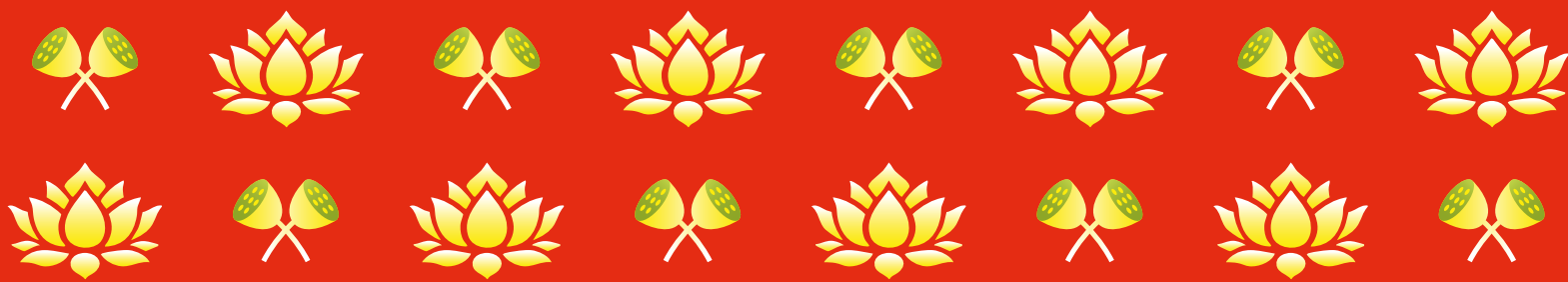


Perspectives on agency from adolescent girls in Lao Cai, Vietnam

TRAN T. N. TRAN & JENNIFER L. O'DONOGHUE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized contexts, agency is part of an everyday struggle. Girls make decisions about their lives while navigating social structures, norms, and systems. Yet the agency of girls and young women living in marginalized contexts is often misunderstood, unrecognized, underdeveloped, and/or actively stifled. Adolescent girls may have their own definitions of agency making it vital that efforts to promote agency in marginalized contexts start with girls. The current report is our effort to do just that, as we share the results of two years of participatory, collaborative, and action-oriented research conducted by members of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) with ethnic minority girls living in the Muong Khuong District in the province of Lao Cai, Vietnam. We outline the context of Lao Cai, describe our girl-centered methodological approach, share what we have learned with girls in the region, and propose priorities and strategies to mobilize actors to transform systems with and for girls' agency.

Agency was generally defined by the girls in Lao Cai as *tính tự chủ*, or autonomy to make choices in life, which they associated with happiness, confidence and a sense of expansion. Yet the expression of agency was nuanced and dynamic, influenced at the individual, relational and systemic levels.

- Self-efficacy and negotiation skills were identified as key to agency; education played a reinforcing role as it not only helped strengthen girls' confidence but also provided status and could be used as a form of decisionmaking leverage within families.
- Relationships at home, school, and through social media were key to girls' agency, providing emotional support, role models, information and guidance. When it came to strategic life choices, the girls described a type of "co-agency" with those around them, a collaborative, negotiated, and sometimes constrained, expression of autonomy.
- Systemic factors challenged girls' agency. Poverty was identified as a key barrier, as were discriminatory and restrictive gender norms that limit mobility and place outsized care burdens on girls. Inconsistent access to quality education is also a barrier that must be addressed at the systems level.

It is key that efforts to promote girls' agency in Lao Cai and similar contexts in Vietnam (and globally), take an (eco)systemic approach, working with girls, their peers, and the key adults around them to strengthen their shared ability to co-construct aspirations, make expansive decisions, and take strategic action in their lives and the lives of their communities. At a minimum, this means:

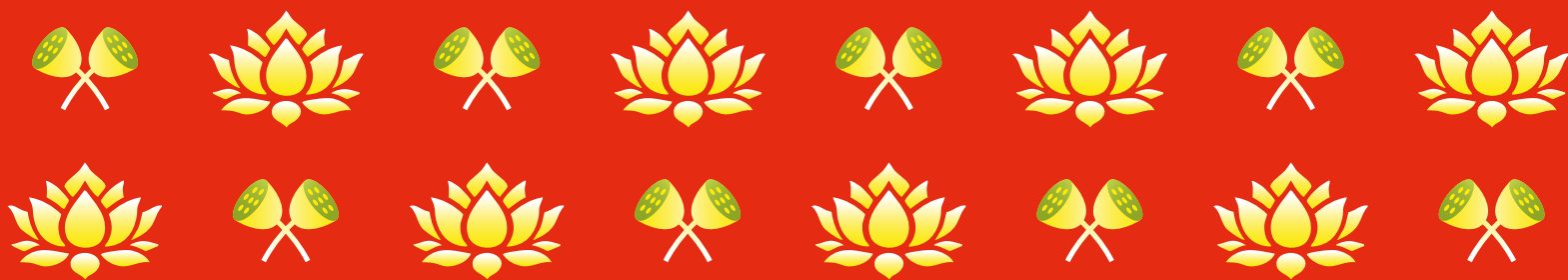
- Girls strengthening skills, knowledge, beliefs, and leadership for agency.
- Families strengthening skills, knowledge, beliefs and practices for co-agency with girls.



- Teachers, community leaders and program implementers strengthening skills and practices to be girls' agency champions and build networks for girls' agency.
- National and local policy makers and authorities working to ensure economic livelihoods, relevant and inclusive education, and equitable gender norms.
- Global researchers and funders promoting girl-centered approaches to research, programming and policy that incorporate individual, relational, and systemic components of agency.

Achieving this will require collaboration and coordinated efforts across diverse local and global education systems. We all have something to learn (and do) to more effectively engage adolescent girls in marginalized contexts, strengthen their agency to resist exclusion, and work together towards more equitable societies.





1. WHY EXPLORE AGENCY WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN MARGINALIZED CONTEXTS¹

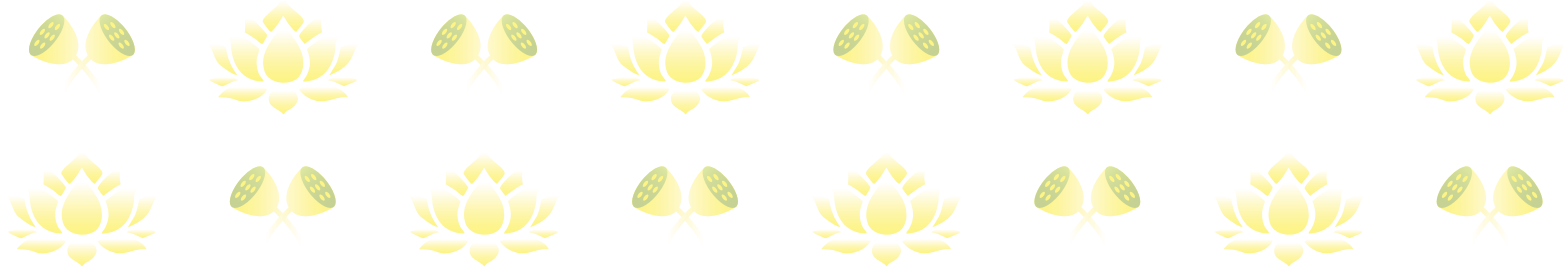
Agency—or the capacity to recognize and voice one’s hopes, make decisions about one’s life and take action freely (see Box 1)—is fundamental to full and equal participation in society and key to educational achievement and improved life outcomes (Friedrich et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2019; Schoon et al., 2021).

Young people face complex challenges—the climate crisis and increased conflict, displacement, and political uncertainty are two examples—that intersect with historical injustices and legacies of colonialism, including gender-based violence and discrimination, economic inequality, ableism, and racism (Barford, 2023; UN, 2018). However, too few education systems around the world prepare children and youth to not only navigate these challenges but to be agents of positive change in their own lives, in their local communities, and on the global stage (NORRAG, 2023; OECD, 2018; Anderson & Winthrop, 2025). Agency can be a generative force that moves young people not only in reaction to challenging situations but also to constructively create their own possible worlds (Sulkunen, 2012).

Box 1. LAAGA’s definition of girls’ agency

Agency refers to a girl’s power to identify and voice her hopes, make decisions, and take action to fully shape her own life and that of her community. Agency involves recognizing oneself as capable of thinking and acting independently in a network of relations. Agency is individual, relational, situational and environmental, bringing a broad set of skills, knowledge and beliefs to play in situations informed by social and cultural norms that may bolster, allow or constrain its exercise in specific contexts. Agency is a fundamental component of full and equal social participation and may require negotiating structural barriers to create opportunities for exercising freedom.

¹ This introduction, common across LAAGA’s 2025 case reports, reflects the work of the larger group of LAAGA case study researchers, including: Christine Apiot Okudi, Ellen Chigwanda, Joyce Kinyanjui, Pamhidzayi Berejena Mhongera, Jennifer L. O’Donoghue, Mary A. Otieno, Atenea Rosado-Viurques, Kazi Nasrin Siddiq, and Tran T.N. Tran.



Agency refers to a girl's power to identify and voice her hopes, make decisions, and take action to fully shape her own life and that of her community. Agency involves recognizing oneself as capable of thinking and acting independently in a network of relations. Agency is individual, relational, situational and environmental, bringing a broad set of skills, knowledge and beliefs to play in situations informed by social and cultural norms that may bolster, allow or constrain its exercise in specific contexts. Agency is a fundamental component of full and equal social participation and may require negotiating structural barriers to create opportunities for exercising freedom.

Since the 2010s, agency has become increasingly central to global education and development research, programming and funding (see for example, Gates, 2019; OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2014). United Nations initiatives like Generation Unlimited and Generation Equality, launched in 2018 and 2021 respectively, are further examples of global efforts to center young people “at the forefront of creating a better, more equitable world.”² The widespread focus on “building,” “boosting,” or “enhancing” agency has been particularly true in relation to adolescent girls (JPAL, 2024; Sidle et al., 2020).

Adolescence, defined here as spanning ages 10 to 19 (WHO, n.d.), is a critical transition period, involving significant biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional changes (Beckwith et al., 2024). Adolescents take on—or are forced into—social roles that bring with them new expectations and responsibilities, and decisions made during these years impact young people's futures as well as those of their families and communities. For girls, adolescence is also accompanied by an accentuation of gender-based constraints, contributing to substantial deepening of gendered attitudes and challenges (Kumar et al., 2021; Bharadwaj, 2024). Limitations are often placed upon adolescent girls with respect to critical life choices around education and economic activities, when to marry and have children, and how to interact with the wider world (Edmonds, et al., 2020).

Adolescence also represents a window of opportunity for the development of skills and the modification of beliefs, expectations, and aspirations about the future (Ballard et al., 2022; Novella et al., 2018). Efforts to strengthen adolescent girls' agency in relation to individual knowledge, skills, and attitudes have yielded some promising results (Amin, et al., 2023; Erulkar et al., 2017; Kwauk et al, 2018; Sidle et al., 2022). However, evidence of the impact of girl-focused interventions on promoting concrete action—the exercise of agency—is more limited as they may not shift power dynamics in families, schools, and communities or address systemic causes of marginalization (Lwamba et al., 2022).

For adolescent girls living in highly marginalized communities, agency is lived as part of an everyday struggle (Khandaker, 2023). Girls and young women make decisions about their lives, in conscious ways and foreseeing their futures, while simultaneously navigating larger social structures, norms, and systems. Yet the agency of girls and young women living in marginalized contexts is often

2 <https://www.generationunlimited.org/our-work>



misunderstood, unrecognized, underdeveloped, and/or actively stifled (Oyinloye, Mkwanaenzi, & Mukwambo 2023; see Box 2).

Box 2. LAAGA's framing of marginalization

From its inception, LAAGA has sought to work with “the most excluded girls,” a group we came to refer to as “girls in highly marginalized contexts.” In our first round of research, this focus informed our efforts to center girls living in high poverty, rural communities in the global south.

We chose to center marginalization in our framing to move away from narratives that depict girls and women as passive victims in need of help or protection or as dependents reliant on external intervention for their “empowerment” (de Wit, 2021; Estrada Ávila, 2023; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Unlike more commonly used terms like “vulnerable” or “disadvantaged,” marginalization acknowledges the structural and systemic barriers that shape their experience, without diminishing their agency.

While the concept of marginalization is not free from critique (Varghese & Kumar, 2022), in our work it refers to social, cultural, and economic exclusion based on imbalances of power. We focus on marginalized contexts to explore how girls navigate and experience intersecting forms of oppression and privilege (gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, ability, and more) as it helps us to identify, examine, and address the systemic forces that girls may face within a given context (UN Women, 2020). We argue that marginalization is the result of discriminatory and exclusionary social norms, practices, policies, processes, and structures (Fluit, et al., 2024) that are dynamic and can be changed.

Understood in this way, marginalization challenges the notion that all girls experience exclusion (or agency) in the same way; instead, it urges us as a collective to ask: which girls, in what ways, and why?

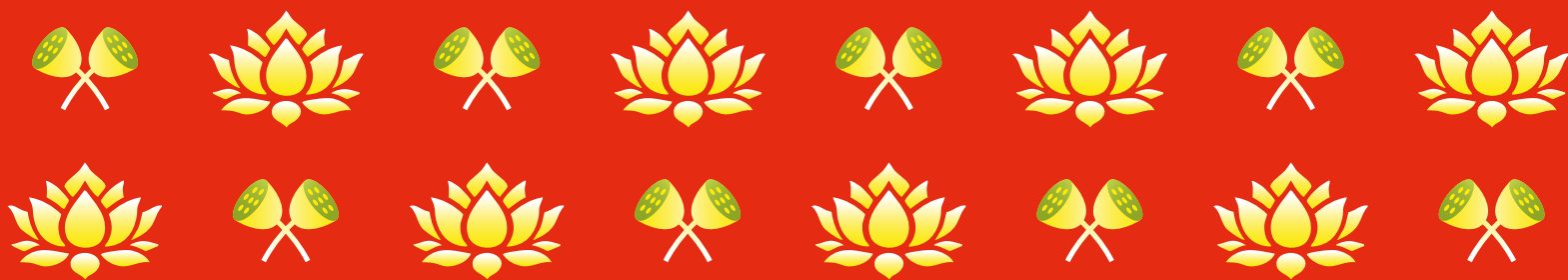


Indeed, the rise in agency-focused work has been accompanied by calls to bring a critical lens to research and action on agency, particularly in how it has been employed in marginalized contexts. Overly individualistic understandings of agency, for example, may miss the ways in which it is embedded in families, learning institutions, and communities (Khurshid, 2015), which themselves are situated within larger social structures and relations of power impacted by class, caste, religion, race, and gender, among other factors (Haslanger, 2024). Efforts (and social narratives) that advance individualized versions of agency can place the responsibility on girls to “lift themselves out of poverty,” while relieving communities and governments—the ecosystem of actors around girls—of their responsibilities (Chawansky 2012; Hauge and Bryson 2014; Koffman & Gill, 2013).

Perhaps the most important critique is that agency work often overlooks a critical reality: that adolescent girls themselves may have their own definitions of agency (Taft 2019) and that efforts to promote that agency should start with girls themselves. The current report is our effort to do just that, as we share the results of two years of participatory, collaborative, and action-oriented research conducted by LAAGA members with girls living in the Muong Khuong district of Lao Cai, Vietnam.³



³ This research was completed before June 2025, preceding the merger of provinces in Vietnam.



2.CONTEXT: MUONG KHUONG DISTRICT

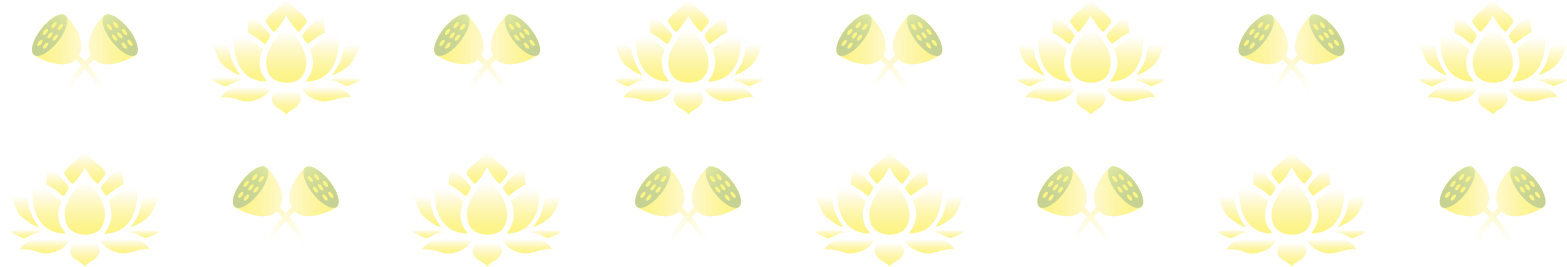
This study engaged adolescent girls in the Muong Khuong district of Lao Cai (see Figure 1). Lao Cai is a land rich in cultural diversity, where 27 ethnic groups converge, each with their own cultural identities, languages, customs, and heritages. The province is also geographically remote and experiences high poverty levels; the ethnic minority communities living here, including the Mong, Nung, Tay, and Dao, face overlapping challenges linked to ethnicity, gender, and geographic isolation (People’s Committee of Lao Cai, 2019; UNICEF & Lao Cai People’s Committee, 2016). Moreover, while research on ethnic minority communities in Lao Cai is expanding, there remains a notable absence of localized, girl-centered studies specifically on agency in remote districts like Muong Khuong. This gap underscores the need for feminist research approaches that center girls as active participants in generating insights about their own agency.

Figure 1. Muong Khuong, Lao Cai Case Site



Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, (c) OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community.

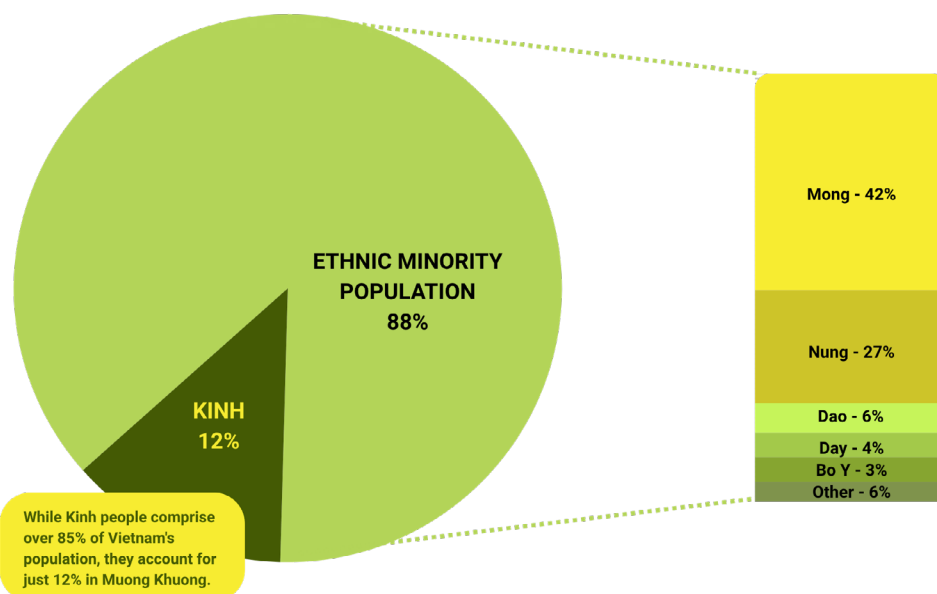
Vietnam is home to 54 ethnic groups. With the Kinh people making up more than 85% of the population, the remaining 53 ethnolinguistic groups are commonly referred to in official and public discourse as “ethnic minorities” (Open Development, 2019). Ethnic minority communities are found throughout the country but are mostly concentrated in mountainous areas which, although recognized by the government as key geographic locations in terms of socioeconomic development, national defense, security and ecological biodiversity (UN Women, 2021a), are among the most marginalized in Vietnam.



At the national level, the proportion of ethnic minority households living in or near poverty is 3.5 times higher than the national rate and the literacy rate for ethnic minority communities remains around 15 percentage points below that of the majority group (UN Women, 2021a). Ethnic minority women and girls in the country face intersectional barriers related to ethnicity, poverty, geographic isolation, and gender, which often preclude or significantly limit their access to quality education, mobility, stable economic opportunities, health care, and social networks thus constraining their capacity to cope with risk (UN Women, 2021b).

Lao Cai is no exception to these trends. A province in the Northwestern mountainous region of Vietnam at the border with China, Lao Cai has an advantageous geographical location and has been recently approved by the Prime Minister to be developed into a major economic hub.⁴ Muong Khuong, where this study was conducted, is the poorest district in Lao Cai, with 68.4 percent of the population living in poverty amidst complex terrain and extreme weather conditions (Lao Cai Provincial Committee, n.d.).⁵ Muong Khuong is also home to one of the largest populations of ethnic minority groups in the country (see Figure 2). Nearly nine of ten residents in the district come from one of five ethnic minority groups, the great majority of whom (86%) live in rural communities marked by higher levels of poverty (UNICEF & Lao Cai People's Committee, 2016; UN Women, 2021b).

Figure 2. Ethnic distribution in Muong Khuong



Source: <http://bantochuc.laocai.org.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/-diem-tua-thoat-ngheo-cua-nong-dan-muong-khuong-1186100>. <https://muongkhuong.laocai.gov.vn/gioi-thieu>

⁴ <https://vietnamnews.vn/economy/1689526/lao-cai-to-become-centre-for-regional-trade-cooperation.html>

⁵ <http://bantochuc.laocai.org.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/-diem-tua-thoat-ngheo-cua-nong-dan-muong-khuong-1186100>

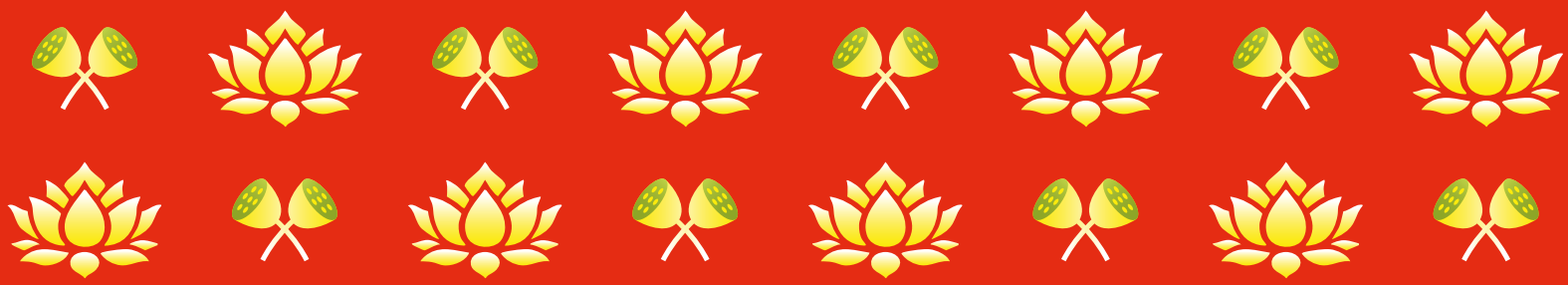


Ethnic minority girls in Vietnam continue to face significant educational disparities driven by cultural norms and economic hardship. Girls are more likely than boys to leave school—particularly secondary school—due to the influence of factors such as early labor force entry, child marriage, limited awareness of rights, and increased social risks like trafficking and drug abuse (Nhan Dan, 2023⁶; UNICEF & Lao Cai People’s Committee, 2016). Compared to men, ethnic minority women in Lao Cai often have limited education because of early marriage (at 16-18 years of age or younger), fewer options for income generation as they tend to engage primarily in agricultural activities, greater income dependence without land ownership rights, and an outsized responsibility for household and familial duties due to gender role bias (UN Women, 2021a; UN Women, 2021b).

In 2021, Muong Khuong was identified as a priority area for the national policy on socioeconomic development for ethnic minority and mountainous areas. Key to this policy has been the program to “Implement gender equality and address urgent problems for women and children,” or what is known locally as “[Project 8](#).” In Muong Khuong, Project 8 focuses on transforming women’s and girls’ mindsets and behaviors, challenging social norms and gender discrimination, enhancing women’s economic empowerment, and addressing urgent problems for women, such as livelihood opportunities, human trafficking, and limited digital literacy.



6 <https://nhandan.vn/thuc-day-binh-dang-gioi-va-giao-duc-tre-em-gai-tai-cac-vung-dan-toc-thieu-so-post745132.html>



3. METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING AGENCY WITH GIRLS

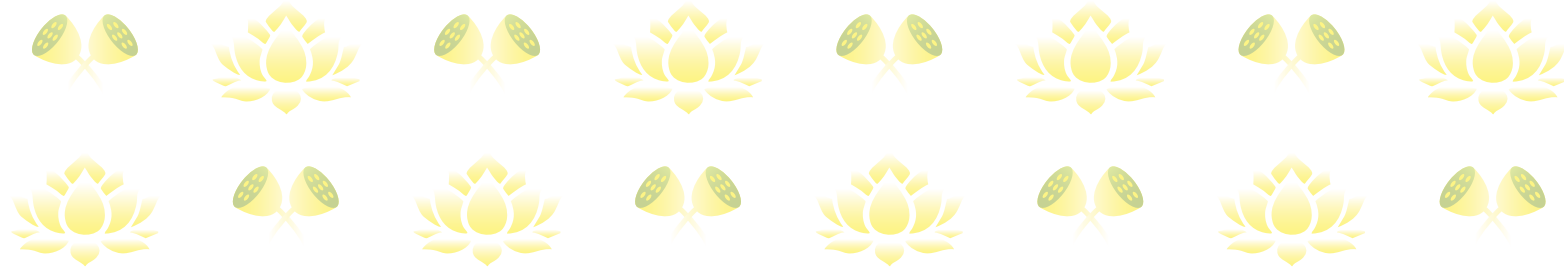
This research seeks to identify, *with girls*, the individual, relational and institutional structures and dynamics that shape ethnic minority girls' agency in Lao Cai, Vietnam. Our primary research question was: What does agency look like for adolescent girls? Secondary questions were developed to further explore this (see Box 3).

Box 3. Research Questions

What does agency look like for girls between the ages of 10-18 in Lao Cai?

- How do girls understand and define agency?
- What knowledge, skills, and beliefs do girls identify as necessary to exercise agency?
- In what situations do girls feel free to exercise their agency? What are the characteristics of those environments?
- How do girls see others in their community exercising agency? How does this impact girls' own sense of agency?
- Who and what do girls identify as challenges to their agency? Who and what do they identify as supports to push against these challenges?

To ensure the research was grounded in the lived experiences and voices of these girls, we relied on participatory qualitative and girl-centered methods (GCM). Informed by youth participatory action research (YPAR), GCM aims to ensure girls' experiences, perspectives, and priorities ground and drive the research process and outcomes (O'Donoghue, 2025; Wang et al., 2023). Centering girls' own definitions of agency, for example, has the potential to redefine the experiences, spaces, and supports that are seen as valuable for girls—not only for adults. Further, rather than superficially including girls only as informants, this work sought to highlight the radical importance of interpreting girls' agency from the affective and social viewpoint of girls themselves. Finally, investigating agency from girls' perspectives created space for different views about agency to emerge, not as a stable and necessarily internal attribute that girls either possess or not, but as a dynamic and complex feature of their lives that may transform itself depending on multiple cultural, social, family, and economic factors.



The research took place over two consecutive days in March 2023 at two schools (one lower and one upper secondary school) in Muong Khuong, scheduled after class hours to provide a familiar and safe environment while ensuring that girls did not miss school. This timing also allowed girls who lived far away to be accompanied home by teachers or staff, supporting their safety and participation.

Ten ethnic minority girls were involved, divided into two age groups (10-15 and 16-18, five girls each). This small, focused group size was intentionally chosen to create a trusting, intimate setting conducive to deeper dialogue and reflection. The girls were already familiar with one another, which further encouraged openness and mutual support during co-design workshops, girl-led observations, in-depth community interviews, and group reflection sessions. Participants were purposefully selected in consultation with schoolteachers based on three key criteria: (1) being an ethnic minority girl; (2) between 10 and 18 years of age; and (3) being fluent in the national language, both written and spoken. These criteria were essential to ensuring that participants not only represented the population at the heart of the research but could also fully comprehend and engage in the research process, which was conducted in Vietnamese. These findings were triangulated with insights from previous research on girls' agency as well as through community dialogues convened in March of 2024 by LAAGA and the Muong Khuong Women's Union.

Given the research involved work with early adolescents, researchers successfully completed ethical training to work with minors prior to data collection. Consent forms were clearly explained and distributed for research participants and their guardians to sign before data collection activities began.

Co-design workshop

Co-design workshop refers to participatory sessions in which girls actively contributed to shaping the inquiry by sharing their own understandings and lived experiences of agency. Conducted on the first day, these approximately 90-minute workshops—one with each age cohort—engaged girls in a series of four activities designed to help girls identify their understanding and definition of agency as well as the personal, relational, situational and structural factors that enabled or constrained their exercise of that agency (see Figure 3). Audio recordings and note taking were used to capture girls' insights without distracting them from the conversations.



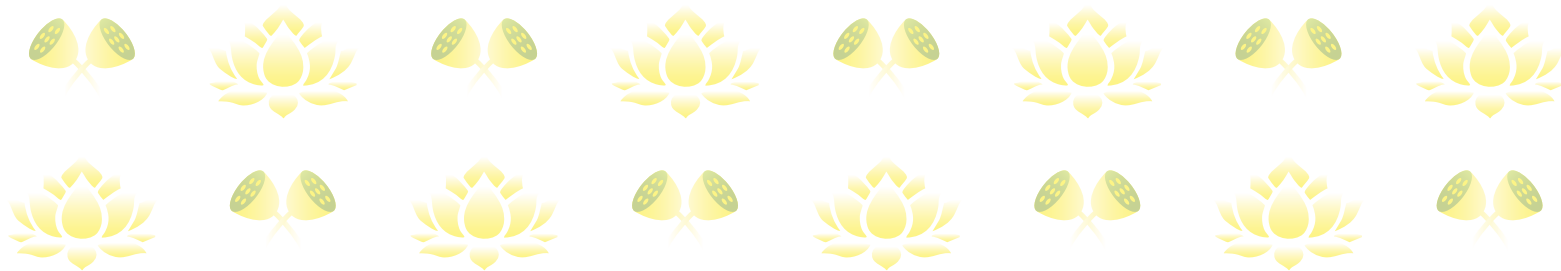
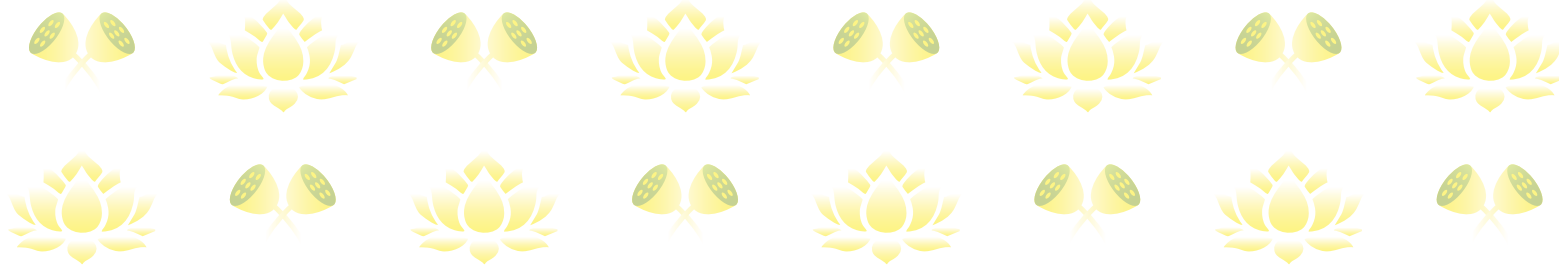


Figure 3. Co-design workshop activities and flow

ACTIVITY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	TIME	OBJECTIVE
Friend Gathering	<p>Each participant received a card that listed a decision and/or choice to be made. These varied from simpler, more every-day choices like, “Which would you choose for lunch: rice or noodles?” to more complex, future oriented questions like, “What career would you like to pursue?”</p> <p>The difficulty/complexity of the decisions varied in the groups to account for variation in age levels.</p> <p>As each participant answered the question, she was prompted to share if and how her decision mattered to her and the people around her. What were the short- and long-term consequences of her decision?</p> <p>Throughout the activity, researchers listened closely and noted common words, e.g. freedom, responsibility, and family expectations.</p> <p>After everyone had shared, researchers read aloud these common words and ideas and then introduced the word “agency” by explaining that all the reflections the girls just shared about making choices, considering consequences, and dealing with influences are part of what this word means. In this way, instead of prescribing a fixed definition, the researchers invited the girls to co-define agency based on their lived experiences and the themes they had collectively surfaced.</p>	15 minutes	Girls identify how they understand and define agency
Thought Shower	<p>Participants were encouraged to take turns sharing a skill, knowledge, attitude, or belief that is necessary for them to exercise agency until the ideas were exhausted. Ideas were written down on a large sheet of paper where everyone could see them and add their thoughts.</p>	10 minutes	Girls identify the individual attributes necessary for them to exercise agency
Storytellers	<p>Girls gathered in a circle with a “story stick.” Whoever held the stick was asked to tell a 5 to 8-minute personal story of a time she made a difficult decision or choice.</p> <p>The stories were guided by the following questions: Why did she find it hard to make that decision? Who or what influenced her decision? Who was supportive? Who rejected it? How important was it to get advice from other people when she made the decision or choice? The researchers asked for more elaboration when necessary.</p>	50 minutes	Girls share experiences of exercising agency and identify factors and characters that supported or limited that.
Bridge Model	<p>Based on the previous activity, girls were invited to draw or list factors that impacted their exercise of agency. When doing this, they were asked to think about the situations when they are more able to exercise agency and the situations where they feel less able to.</p> <p>They were then asked to visualize with words or drawing what enhanced agency would look like for them. A “bridge” was then constructed between the two situations as girls added words or pictures to represent ways to achieve their aspirations and possible solutions to address some of the challenges they faced.</p>	15 minutes	Girls identify challenges to exercising agency and possible solutions to address these.



Girl-led interviews and observations

After the workshops ended, participants were asked to observe and talk with 1-2 women and girls around them that afternoon and evening. These could be their mothers, aunts, sisters, and/or female friends. We asked that each talk last at least 30 minutes and address the following questions:

- When and how do they exercise agency?
- When and how do they not?
- What are the reasons behind this?
- What initiatives can be taken to overcome barriers to exercising agency?
- Who helps them to mitigate challenges to exercising agency?

Reflection discussions

The girls returned the next day, bringing with them notes or drawings that captured their data collection. Each was invited to share their conversations, observations, and reflections with the group. Rather than a simple reporting exercise, this session served as a space for collective reflection. Researchers facilitated a guided discussion to help the storytellers explore how their data illustrated dimensions of agency such as decisionmaking processes, influential voices, and enabling or constraining factors. Audio recordings and note-taking were used to document the insights shared.

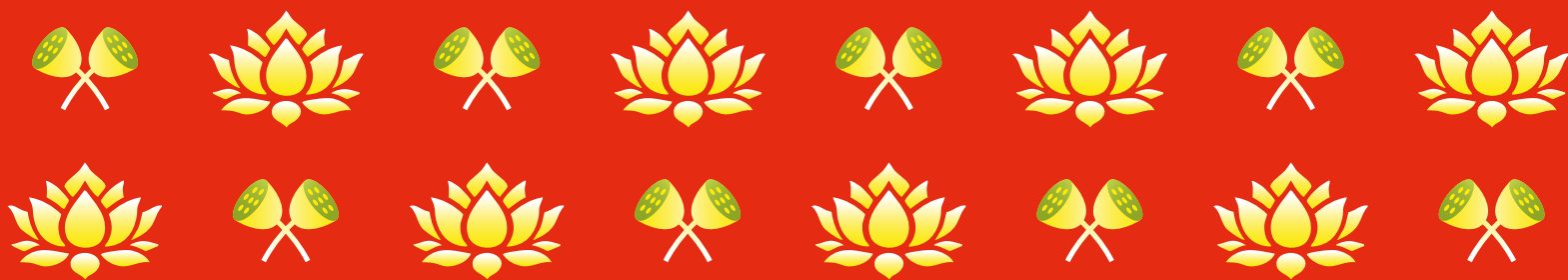
Community dialogues

To deepen the participatory nature of our research, foster accountability with the community, further integrate participant voices, and bring greater relevance to LAAGA's work (Dick, 2015; Kwan & Walsh, 2018; Patnaik, 2019), we engaged in dialogue around the research findings with the girls and the adults they pointed to as impacting their sense of agency. In Vietnam, this took the form of a series of events held over three days in March of 2024 in Muong Khuong, Hanoi, and Can Tho (a city along the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam with an important ethnic minority presence, particularly Khmer). Nearly 100 community, district, provincial, national, and global actors participated in these dialogues (see [Appendix A. Community Dialogues](#) for more detail on structure and participants).

The roundtable held in Muong Khuong provided the opportunity for the girls who had participated in the earlier research to discuss the findings, identify priority challenges, and explore potential solutions with their families, teachers, and local authorities. School visits with students in Muong Khuong and Can Tho, brought girls and researchers together to reflect on and deepen research findings. Finally, meetings were held with representatives of the Vietnam Women's Union, Irish Aid, and UN Women to share LAAGA's preliminary findings and learn more about efforts being led by these groups to support ethnic minority girls and their communities in Lao Cai and across the country. The goal of these meetings was to strengthen cohesion, commitment and capacity across actors working in ethnic minority communities in Vietnam to better promote the agency of adolescent girls through collaboration and complementary action.

These community dialogues reflected and reinforced the iterative and cyclical nature of LAAGA's research to action process (O'Donoghue, 2025), serving as a catalyst for the construction of action-able and sustainable interventions that are meant to be not only useful but also community driven (Ivankova & Johnson, 2022). In the Recommendations section we outline some of the community-identified solutions shared in these spaces.





4. FINDINGS

Agency was generally defined by the girls in this research as *tính tự chủ*, or autonomy to make choices in life. In their discussions to arrive at the appropriate phrase in Vietnamese, the girls shared how agency enables them to become “boss of their own lives,” taking ownership of their emotions, dreams, and futures. It is not just about making decisions (*tự quyết*), but about having the power to make choices about their own path, pursue their goals, and shape their future on their own terms (*tự chủ*).

Yet the girls also expressed nuanced and dynamic understandings of this that varied with respect to the type of decision or action being taken, the impacts of their choices on immediate family, and their sociocultural and economic contexts.

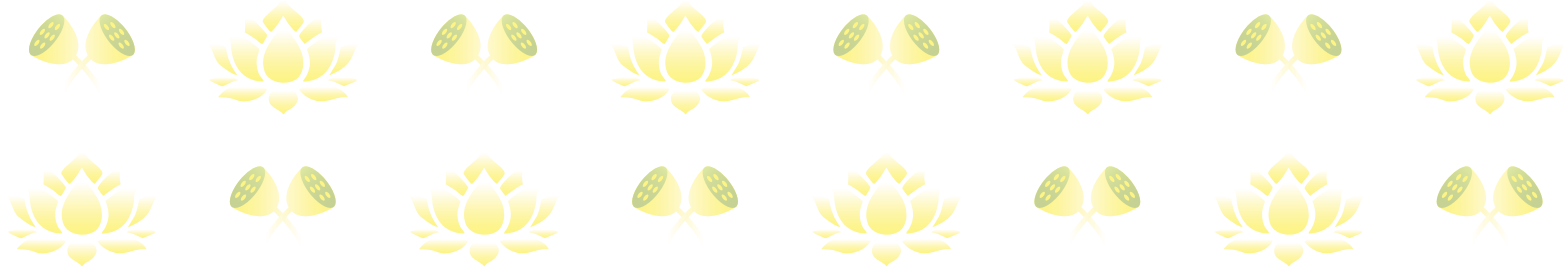
In relation to everyday, individual matters such as food, entertainment, and clothes, girls spoke of agency as substantive autonomy to make one’s own choices, according to their own knowledge and preferences, and without seeking constant reassurance from others.

I am able to decide what I eat. I want to have rice, meat and vegetables in my daily meal because these ingredients give my body the nutrients it needs to function well, such as proteins, fat, fiber, and vitamins. (13-year-old Nung girl)

I choose comfortable clothes, like T-shirts, depending on the weather. But I also think carefully and make my own decisions. Sometimes I want to change things up so others don’t think I’m boring. During festivals, I wear our traditional Mong outfit. It’s bright and beautiful, with sparkling beads. Wearing it makes me pretty and feel proud to be Mong. (14-year-old Mong girl)

When it came to “larger,” strategic life choices, such as those related to education, employment, marriage and family life, however, nearly all the girls explained that these types of decisions would be made in consultation with—or in a few cases by—adult caregivers (e.g. parents, grandparents, and/or teachers). In this sense, they described a type of “co-agency”⁷ that was a collaborative, negotiated, and sometimes constrained, expression of autonomy. For example, a 14-year-old Nung girl stated, “I will become a teacher, as this is what my parents want,” expressing confidence in a decision that aligned with parental expectations. A 15-year-old Mong girl expressed an aspiration

7 Co-agency recognizes that a person’s ability to aspire, make decisions, and take actions is not solely individually determined, but also is influenced by and develops in interactive, mutually supportive, and enriching relationships where peers, teachers, parents/caregivers, and other community members become co-creators with girls. This conceptual understanding goes beyond individualized notions of agency in which peers and adults play a supportive, but secondary role in a girl’s development and expression of agency; instead, it posits a true partnership in which co-agents act girls.



to become a fashion designer, yet noted, “I will have to ask for my mom’s opinion,” indicating a need for familial approval.

Another 15-year-old Mong girl described a more dialogical process: “My mom agreed to let me go because she wanted me to experience the realities of people’s lives [through her work as a TV reporter], and from that, reflect and make thoughtful decisions for my future.” Interestingly, during the community dialogues, her mom shared her own story of negotiating with her family on the way to becoming a TV reporter; given what her daughter expressed in the research, she seems to be passing the learning from this experience down to the next generation. These examples reveal how girls’ career aspirations were often situated within intergenerational negotiations, reflecting both support and subtle constraints within the family environment.

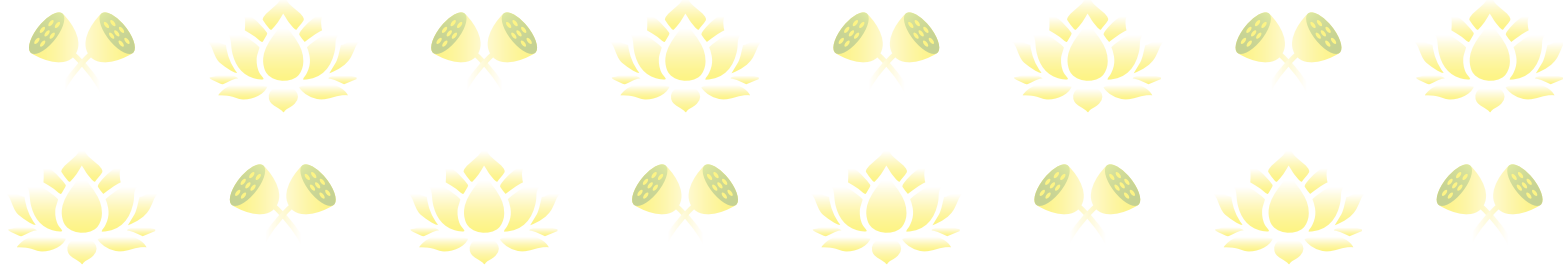
We noticed that these co-agentic decisionmaking processes were more common in the younger age cohort. Most girls in the 16-18 age group felt their career choices would be driven by their own aspirations, with some support from others.

My parents are easy; they let me decide my career. My teachers told me to keep studying, or at least learn something if I didn’t pass. My uncle, who works in the environment sector, said, ‘Study so others won’t look down on you. Earn enough to support your family. Don’t struggle like I did.’ He made me believe in the power of education. (Pa Di girl)

My dad wants me to go to university, but I want to start my own business. I’ll make my own decision and may not get advice from anyone. (Mong girl)

Finally, the girls associated the exercise of agency with happiness, confidence, and a sense of expansion. They imagined that a fuller sense of agency would lead them to be more open to sharing and feeling proud of themselves. One 15-year-old Mong girl saw herself as an award recipient if she could take control of her life and increase her sense of agency. Another Mong girl compared herself exercising agency with being “a freedom traveler,” while a 14-year-old Nung girl described a sense of agency as having “sparkling eyes.” These powerful phrases demonstrate the ways in which girls quickly grabbed on to the idea of agency, recognizing what a strengthened sense of agency might mean in their lives.

In the following sections, we provide a deeper look at what girls identified as the key enablers and barriers to agency at the individual, relational and systemic levels.



4.1 Self-efficacy and negotiation were among key elements of agency at the individual level

Girls participating in this study demonstrated a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, and mindsets they believed were essential to exercising agency. Across age groups, attributes such as accountability, assertiveness, confidence, and persistence were commonly identified. For example, a 13-year-old Nung girl noted, “confidence helps us communicate with others, and they will support us and give us advice.” A 15-year-old Mong girl reflected on her mother’s influence, observing that “She has been determined and persistent since she was young. She held onto that goal to ensure a better future for herself and her children.” Similarly, a 17-year-old Nung girl underscored the importance of self-determination, stating, “If there’s something you like, just go for it—don’t let anyone stop you.”

These findings align with previous research highlighting self-efficacy, or girls’ belief in their ability to influence outcomes, as central to agency. Girls with higher self-efficacy tend to take more initiative, persist through challenges, and recover more easily from failure (Bandura, 1986; McKelway, 2018; UNDP & UNICEF, 2021). In this study, a 15-year-old Nung girl shared the story of a female neighbor who struggled to find work in Muong Khuong. Reflecting on her experience, the neighbor said, “I believe the final decision must be mine. My parents can give advice and opinions, but in the end, it’s up to me to decide and choose for myself.” Similarly, a 17-year-old Mong girl shared, “My family opposed my decision to attend university, but I will be determined to continue studying because I don’t want to suffer later in life. I will convince my parents and take on a part-time job to pay my tuition fees.”

For the girls in Muong Khuong, education played a reinforcing role in the development of their self-efficacy or perceived “power within”⁸ to exercise agency.

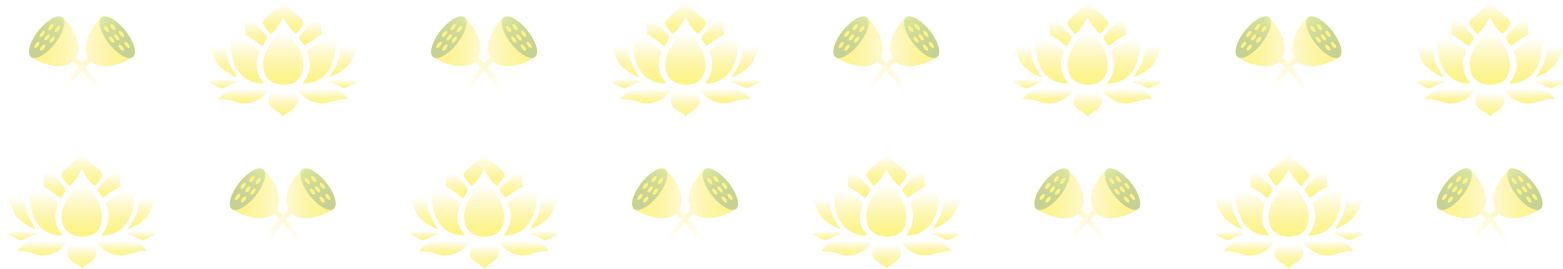
I need to get high scores in drawing and mathematics, so that I can pursue my dream job: fashion designing. (15-year-old Mong girl)

I have to study well to enroll in college, so I can decide when to get married. (15-year-old Mong girl)

I can convince my parents to accept my career interest if I have a good academic record. (12-year-old Nung girl)

My uncle was poor. He expected me to study hard and earn a good living, so I would not be looked down on as he was. (17-year-old Dao girl)

8 “Power within” refers to the “psychological elements of agency,” including belief about one’s worth and ability; this is often expressed (and measured) through aspirations, self-efficacy, and attitudes about gender norms (JPAL, 2020).



The girls' words here also make visible the importance of negotiation skills and the role of bargaining power in the exercise of agency. That is, education not only helped strengthen girls' confidence and beliefs in themselves, but they also recognized that educational achievement could provide status and be used as a form of decisionmaking leverage. In a similar way, girls talked of potentially using their seniority and economic independence as sources of bargaining power.

*My parents will agree with my decision as I am the oldest child in my family.
(13-year-old Nung girl)*

*[If I secure a decent job], I can do whatever I like and not rely on anyone else.
(18-year-old Mong girl)*

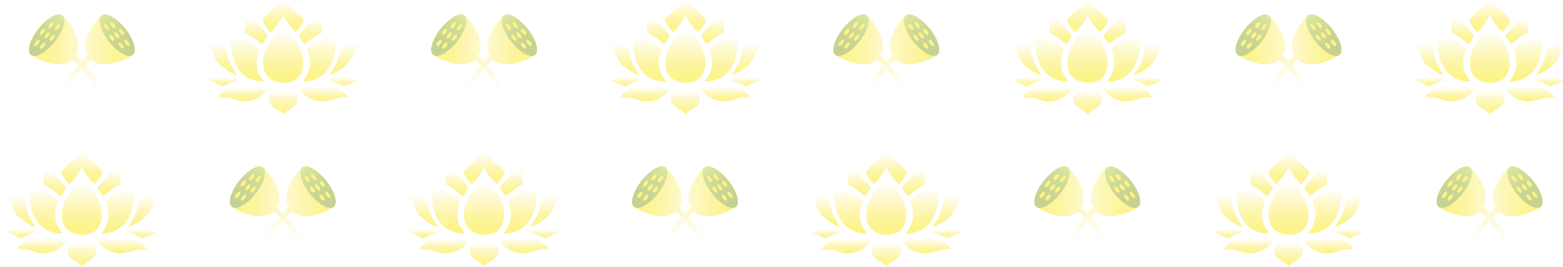
Furthermore, and in relation to confidence, resilience, and bargaining power, the girls felt that they would exercise agency more freely when they are economically independent. They shared examples of how economic independence enables girls to pursue schooling as desired:

My parents did not want me to continue my studies because of our financial constraints. I successfully convinced them by taking a part-time job outside the classroom for tuition payment. (17-year-old Nung girl)

They also imagined that in the future, income generation would mean girls would not need to be financially dependent on husbands, would not be "looked down upon by the in-laws" (13-year-old Nung girl), and would be "able to take good care of our parents" (18-year-old Nung girl).

4.2 Relationships at home, school and increasingly social media are key supports for girls' development and exercise of agency

When asked in what situations they felt free to exercise agency, most of the girls described feeling confident in private spheres like home and classroom and, increasingly, in public spaces afforded by technology, like social media. Although, as described in the previous section, girls had clarity on the individual elements that promoted a strong sense (and exercise) of agency, their own self-doubt, fear of failure, and vague goals were common themes in the stories they shared. Most of these girls were worried about an unknown future and shared that they felt uncomfortable making strategic life decisions on their own, seeking instead support and approval from others, principally their adult caregivers. In this section, we focus more explicitly on these relations and their influence on girls' agency.



» **Girls felt more comfortable expressing agency when supported by their relatives, teachers and peers**

Support from adult caregivers, including family and teachers, was identified as playing a critical role in shaping girls' self-esteem, which in turn enabled them to exercise agency. The familial support networks described by participants commonly included immediate family members such as grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, and siblings, as well as more extended family. Nearly half of the girls in this study reported receiving stronger support from male figures, particularly fathers and grandfathers.⁹

My grandfather was supportive of my mom's choice and was willing to pay for her schooling. (Mong girl)

When I asked my parents, my dad wanted me to continue studying, while my mom did not. So I followed my dad's decision. (Nung girl)

When I decided to stay in Muong Khuong, I asked both my parents. My dad said he respected my decision and encouraged me to come visit when I had time. He supported my choice. (Nung girl)

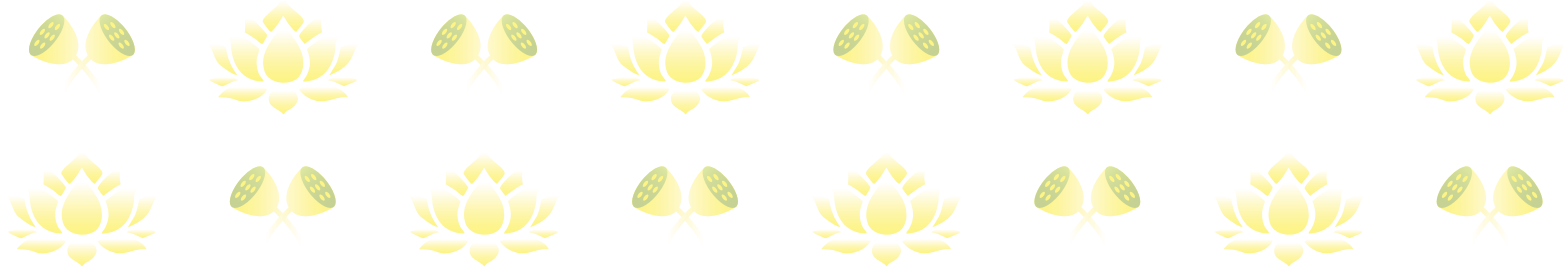
Support came in the form of advice, guidance, and even finance. All girls in the 16-18 age cohort, for example, expressed confidence about their future education choices because their parents could afford it.

I always seek support from my aunt and my head teacher for any choice made. (17-year-old Mong girl)

My parents had asked me to stop schooling because the distance from home to school is quite far. Since I love studying, they eventually let me continue my education. I am staying with my uncle near the school, and visiting my parents once a week. They call me every day to check in. (16-year-old Mong girl)

The level of comfort and support girls found in their families and familial networks was not uniform. Girls who felt it was easier to share their preferences and long-term plans with parents generally described their parents as more open-minded or receptive to ideas. Other girls found their families

⁹ The importance of male family members and schoolteachers was also identified by girls in LAAGA's research in the Feni District of Bangladesh. In contrast, girls in the Karamoja region along the Kenya/Uganda border and in Zvishivane, Zimbabwe pointed to mothers and other women in the community as the most important champions of girls' agency.



to be unsupportive of their continued education or career goals, which was often related to financial constraints faced by the family intertwining with restrictive gender norms for girls.

My parents wanted me to quit school and follow my sister's path, going overseas to work to get out of poverty. (14-year-old Nung girl)

I am asked by my parents and relatives to abandon school, as they believed that further education should be invested for sons only. (16-year-old Nung girl)

[My parents are concerned that] a highly educated girl might have trouble finding a guy to marry. (16-year-old Mong girl)

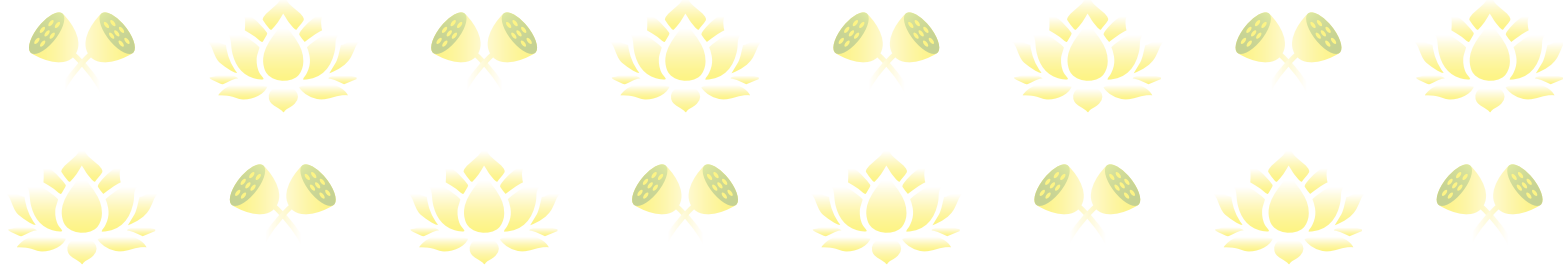
Teacher emotional support also played an important role in developing girls' sense of agency. Some girls described the comfort it gave them to ask their female teachers for advice, with teachers becoming a bridge between them and their parents. Finally, friends were widely cited as a source of emotional support and learning for girls, as they share similar interests, motivations, and challenges. As one girl explained during our community dialogues in 2024, friends just "get it faster."

» Relationships provide girls with much-needed role models

Relationships with others provided these girls with access to much-needed role models. Indeed, the three girls with the clearest future goals (identified as a necessary component of agency) shared that they wanted to follow the career paths of their mothers and female teachers. Direct exposure to such role models increased both their confidence and their understanding of what it would take to set, act on, and achieve their goals.

I wished to become a teacher. Initially Mom did not agree, because she is a teacher, and she knows how hard the profession is. Now she agrees with my choice as she understands how I love teaching. She also explained to me the pros and cons of being a teacher in such a remote area. (14-year-old Nung girl)

With technology (e.g. smart phones, computers, etc.) and internet connectivity, inspirational stories and positive female role models are increasingly accessible. These girls shared how the internet opened up new knowledge for them about jobs like fashion design, hairdressing, and performing. Through film series on platforms like YouTube, girls were exposed to the outside world and developed new ideas on how to enhance their voice and more fully exercise their agency. One 13-year-old



Nung girl, for example, explained that she aspires to be “economically independent” because “I learnt that from a movie.”

» **Girls seek out others for information and guidance on educational and career pathways**

As analyzed above, girls shared that education can be a source of bargaining power for them to exercise agency. However, they also identified the need for reflective spaces, guidance, and information to help them make key decisions about their futures, especially in relation to careers.

I have no idea about my strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, I cannot identify my suitable career. (16-year-old Mong girl)

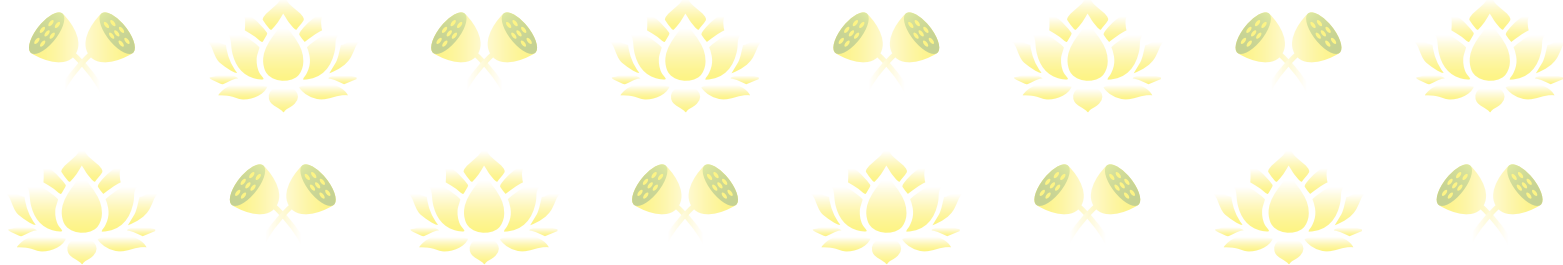
I am considering what career is right for me. My parents are open to any idea. My teacher advised me to go to college, or to a vocational school if I fail college. I don't know. (18-year old Nung girl)

For some girls, family experiences provide these opportunities.

Mom is working for the local television. She travels a lot... She let me decide what I want to do in the future by allowing me to travel and reflect on my experience. (15-year-old Mong girl)

And other girls reported seeking guidance from their teachers. For some of them, “teachers are knowledgeable, and have the ability to give useful advice. Parents cannot do that since their experience is about farming only” (16-year-old Phu La girl). During the school visits in 2024, girls shared how they are also seeking career guidance through social media platforms (and, in turn, passing this along to their friends).

Relationships are key for these girls in strengthening their agency with respect to strategic life decisions. Yet these girls still have inconsistent access to the full range of emotional support, role models, and information and guidance that they need and want. In the community dialogues, for example, several adult participants mentioned that “lack of a sense of purpose” was a major barrier for girls in the community. Girls emphasized the value of close family ties; one girl shared that she would like to make a “rule” about family dinners, highlighting the importance of fostering connections. When navigating challenges, they often turn to parents, teachers, and peers for advice and reassurance.



Strengthening these relationships and ensuring they are accessible and supportive for all girls in Muong Khuong will be key to advancing their agency and aspirations.

4.3 Structural and systemic factors challenge girls' agency

Through participatory activities girls shared their insights, experiences, and observations about the factors that supported or challenged their agency. In this section, we discuss some of the structural and systemic level factors that girls identified or that emerged from their stories and reflections.

The girls spoke of the ways in which their decisions and actions were tied to their family's economic situation and the gendered power dynamics within their households as well as the broader sociocultural contexts of their communities. Most girls in this research, for example, felt that their decisions around whether to pursue higher education, when to get married, and how to earn a living were (or would be) strongly influenced by financial constraints, the values and beliefs of family members, social pressure around early marriage, and gendered social norms around caregiving. Moreover, despite progress, the right to quality education has still not been guaranteed for these girls, or their families.

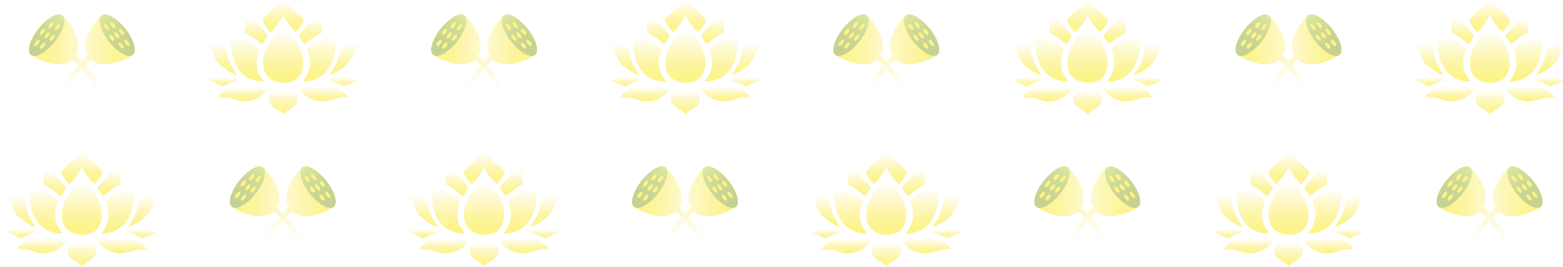
» Poverty and economic constraints

Half of the participating girls reported that family financial constraints were a key barrier to their education. While they recognized the importance of continued education in increasing their exercise of agency, girls living in or near poverty face an uncertain future as this is often beyond their control. Further, a family's struggle with economic instability or poverty can increase the unpaid care burden that falls to girls, as well as the likelihood of early marriage (Bah, 2024; UN Women, 2021a).

The average age of marriage in my village is 18. For me, early marriage is a tragedy because I will be more burdened with housework and childbearing. I want to get married at the age of 26 after graduating from college and securing a stable job. Yet, if I fail college, I think I will have to get married at the age of 23 at the latest. (a 15-year-old Mong girl).

» Gender norms and unequal gendered power relationships

Discriminatory and restrictive gender norms present cross-cutting barriers for girls in Muong Khuong to fully exercise their agency. The girls shared their concerns that the caregiving role/care burdens placed on women will restrict their participation in the labor force and make them rely on their



husbands' finances. Most of them mentioned the social pressure to get married early to "protect the family honor" and to avoid "the difficulty of getting married when they are getting older."

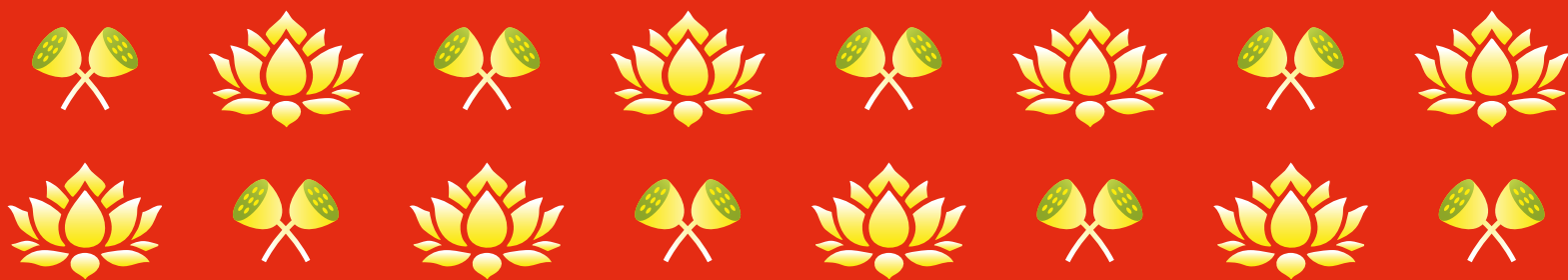
Gender norms have also led to constrained mobility for many of the girls who participated in this study (and the women around them). A 15-year-old Mong girl, for example, shared that her mom had given up on her own dreams to be a teacher because she "could not travel that far." Similarly, a 13-year-old Nung girl shared that she might not be able to study abroad as desired since she would not be allowed to be away from home. These types of limitations can exacerbate gender gaps in education and labor force participation, which in turn, as highlighted above may limit girls' agency ([Chang et al., 2020](#)).

In all cases, fathers were described as the ones who make everyday decisions, ranging from family activities to girls' schooling and careers. As girls shared, they had grown accustomed to the image of caregiving mothers and the realities of gendered power relations in the family. In some cases, girls said they found it challenging to seek support from their mothers who they perceived as conforming to such entrenched social norms; indeed, the in-depth interviews with their mothers were one of the most difficult components of this research, as many girls found their mothers unwilling to talk about their own agency. As the girls reflected, this gender dynamic continues to limit their own sense of agency.

» **Inconsistent access to quality education in ethnic minority communities**

Similar to other mountainous regions of Vietnam, ethnic minority communities in Lao Cai continue to face challenges in accessing quality education, contributing to persistent disparities in literacy rates (UNICEF & Lao Cai People's Committee, 2016).¹⁰ Many girls grow up with limited opportunities to learn in their mother tongue and insufficient support to develop full proficiency in the official language (Nguyen and Tran, 2024). This dual-language gap hinders their ability to express themselves confidently and participate fully in public settings. During data collection for this study, for example, a few girls struggled to follow certain activities and appeared less engaged and confident than their peers. These challenges reflect broader structural barriers to inclusive language education. The impact also extends into the home, where language barriers can restrict communication between girls and their caregivers, limiting opportunities for guidance, support, and open discussions around agency (Gurdal, 2019). As one 15-year-old Mong girl shared, "Mom refused to talk about agency. She said she was illiterate and had no idea about it."

¹⁰ Although ethnic minority children face common barriers to education, these often have gendered impacts. Cultural norms and safety concerns that restrict travel for girls, for example, means that many are unable to make the average daily journey to attend secondary school (9 km) or high school (11 km; Open Development, 2019). Indeed, while the participation rate in 10th grade entrance exams stands at around 69% for ethnic minority boys in Lao Cao, only about 31% of ethnic minority girls take the exam, and even fewer enter high school (UNICEF & Lao Cai People's Committee, 2016).

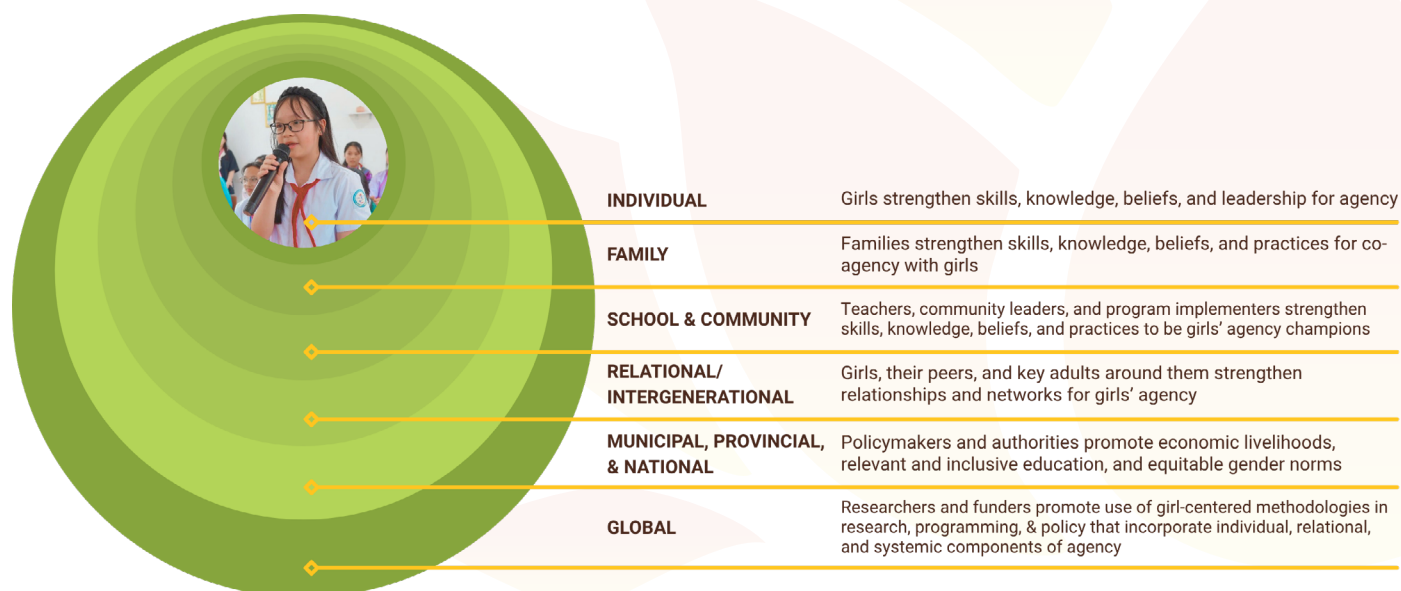


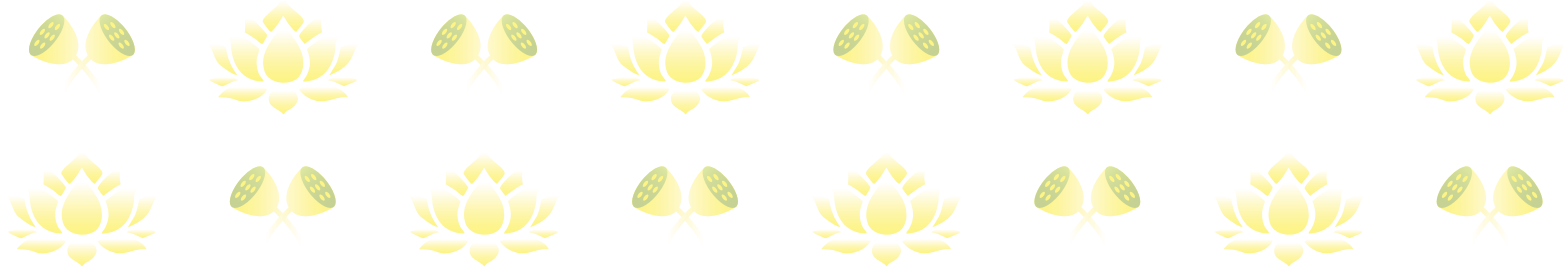
5. MOVING INTO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING GIRLS' AGENCY IN LAO CAI

The girls who participated in this research in Muong Khuong have deepened our understanding not only of what agency means to them and how they experience it; they have also shed critical light on what might be done to promote agency for ethnic minority girls in Lao Cai. While agency was generally understood at the individual level as *tính tự chủ*, or decisionmaking autonomy, they also described the ways in which this autonomy is shared, negotiated, and sometimes constrained by “co-agents” who, like girls, are embedded within systems and structures that present challenges (and also opportunities) for girls. In short, agency is at once individual, relational, and systemic.

It is key that efforts to promote girls' agency in Lao Cai (and in other similar contexts), take an (eco) systemic approach, working with girls, their peers, and the key adults around them to strengthen their shared ability to be “freedom travelers,” co-constructing aspirations, making expansive decisions, and taking strategic action in their lives and the lives of their communities (see Figure 4). This approach also highlights the urgent need to transform systems around girls and their communities by taking action to address poverty and discriminatory gender norms and ensure relevant and inclusive education for all.

Figure 4. An (eco)systemic approach to strengthening girls' agency in Lao Cai





Funders and researchers also form part of the ecosystem around girls and have a key role to play in ensuring that girls and their communities have what they need to take action. Researchers should continue to implement and expand upon participatory, girl-centered approaches that engage young people as co-creators of knowledge and co-developers of context-relevant solutions. Funders should direct resources towards the promotion of work on agency that centers girls as the drivers of change and incorporates the relational and systemic components of agency so that girls are not left to carry the burden of exclusionary systems on their own. Indeed, ongoing research and funding will be essential for the effective implementation of the priority action areas outlined below.

5.1 Priority action areas for girls' agency in Lao Cai

Through our conversations with the girls as well as in the community dialogues, we have identified five action areas with corresponding priority next steps that seek to strengthen the (eco)system of policies, practices, relationships and mindsets for girls' agency in Lao Cai.

» Action area 1: Adolescent girls strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs for agency.

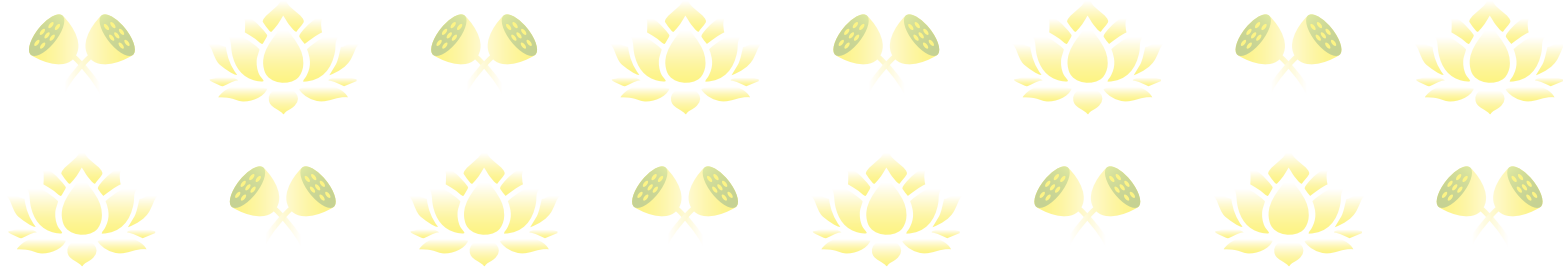
At the individual level, girls need opportunities that support them in recognizing, developing, and acting upon their agency—both through honing their “power within” and through engaging with the world around them.

Priority actions:

- Create safe and reflective spaces for girls to:
 - » Connect, learn with and from one another, share challenges, receive peer support and encouragement, and collaborate to address shared concerns.
 - » Participate in structured activities that develop self-awareness, confidence, self-esteem, and leadership skills.
 - » Reflect on personal and collective experiences to enhance resilience in the face of uncertainty, social pressures and risks.

Note: Project 8's “Change Champions Clubs” or similar models could be leveraged for this purpose, with updated curriculum and facilitator training.¹¹ In the community dialogues held in Muong Khuong in March of 2024, local implementers of Project 8 expressed excitement about the possibility of integrating an agency perspective into this existing project.

¹¹ A central component of Project 8, “Change Champions Clubs,” work with adolescent ethnic minority girls in both school and community settings. These clubs seek to convene girls in safe spaces where they engage in self-facilitated activities to build awareness and knowledge around critical topics such as gender-based violence, early marriage, and gender equality. Through open dialogue and interactive learning, the clubs aim to equip girls with essential life skills to prevent and respond to violence and abuse, while fostering self-confidence, resilience, and a stronger understanding of their rights and potential.



- Provide opportunities both within and outside of schools for career guidance and employability skills training to prepare girls for pursuing decent employment and achieving economic independence.
- Provide leadership opportunities for girls within and outside of schools, including community initiatives and youth-led organizations to nurture girls' confidence, decisionmaking abilities, and sense of purpose, while engaging them to actively contribute to and influence their communities.
- Center youth voice and agency in community dialogues and decisionmaking processes.

» **Action area 2: Adolescent girls strengthen their relationships and networks for girls' agency.**

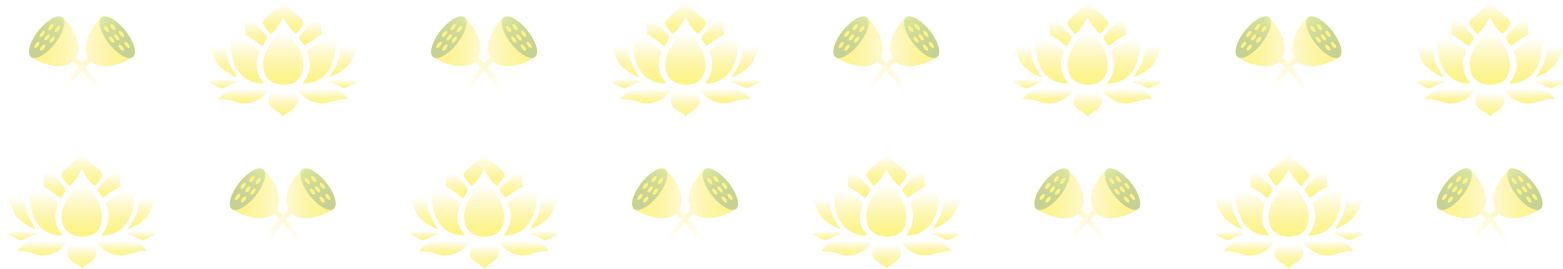
Supportive relationships and networks are critical to girls' agency, particularly within family, peer groups, and communities. Strengthened relationships and expanded networks can foster girls' agency by reducing social isolation and challenging restrictive norms.

Priority actions:

- Make visible the stories of and ensure access to positive role models—especially other girls and women—through community dialogues and storytelling, mentoring programs, and social and traditional media. Showcasing real-life stories of girls and women who have overcome challenges and demonstrated leadership in culturally relevant ways can foster inspiration, strengthen girls' beliefs in their own potential, and help them see beyond traditional limitations.
- Engage girls and their mothers in intergenerational opportunities such as joint programs that promote proficiency in both mother tongue and Vietnamese language, family-based economic development initiatives to build financial literacy and vocational skills, and mother-daughter dialogues to facilitate joint reflection on aspirations.
- Engage male relatives (fathers and grandfathers, uncles, brothers and cousins) as agency allies/champions for and with girls. This could be achieved through community dialogues or workshops on positive masculinity and shared caregiving, father-daughter engagement activities that foster mutual support and understanding, and community storytelling efforts that showcase male role models advocating for girls' education, safety, and leadership.

» **Action area 3: Families strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs to serve as co-agents with girls.**

Families play a pivotal role, not only as supporters but as co-agents in fostering girls' agency. They need opportunities and tools that will support them in creating nurturing environments where girls can grow, lead, and thrive.



Priority actions:

- Instead of positioning girls' agency and wellbeing as a "girls-only" issue, foster inclusive spaces where men and boys are encouraged to critically examine gender norms, recognize the value of shared agency, and strengthen skills, practices, and mindsets to promote gender equity.
- Strengthen parental capacity to support adolescent girls by providing tailored training programs that equip parents with effective communication skills and knowledge on adolescent development, including mental health and active listening. These programs should help parents better understand the unique challenges girls face and support them in exploring their interests and making informed decisions.
- Leverage community events to socialize the role of families in girls' agency. Family-friendly spaces such as festivals and cultural celebrations can serve as strategic platforms to promote messages of shared agency, acknowledge the role of supportive families, and build collective community commitment to advancing girls' agency and opportunities.

» **Action area 4: Teachers, community leaders, and program implementers strengthen their skills, knowledge and beliefs and have access to relevant tools to serve as champions of girls' agency.**

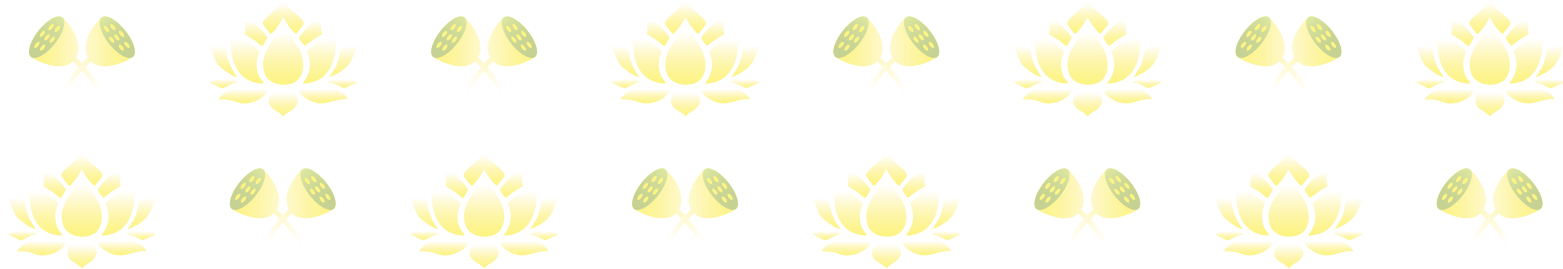
Schools and community programs are key spaces for the development and exercise of agency. With strengthened skills, transformed mindsets, and relevant tools, educators, local leaders, and program facilitators can more effectively recognize, encourage, and actively engage girls' agency.

Priority actions:

- Develop localized guidelines and toolkits for teaching and facilitation that promote girls' agency.
- Provide professional development opportunities with a focus on gender responsive and inclusive practices that support the development and exercise of agency in students/young people.
- Ensure teachers and program facilitators have adequate training in career guidance and mentoring.

» **Action area 5: National and local policy makers work with girls and their communities to promote economic livelihoods, relevant and inclusive education, and equitable gender norms.**

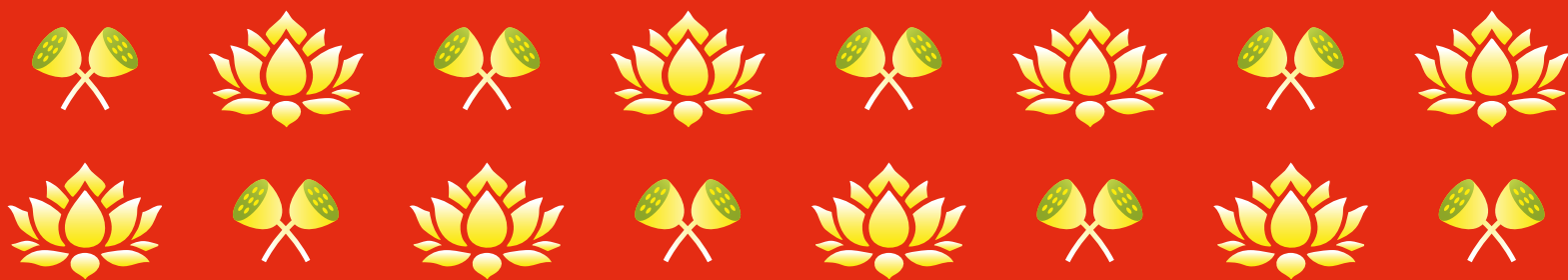
There is an urgent need to address the systemic factors that limit the agency of girls and their families and communities. A transformative policy approach must ensure that adolescent girls' voices, needs and priorities are central to policy planning, implementation, and evaluation.



Priority actions:

- Promote sustained, community-driven economic development in the region, especially for girls and women. This may include entrepreneurship training and capacity-building in green economy skills to foster inclusive and resilient local growth.
- Expand economic supports for girls and their families, particularly for continued education. This may include need-based scholarships, transportation and boarding allowances for girls in remote areas, and targeted incentives to encourage inclusive enrollment and retention in technical and vocational education (TVET) and STEM programs (e.g. tuition waivers for girls enrolling in such programs), career counseling to introduce non-traditional fields, and mentorship programs pairing girls with female professionals in technical careers.
- Develop strategies with girls and their communities to change inequitable gender norms. This may involve supporting community-led campaigns that address issues such as early marriage and restriction on girls' mobility.
- Provide appropriate public supports to remove the burden of unpaid care from girls and women. This may include investing in rural infrastructure and expanding access to community childcare elder care services, enabling girls to continue their education and pursue employment without being limited by caregiving responsibilities.
- Work with girls and their communities to develop a strategy that ensures access to relevant, quality education for all young people in ethnic minority communities, particularly at the secondary and upper secondary levels.



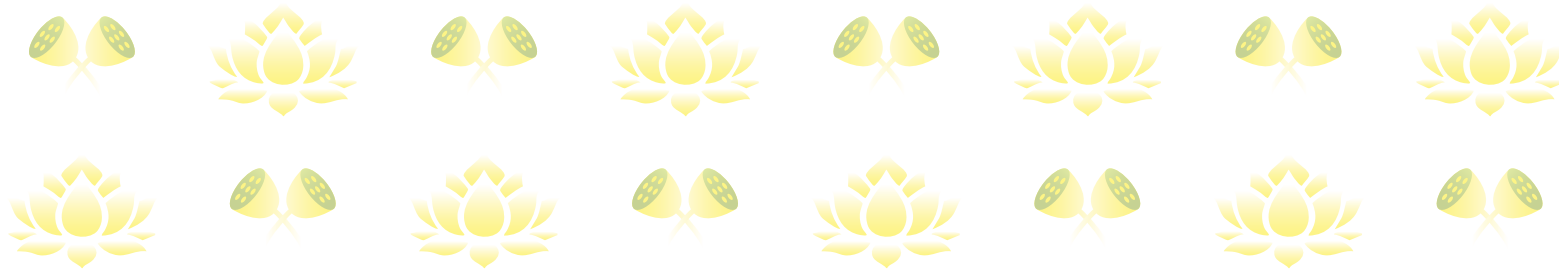


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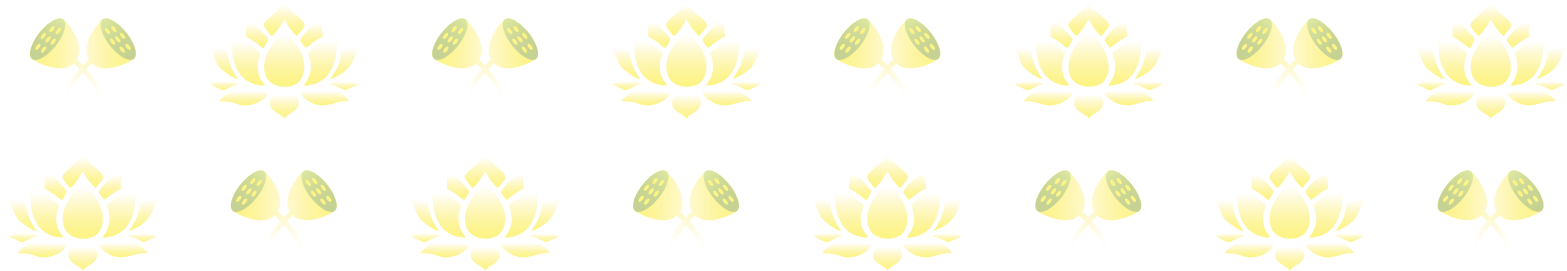
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APPENDIX A. COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

From March 25 to 29, LAAGA members engaged with community, district, school, provincial, national and international actors in Vietnam in a series of events co-hosted by the Vietnam Women's Union, the Vietnam Women's Academy and the Center for Universal Education at Brookings. LAAGA members included Vietnam case lead, Tran Thi Ngoc Tran, as well as Sumbal Naveed (Pakistan), Nasrin Siddiqi (Bangladesh), and Jennifer O'Donoghue (United States). Participants varied from ethnic minority girls aged 10-18, teachers and school directors, community leaders and local media to municipal and provincial authorities, academics, and representatives of international and multilateral institutions (see Table A.1).

Table A.1. Community dialogues and meetings in Vietnam, March 2024

DATE	LOCATION	ACTIVITIES	PARTICIPANTS
March 25, 2024 9 am to 1:30 pm	Muong Khuong	Case presentation, panel conversation, community dialogue, cultural performances, and community lunch.	45 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vice Chair, Muong Khuong People's Committee • Chairwoman Muong Khuong Women's Union • Vice Dean, Vietnam Women's Academy • Reporter, Muong Khuong Television • Teachers and school directors from secondary and high schools in Muong Khuong • Ethnic minority girls aged 10-18 • Families of girls • LAAGA members
March 25, 2024 1:30 to 3:30 pm	Muong Khuong	School visit Agency dialogue with girls	20 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 ethnic minority girls, grade 9 • LAAGA members • Vietnam Women's Academy Staff
March 26, 2024 10-11:30 am / 2-3:30 pm	Hanoi	Meetings at Irish Embassy & UN Women offices	12 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAAGA members • Irish Embassy/Irish Aid: Deputy Head of Mission, staff leading work in education and with ethnic minority communities (5) • UN Women Head of Office & Gender Program Manager • Vice Dean, Vietnam Women's Academy



DATE	LOCATION	ACTIVITIES	PARTICIPANTS
March 29, 2024 9:30 am -1 pm	Can Tho	Case presentation, community dialogue, cultural performances, and lunch with leadership.	24 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAAGA members • Vietnam Women's Union staff from across the province • Vietnam Women's Union leadership group • Vice Dean, Vietnam Women's Academy
March 29, 2024 1:30 to 3:30 pm	Can Tho	School visit Agency dialogue with girls	18 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 ethnic minority girls, grade 9 • LAAGA members • Vice Dean, Vietnam Women's Academy • Vietnam Women's Union Staff

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A NOTE ON THE USE OF PHOTOS

In keeping with LAAGA's ethical standards, girls were invited to participate in the public sharing of this research in ways that felt comfortable to them. Photos used in this brief reflect girls' interest and assent (as well as consent of their guardians) to be part of the sharing of the lessons on girls' agency they have co-constructed.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research was developed as part of the collaborative work of the Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA). Using participatory, girl-centered methodologies developed collectively, from 2023 to 2025, LAAGA has conducted research in highly marginalized communities in Bangladesh, Jamaica, Nigeria, Pakistan, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and the Karamoja region along the Kenya/Uganda border. Together, we are exploring how adolescent girls understand and exercise agency in their lives and the social, cultural, environmental, and economic policies, practices, and relationships that support or constrain that. This paper presents findings from and recommendations for Vietnam.

ABOUT LAAGA

The Learning and Action Alliance for Girls' Agency (LAAGA) is a community of practice composed of 25 leaders in gender and education, working in 15 countries across Africa, America, Asia, and the Middle East. LAAGA has grown out of and deepened the collaboration between alumni of the [Echidna Global Scholars Program](#) and the [Center for Universal Education](#) at the Brookings Institution. Guided by a vision of a world that values the knowledge and dignity of girls and young women, listens to their voices, and supports them in taking action to shape their own lives and those of their communities, LAAGA is working to co-create ideas and understandings on the development and exercise of girls' agency across diverse contexts. We are committed to translating these ideas and understandings into action, working alongside girls, their families and communities, educators, practitioners, and policy makers. For more information and to see our latest publications and events, please visit: www.brookings.edu/projects/learning-and-action-alliance-for-girls-agency/.

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