

**Social and Cultural Barriers To Rural Adolescent Ethnic  
Community Girls Accessing Lower Secondary Schools  
in Northern Laos**



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- ChildFund Laos - Vientiane, Nonghet;
- The Gender Development Group (GDG);
- Interns from Plan International and ChildFund Laos;
- Community members in villages who gave their time and views so generously.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

This research project was the first qualitative research activity the Plan International and ChildFund interns, and the District Education Department staff had participated in. The project was led by a qualitative researcher with 16 years experience working in Myanmar, Vietnam and Australia and was well supported by three experienced Lao researchers from the Gender Development Group who supervised teams in the field. The research team members who had not conducted research before participated in a 5-day training program and piloting activities with the team leaders. They demonstrated their new skills before beginning live fieldwork and were supervised closely throughout the project. After fieldwork all members of the research teams participated in a 5-day analysis workshop in Vientiane where teams were trained in how to interpret the information they had collected. They listened again to recordings of their interviews and identified quotations from respondents that demonstrated key findings. The limitation of this capacity-building aspect to the project was that some respondents' answers were not probed as fully as would be valuable. The teams were successful at obtaining a great deal of information relevant to the objectives and good understandings of issues and views were achieved. Where respondents' views were not completely clear they have not been reported.

It was difficult to recruit female interviewers from the Hmong communities in Nonghet District and the two interns who did work on the project were not present in Huay Xai for training. They were trained in the field by their supervisor and then closely supervised during fieldwork. The approach to interviewing adopted by male members of the Hmong research team was less participatory than the approaches taught and adopted by other members of the three research teams.

Two members of the Meung District research team had received only a few years of primary school education and their Lao language written skills were limited. To overcome the hurdles these team members faced in reading discussion guides the team supervisor and the other two members of their

team working closely with them to go through discussion guides orally. Additional time in training and supervision in the field was required to assist these team members who demonstrated great perseverance and enthusiasm to complete their work. They were an asset to the Meung District research team because, being from the areas studied and peers of the girls being researched, they were able to help explain the research activities to villagers and encourage them to participate. The Lahu communities studied in the Meung District tended to be shy to speak to the research teams. Even community leaders in two villages were initially hesitant to participate. Research teams were assisted by Plan staff from the Meung District office to make villagers feel more comfortable with the research activity and research teams took more time to conduct the research in these locations. Only people who felt comfortable to participate did and the teams achieved most of the interviews they had planned to conduct.

The research was conducted during the wet season when schools were closed and villagers were busy with rice cultivation. Because some teachers in the villages come from outside the area to teach in the ethnic communities these teachers were absent as they had returned to their hometowns after schools closed. As a result the teams were able to interview fewer teachers than was intended. Research teams went to the villages knowing they may have to go and find respondents in the rice fields where they were busy with rice planting and weeding. However, the support of District Education Bureau and local Plan and ChildFund offices, meant that community leaders knew when research teams were arriving and they asked villagers to stay back in the villages until they had met the research teams. This allowed teams to select the respondents and make arrangements to interview them with minimal disruption to their farming activities. These arrangements did sometimes make privacy difficult to achieve because villagers were interested to observe the research activities.

Communities were aware that Plan International and ChildFund Laos were supporting the research activities and an impact of this was that initially some

villagers felt motivated to try and give answers they thought would be “correct” in the eyes of the two organisations conducting programs in their areas that benefit communities. This bias was anticipated and ways to deal with it were covered with research teams in training. Interviewers were trained to listen to all responses, to remind respondents that there were no right or wrong answers and to be prepared to ask questions in different ways so the reality of villagers’ experiences and views were expressed.

In Nonghet District the research team was unable to find any girls who had married and left school because these girls had left the villages being studied to go and live with their husbands’ families elsewhere. Research teams asked to speak to girls who had come to live in the villages from other locations after marriage but community leaders said they were reluctant to ask their families for permission for the girls to participate.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

There are significant social and cultural barriers to adolescent girls living in remote Lahu, Khmu and Hmong communities participating in secondary education. In some areas, particularly the Lahu communities studied in Bokeo Province, the barriers that exist mean many girls do not complete even their primary school education.

The practice of marrying at an early age, between 14 and 16 years, is common in these communities and is a major barrier to girls gaining a secondary education. Married girls are not accepted at schools. It is common in each of the cultures studied for girls to feel mature enough for marriage at this age and finding a marriage partner becomes a focus of their lives at this time. In the Lahu communities studied many girls at this age have only attended two or three years of primary school by the time they start thinking about marriage. Most parents, following their cultural traditions and practices, encourage their girls to marry during their teenage years.

Marriage dowries paid to girls' parents and the practice of newly married couples going to live with the boys' family is another barrier to girls' education opportunities because priority is then often given to the education of boys, who will stay in the family home, rather than girls who are likely to leave to live with another family during her teenage years.

Other social and cultural barriers to girls completing their education are:

- families' reliance on children to assist with farming, household and childcare tasks
- children's duty to assist their parents
- parent's perceptions of the value of education for girls is low and they therefore tend not to encourage their children in relation to education
- teaching in Lao language makes school daunting and difficult for students
- parents and children have difficulty communicating with teachers because they often do not share a common language

- gender inequalities mean boys are more likely than girls to receive support to complete their education

Family's reliance on children to assist with farming, household and particularly childcare tasks and children's duty to assist parents is a barrier to school attendance in primary school as well as secondary school. Research teams in the Lahu communities in Meung District consistently heard from respondents that many girls did not start attending primary school until they were 10 or 11 years old because until then they were helping their parents care for younger siblings. The impact of this on the possibility of these girls finishing primary school or continuing on to secondary school is great as the girls feel too old for school when they reach puberty and begin considering marriage. Continuing their education is unlikely for many and they leave school unable to read or write. In the Lahu communities studied, authorities are not fining parents who do not send their children to school when they are six years of age, as they are in villages studied in Nonghet District of Xieng Khoang Province. The girls from Hmong families studied in these villages were far more likely to have completed a primary school education by the time they had married than the girls in the Meung District, simply because they had started school at an earlier age.

In the Khmu villages studied, girls' duty to assist parents was also found to be a considerable barrier to school attendance. Girls have more responsibility than boys do to help parents at home, in the fields and with caring for younger children. If a family has to choose which of their children will stay at school for economic or labour reasons priority will usually be given to a boy. The Khmu villages in Pak Tha District were the only research locations where research teams met girls who had completed secondary school. It was clear from their stories that the opportunity to study at secondary school is a fragile chance for girls. It takes commitment and perseverance from girls to make attending secondary school a reality. They have to overcome the financial and physical access barriers that exist and need to convince their parents they will be safe in a town away from home. Even when they have managed to attend

secondary school the opportunity can quickly disappear if circumstances change at home. If a parent becomes ill or a sibling leaves home to marry the girl at school may be called home and her duty to help her family will be stronger than the value perceived in completing an education. Once back home it is likely she will soon marry and assume traditional roles. It is uncommon for girls in these situations to resume their education at a later date although girls do try to do so. Girls who described this situation were sad at their loss of educational opportunity and tended to be unsupported by their family and community in their dreams and efforts to resume their education. These girls may attain leadership positions in their villages as they are more able than others in the village to communicate with district authorities in Lao language.

Parents are the key decision makers about girls' education. There is evidence that girls also can influence decisions to continue their education, and this is more so in the Khmu and Lahu communities than in the Hmong communities. There are parents, particularly mothers in Bokeo's Lahu and Khmu communities, who are advising their daughters to marry later and encouraging them to pursue studies. They want their daughters to have the chance to avoid subsistence living, obtain employment and for them "to have a better life than I have". However, there are still many parents in these communities who do not encourage their girls to attain primary or secondary education.

A very significant barrier to girls' participation in education is the low perceived value of education for girls living in these remote communities where traditional ways of life are practiced. Marriage is considered more important to a girl's future than education. One of the more widely perceived values of education is that students learn Lao language and can then communicate with district authorities and take part in village leadership. In many villages only men are considered for these roles simply because they are the only people who have developed any Lao language skills. In many cases these men have learnt to speak Lao not through attending school, but because they have been given the opportunity to attend meetings and listen to Lao being spoken when

district authorities visit. Although women's representation in leadership positions is low in the three ethnic communities studied it is accepted that women could hold leadership positions if they had the Lao language skills and the necessary personal attributes.

## **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Improving Perceptions Of The Value Of Education**

Improving communities' perceptions of the value of education overall, and for girls in particular, is key to improving girls' participation rates in school. Parents are the key decision makers and influence greatly the level of opportunity a girl can have to focus on her education. In the communities studied many of the parents have not received much formal education and do not speak the Lao language used in schools. Despite this there are parents, particularly mothers, who want a better life for their daughters and are encouraging their children to marry later and study longer.

Advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits of education and to change community perceptions about the value of girls' education have been used effectively in many countries of the world (Kane, 2004).

Education campaigns delivered to parents via community leadership promoting the benefits to the community, families and children of education could capitalise on these feelings among parents. Opportunities for convincing communities of the value of secondary school education for their children include:

- Stronger village leadership and greater ability to liaise with district authorities because more people in the village could communicate in Lao language.
- The possibility of more trained teachers and health care workers in villages.
- Development of economic opportunities for villages. In each of the communities studied respondents spoke about emerging opportunities for them to grow cash crops such as rubber, vegetables and tea. Education could equip community members with skills they could use to better evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of these opportunities and strengthen their position to negotiate for the best land use and economic outcomes for villages.
- A better life for their children and future generations.

It is important that consistent messages from government and development partners are relayed to communities in advocacy communication activities.

It is also recommended that communication materials prepared be tested with the target ethnic communities to ensure language and content are relevant and understood.

### **Additional Training**

Life Skills training in school and communities may help prepare young people for the choices they will make at puberty regarding marriage, education and starting families.

### **Positive Role Models**

Because there are few girls in these communities who have completed secondary education there are few positive role models in villages of girls whose lives have benefited from having finished their education before marrying.

It is recommended that communication materials that are engaging and easy for communities to understand could be developed that tell the stories of girls in other places whose lives have benefited from having gained higher levels of education. These stories could also show how the girls' family and community came to benefit from her education.

Despite the social and cultural barriers that exist there are teachers, parents of adolescent girls and adolescent girls themselves who demonstrate they have the desire, will and potentially the agency to make secondary education a reality in girls' lives. There are significant barriers, but they are not insurmountable, and as has been demonstrated in African and Asian communities, with support girls' and their communities can take responsibility for ensuring girls' (and boys') rights to education are protected as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Miske Witt and Associates, 2007).

### **Bi-Lingual Teachers**

Teachers could also be engaged to promote education within communities, but for this to occur a language barrier needs to be overcome in many places where Lao-speaking teachers do not share a common language with parents and students.

Addressing the difficulties teachers and students have in communicating with each other would greatly assist efforts to improving the perceptions of the value of education and would significantly improve education delivery. Students would feel better able to study and parents would see their children getting more from school through their improved participation in class than is currently the case. Some parents say their daughters are reluctant to talk to teachers and therefore do not learn at school. This becomes a justification for parents removing their daughters from school. Eventually, greater participation in education may result in more trained bi-lingual teachers who can teach Lao language in primary school and communicate in the local language.

Similar issues have been identified among ethnic communities, including the Hmong, in Vietnam (Miske, 2008) where it was recommended that teachers who spoke the dominant language to be trained in teaching the language to second language learners and that recruiting teachers from local ethnic groups be adopted as a long-term strategy.

It is recommended that efforts be considered to recruit people from ethnic communities to train as teachers. These efforts could involve scholarships and incentives for trained teachers to return to their own ethnic communities to teach. It would greatly assist students and teachers for them to share a language as they go through the stages of Lao language teaching in the classroom.

### **Engage Teachers With Parents**

Interactions between teachers and parents in the ethnic communities studied tended to be limited, perhaps due to language barriers. It is recommended that relationships between parents and teachers be fostered so that parents can develop clearer understandings of their children's abilities and progress at school and will grow their awareness of the benefits of education for their children.

One way of doing this may be to introduce Lao language literacy classes for adults. This could deliver many benefits to parents, their children and communities, including stronger parent/teacher relationships, empowering of parents, reinforcement of messages about education value, strengthening participation in village leadership and helping parents to support their children's learning.

### **Improving Access To Pre-School & Beginning To Teach Lao Language**

Teachers who participated in the research and had been exposed to pre-schools said that teaching Lao language sounds and letters in pre-schools assists them in engaging students in primary school and accelerates their ability to teach Lao and then have a common language with students.

For parents who have been convinced of the value of education to be able to support and encourage their children to attend school they need support in caring for younger children while they are farming. This appears to be one of the key roles that families rely on girls for and that keeps girls from the classroom. Perhaps communities convinced of the benefits of education could develop communal solutions for the childcare most, if not all, farming families need. Childcare cooperatives could provide adult-supervised care for young children allowing pre-school age children to go to school and school-aged children to attend school.

### **Enforcing The School Starting Age With Incentives**

The enforcement of the school starting age in Nonghet District appears to have had a positive effect on the primary school completion rates of girls. Families with children over six years of age in this district who do not send their children to school are fined. Community leaders in Meung District are reluctant to enforce the school starting age by fining families because even a small fine is a burden on people who are living by subsistence agriculture and earning little cash. Perhaps an incentive system could be developed where families who do send their children to school from six years of age receive a benefit, such as a school completion bonus. Providing meals for students at schools is another incentive-based program that has been implemented with success in some countries.

### **Allow Married People To Participate In Education**

The cultural practice of early marriage is perhaps the barrier that is hardest to change, particularly when the perceived value of education is low and there is little growth in economic opportunities in villages, because boys, girls and their families feel marriage is an appropriate and desirable step to take in the teenage years. If girls and boys could continue their education during their early years of marriage participation rates would rise, as there is desire and willingness among married teenagers to continue their studies. Unmarried teenagers say they drop out of school because their peers have left to marry and farm and they are lonely at school. If married teenagers could study it may help the whole age cohort continue to attend school.

Informal education programs currently being run in some areas targeting married students could be considered for expansion into ethnic communities where early marriage is the norm. Such flexible delivery methods of education are recommended for consideration.

It is recommended that Life Skills Education and education programs in reproductive health be considered in communities and schools. Improving knowledge of, and access to birth spacing, may be useful for young married

couples who could delay starting their families until completing their education, also delivering better maternal and infant health outcomes for communities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Plan International and ChildFund Laos collaborated to conduct research investigating the social and cultural barriers to adolescent girls living in rural ethnic communities in Northern Lao accessing lower secondary education.

Plan International has worked in Pha Oudom, Meung and Pak Tha Districts of Bokeo Province since 2008, predominantly in the field of education. These are the “poorest” or “poor” districts, and are on the Ministry of Education’s list of 56 priority districts. The districts are mountainous and most of the population belongs to a variety of ethnic groups. The position of women and girls varies from group to group, but generally women and girls have less power and status.

ChildFund Laos is the representative office of ChildFund Australia in Lao and has worked in Nonghet District of Xieng Khoang Province since early 2010 focusing on improving access to quality pre-primary and primary education. Nonghet is an ethnically diverse district with a significant Hmong population. In partner communities, commitments to education for boys and girls are generally strong at a young age, but access for girls in later years is a challenge to improving education levels for all children. Issues of access and extreme poverty are barriers to education in many households.

Although nationally girls’ initial enrolment in primary school has risen to over 90%, 30% of these girls drop out before Grade 5. Nationally over 55% of girls enter lower secondary school and only 30% of them will enrol in upper secondary school. In rural Bokeo and in Xieng Khoang even fewer girls enrol in lower secondary school.

The known barriers to girls accessing secondary school can be divided into physical access barriers, economic barriers and social and cultural barriers. Plan International and ChildFund Laos already conduct activities that address physical and economic barriers and issues of physical access and poverty have been explored in recent research conducted by the Ministry of

Education. Social and cultural values and practices that impact on girls' participation in education have received relatively less attention. Marrying at a young age is one practice thought to impact on girls' participation in lower secondary school. Although Lao's Family Law sets the marriage age at 18 years it is believed that many or most girls in rural ethnic communities marry during adolescence. It was therefore decided that this research study on social and cultural barriers to girls' participation in education examine the linkages between early marriage and girls' secondary school attendance as well as explore the values and practices that influence decision making on girls' education.

It is intended that the research will be used by Plan International and ChildFund Laos to improve efforts in Bokeo and Xieng Khoang to meeting girls' rights to education, equality and protection from abuse. The research is also intended to contribute to the efforts of the Ministry of Education and other development partners working towards the goals of the Education Sector Development Framework, the National Policy on Inclusive Education and the Schools of Quality Policy. It is hoped that government and other agencies working in the fields of reproductive health, protection and on girls' and women's' rights may also find insights and information gathered during the research useful.

## RESEARCH

## OBJECTIVES

The research was designed to meet the following objectives:

- To identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls to discontinue their education after primary school (target age group 12-16). This included specific exploration of marriage practices.
- To identify key decision makers and analyse the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- To identify cases of 'positive deviance', where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- To propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was applied to meet the objectives of the research. The research was conducted in Bokeo and Xieng Khoang Provinces of Lao in three districts where Plan International and ChildFund conduct programs designed to improve participation in education. The research locations were:

Bokeo Province		Xieng Khoang Province
Meung District	Pak Tha District	Nonghet District
Poung Pha village Houa Nam Kha village Torlae village	Houay Sat village Houay How village Houay Souak village	Paka village Phakhae Neua village Khorthong village

### Baseline Data Research Villages

Villages	House holds	Population		2-11 year olds		Ethnic Group	km from district centre (km)	Access
	Total	Total	Female	Total	Female			
<b>Meung District Villages</b>								
Toleo	37	170	78	53	21	Lahu	6	Car, mbike
Huanamkha	129	1089	527	304	134	Lahu	17	Car, mbike
Poungpha	64	491	167	103	48	Lahu	12	Car, mbike
<b>Pak Tha Villages</b>								
Houay Soak	71	489	236	158	70	Khamu	10	Car, mbike boat
Houay Saed	144	1034	492	279	152	Khamu	50	Boat
Houay How	32	209	110	69	34	Khamu	48	Boat
<b>Xieng Khoang Villages</b>								
Paka	72	463	224	161	82	Hmong	7	Any
Khorthong	40	281	129	95	44	Hmong	33	Any
Phakhae Neua	43	295	157	101	61	Hmong	30	Any

In each of the nine villages Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with girls at school (12-16 years) and with girls who had left school and married (12-16 years). These two groups of girls were researched independently of each other so the participants in the groups were homogenous in terms of their school attendance and marital status. In-Depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted in each village with community leaders, mothers and fathers of girls at school and girls who had left school and FGD with teachers. It was intended that parents be interviewed individually so they would feel comfortable to discuss their own views freely. However, it was not always possible to interview people individually because of time and because of the number of people who had stayed in the village from the rice fields to participate and wanted to join the discussion. Teachers were interviewed individually rather than in a group situation because there were few teachers available to interview due to school holidays and teachers being absent from the villages where they worked. Many teachers were either at teacher training in another province or were back in their own home villages working in rice fields.

Fieldwork was conducted between July 19 and 30, 2011.

The following tables detail the numbers of respondents interviewed at each location.

	Meung District – Lahu ethnicity			
	Poung Pha	Houa Nam Kha	Torlae	TOTAL
<b>Girls at school</b>	4	4	6	<b>14</b>
<b>Girls left school &amp; married</b>	4	3	3	<b>10</b>
<b>Girls completed secondary school</b>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Mothers of girls at school</b>	9	2	3	<b>14</b>
<b>Mothers of girls left school</b>	3	2	3	<b>8</b>
<b>Fathers of girls at school</b>	7	2	3	<b>12</b>
<b>Father of girls left school</b>	3	2	3	<b>8</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	0	2	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Community leaders</b>	3	4	3	<b>10</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>78</b>

No girls who had completed secondary schools were identified in the Meung District villages studied. Teachers in Poung Pha and Torlae (Meung District) and Houay Set and Houay How (Pak Tha District) were not present at the time of fieldwork as they had returned to their hometowns during the school holidays.

	Pak Tha District – Khmu ethnicity			
	Houay Set	Houay How	Houay Souak	TOTAL
<b>Girls at school</b>	12	4	7	<b>23</b>
<b>Girls left school &amp; married</b>	2	5	6	<b>13</b>
<b>Girls completed secondary school</b>	1	0	2	<b>3</b>
<b>Mothers of girls at school</b>	2	2	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Mothers of girls left school</b>	2	2	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Fathers of girls at school</b>	2	2	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Father of girls left school</b>	2	2	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	0	0	2	<b>2</b>
<b>Community leaders</b>	3	1	3	<b>7</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>68</b>

	Nonghet District – Hmong ethnicity			
	Paka	Phakke Neu	Khorthong	TOTAL
<b>Girls at school</b>	4	3	4	<b>11</b>
<b>Girls left school &amp; married</b>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Girls completed secondary school</b>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Mothers of girls at school</b>	3	3	3	<b>9</b>
<b>Mothers of girls left school</b>	4	4	4	<b>12</b>
<b>Fathers of girls at school</b>	4	4	4	<b>12</b>
<b>Father of girls left school</b>	2	1	1	<b>4</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Community leaders</b>	1	1	1	<b>3</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>53</b>

The research teams did not identify any girls who had completed secondary school in the three villages visited during fieldwork in Nonghet District. The girls from the villages who had left school and married were now living in their husband's villages and so were unavailable to interview. Community leaders did not allow the research teams to locate and interview girls who come to live in the villages with their husbands after having left school to marry. Research teams were told these girls were busy with rice production and did not have the permission of their husband's and their in-laws to participate.

### **Respondent Recruitment**

District authorities and village leaders were informed of the research activities before research teams traveled to the districts and village leaders informed community members of the days the research would be conducted so that villagers were available for interviews. The fieldwork was conducted during the wet season when schools were closed and villagers were busy in rice fields. In most cases village leaders had asked parents, teachers and girls to wait in the village on the first day of the research activities to meet the team before attending the rice fields. On arriving in the research locations the research teams identified girls, parents and community leaders to participate in the research according to the recruitment criteria. They then arranged to

conduct interviews and group discussions over two to three days with as little disruption to villagers' work in the rice fields as possible.

Researchers attempted to interview respondents in village locations where there was as much privacy as possible. It was not always possible to achieve privacy as other children and adults were curious about the research activities.

### **Research Instruments**

Detailed discussion guides were prepared for each respondent group (Annex 1) and these were translated into Lao language. During the 5-day training held in Houay Xai in Bokeo Province these discussion guides were refined in consultation with supervisors and interviewers. Each research team translated the discussion guides into the other language spoken in their research communities. They then practised interviewing in their local language.

A child-centred approach was be incorporated into discussion guides and interview guides for FGD and IDI with children. The research instruments included exercises, games and alternatives to verbal methods, which moderators could introduce at any time to improve the dynamic among the children and to help children feel more comfortable, so that they could enjoy the activity as well as participate.

The subject matter of the discussions was kept within children's capabilities in terms of knowledge and maturity.

Research instruments were written to ensure that:

- The moderator and the research activity were well introduced to the children;
- Children were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research activity at any time;
- Children were given the opportunity to leave the research at any time;
- Children could develop trust in the moderator and the activity;
- Moderators followed the respondents – the discussion guide was

written with a particular flow through discussion points, but included reminders to moderators to be flexible to respondents' interest levels and to follow their interest when introducing topics and to cover topics in any order that felt natural for respondents;

- Moderators used simple language;
- Moderators noticed and used the same language as the children;
- Children knew they could draw, eat, drink or move around as they wanted to;
- Children felt respected and their opinions and emotions valued;
- Children felt listened to;
- Privacy and confidentiality was respected;
- Children were not lectured, rushed, criticized, dominated, compared or embarrassed.

All respondents were informed and reminded that their participation was voluntary, their responses confidential and that there were no right or wrong answers.

Each interview and discussion was recorded on digital voice recorders. After each interview interviewers completed an analysis framework for each interview or group discussion recording the main findings they recalled. These analysis frameworks were used by research teams in the 5-day analysis workshop held in Vientiane following fieldwork.

### **Research Teams**

Three research teams were formed to conduct the research in the three districts. Each team was led by a representative from the Gender Development Group who had extensive experience conducting research in rural Lao on sensitive topics such as domestic violence. Interns from Plan International who spoke the local languages in Paktha and Meung Districts formed the teams for those districts and Child Fund staff who spoke local languages in Xieng Khoang District formed the team there. An Education Department representative accompanied each team.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Roles**

Early in each discussion each respondent group discussed what the roles were of men, women and girls in the family and community.

In all of the 9 villages studied most people are engaged in subsistence agriculture growing rice, vegetables and raising animals for their own consumption. In each district there were also one or two crops being grown commercially but on a small scale and they did not appear to be particularly lucrative, nor was their a great deal of potential discussed by respondents for improving the commercial viability of these farming activities.

In all villages studied men, women and children had roles to play in agriculture, looking after animals and collecting food and materials from the forest. Respondents described the need for everyone in the family to contribute their labour to help with rice cultivation, animal husbandry, household chores and caring for children.

Respondents consistently described women as having a heavy workload in families and girls are taught from a young age how to do the tasks of a woman. Respondents in all villages said boys had more free time to play than girls did because girls had to help their mothers with household chores.

The roles of men, women and children described by respondents were similar in the three districts. The following table indicates the division of labour as indicated by the majority of respondents. Naturally, the lists are not always exclusive and roles are shared between men and women as families and communities distribute labour in the most practical way for their individual circumstances. Children's roles have not been segregated by gender because boys and girls both perform the tasks their families ask of them depending on the ages and number of children and the families' structure. It was made clear in two of the Hmong villages that there tended to be fewer expectations of boys to contribute to household chores and girls in these communities were

asked from a young age to look after the needs of their brothers at meal times.

<b>Women's Roles</b>	<b>Men's Roles</b>	<b>Children's Roles</b>
<u>Agriculture</u>	<u>Agriculture</u>	Help collect water
Upland rice planting	Upland rice planting	Collect vegetables
Lowland rice planting	Lowland rice planting	Help in rice fields
Rice crop weeding and harvesting	Clearing land for rice cultivation	Help with cooking
Feeding animals	Working in cash crop cultivation (rubber, tea)	Feed animals
Growing vegetables	Hunting for animals in the forest	Collect bamboo shoots from the forest
<u>Income Generation</u>		Help care for younger siblings
Selling animals	<u>Income Generation</u>	
	Collecting items from the forest to sell	Play with friends
<u>House</u>	Working on cash crops	Go to school
Washing clothes		
Cleaning house	<u>House</u>	
Cooking rice	Cutting and carrying firewood	
Collecting water	Cutting wood for building & building	
Making clothes		
<u>Family</u>	<u>Community</u>	
Caring for children	Attending village meetings	
	Organises village ceremonies	

The roles that children, particularly girls, have in caring for younger siblings and helping their parents with household chores and in the rice fields impacts

on girls' participation in school because it is common for parents to prioritise their children's time to these chores rather than go to school.

*"Girls have to help their parents with the house and with farming. Girls have a duty to do as they are told. Boys do not have the same obligation to help. They can get away with being more disobedient and boys are not expected to make the same sacrifices as girls are. This sometimes means the boys go to school for longer than girls."*: Community Leader, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

In each of the three villages in Meung District, parents and girls said children, particularly girls, did not start school until they could be spared from helping their parents with daily family tasks.

*"I went to school for two years. I started going to school when I was 11 years old. I couldn't go earlier because I had to look after my younger brother and sister while my parents were in the rice fields. Once my sister was about eight years old I could go to school."*: Girl, 14, who had left school after two years, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*"No children start school at 6 (years of age). Parents usually take their children to the rice fields until they are 10 or 12 (years of age)."*: Community Leader, Torlae Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*"My children have gone to school, but they still have to work. There is too much to do in our family for the children to only study. They have to help in the rice fields and around the house."*: Father, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*"Children have to help their parents. There is a lot of work to do and children have a duty to help. We are all working towards having enough food. When we are away in the rice fields each day I have to rely on my daughter to look after her brothers and sisters. When my second*

*daughter is old enough to look after her brother then my first daughter can go to school.”: Mother, Houa Nam Kha village, Meung District, Bokeo.*

In Pak Tha villages families also reported girls starting school late because they needed to take care of siblings while parents worked in rice fields.

In each Xieng Khoang village studied, parents, girls, teachers and community leaders expressed views that indicated that girls had less time than their male peers for homework and school because they had more responsibilities for chores around the house.

*“The girls have more to do after school than the boys at home so the boys have more time for homework from school.”: Teacher, Phakkhæ Neua village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.*

*“My son can focus more on school than his sister because I need her to help me after school with the younger children and the cooking. It is different for boys and girls.”: Mother, Khorthong Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.*

### **Decision Making Relating To Education**

In each of the three districts it is clear that parents have the most influence over decisions about whether girls continue their study. There is evidence that in some families girls also influence decisions about their own education, but their success depends on how their parents value education and on their parents' resources and financial ability to send them to school. Girls appear less likely to influence decisions about their education in Xieng Khoang than in Meung and Pak Tha Districts.

Contrary opinions emerged throughout the research in each of the districts studied about who decides whether a girl continues at school or not. Some parents claimed it was their children who decided. In many of these instances

the parents were talking about decisions about whether to continue primary school rather than secondary school. Respondents knew that Plan and ChildFund were involved in the research activities and this may have influenced some of their responses in relation to questions about whether they or their children decided to continue at school. In some instances it seemed that parents did not want to admit they had prevented their children from attending school. For instance, in one of the Pak Tha villages a mother said: *"Girls decide for themselves. My daughter chose to leave school (primary) because she could see that we needed help in the fields"*.

In some cases it was clear that parents had let their children leave primary school when they wanted to and chose to rather than encourage their children to stay at school. Some of the parents interviewed failed to encourage their children to stay at school because they needed their children's help in the rice fields and because they did not place a high value on their children's education.

Some of the girls in Meung and Pak Tha Districts who had left school said their parents had stopped them from continuing their education.

*"I wanted to go to high school to become a teacher but my parents did not support me. I got married after primary school - so did most of my friends."*: Girl, 16, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*"Our parents would line up at the fence of the school where we could see them from the classroom (primary school) and wait for us to come and join them in the fields. So we did, because in our culture it is our duty to follow our parents before we follow our teachers."*: Girl, 13, who had left school, Meung District, Bokeo.

In each of the Meung villages parents described how their children would threaten suicide by eating a toxic plant that grows in the area when they were not getting their way on an issue. However, the examples offered of when

these threats were made related to decisions about marriage partners rather than decisions about continuing education.

*"We let our children do what they like because if we ask them to marry someone and they don't want to then they might eat the poisonous plant and kill themselves. Also if they want to marry someone and we say no then they might say they will do the same thing - suicide. This plant (nguan) grows here all around and the children can easily find it. Some young people here have done this and it scares us, so this is how the children get their own way."*: Mother, Meung District, Bokeo.

Community leaders in Pak Tha and Xieng Khoang indicated that men and not women made decisions about children's education.

*"All decision making belongs to men because women don't have education. Women must listen to the men. The men decide."*: Community Leader, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*"Women don't have education. They cannot make decisions on their own. They have to listen to the men."*: Father, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

However, responses within villages did vary about who in the family made decisions about education indicating that mothers as well as fathers played a role in determining their children's participation in education. It is possible that women, particularly in the Khmu and Lahu cultures have more of a decision-making role than respondents are prepared to admit because culturally the men are presented as the leaders of families and communities.

## **Experiences Of School**

### **Starting Age**

As stated earlier, in many of the villages studied children did not start school at six years of age as prescribed by law. Boys and girls begin school later

when their parents can spare them from household or agricultural jobs. Girls seem more likely to begin school later than boys who tend to be relied on less than girls to care for siblings and perform household jobs.

In the three Xieng Khoang villages studied the six-year-old school starting age appears to be more consistently enforced and practised than in the six Bokeo villages. Community leaders, teachers and parents in the three Xieng Khoang villages said families were fined if their children did not start school at six years of age.

*“The Government started to enforce the school age of six in Nonghet in 2005. The teachers are instructed on how to contact parents and village authorities about who is attending school. The teachers show parents the rules and tell them you must send your child to school or you will be fined 20,000 Kip fine per year and still then you will also have to send your child to school.”*: Community Leader, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

*“The authorities fine parents who don’t send their children to school when they are six. There are a few families who don’t send their young children to school in this village. They say they are too poor to send their children to school, but the village authorities can write a letter saying you are poor and the children can go to school for free. But still, these families keep their children with them helping them in the fields.”*: Teacher, Kothong Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

In Meung District the community leaders said the six-year-old school starting age was not enforced because people could not afford either to pay a fine or spare their children from agricultural and household work.

*“There is a 700,000 Kip fine that parents can be asked to pay if they don’t enroll their children over six in school or if their children do not finish the academic year. But the authorities do not enforce it because*

*people are too poor to pay. Parents need their children in the rice fields. In August, the District Education Offices does try to motivate parents here to send their children to school, but they are not fined if they don't.*”:  
Community Leader, Houa Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

### **Feeling Too Old For School**

Girls in Meung District who had not started going to school until they were between 10 and 12 years of age described feeling “embarrassed” or “shy” to be at school when they were between 13 and 15 years of age. As a result they may only stay at school for a few years. Many marry soon after reaching 14 years of age.

*“I started school when I was 11 (years old) and after a couple of years at school I really felt too old to be there anymore.”*: Girl, 14, Houay Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“When I was about 14 all my friends left school and many of them found husbands and got married. I felt very shy to be the only one at school who was that old so I also left. I have not met my husband yet.”*: Girl, 15, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“My friend and I went to high school together, but then she fell in love and got married so she had to drop out of school. After a short time I stopped going to school also because I had no one I knew to be there with.”*: Girl, 16, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

### **Girls Not Participating At School**

Parents of girls who had left school during primary school or before secondary school spoke about their children’s reluctance or inability to communicate with teachers and make the most of their time at school.

*“My daughters are too shy with the teachers. They are embarrassed to talk to the teachers. They don’t say anything at school.”*: Mother, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“Boys can go to school because they are lazy at housework. The girls are diligent about housework so they can stay home. The girls are lazy at school.”*: Girl who has left school, Houay How village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

### **Quality Of Teachers**

In two of the villages in Meung District parents and students spoke critically about the teachers and some of their teaching methods.

*“The teachers are not qualified or experienced enough to teach our children well. Sometimes they don’t even go to school – if there is a birth in the village the teacher might write a lesson on the board and then leave and go and celebrate with the family who has had the baby. The teacher will drink alcohol with the other people, leaving the children alone in the classroom.”*: Mother, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“The teachers are very strict. They make us run around the classroom if we do something wrong or they hit us as punishment. I didn’t like it.”*: Girl who has left school during primary school, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“At the end of the year the teacher has to finish teaching us the lessons for the year and she hurries through all the last lessons – she says ‘hurry up, hurry up’ and we don’t understand.”*: Girl at primary school, Meung District, Bokeo.

In one Pak Tha village, a teacher when asked how many of her students went on to secondary school said *“I don’t know. I am not responsible for this”*.

In Xieng Khoang, the research team interviewed teachers who were clearly committed to their role as teachers.

*“I became a teacher because I was a country girl and there were few options for me to do any other job other than be a teacher. I didn’t realize how difficult it would be. The salary is very low and I also have to do farming work to survive. After school and during the holidays I go the rice fields. I have a baby also now and I take my baby to the rice fields. I have learned many things about how to teach children and I am grateful for this because I can use these skills to teach my own children. I try and motivate my students at school to learn and try hard at school. Every Friday we have one hour where we just talk. We talk about their futures and their hopes. They ask me questions and I give them advice.”:*  
Teacher, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

### **Difficulties Participating In Lao Language Teaching**

Respondents spoke of how difficult it was for teachers and students to understand each other because of language barriers. In the remote villages studied the teachers tend to come from other parts of Lao and teaching tends to be conducted in Lao language by teachers who often do not speak the local language.

*“I did not feel I was very good at school because I could not speak Lao and the teacher could not speak Lahu so it was hard for me to understand and learn.”:* Girl who has left school during primary school, 15, Torlae Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“The only people who can speak Lao language in our village are the teacher and the village leaders. The men speak Lao to the district authorities when they come to visit our village. Otherwise we only speak Lahu.”:* Mother, Torlae Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“The first time I ever spoke in Lao was when I went to school. The teacher spoke Lao to us. She could speak some Hmong so it made it a bit easier, but most of the time school is in Lao and it is hard.”*: Girl at school, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

*“The majority of my students are ethnic Hmong and I am Lao. I teach in Lao. It is very difficult to communicate.”*: Teacher, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

There were no teachers available to participate in the research in the three Meung villages studied because all teachers at schools in the village came from other districts. At the time of the research, schools were on holidays and the teachers were either at teacher training elsewhere or were back in their home towns helping with rice planting in their home communities.

*“My daughter did not feel capable at school. She did not want to talk at all when she was at school. I don’t think she was learning anything.”*: Mother, Houa Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“The teachers only speak Lao language. The classes are in Lao. The students speak Lahu language with each other. They don’t understand the teachers. So when my daughter wanted to stop school to get married we agreed because she was not learning much at school.”*: Mother, Meung District, Bokeo.

A teacher in Pak Tha District said he wanted children to attend pre-school and learn some Lao letters and sounds before they came to primary school.

*“It is very difficult when they come to school and do not know any Lao. If they could learn some sounds and letters at pre-school it would be a more positive start at school.”*: Teacher, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

The research teams in all districts were comprised of interviewers who came from the areas where the research was being conducted and spoke the local languages of Lahu, Khmu or Hmong. The supervisors of the teams in Bokeo did not speak the local languages and relied on other team members to translate for them when speaking to people in villages.

Another disadvantage of teachers not being able to speak local languages is they do not have the opportunity to speak to parents about their children's education or progress at school.

*"The parents I see are the ones who are waiting at the school gate waving for their children to come and join them in the rice fields. The parents do not seem to mind if the children miss school when they need help in the rice fields."* Teacher, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

### **Attitudes To School & The Value Of Education**

A significant barrier to girls participating in primary or secondary education in all villages studied is the lack of value perceived in education. Many parents and girls interviewed in all nine villages indicated that they, their families and communities did not see great value in secondary school for girls.

*"I didn't go to school. I don't think people like us need a lot of education because we are just farming rice and living here in the village."* Mother, Houa Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*"Study is a waste of money. The children are only going to come and work with me in the fields anyway."* Father, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*"We have to go to school but I don't see how it will help me in my life. I will get married like my mother did and have children and work in the rice fields. How will school help me with my life? I like learning the Lao culture subjects, but other subjects are hard and I don't think I need to*

*know them.*”: Girl at school, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

There were parents in all villages who spoke about their own lack of education and how this made them doubt the value of education for their own children.

*“When my children say they don’t want to go to school any more I let them come with me to the fields. I didn’t go to school.”*: Mother, Khorthong Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

In one Pak Tha village the parents interviewed said they did not know which year level their children were in at school or whether they went at all.

*“I don’t know what year she is in at school. I don’t really know how often she goes when I am in the rice fields.”*: Mother, Pak Tha Village, Bokeo.

A teacher in Xieng Khoang expressed her frustration that she could not convince parents of the value of education for their children.

*“Parents don’t understand how important school is for their children. They let their children go to the rice field everyday and look after younger children. I try to convince mothers to let their children come to the school but they explain they need help in the fields and I understand their problem, but it is a shame for their children.”*: Teacher, Paka Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

When researchers spoke to parents about supporting their children to go to school the understanding of support tended to be financial support. It appeared that few girls received encouragement from their parents to make education a priority.

*“It is hard for us to support our children to go to school because it costs money and we also don’t have their help when they are at school around the house.”: Father, Paka Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.*

*“I finished primary school and then stayed at home and joined the family with farming. No one at home encouraged me to continue studying. I wanted to but no one would help me so I got married.”: Girl, 15, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

*“I wanted to go to high school but my parents would not help me fill in the forms, apply or organize accommodation. Boys can go by themselves if their parents are not interested but girls need the support of their parents.”: Girl, 16, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

Boys from villages have more opportunities to attend secondary school in towns away from their family than girls do because girls’ families fear their daughters may become involved in relationships and fall pregnant while away from home and unmarried.

*“We worry that if our girl goes to secondary school when she is older than 14 then she will get pregnant before she marries. That is socially embarrassing so we would rather she got married now.”: Father, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

*“We like to support the boys to go to high school because they can travel and go to another place. But it is not safe for a girl – she may find herself pregnant. That is why we don’t support girls to go to high school because we want to protect them from pregnancy.”: Community Leader, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

*“When I was at high school one of my friends from primary school had to drop out because she was pregnant.”: Girl, 15, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

Parents in Xieng Khoang villages spoke of their children's responsibility to help with agriculture and household chores as a duty to their parents, and described this duty as more important than education.

*"It is the duty of children to help their parents. When you are poor everyone has to work hard and this means children can be too busy helping their parents to go to school."*: Father, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

Community leaders in Xieng Khoang and in Pak Tha indicated that they expected girls who gained a secondary education to return to their villages and take on traditional roles as a wife, mother, housekeeper and farmer.

*"Girls who have studied in secondary school come back to the village and make much better wives than those who have left school at primary school. Girls who have been to high school are better at decorating the house, entertaining guests and being organized about keeping the house."*: Community Leader, Houa Nam Kha Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

*"Girls who go to secondary school learn how to speak properly and how to show respect."*: Community leader, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

There were mothers in all districts researched who said they did value education because they wanted their daughters to have a better life than they did. However not many adult respondents voiced this attitude.

*"I want my daughter to stay at school and learn Lao language because I don't want her to work as hard as I have. I want her to be able to study further and maybe have a job, like a teacher. The life we have here is*

very hard.”: Mother of girl at school, Houa Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“I supported my daughter to go on to secondary school because she wanted to keep studying and I also want her to learn more. Maybe she can be a teacher or a nurse or a policewoman. If your children can learn then it is a good opportunity to have a better life than we have. We are very poor.”*: Mother, girl at secondary school, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*“If my daughter can study then maybe she can have a better life than us. If she can get a job then she can have a nicer house and better food and a happier life without doing such heavy labour.”*: Mother, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

Some girls spoke about their ambition to finish school and work in jobs rather than in the family rice fields.

*“I do want to go to secondary school and finish. I dream of being a nurse, or maybe a teacher or policewoman, but I don’t know whether my parents can support me to do that.”*: Girl at school, 13, Paka Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

Other girls indicated they did not feel confident they could competently study high school subjects.

*“The subjects at school in high school are hard. I’m not sure I can do it. The maths is hard and the subjects are very technical.”*: Girl at school, 13, Paka Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

There is certainly a value perceived in being able to read and speak Lao language. This was demonstrated in the research across all villages by

respondents who said the only people qualified to hold village leadership positions were those who could communicate in Lao.

## **Marriage Practices & Attitudes**

### **Marriage Age**

It is a clear finding of the research that it is a common practice for girls to marry between the ages of 14 and 16 years in the Lahu, Khmu and Hmong villages studied.

Girls feel mature and ready for marriage from 14 years of age. Many fear they will not find a husband if they wait too long to marry.

In all districts studied, girls, parents and community leaders described girls' desire to marry once they were about 14 years of age.

*“When the girls reach about 14 they change and start to become interested in falling in love. This becomes more interesting than school. They want to flirt with the boys.”*: Mother, Houa Nam Kha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“We start to see our friends getting married when they are about 14 and we want to do the same. I worry if I don't get married soon I may never marry.”*: Girl, 15 years old, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“Girls want to marry when they see their friends getting married. If they are not married by 15 (years of age) then they feel too old to marry. They worry they will miss their opportunity to find a husband,”*: Mother of a girl who had left school to marry at 14 years of age, Pong Pha Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

*“Our parents and grandparents tell us – if you wait too long no one will want to marry you and that worries us and makes us want to look for a*

*husband. We worry we may not find someone.*”: Girl, 14, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

Girls in Xieng Khoang villages described the same feelings about their maturity at 14 years of age and their desire to marry once reaching puberty.

*“My friends and I are 14 and 15 now and we think about falling in love now. We hope to get married soon and will stop school then.”*: Girl, 14, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

Parents also feel it is normal for their daughters to marry between 14 and 16 years of age. Some parents encourage their daughters to marry at this age so they avoid becoming pregnant while unmarried.

Girls and their mothers in Pak Tha District spoke about girls being ready to marry after 14 years of age.

*“The girls leave school because they want to get married. They usually start to feel that way when they are about 14 or 15 (years of age),”*: Mother, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*“I left school after all my friends did. They all got married and started living like married women, going to the rice fields and starting to have children. I felt lonely at school.”*: Girl, recently married and left school, 15, Houay How Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

Some girls said it was their mothers who encouraged them to leave school and get married when they were in their mid-teens.

*“My parents chose who I would marry. I had finished primary school by then and got married.”*: Girl, married, 16 years of age, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

Men in Xieng Khoang spoke about their desire to find a bride who was around 14 years of age when they were ready to marry at around 18 years of age.

*“We want to marry a pure girl so we look for a wife among the girls who are around 14.”*: Father, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

*“We prefer our brides to be young. This is the Hmong man’s lifestyle – a real man can get a young bride. All the decision-making in a marriage will be led by the man, so the woman does not have to be experienced or be able to think about important matters. We will have all the responsibility as a man so what we want is a beautiful young bride who is a virgin.”*: Father, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.

### **Married People Cannot Go to School**

All respondents were asked whether married girls and boys could continue their studies and it was unanimous that this was not possible in any of the nine villages studied. A few girls said they had wanted to continue studying after marriage but the teachers said they were not allowed to attend school once they were married.

*“I got married when I was 18 and I wanted to keep going to school but I was not allowed to because I was married. They said I would soon have children and family responsibilities and I needed to start to prepare for that. I was very disappointed.”*: Married woman, 20 years of age, with two children, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

In Pak Tha District researchers heard of a boy who had married at 15 years of age and had started going to school in another village in the hope that there the school would not know of his marital status. Once that school found out he was married he was asked to stop attending school.

## **Dowry & Negotiating Weddings & Marriage**

The practices of dowry, weddings, marriage and the location of where the young couple lives after marriage varies across the three cultures studied.

### Hmong

In Xieng Khoang the man's family pay a dowry to the family of the girl they will marry and she will almost always leave her family home and go to live with her new husband and his family.

The dowry may involve a monetary gift, calculated according to a traditional measure of silver, and livestock, usually cows, pigs and buffalo. If a girl's family wants an elaborate wedding ceremony and party the families will negotiate how much the husband's family will pay for the wedding and how much for the dowry.

The practice of abducting girls for marriage was described during the research in Xieng Khoang. Researchers said they had learned that when a man had chosen his wife he could take her to his family house where she would spend at least three days. During this time a representative from the man's family would visit the girl's family to negotiate a dowry and the cost and scale of the wedding. While the negotiations are taking place it is traditional for a ceremony to take place at the future husband's house in front of the family altar to their family gods. This ceremony involves the future bride becoming a member of her future husband's family, which prevents her from spending another night under the roof of her parents. From that moment she is effectively married. Respondents spoke of this practice occurring in their villages today and involving marriages in which the girls had little choice.

However, many respondents in Nonghet District said that some girls did have a choice in the selection of their marriage partners.

*"When the men are ready to marry they start to look for a girl to marry who is a bit younger than them. Maybe he is 18 and he looks for a girl*

*around 14. Then the falling in love happens and he will tell her a ‘dream story’ – a story about how he we will help her at home with collecting water and the children. She will think he will be a good husband. He might even go to her house and help her with her chores to show he means the ‘dream story’. Of course it is just a story, Hmong men do not do this kind of work, but it is a way for a man to get a girl to fall in love with him when she is young.”: Father, Nonghet District, Xieng Khoang.*

The greatest implication of marriage practices in Hmong communities for the education of girls is that a girl’s parents may be reluctant to invest in her education because it is known that she will move to live with another family after marriage. Families want their girls to be strong marriage candidates - virginal (young) and skilled in traditional roles.

One father in Phakkhæ Neua spoke about his concerns for his 16-year-old daughter who had recently married.

*“How can she start a new family at 16 and what will her future be like without education.”: Father, Phakkhæ Neua Village, Nonghet District, Bokeo.*

The Xieng Khoang research team attempted to interview girls who had left school and married but could not find girls in this situation because they were told by community leaders that these girls had moved to other villages to live with their husband’s family. When the teams asked to speak to married girls under 16 years of age who had moved to the village from other places to live with their new husbands the community leaders said it was not possible because these girls were either in the rice fields or did not have the permission of their husbands or their husband’s family to participate.

### Lahu

The Lahu villages in Meung District have more flexible marriage and dowry practices than in the Hmong culture. In the Lahu culture respondents said

couples could marry simply, without a dowry, and the newly married couple could choose to live with either parents before moving to live on their own after a couple of years or going to live with the other family.

*“Families here are very poor. If a couple want to marry they can just declare that and the ceremony can be as simple as drinking tea.”:*

Mother, Torlae Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

There also appears to be a greater tolerance of pre-marital sex in Lahu culture than in the other two ethnic groups studied. Respondents described a traditional practice of girls after reaching puberty building small huts close to the village where they would sleep at night and be visited by young men searching for wives. Respondents said that if a girl became pregnant after an encounter with a man he was expected to marry her and the community leaders could fine him if he did not. Several respondents said the District Governor was trying to stop the practice and had threatened to burn these huts, apparently in an attempt to stop girls being sexually exploited.

Newly-married couples in the Lahu villages studied can choose to move and live away from either family after marriage, and can choose to even live away from the village in the areas where the village’s animals are kept, taking up animal husbandry roles for the village.

The Meung District research team encountered three girls who had chosen not to marry until they were older. One of the girls, aged 15, had avoided a marriage arranged by her mother by running away from her village. She had returned when her mother agreed that she did not need to marry the man.

*“I didn’t want to marry that man. I’m not sure I want to get married yet. My mother accepts this now. She said she just wanted me to come home.”:* Girl, 15, left school and unmarried, Meung District, Bokeo.

Another girl, 17, said she had been encouraged by her mother not to marry. She had wanted to marry her boyfriend and her mother persuaded her not to because he was poor.

*“My mother did not want me to marry the boy I loved because he was so poor. She told me that he was as poor as we were and if I married him my life would be the same as hers – very poor. She wants me to have a better life. So I did not marry him. I think I will wait until I am 24 or 25 before I get married. I would like to get a job in the government so I can improve my life. I don’t worry about finding a husband later because I know I am beautiful and boys love me.”*: Girl, 17, who has left school after three years of primary school education, Meung District, Bokeo.

### Khmu

In the three Khmu villages visited in the research the teams learned that a dowry was paid to the girl’s family by her husband’s family. It is traditional for the dowry to be made up of cash paid in Thai Baht and animals – buffalo, pigs or cows. The amount paid is negotiated by the families and depends on the financial position of the man’s family.

In Houay Set, the village has decided in recent times to set the dowry price at 3,000 Baht and one buffalo or cow, which is paid to the girl’s family. One-third of the money is then given to the marrying couple. It has also been determined that the husband’s family contribute five pigs and the wife’s family contribute one pig for slaughter and consumption at the wedding ceremony. In this village the traditional custom of the newly married couple going to live with the husband’s family is practised.

A similar dowry is applied in Houay How – 3,000-4,000 Baht, seven pigs and one or two buffalos. A wealthier family is expected to pay more in cash – up to 12,000 Baht. Community leaders in Houay How said the woman’s family would occasionally pay a dowry to their daughter’s husband’s family and in such a case the newly married couple would go to live with the bride’s family.

The usual dowry price in Houay Souak is between 4,500 and 5,000 Baht and four pigs. If the couple marrying are cousins the man's family must also pay one buffalo to the girl's family. The difference in this village is that the newly married couple lives with the girl's family for three years before they establish their own home.

The research teams heard stories of young couples choosing their own marriage partners and of couples whose marriages were arranged by their parents.

*"When I was young, about seven or eight years old, my mother said I could not go to school because I had to go with her to the rice fields. One day I got a notebook and went to the school anyway. My mother came and dragged me from the classroom and took me back to the fields. Then one night when I was 14 and in my bed a man came in to my bed. I asked him who he was and he said he was going to be my husband. My mother had agreed I would marry him."*: Girl, 17, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

### **Positive Deviance**

Research teams attempted to find and interview girls who had finished secondary school before marriage in each village. In the three villages in Meung District and in the three villages in Xieng Khoang the research teams did not find any girls who had finished secondary school. In the Meung District villages it is a challenge for girls to finish primary school before marriage because it is common for girls to start primary school just a few years before they reach puberty and feel ready for marriage. Girls in the Xieng Khoang villages are more likely to complete primary school before marriage because they start primary school around 6 years of age. However they are unlikely to complete, or even start, secondary school before marriage.

In Torlae village in Meung District one mother described her failed attempt to

encourage her daughter to go to secondary school.

*"I wanted my daughter to go to high school because I wanted her to have a better life than me. My daughter said she would go if I bought her a motorbike. It was hard for our family to do this but we managed to get her a bike, but still she didn't study. Then she asked for clothes and said if she got them she would study, and then a telephone. She has never studied."*: Mother, Torlae Village, Meung District, Bokeo.

In each of the three Pak Tha villages the research team did find girls who had either completed secondary school before marriage or were still attending secondary school. Four girls in this situation were found and interviewed. Each of the four girls said they had made the decision to pursue their secondary education and had been supported by their parents.

*"I want to have an education so that when I do marry I can be more involved in decision making with my husband."*: Girl at secondary school, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*"After secondary school if I can get a scholarship I will go to university to be a teacher. If I can get the money together then I can choose the subject to study, but I probably won't so I won't have a choice."*: Girl at secondary school, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*"After secondary school I hope I can be involved in village activities, like being the leader of the women's union for my community."*: Girl at secondary school, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

Parents in both these villages spoke of encouraging their children to continue studying after primary school. The factors that appeared to influence this attitude there were better access to secondary schools and more cash generation opportunities resulting in families having a slightly better capacity to support their children to continue studying at school.

*“I really want my children to have a better life and not just come back to the village and plant crops. I don’t want my children to have my life. We have earned some money from selling our crop so we are lucky we can send our children to high school.”: Mother, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

*“I don’t want my children to have a life like me. I will do what I can to help her study.”: Mother of girl at secondary school, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

*“No one in Houay Souak can read and write Lao. Some of the men can go to a meeting with people from the district and understand the conversation, but no one can read or write Lao language. That’s why I want to support my children to go to school so their life can be different. I will work hard to support my children to be students as much as I can.”: Mother, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

One of the girls in Houay Set who had gone to secondary school had won a scholarship to a school for people from ethnic minority groups in Houay Xai. Her mother said she had encouraged her daughter to pursue secondary education but she was unsure the family could have afforded for her daughter to go to school without a scholarship.

*“She is so lucky to get this scholarship because otherwise she may have had to stop studying. She wants to go to university to be a teacher. I encourage her because I also want to keep her studying so she can have a better life and earn a proper salary.”: Mother of girl at secondary school, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.*

The opportunity for a girl to study at secondary school is a fragile chance as demonstrated by stories respondents told of girls who had attempted, but failed, to complete their secondary school education.

*“My friend made it to grade 4 in high school and then she dropped out because her brother and sister said she had to. They had left home and even though her parents wanted her to continue at school the brother and sister put pressure on her to go home and help the parents. They wanted her to stay home so their younger brother could go to secondary school. She did it and quit school. Then her younger brother ended up dropping out and getting married. My friend never returned to school but she is the leader of the young women’s group in her village.”*: Girl at secondary school, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*“I know a girl who was in third year of high school and she had to drop out because of problems in her family. They couldn’t afford to send her anymore. Her brother kept studying though – they could only afford for one of them to study and they chose the boy.”*: Girl at secondary school, Houay Set Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*“I left secondary school after my father became sick. I went back to the village to help at home and then soon after that I got married. I had hoped to be a tailor. I was hopeful of what I could achieve with my education and of all the things I could do. But I was back at home and after my father died the difficulties of our everyday life overwhelmed me. Then I could barely remember what it was like to use my mind and be thinking of the future and possibilities.”*: Girl, married, 16, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

*“I went to secondary school but I had to drop out when my family said they needed me back at home. I wanted to be a pre-school teacher. Now I am 19 and I worry that I will just get married and end up being even poorer than I am now. I am still applying to go back to school and become a pre-school teacher, but I don’t know what will happen.”*: Girl, 19, unmarried, Houay Souak Village, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

One of the girls who had been to secondary school said her life had not changed although she had finished her education.

*“I went to secondary school but my life is the same as if I did not. It’s the same as my friends who finished school at primary school. Now I am married, I work in the rice field and soon I will have children.”*: Girl finished secondary school, Pak Tha District, Bokeo.

The Meung District research team met a young woman in her early twenties who was unmarried and had attended a secondary school for students from ethnic minority groups. She had studied to become a teacher. Her father and sister had supported her in reaching her goal to study and not marry although her mother had resisted her plans. She said her mother was now proud of her and she knew other mothers in her village and their daughters saw her as a positive role model.

*“I had to defy my mother. She was worried I would not meet a husband, but my sister and father supported me. Now I have graduated and have a job and my mother is very proud of me. When I go back to the village women come and talk to me about how I managed to study and get a job because they want a better life for their daughters. I have talked to girls from my village who wanted to study and I know some of these girls have enrolled in secondary school because I could help show them they could do that.”*: Woman, 22, Meung District, Bokeo.

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## ANNEX 1 – DISCUSSION GUIDES

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – GIRLS AT SCHOOL

FGD 1	Girls (12-13 years) currently attending school
FGD 2	Girls (14-16 years) currently attending school

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls (12-16 years) to discontinue their education after primary school. This will include specific exploration of marriage practices.
- Identify key decision makers and analyze the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- Identify cases of 'positive deviance', where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- Propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

### GROUP INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP (10+ MINUTES)

Welcome and explanation of what we will be doing today:

- Why we have focus groups
- Explain role of moderator and respondents
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please talk openly and freely
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- It's OK to disagree with another respondent- this is a friendly discussion
- Assure respondents of confidentiality
- Assure respondents they can ask you a question at any time
- Let respondents know they are free to get up and move around.

- Food and beverage are available
- Consent for recording.

Moderator first introduces herself (name, age, family, township) – each Moderator to show respondents a photograph of their family and be prepared to answer questions about the people in the photo and the relationships. Then ask each respondent to introduce themselves to the rest of the group.

Moderator encourages everyone to tell the group something about themselves – how many in family, where child fits in family (eldest, youngest etc), where they live ... Moderator helps group to form focusing on the things the respondents have in common and not things that will make them feel different from each other (eg: age, family position)

Moderator invites respondents to ask him/her any questions they have about the Moderator and the research. Answer all questions - honestly and simply. Only make a promise you can keep.

Try to stimulate laughter – show respondents they can relax and have fun – it is safe and friendly.

I will just remind you that everything you say in here today is treated with confidentiality. That means it is a secret between us. It's important to all of us that we can speak freely and say what we want to say & it's important that we also enjoy ourselves. We're going to have fun today. There are no right or wrong answers - we are just going to talk about what we know. I appreciate all of your ideas and experiences. If you think something different to someone else then tell us all about it.

What we are going to do is all discuss together the different topics I introduce. It is important that we all listen to each other and say what we think. We will also play some games that I will show you.

So, let's start - is everybody ready to start? MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH EVERYONE – DO YOU HAVE THEIR AGREEMENT? ARE THEY COMFORTABLE?

### **PROBING**

Throughout all discussions probe to gather explanations and understandings of what respondents mean about what they are mentioning and discussing in relation to our topics.

Probing is encouraging respondents to build on what they have said, to explain, so we as researchers understand their situation & attitudes clearly & completely.

The objectives listed above detail what we are interested in and cover some of the possibilities you may find in the field – you will not necessarily cover all possibilities with every respondent in every township – it depends on their situation. Know these objectives. Then use your probing skills to uncover a complete, clear, detailed picture of your respondents' situation in relation to our topics.

### **PERSON GAME (10+ minutes)**

We're going to start with a game – it is a puzzle. I'm going to pass out all these pieces GIVE EACH CHILD A COUPLE OF PIECES & PUT ANY REMAINDER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CIRCLE. MAKE THE PUZZLE ON A PIECE OF CARDBOARD BOX THAT YOU CAN SLIDE AWAY TO THE SIDE OF THE GROUP AND BRING BACK LATER. All these pieces fit together to make two pictures – together we are going to fit them together and see what the two pictures are.

LET RESPONDENTS EXAMINE THE PIECES AND SEE WHAT EVERYONE HAS – What do you think that piece could be? And this one? SEE IF THEY CAN GET IT STARTED – IF THEY CANNOT, THEN HELP THEM BY SUGGESTING THE CHILDREN WITH MAJOR PIECES THAT MATCH PUT THEM TOGETHER IN THE MIDDLE– Does anyone see what this could be now? PRAISE THE RESPONDENTS WHO OFFER IDEAS AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. How do the other pieces fit, let's try – we can always move it to another place if it doesn't fit where we try first. HELP RESPONDENTS FINISH THE PUZZLE BUT DON'T DO IT FOR THEM

– FROM THIS EXERCISE YOU WANT THEM TO FEEL THEY CAN PARTICIPATE AND ALL EFFORTS ARE VALUED – GIVE RESPONDENTS YOUR POSITIVE FEEDBACK.

MOVE ON WHEN ALL PIECES ARE PLACED AND THE GROUP HAS IDENTIFIED THE PICTURE.

Ok, that's great – you all did that really well.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE & ROLES – 20 MINUTES**

Next, we're going to talk about the girl and the boy we've just made in that puzzle. We're going to bring them to life.

- Let's give them both a name ... What should we call them? OK, and how old are they? Same age or different? Do you like them? Why? Why not?

LISTEN TO RESPONDENTS IDEAS. ACCEPT THEM ALL WITH INTEREST. IF SOME RESPONDENTS DISAGREE, ENCOURAGE THEM & LET THEM EXPLAIN WHAT THEY WANT THE GIRL & BOY TO BE LIKE & OBSERVE REACTIONS IN THE GROUP – IF SOMEONE LOOKS LIKE THEY WANT TO DISAGREE ASK THEM TO SAY WHAT THEY THINK.

I ALSO HAVE PAPER AND CRAYONS HERE – IF YOU WANT TO DRAW OR WRITE SOMETHING TO ADD TO WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT PLEASE DO. SOMETIMES IT IS EASIER TO EXPLAIN WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE HAVE A PICTURE TO TALK ABOUT AND SHOW WHAT WE MEAN.

- Let's focus on the girl now - Where does she live? What type of house does she live in? What is the house made of? And what about the boy? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND DIFFERENCES RESPONDENTS' PERCEIVE BETWEEN THE BOY AND GIRL.

- Who lives in that house with her? What are their relationships to her? What do the different people in the house do – what are their jobs and how do they spend their time? PROBE FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS/MEN AND WOMEN'S ROLES. IF YOUNG MARRIED PEOPLE IN FAMILY PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW OLD THEY ARE WHEN MARRYING & STARTING A FAMILY.
- How do they each spend their days? Does she have jobs she has to do at home? What do people in the family rely on her to do? And what about the boy? PROBE ABOUT SCHOOL AND ROLE IN FAMILY.
- How does she get along with all the people in the house – who does she like the best and the least? Why? And what about the boy?
- Who makes the decisions for the family? Decisions about food, work, school, children, elderly people, the house? PROBE TO DISCOVER WHO MAKES DIFFERENT DECISIONS OR IS ONE PERSON CONSIDERED TO BE THE DECISION MAKER FOR THE HOUSEHOLD? Who does the person who makes the decision listen to or ask for advice? Do they ask her (girl in puzzle) for her opinion – about what? And what about the boy – does he get asked for his opinions or make any decisions?
- Does \_\_\_\_\_(the girl's name) have friends? Who are they? How does she spend time with them – what do they do together and where?
- What about \_\_\_\_\_(the boy's name) who are his friends and what do they do together?
- How do you think their moods are – are they happy? Or sad? What makes them happy/sad? Are they worried or scared about anything? What?

### **EDUCATION - ATTITUDES & EXPERIENCES – 40 MINUTES**

We're doing really well so far – well done. I'm going to move our girl and boy to the side for awhile so we can do something different here, but anytime you want to say something about them please do – They are just

here and we can bring them back anytime. MOVE CARDBOARD WITH GIRL & BOY TO SIDE WHERE EVERYONE CAN STILL SEE THEM. KEEP PAPER AND CRAYONS ACCESSIBLE FOR RESPONDENTS TO USE.

In this next section we're going to talk about school and education.

- You are all going to school – let's talk about what you like about going to school?
- What don't you like about going to school?
- Thinking about the things you are learning at school – what interests you the most? What do you find easy/enjoyable to learn? What is difficult?
- Do you always go to school on school days or do you sometimes not go to school? IF SOMETIMES DON'T ATTEND – Why do you miss school? Who decides you don't have to go? How often does that happen?
- How do you think going to school helps you in your future? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW GIRLS VALUE THEIR EDUCATION – If you go on and study at secondary school what does it add to your life – what opportunities does secondary school give you?
- Is it any different for boys? How is it different?
- When do you plan to finish school? Why? Who do you talk to about this in your family? Do different people in the family have different ideas about how long you stay at school? Who? What are the ideas? Who makes the final decision?

PROBE TO UNDERSTAND REASONS FOR STAYING OR LEAVING SCHOOL. PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF MARRIAGE TO UNDERSTAND AGE AND ROLES AFTER MARRIAGE.

IF RESPONDENTS SAY SOMEONE ELSE DECIDES WHEN THEY LEAVE SCHOOL ASK THEM HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THAT & WHETHER THE GIRLS HAVE ANY INFLUENCE OVER THE DECISION.

- What will you do after you finish school? WORK – WHAT? MARRIAGE – WHEN? FURTHER STUDY – WHAT, WHERE?
- Tell me about other people in your family – parents, brothers and sisters - when did they finish school? What did they do after school?

IF RESPONDENTS MENTION PEOPLE THEY KNOW WHO FINISHED SCHOOL BEFORE SECONDARY PROBE TO EXPLORE HOW RESPONDENTS FEEL ABOUT WHETHER MORE SCHOOLING COULD HAVE IMPROVED THAT PERSON'S LIFE OR NOT eg: do you think that person's life would have been different if they had stayed at school longer? How?

PROBE FOR DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TO GIRLS' AND BOYS' EDUCATION.

- Do you know any girls who have got married already? What are their lives like now? ARE THEY WORKING? WHAT ARE THEIR JOBS?
- Did they have to leave school to get married? How did they feel about leaving school? Could they stay at school and be married?

### **FUTURE EXPECTATIONS – 20 MINUTES**

This is our final section of this discussion and we're going to bring back our boy and girl that we used at the beginning. BRING PUZZLE BOY & GIRL BACK TO CENTRE.

- I want us to all imagine what their life in the future is going to bring. Before, we agreed he was \_\_\_years old and she was \_\_\_years old. Now think of them in 5 years time. What do you think each of them will be doing? Where will they be living? Who will they be living with?

PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF EDUCATION – WHERE WILL THEY BE STUDYING? WHAT WILL THEY BE STUDYING? HOW WILL THEY USE THEIR STUDIES FOR WORK AND WHAT BENEFIT WILL THAT BRING TO THEIR FAMILY/VILLAGE. HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT FOR THE BOY AND THE GIRL? WHY WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

ALSO PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF MARRIAGE – WHAT AGE WOULD THEY MARRY? WHO WOULD THEY MARRY? WHO WOULD INFLUENCE THE DECISION ABOUT WHEN AND WHO TO MARRY. WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE AFTER MARRIAGE? HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT FOR THE BOY AND THE GIRL? WHY WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

- And what about these two in 10 years – when they are \_\_\_years old. What will their life be like then?
- When respondents mention marriage – what is married life like for the boy and for the girl when they are older? Describe where they live. What type of house? Who lives there too? What jobs do they have? Who earns the money for the family and who decides how it is spent? What role does the married mother have in earning income for the family? How can she earn income?
- What do you hope for your own life? When would you like to marry and have children? And what about work and contributing income to your family and community?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – GIRLS FINISHED SECONDARY SCHOOL BEFORE MARRIAGE

FGD 1	Girls (12-13 years), married and have left school
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### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls (12-16 years) to discontinue their education after primary school. This will include specific exploration of marriage practices.
- Identify key decision makers and analyze the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- Identify cases of 'positive deviance', where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- Propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

### GROUP INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP (10+ MINUTES)

Welcome and explanation of what we will be doing today:

- Why we have focus groups
- Explain role of moderator and respondents
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please talk openly and freely
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- It's OK to disagree with another respondent- this is a friendly discussion
- Assure respondents of confidentiality
- Assure respondents they can ask you a question at any time
- Let respondents know they are free to get up and move around.

- Food and beverage are available
- Consent for recording.

Moderator first introduces herself (name, age, family, township) and invites respondents to ask him/her any questions they have about the Moderator and the research. Answer all questions - honestly and simply. Only make a promise you can keep.

Establish a friendly tone for the discussion – the interview will be like a conversation about the topics the moderator introduces. Encourage respondents to talk freely and fully.

There are no right or wrong answers - we are just going to talk about what we know.

### ***PROBING***

Throughout all discussions probe to gather explanations and understandings of what respondents mean about what they are mentioning and discussing in relation to our topics.

Probing is encouraging respondents to build on what they have said, to explain, so we as researchers understand their situation & attitudes clearly & completely.

The objectives listed above detail what we are interested in and cover some of the possibilities you may find in the field – you will not necessarily cover all possibilities with every respondent in every township – it depends on their situation. Know these objectives. Then use your probing skills to uncover a complete, clear, detailed picture of your respondents' situation in relation to our topics.

### **YOUR EDUCATION (30 minutes)**

- We are going to talk today about your education. I understand you went to primary school and secondary school. Tell me about your experience at school and what you enjoyed studying?
- Let's talk about what you liked about going to school?
- What didn't you like about going to school?

- How has school helped you in your life so far? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW GIRLS VALUE THEIR EDUCATION
- How would you say your life is different today than it would have been if you had left school after primary school and got married?
- Was it your decision to finish all your schooling? Did anyone encourage you to stay at school – who?
- Who supported you to stay at school? How did they support you?
- Did anyone try to stop you from staying at school. Who? What did they want you to do? How did you resist them?
- Who in your family made the decision about when you finished going to school?
- Did different people in the family have different ideas about how long you stayed at school? Who? What are the ideas? Who makes the final decision?
- In your opinion, are boys and girls education valued differently in your community? How? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND

PROBE TO UNDERSTAND REASONS FOR STAYING OR LEAVING SCHOOL. PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF MARRIAGE TO UNDERSTAND AGE AND ROLES AFTER MARRIAGE.

IF RESPONDENTS SAY SOMEONE ELSE DECIDES WHEN THEY LEAVE SCHOOL ASK THEM HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THAT & WHETHER THE GIRLS HAVE ANY INFLUENCE OVER THE DECISION.

- Tell me about other people in your family – parents, brothers and sisters - when did they finish school? What did they do after school?

IF RESPONDENTS MENTION PEOPLE THEY KNOW WHO FINISHED SCHOOL BEFORE SECONDARY PROBE TO EXPLORE HOW RESPONDENTS FEEL ABOUT WHETHER MORE SCHOOLING COULD HAVE IMPROVED THAT PERSON'S LIFE OR NOT eg: do you think that person's life would have been different if they had stayed at school longer? How?

PROBE FOR DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TO GIRLS' AND BOYS' EDUCATION.

- Is it possible to be married and also go to school. Why? Why not?
- Is it any different for boys? How is it different?

**MARRIAGE & FUTURE EXPECTATIONS – 30 MINUTES**

Now, were going to talk about your lives in the future.

- Do you plan to marry? When do you think you will marry? And where will you live?
- Does having stayed at school affect your chances of marrying?
- What will you do for work?
- How will your education help you in earning money for yourself and your family?
- When do you think you will start to have children? Do you have an idea of how many children you would like to have? WHY? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND FUTURE ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND HOW THAT INFLUENCES THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN.
- And what type of life do you hope your children will have?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – GIRLS MARRIED & LEFT SCHOOL

FGD 1	Girls (12-13 years), married and have left school
FGD 2	Girls (14-16 years), married and have left school

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls (12-16 years) to discontinue their education after primary school. This will include specific exploration of marriage practices.
- Identify key decision makers and analyze the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- Identify cases of 'positive deviance', where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- Propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

### GROUP INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP (10+ MINUTES)

Welcome and explanation of what we will be doing today:

- Why we have focus groups
- Explain role of moderator and respondents
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please talk openly and freely
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- It's OK to disagree with another respondent- this is a friendly discussion
- Assure respondents of confidentiality
- Assure respondents they can ask you a question at any time
- Let respondents know they are free to get up and move around.

- Food and beverage are available
- Consent for recording.

Moderator first introduces herself (name, age, family, township) – each Moderator to show respondents a photograph of their family and be prepared to answer questions about the people in the photo and the relationships. Then ask each respondent to introduce themselves to the rest of the group.

Moderator encourages everyone to tell the group something about themselves – how many in family, where child fits in family (eldest, youngest etc), where they live ... Moderator helps group to form focusing on the things the respondents have in common and not things that will make them feel different from each other (eg: age, family position)

Moderator invites respondents to ask him/her any questions they have about the Moderator and the research. Answer all questions - honestly and simply. Only make a promise you can keep.

Try to stimulate laughter – show respondents they can relax and have fun – it is safe and friendly.

I will just remind you that everything you say in here today is treated with confidentiality. That means it is a secret between us. It's important to all of us that we can speak freely and say what we want to say & it's important that we also enjoy ourselves. We're going to have fun today. There are no right or wrong answers - we are just going to talk about what we know. I appreciate all of your ideas and experiences. If you think something different to someone else then tell us all about it.

What we are going to do is all discuss together the different topics I introduce. It is important that we all listen to each other and say what we think. We will also play some games that I will show you.

So, let's start - is everybody ready to start? MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH EVERYONE – DO YOU HAVE THEIR AGREEMENT? ARE THEY COMFORTABLE?

### **PROBING**

Throughout all discussions probe to gather explanations and understandings of what respondents mean about what they are mentioning and discussing in relation to our topics.

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The objectives listed above detail what we are interested in and cover some of the possibilities you may find in the field – you will not necessarily cover all possibilities with every respondent in every township – it depends on their situation. Know these objectives. Then use your probing skills to uncover a complete, clear, detailed picture of your respondents' situation in relation to our topics.

### **PERSON GAME (10+ minutes)**

We're going to start with a game – it is a puzzle. I'm going to pass out all these pieces GIVE EACH CHILD A COUPLE OF PIECES & PUT ANY REMAINDER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CIRCLE. MAKE THE PUZZLE ON A PIECE OF CARDBOARD BOX THAT YOU CAN SLIDE AWAY TO THE SIDE OF THE GROUP AND BRING BACK LATER. All these pieces fit together to make two pictures – together we are going to fit them together and see what the two pictures are.

LET RESPONDENTS EXAMINE THE PIECES AND SEE WHAT EVERYONE HAS – What do you think that piece could be? And this one? SEE IF THEY CAN GET IT STARTED – IF THEY CANNOT, THEN HELP THEM BY SUGGESTING THE CHILDREN WITH MAJOR PIECES THAT MATCH PUT THEM TOGETHER IN THE MIDDLE– Does anyone see what this could be now? PRAISE THE RESPONDENTS WHO OFFER IDEAS AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. How do the other pieces fit, let's try – we can always move it to another place if it doesn't fit where we try first. HELP RESPONDENTS FINISH THE PUZZLE BUT DON'T DO IT FOR THEM

– FROM THIS EXERCISE YOU WANT THEM TO FEEL THEY CAN PARTICIPATE AND ALL EFFORTS ARE VALUED – GIVE RESPONDENTS YOUR POSITIVE FEEDBACK.

MOVE ON WHEN ALL PIECES ARE PLACED AND THE GROUP HAS IDENTIFIED THE PICTURE.

Ok, that's great – you all did that really well.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE & ROLES – 20 MINUTES**

Next, we're going to talk about the girl and the boy we've just made in that puzzle. We're going to bring them to life.

- Let's give them both a name ... What should we call them? OK, and how old are they? Same age or different? Do you like them? Why? Why not?

LISTEN TO RESPONDENTS IDEAS. ACCEPT THEM ALL WITH INTEREST. IF SOME RESPONDENTS DISAGREE, ENCOURAGE THEM & LET THEM EXPLAIN WHAT THEY WANT THE GIRL & BOY TO BE LIKE & OBSERVE REACTIONS IN THE GROUP – IF SOMEONE LOOKS LIKE THEY WANT TO DISAGREE ASK THEM TO SAY WHAT THEY THINK.

I ALSO HAVE PAPER AND CRAYONS HERE – IF YOU WANT TO DRAW OR WRITE SOMETHING TO ADD TO WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT PLEASE DO. SOMETIMES IT IS EASIER TO EXPLAIN WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE HAVE A PICTURE TO TALK ABOUT AND SHOW WHAT WE MEAN.

- Let's focus on the girl now - Where does she live? What type of house does she live in? What is the house made of? And what about the boy? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND DIFFERENCES RESPONDENTS' PERCEIVE BETWEEN THE BOY AND GIRL.

- Who lives in that house with her? What are their relationships to her? What do the different people in the house do – what are their jobs and how do they spend their time? PROBE FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS/MEN AND WOMEN'S ROLES. IF YOUNG MARRIED PEOPLE IN FAMILY PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW OLD THEY ARE WHEN MARRYING & STARTING A FAMILY.
- How do they each spend their days? Does she have jobs she has to do at home? What do people in the family rely on her to do? And what about the boy? PROBE ABOUT SCHOOL AND ROLE IN FAMILY.
- How does she get along with all the people in the house – who does she like the best and the least? Why? And what about the boy?
- Who makes the decisions for the family? Decisions about food, work, school, children, elderly people, the house? PROBE TO DISCOVER WHO MAKES DIFFERENT DECISIONS OR IS ONE PERSON CONSIDERED TO BE THE DECISION MAKER FOR THE HOUSEHOLD? Who does the person who makes the decision listen to or ask for advice? Do they ask her (girl in puzzle) for her opinion – about what? And what about the boy – does he get asked for his opinions or make any decisions?
- Does \_\_\_\_\_(the girl's name) have friends? Who are they? How does she spend time with them – what do they do together and where?
- What about \_\_\_\_\_(the boy's name) who are his friends and what do they do together?
- How do you think their moods are – are they happy? Or sad? What makes them happy/sad? Are they worried or scared about anything? What?

### **EDUCATION - ATTITUDES & EXPERIENCES – 30 MINUTES**

We're doing really well so far – well done. I'm going to move our girl and boy to the side for awhile so we can do something different here, but anytime you want to say something about them please do – They are just

here and we can bring them back anytime. MOVE CARDBOARD WITH GIRL & BOY TO SIDE WHERE EVERYONE CAN STILL SEE THEM. KEEP PAPER AND CRAYONS ACCESSIBLE FOR RESPONDENTS TO USE.

In this next section we're going to talk about what school was like for you.

- Let's talk about what you liked about going to school?
- What didn't you like about going to school?
- How has school helped you in your life so far? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW GIRLS VALUE THEIR EDUCATION
- When did you all stop going to school? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO GIRLS STOPPING SCHOOL.
- How did you feel about stopping going to school?
- Who in your family made the decision about when you finished going to school? Did different people in the family have different ideas about how long you stayed at school? Who? What are the ideas? Who makes the final decision?

PROBE TO UNDERSTAND REASONS FOR STAYING OR LEAVING SCHOOL. PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF MARRIAGE TO UNDERSTAND AGE AND ROLES AFTER MARRIAGE.

IF RESPONDENTS SAY SOMEONE ELSE DECIDES WHEN THEY LEAVE SCHOOL ASK THEM HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THAT & WHETHER THE GIRLS HAVE ANY INFLUENCE OVER THE DECISION.

- Tell me about other people in your family – parents, brothers and sisters - when did they finish school? What did they do after school?

IF RESPONDENTS MENTION PEOPLE THEY KNOW WHO FINISHED SCHOOL BEFORE SECONDARY PROBE TO EXPLORE HOW RESPONDENTS FEEL ABOUT WHETHER MORE SCHOOLING COULD HAVE IMPROVED THAT PERSON'S LIFE OR NOT eg: do you think that person's life would have been different if they had stayed at school longer? How?

PROBE FOR DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TO GIRLS' AND BOYS' EDUCATION.

- Do you have friends who have stayed at school after you left. What do they tell you about their experience at school now.
- Do you have any plans to return to school? Is it possible to be married and also go to school. Why? Why not?
- Is it any different for boys? How is it different?

### **MARRIAGE & FUTURE EXPECTATIONS – 30 MINUTES**

Now, were going to talk about your lives as married women.

- Tell me about when you were married? How did you choose your husband? What did your family think? PROBE TO DISCOVER WHO PLAYS A ROLE IN THE DECISIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE
- How has your life changed since you were married? PROBE: LIVING IN A DIFFERENT PLACE? DIFFERENT RESPONSIBILITIES?
- What is your day like – tell me about your jobs, responsibilities and routines?
- Do you participate in more family decisions now you are married, compared to before you were married? WHICH DECISIONS DO YOU INFLUENCE?
- How will you contribute to the family's income?
- When do you think you will start to have children? Do you have an idea of how many children you would like to have? WHY? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND FUTURE ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND HOW THAT INFLUENCES THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN.
- And what type of life do you hope your children will have?

This is our final section of this discussion and we're going to bring back our boy and girl that we used at the beginning. BRING PUZZLE BOY & GIRL BACK TO CENTRE.

- I want us to all imagine what their life in the future is going to bring. Before, we agreed he was \_\_\_years old and she was \_\_\_years old. Now think of them in 5 years time. What do you think each of them will be doing? Where will they be living? Who will they be living with?

PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF EDUCATION – WHERE WILL THEY BE STUDYING? WHAT WILL THEY BE STUDYING? HOW WILL THEY USE THEIR STUDIES FOR WORK AND WHAT BENEFIT WILL THAT BRING TO THEIR FAMILY/VILLAGE. HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT FOR THE BOY AND THE GIRL? WHY WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

ALSO PROBE ALL MENTIONS OF MARRIAGE – WHAT AGE WOULD THEY MARRY? WHO WOULD THEY MARRY? WHO WOULD INFLUENCE THE DECISION ABOUT WHEN AND WHO TO MARRY. WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE AFTER MARRIAGE? HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT FOR THE BOY AND THE GIRL? WHY WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

- And what about these two in 10 years – when they are \_\_\_years old. What will their life be like then?
- When respondents mention marriage – what is married life like for the boy and for the girl when they are older? Describe where they live. What type of house? Who lives there too? What jobs do they have? Who earns the money for the family and who decides how it is spent? What role does the married mother have in earning income for the family? How can she earn income?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – PARENTS OF GIRLS 12-16 YEARS

IDI	Mothers of girls (12-16 years)
IDI	Fathers of girls (12-16 years)

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls (12-16 years) to discontinue their education after primary school. This will include specific exploration of marriage practices.
- Identify key decision makers and analyze the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- Identify cases of 'positive deviance', where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- Propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

### INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP (10+ MINUTES)

Welcome and explanation of what we will be doing today:

- Why we have focus groups
- Explain role of moderator and respondents
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please talk openly and freely
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- It's OK to disagree with another respondent- this is a friendly discussion
- Assure respondents of confidentiality
- Assure respondents they can ask you a question at any time
- Let respondents know they are free to get up and move around.

- Food and beverage are available
- Consent for recording.

Moderator first introduces herself (name, age, family, township) and invites respondents to ask him/her any questions they have about the Moderator and the research. Answer all questions - honestly and simply. Only make a promise you can keep.

Establish a friendly tone for the discussion – the interview will be like a conversation about the topics the moderator introduces. Encourage respondents to talk freely and fully.

There are no right or wrong answers - we are just going to talk about what we know.

### **PROBING**

Throughout all discussions probe to gather explanations and understandings of what respondents mean about what they are mentioning and discussing in relation to our topics.

Probing is encouraging respondents to build on what they have said, to explain, so we as researchers understand their situation & attitudes clearly & completely.

The objectives listed above detail what we are interested in and cover some of the possibilities you may find in the field – you will not necessarily cover all possibilities with every respondent in every township – it depends on their situation. Know these objectives. Then use your probing skills to uncover a complete, clear, detailed picture of your respondents’ situation in relation to our topics.

### **FAMILY STRUCTURE – 10 MINUTES**

- Let’s start by talking about your family – can you tell me how many children you have, their ages and whether they live with you or not. Who else lives in the same house as you?
- What work do the people in your family do? PROBE FOR ALL FAMILY MEMBERS.
- Do all your children attend school? Which grade are they in?

- Are any of your children married already? IF SO – where do they live now? What do they do for work? Do they have any children of their own?
- Who makes the decisions for the family? Decisions about food, work, school, children, elderly people, the house? PROBE TO DISCOVER WHO MAKES DIFFERENT DECISIONS OR IS ONE PERSON CONSIDERED TO BE THE DECISION MAKER FOR THE HOUSEHOLD? Who does the person who makes the decision listen to or ask for advice?

### **EDUCATION - ATTITUDES & EXPERIENCES – 30 MINUTES**

The focus of our discussion today is education and school.

- Tell me about your children's experiences at school. Which grade are they in now and how do they like it at school?
- IF PARENTS HAVE CHILDREN CURRENTLY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ASK – How long will your child/children stay on at school – until which grade? Why?

PROBE THROUGHOUT FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS.

- IF PARENTS HAVE CHILDREN WHO HAVE LEFT SCHOOL – how long did they attend school – up until which grade? Was it the same for each child?
- IF CHILDREN HAVE FINISHED AT PRIMARY SCHOOL – did you or your child consider staying at school for secondary school? Why?/Why not?
- FOR PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN HAVE LEFT SCHOOL - What did your children do after they left school – did they start earning money? Doing what?
- FOR PARENTS WHOSE DAUGHTER/S HAVE LEFT SCHOOL - Did your child marry after leaving school? IF YES – HOW OLD WAS

YOUR DAUGHTER/SON THEN? Could they have stayed at school and still married? Why?/Why not?

- How do you think going to school helps your children in your future? PROBE TO UNDERSTAND HOW PARENTS VALUE EDUCATION. If your child goes on and studies at secondary school what does it add to their life – what opportunities does secondary school provide?
- Is it any different for boys? How is it different?

I want to talk a bit further now about how decisions about school are made in your family.

- Who makes the decision in your family about when children leave school? Please tell me about how those decisions are made in your family. ENCOURAGE RESPONDENT TO GIVE A REAL EXAMPLE FOR THEIR FAMILY – RETELL WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THEIR DAUGHTER/SON LEFT SCHOOL.

IF RESPONDENT SAYS THEY MAKE THE DECISION ASK – What do you consider when making that decision – child's work prospects? Marriage? Ability at school? Future earning potential?

Does anyone else influence the decision? The child? Other people in the family?

- What will your children do after they finish school? WORK – WHAT? MARRIAGE – WHEN? FURTHER STUDY – WHAT, WHERE?

### **MARRIAGE & FUTURE EXPECTATIONS – 30 MINUTES**

I want us to talk now about the lives of your children into the future.

- What do you hope for your children in their lives as they become adults. PROBE FOR DETAIL – IF RESPONDENT SAYS 'A GOOD JOB' ASK DOING WHAT? EARNING ENOUGH TO AFFORD WHAT? OR IF RESPONDENT SAYS 'A GOOD MARRIAGE' – ASK WHAT IS A 'GOOD MARRIAGE'.
- How do you imagine your children's lives as adults will be different to your own life? PROBE FOR DETAIL

- Let's talk about marriage ... what age do young people today in your village get married? And how about you – how old were you when you were married? PROBE FOR DETAIL – IF RESPONDENT MARRIED AS A TEENAGER – ASK – WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO START MARRIED LIFE AT THAT AGE FOR YOU?
- Who decides who a young person will marry? Who influences those decisions? – Does the young couple decide for themselves? Who do they ask for advice?
- How is it different being the parent of a boy compared to being the parent of a girl when it comes time for them to marry?
- What is life like for a girl when she first marries? What are her responsibilities? How does her life change?
- Do young married women earn money for the household? Doing what type of work?
- At what age do you consider a girl is ready to start having children of her own?
- Is it possible for a girl to be married and go to secondary school. Why? Why not?
- Do you know of any girls or boys who have left the village to continue their studies at secondary school or university? What has been their experience? Did they return to the village? What type of job could they do after their studies?
- I want you to imagine for me into the future – in 10 years time what do you think life will be like for your children – where will they be living? Doing what jobs? What will their family life be like?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – TEACHERS

FGD	Teachers
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### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Identify and examine the main social and cultural factors in the decision for adolescent girls (12-16 years) to discontinue their education after primary school. This will include specific exploration of marriage practices.
- Identify key decision makers and analyze the power dynamics in cases of discontinuation of education for social and cultural reasons, in order to determine the agency of adolescent girls in the decision making process.
- Identify cases of ‘positive deviance’, where young girls have not married early and have continued education, and analyze the important influencing factors in this decision.
- Propose appropriate actions that can be undertaken by village authorities, District Education Bureaus and Provincial Education Service staff and Plan International/ChildFund Laos staff to reduce the social and cultural barriers to accessing secondary education in the three researched districts.

### INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP (10+ MINUTES)

Welcome and explanation of what we will be doing today:

- Why we have focus groups
- Explain role of moderator and respondents
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Please talk openly and freely
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- It’s OK to disagree with another respondent- this is a friendly discussion
- Assure respondents of confidentiality
- Assure respondents they can ask you a question at any time
- Let respondents know they are free to get up and move around.
- Food and beverage are available

- Consent for recording.

Moderator first introduces herself (name, age, family, township) and invites respondents to ask him/her any questions they have about the Moderator and the research. Answer all questions - honestly and simply. Only make a promise you can keep.

Establish a friendly tone for the discussion – the interview will be like a conversation about the topics the moderator introduces. Encourage respondents to talk freely and fully.

There are no right or wrong answers - we are just going to talk about what we know.

### ***PROBING***

Throughout all discussions probe to gather explanations and understandings of what respondents mean about what they are mentioning and discussing in relation to our topics.

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The objectives listed above detail what we are interested in and cover some of the possibilities you may find in the field – you will not necessarily cover all possibilities with every respondent in every township – it depends on their situation. Know these objectives. Then use your probing skills to uncover a complete, clear, detailed picture of your respondents' situation in relation to our topics.

### **SCHOOLS – 10 MINUTES**

- Let's start by talking about your jobs as teachers – how long have you been a teacher?
- Are you from this village or did you come to teach here from somewhere else?
- What made you want to be a teacher?
- What do you enjoy about teaching?

- Tell me about the challenges of teaching? What do you find difficult about the job?

### **EDUCATION - ATTITUDES & EXPERIENCES – 40 MINUTES**

The focus of our discussion today is education and we are particularly interested to talk about the factors that influence when children finish school.

- To start, can you describe to me the school you teach at here – how many children? What ages? Year levels?
- How is school attendance for children at the school? Do most children come regularly? IF NOT – Why do children miss school? What happens if a child does not come to school regularly – do you have a conversation with the child’s parents?
- At what age do most children here finish school? Why at that age?  
PROBE FOR DETAIL ABOUT WHY THE CHILDREN LEAVE SCHOOL.

IS IT DIFFERENT FOR BOYS AND GIRLS? HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?

- What about children who stay on longer at school – what is different about their situation?
- Who makes the decision about when a child finishes school? Do parents talk to the teachers about those decisions?
- How do you think children feel when they face leaving school? Tell me about children you know and their experiences.
- Tell me about children you know who have gone on to secondary school.
- What do you see as the value of a secondary education for a young person living in this village?
- Can you tell me how you think education is valued in this community – what do parents want from the education system for their children?  
PROBE TO DISCOVER WHETHER PARENTS JUST WANT THE

BASICS OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY OR IS THERE A FEELING FOR CHILDREN TO RECEIVE MORE EDUCATION AND USE IT TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES.

- What do you think can be done to encourage more young people to go on and study at secondary school.

### **EARLY MARRIAGE & EDUCATION (20 MINUTES)**

- I understand some girls marry not long after they finish primary school. How well prepared for married life would you say they are at this stage of their development?
- Who makes the decision about when a boy or a girl are ready for marriage?
- Imagine a situation where a family decides their daughter will finish school and marry after primary school, but she would prefer to continue her education – would she be able to change her family’s mind on a matter like this. How? IF NOT – Why? Could someone else advocate for her? Who?
- When girls and boys marry at a young age do they choose their own marriage partners or do the families have a say in this?
- What is the benefit a girls’ family receives by having her get married at a young age?
- And what benefit does the boy’s family receive. PROBE TO UNDERSTAND CLEARLY WHAT MOTIVATES BOYS’ AND GIRLS’ FAMILIES TO HAVE THEIR CHILDREN MARRY AT A YOUNG AGE.
- Would it be possible for a girl to continue studying while she was married? What barriers to this are there?
- Is it different for boys?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE – COMMUNITY LEADERS

IDI	Community Leaders
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### **SCHOOLS & YOUNG PEOPLE – 40 MINUTES +**

- Our main topic for discussion is school and young people and education. Before we start can you tell me about your role in this community.
- And you are also a parent? IF SO, how old are your children? Are they still at school? IF SO – what year level at school? IF FINISHED SCHOOL ESTABLISH WHAT AGE THE CHILDREN WERE WHEN THEY COMPLETED SCHOOL AND WHAT DO THEY DO NOW. MARRIED – AT WHAT AGE?

- Can you tell me how you think education is valued in this community – what do parents want from the education system for their children? PROBE TO DISCOVER WHETHER PARENTS JUST WANT THE BASICS OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY OR IS THERE A FEELING FOR CHILDREN TO RECEIVE MORE EDUCATION AND USE IT TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES.
- In your view when do most children finish their schooling? Why do they not continue beyond this age? PROBE ALL ANSWERS BUT REMEMBER THE FOCUS OF OUR RESEARCH IS ON SOCIAL AND CULTURAL REASONS. IT IS OK TO TALK ABOUT THE ECONOMIC AND PHYSICAL/DISTANCE REASONS FOR NOT CONTINUING SCHOOL WHILE GETTING CONVERSATION STARTED, BUT STEER DISCUSSION TOWARDS EARLY MARRIAGE AND OTHER SOCIAL AND CULTURAL REASONS.
- I understand some girls marry not long after they finish primary school. How well prepared for married life would you say they are at this stage of their development?
- Who makes the decision about when a boy or a girl are ready for marriage?
- When they marry at a young age do they choose their own marriage partners or do the families have a say in this?
- What is the benefit a girls' family receives by having her get married at a young age?
- And what benefit does the boy's family receive. PROBE TO UNDERSTAND CLEARLY WHAT MOTIVATES BOYS' AND GIRLS' FAMILIES TO HAVE THEIR CHILDREN MARRY AT A YOUNG AGE.
- Would it be possible for a girl to continue studying while they were married? What barriers to this are there?
- Is it different for boys?
- Do you think the community benefits from children completing their education at secondary school. What benefits does that bring back to the community?

- What do you think can be done to encourage more young people to go on and study at secondary school.
- Tell me what the employment opportunities are for young people here. What choices do they have?

THAT IS THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION. THANK-YOU I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR TIME AND THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME.



Contact Us



**Plan**

Sapharntong Tai Village  
Sisattanak District  
Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR

Tel: +856 21 353489-11  
[www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)

**ChildFund**  
Laos

Naxay Village  
Saysettha District  
Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR

Tel: +856 21 412966 or 453502  
[www.childfund.org](http://www.childfund.org)