of female children not able to go to school than poor households.

Education attainment of ethnic minority women is also related to their income. The survey results show that ethnic minority women’s income is correlated to their education levels ( $P < 0,001$ ). The group who have never attended school are also most likely to have income of less than 1 million dong / month (66.7%), second is the group with primary school level (43.4%); this probability is lower among those with higher education levels (Figure 2).

combined schools or classes to encourage children to go to school. However, starting from high school, students need to travel to the district centres, which are difficult for students living in remote communes. According to: Irish Aid, The National Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, and UNDP (2017), the average distance from home to the nearest high school for EMGs is 11.7km; for the ethnic Muong it is 16.3km and for the ethnic Hmong it is 23.3km. This is one of the main reasons that limit access to education for ethnic minority students, particularly ethnic minority female students. According to the survey results, about 8% of informants say that schools are too far and 10.4% drop out because they don’t have a vehicle to go to school early in the morning.

**Figure 2. Ethnic minority women’s education level by income level (%)**



Source: Survey data of the 2021 Study.

**3.4. Infrastructure factor**

In recent year, several measures have been taken to improve the education quality for ethnic minority communities, such as investing in school facilities, scholarships, free or deducted tuition, learning support, increase of Vietnamese lessons for minority children... In every commune, kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools are equipped with necessary facilities; villages that are hard to reach have already had

An official from the Division of Education and Training in Van Chan district, Yen Bai province said: “At the moment all communes and towns in our district have primary and secondary schools. Communes that are hard to reach such as Son Luong, An Luong, Suoi Quyen, Suoi Giang, have a primary school site at the villages. However, students there only finish ninth grade at most, many girls only finish fifth or seventh grade and drop out to go to work.

At the present the district has an ethnic minority boarding school at the district centers for high school students. But the roads are very hard to travel on, and it is impossible to commute during the rainy seasons because the motorcycle wheels will be stuffed with mud” (Informant, female, 45 years old, ethnic Tay, officer of the Division of Education and Training of Van Chan district, Yen Bai province).

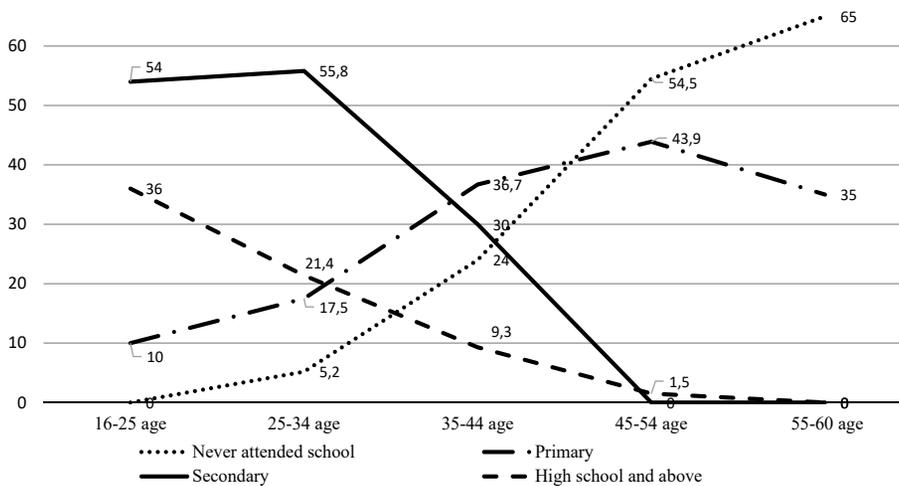
**3.5. Age factor**

Age also influences education attainment of ethnic minority women in these two provinces (Figure 3).

For the under-25 group: There are no women who have never been to school. Women with primary school qualifications only make up 10%, 54% have finished secondary school and 36% have finished high school or above. This group has the highest rate of women finishing high school level and above among all age groups.

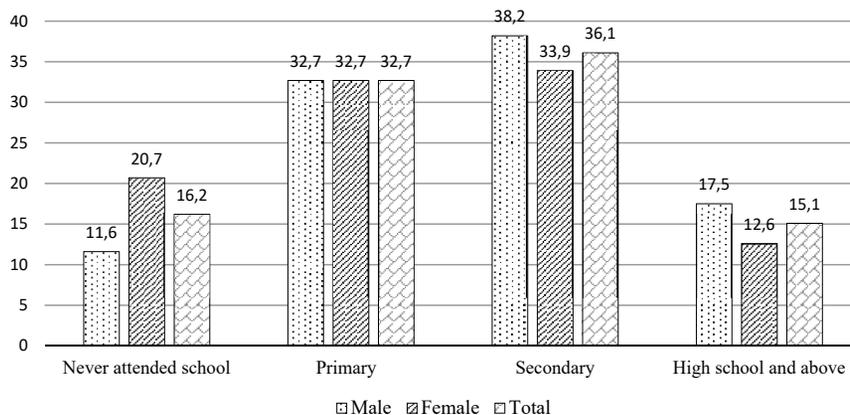
The 25-34 age group: The rate of those with secondary school qualifications is 55.8% - the highest among all age groups. The rate of women who finish high schools or above are 1.68 times lower than those who finish secondary schools for this age

**Figure 3. Education levels of ethnic minority women by age group (%)**



Source: Survey data of the 2021 Study.

**Figure 4. Education levels of ethnic minority women by gender (%)**



Source: Survey data of the 2021 Study.

group, which is lower than the under-25 age group. The rate of women who have never been to school or only have primary school qualifications is higher than the under-25 group.

The 35-44 age group: the rate of those who have never attended school is quite high, at about 24%; those who finish primary school only takes 36.7%; those who finish secondary school takes 30%; only 9.3% finish high school or above.

The 45-54 age group: over half of the informants have never attended school (54.5%), those with primary school qualifications make 43.9%, no women have secondary school qualifications only, and only 1.5% graduate from high school or above.

The above 55 age group: over 65% have never attended school, primary school graduates take up 35%, no one has secondary school qualifications or above.

The survey results demonstrate that education attainment of ethnic minority women varies across age groups. Women of younger age groups have more opportunities to access high education levels.

### **3.6. Gender factor**

According the 2019 population and housing census data of the General Statistics Office, the average school attendance period for residents of Lai Chau province is 5.3 years, for which it is 6.4 years for male and 4.3 years for women; the school attendance period for residents in Yen Bai province is 8.1 years, for which it is 8.6 years for male and 7.5 years for female (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the General Statistics Office, 2020). The data above show that school attendance period for women is fewer than for men.

Chi-squared analysis with  $P < 0,001$  shows that there is a relationship between education attainment and gender for ethnic minority

people. In particular, at the secondary school level, 33.9% women have finished this level, yet for men this is 38.2%. For high school level and above, there is a stark difference between the rate of men achieving this level and that of women - 12.6% for women and 17.5% for men.

Notably, there is a big gap between men and women in the 16-60 age group for those who have never been to school: 11.6% for men and a whopping 20.7% for women, which is 1.8 times higher.

The survey results of the 2021 study (Figure 4) show that, gender disparity with regards to access to education still exists in the Northern mountainous region. Comparing to men, the rate of women not being able to access education is relatively high; the higher the education level, the less likely ethnic minority women will attend.

The in-deep interview results also reflect the same trend: “Even after studying girls will end up marrying and giving birth to children, what is the point in studying at higher levels?” (Informant, female, ethnic Thai, San Thang commune, Lai Chau City, Lai Chau Province).

### **3.7. Perspectives on gender equality**

One of the factors impacting education attainment of ethnic minority women in these two provinces is the residents’ perspectives on gender equality.

Gender inequality is reflected in how men are considered the head of the family (74% men in Vietnamese households hold exclusive land use rights and credit loans) (*Việt Nam News*, 2017). Prioritisation of men is also shown when: “After getting married, men are still prioritised to study, while women have to stay at home to perform their ‘nature-assigned duties’ of being mothers and wives. As a result, ethnic minority men are more likely to be able to read and write than women (Informant, male,

41 years old, ethnic Muong, leader of Suoi Giang commune, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province).

**Table 2. Rate of ethnic minority women agreeing to gender norms with regards to education, categorised by age (%)**

Norms	Age group			
	16-25	25-34	35-54	55-60
Men should study at higher levels than women ***	7.0	7.0	14.0	23.1
Men are more suitable than women when it comes to participating in technical training courses *	12.3	14.6	20.4	20.0
If a household is economically-difficult, boy's education should be prioritised. ***	7.0	8.2	7.9	23.4
Boys have better learning ability than girls ***	10.5	1.9	4.2	16.9

Source: Survey data of the 2021 Study.

P<0,001\*\*\*, P<0,01\*.

This result is also reflected in the survey data of the study (Figure 2). It can be observed that young women (under 25) adopt a more modern mindset on gender equality comparing to the over-55 age group at the two provinces under investigation. However, because young married couples typically still live with their husband's families, their voices are seldomly heard. Decision-making power within the household or the community still rests with the elders, which creates a barrier to advancing girls' education. "If we

have to choose between investing in either boys or girls on education or healthcare, we would choose boys. Only boys will take care of us in the future since we live with them, while girls will marry away and live with their husbands' families. Girls don't need to study too much, they just need to get married, give birth to children, and stay at home to take care of the husbands' families" (Informant, female, 30 years old, ethnic Hmong, Phuc Than commune, Than Uyen district, Lai Chau province).

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, education attainment of ethnic minority groups, particularly ethnic minority women, is still low. The research continues to provide more evidence about the barriers to education for ethnic minority women, such as: economic, infrastructure, teacher quality, gender norms, and perspectives on gender equality. However, this trend has slowly been reversed when women of younger generations gain more access to education, study at higher education levels, and develop a more modern perspective towards gender equality.

Therefore, it is necessary to continue education support policies for ethnic minority in general and ethnic minority girls in particular. In addition, there also needs to be more regular advocacy activities so that ethnic minority groups understand the role of education to human development and economic growth □

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(continued from page 60)

Vietnamese historians, in *Complete Annals of Dai Viet*, founded the national consciousness, which greatly influenced later generations to express the idea of national autonomy. In general, *Complete Annals of Dai Viet* highlighted the cultural and historical characteristics of Vietnam, recorded methods and principles of internal and external relations, policies, orthodox

conceptions, politics, and Confucian thought. These ideological and cultural heritages of Vietnam are still acquired and applied in the political and cultural life of modern times.

The thesis was successfully defended at the Thesis Examination Council of the Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in May 2022.

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