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# Gender Meanings and Inclusion of Girls in Primary Education Among the Ta-oy Tribe in Saravan Province, Lao PDR

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Using feminist theories highlighting standpoint theory as anchor, this mixed method study investigated how 159 households, 68 lower secondary school students, 10 focus group discussion (FGD) participants and two key informants from 13 villages in the Ta-oy District, Saravan Province, Lao PDR defined gender and its implications to girls' inclusion in primary school. Data was gathered using surveys, FGD, and Key Informant Interviews. The Pearson Chi-square test was used to determine the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the respondents' view on gender role. The majority of the respondents were male; with no formal education, upland rice farmers, with an annual income of US\$120.00 or less and got married as early as age 11 with majority between the ages of 16 and 20 years old. Almost half defined gender as "men and women who are working in solidarity in the farm." This is the reason for expecting girls to do household chores as a priority over school participation. The respondents' socio-demographic characteristics such as sex, educational attainment, occupation and annual family income were not significantly related to their view on gender role regarding girls' inclusion in school. It can be surmised, though, that fathers among the Ta-oy tribe played a major role in inhibiting girls' participation in school. Therefore, school officials at the local levels need to address this concern to ensure compliance to MDG number 2 or universal access to primary education.

**Keywords:** gender, gender meaning, gender role, gender inequality, girls' education

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## INTRODUCTION

The word gender or the sense of ‘the state of being male or female’ has been used since the 14th century, but this did not become common until the mid-20th century (Oxford Dictionary). Even if the words sex and gender both have the same sense ‘the state of being male or female,’ they are typically used in slightly different ways because “sex” refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women, while “gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (WHO-gender).

The concept of education has to be understood in order to understand the factors that would contribute to the definition of gender. Assumptions of having understood a particular concept are dangerous because people define or perceive things or ideas differently. As the saying goes “meanings are in people, not in words.” Therefore, defining gender in the context of education by an ethnic minority group may have some bearing on why girl’s inclusion in school is very low compared to boys in Lao PDR. Such phenomenon more often than not has been attributed to socio-demographic factors, early marriage, older children taking care of younger siblings and the like. Andrabi et al. (2012) studied the impact of a mother’s education on their child’s education in Pakistan and found a causal link between a mother’s education and the time spent by their children on educational activities outside of school. This link showed lower results for children whose mothers had low education levels. Subrahmanian (2002) identified that schooling for poorer households is difficult due to the cost, directly in the form of school supplies, transportation, uniforms, food, etc. but also indirectly in the loss of labor provided to a household, especially by girls. A study by Bayisenge, J. (n.d.) in Africa identified the impact of early marriage on girls’ education which recognized that for poorer families, the value of investing in education for girls is too distant to be recognized as it is perceived as only benefiting the husband’s family and not the girl’s parents.

Research in education in Nepal by Stash and Hannum (2011) found that in general, family decisions about their children’s education depend on the availability of resources as well as the families’ perspective on the

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benefit of education for the child. This cost-benefit analysis often ends up detrimentally for girls because they believe that education will not benefit girls in obtaining employment, as jobs requiring education are generally not open for women.

Samal (2012) discovered that low socio-economic status could negatively affect the attitude towards schooling and education in India. For poor families, it is viewed as more lucrative for children to engage in traditional occupations to enhance the family income, whereas education is regarded as a waste of time and money as the outcomes are uncertain.

According to the study on “Girls’ and Women’s Education in Laos” Peters (1998) “girls and women in Laos are not the target of strong discriminatory practices.” In addition, the Lao legal system does not discriminate against women. The results simply showed that there are more males than females in schools. Furthermore, the low education level of women is reflected through the average wage rate for women being 28% lower than that of men and that double the number of women to men, 53%, work in the informal sector (FAO, 2013). One reason that could perhaps explain this is that culturally, girls are expected to do domestic chores, older daughters are responsible to take care of their younger siblings and ethnic minority girls in remote villages of Southern Laos, where this study was conducted, got married and bore children at a young age. These observations perhaps, are applicable to older children but not primary education students.

The various problems attendant to girls’ education in Lao PDR are not limited to this country but also apply to many countries around the world. Currently, the issue of gender in education has been raised at a global level. UNESCO launched the Global Partnership for Girls and Women’s Education in May 2011. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova welcomed the participants to the Forum, which aimed to galvanize support from the private and public sectors to make quality education available for girls and women everywhere. In Lao PDR, specifically, INGOs have cooperated with JICA through education projects called “Community Initiative Education Development.” These projects were conducted in four provinces in Southern Laos. In like manner, results showed that the number of girls in primary school was lower than boys particularly in remote areas where the majority of minority ethnic groups live. Despite the multiple interventions to mainstream women or girls in

education, there seems to be a gap in explaining the phenomenon. How are women viewed specifically in the Ta-oy tribe? Could there be hidden meanings or untold practices regarding girl's participation in school? Therefore, this study on gender meanings is meant to find out and respond to the gender education issues in the Ta-oy tribe in Southern Laos.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employed a mixed methods research design, the explanatory sequential design and transformative design. The purpose of the explanatory sequential design was to use a qualitative strand to explain initial quantitative results (Creswell, J, & Clark, V. 2011). This design used quantitative results for the first three objectives of the study to guide purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase in the last two objectives of the study.

The method for collecting data for the purpose of this study employed Simple Random Sampling to select the sample from 56 villages, 3,397 households of the Ta-oy District. However, since this study was conducted with the Ta-oy tribe only, therefore the number of villages and households were reduced to 13 villages and 1,017 households which were made up purely of the Ta-oy tribe. Therefore, the computation of the population size of this study for households resulted to 159 and 68 respondents from student representatives (lower secondary school of Pajudon Village) participated in the survey.

Questionnaires were distributed and facilitated by the researcher and his 10 person team who were trained as enumerators. Mostly, they were female enumerators. One of the lower secondary schools in the Ta-oy district was selected for the student respondents, where 68 students were asked to answer the questionnaire. In-depth interviews were conducted with two head office directors of the district, one of whom was from the Lao Women's Union and one from the District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB). An FGD was conducted with 10 members of the Village Education Development Committee.

Data gathered from the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Relationships of the variables was employed using the measures of association/ correlation test of the data to determine the relationship of

the socio-demographic characteristics and the views on gender roles of the respondents and to find out significant differences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Socio-demographic Characteristics of the respondents

Of the 159 respondents, the majority (64.8%) of the respondents were male with 47.2% of respondents had no formal education (19.5% males, 27.6% females), upland rice farmers (91.8%), with an annual income of US\$120 or less and got married as early as age 11 with majority (62.3%) between the ages of 16 and 20 years old. The young marrying age is a potential reason why students, females in particular, do not continue with higher education and the dropout rate is high.

The male respondents outnumber the females, because, generally, in Ta-oy tribe the wives are expected to be quiet and the husbands are to respond to the questions, unless the husband was not present or the question directly involves the women. This implies that the conclusion by Khamphoui (2012) that men tend to engage in discussions and make decisions whereas women stay quiet was accurate and the impact could be more extensive, in that women do not participate in community activities and leadership as well as education. Furthermore, it indicated the cultural impression of women's role in society, which could negatively impact on female education. Table 1 indicates that female education was previously not prioritized as more women than men had no formal education. Additionally, even where women did have some education, there were significantly less females than males who had achieved higher education.

### Defining Gender in the Context of the Ta-oy Tribe

Most of the respondents (56.6%) had heard the word gender. They knew the term from NGOs (35.8%) who have implemented activities related to gender issues. Community meetings (13.8%) were another source that has spread information about gender to the villagers.

Moreover, respondents were asked to define the meaning of the word gender based on their own definition and perspective. Of the 159 respondents, most (49 or 31%) defined gender as "men and women who are

working equally in solidarity in the farm.” This may be because the majority of respondents were upland rice farmers, thus their definition was within the context of working equally in the farm. There were 7 (4%) respondents who defined gender as, “men and women who are equal in working and together make decisions to solve any problem” while 13 (8%) respondents stated that gender is, “both men and women are equal in receiving knowledge in school,” which indicated that some respondents recognized gender inequality in education. More than a third (43 or 27%) gave a very simple definition as “the condition of being female or male.”

Other views of gender meaning came from key informant interviews with the director of the Lao Women’s Union in Ta-oy district who defined gender as, “the relationship between female and male in social and cultural activities.” Different people will give different meanings depending on where their source of knowledge about the word gender comes from. As the standpoint theory asserted, a person’s stand point affects their view of the world and thus the respondent’s position in the community and environment they are living in will influence their interpretation of gender meanings as the role of men and women in the society will be different for each person. For instance, the respondents would define gender in the context of working in the farm equally between men and women, while the head of the LWU defined gender as the relationship between men and women. As both representative respondents were from different livelihood backgrounds, their definitions were distinct.

It can be surmised that in general, respondents knew the word “gender” and they also had their own definitions such as “men and women who are working equally in solidarity in the farm” and some of respondents mentioned gender which means “both men and women are equal in receiving knowledge in school.” More than half of the respondents could define gender with an appropriate definition. It could be seen that NGOs played an important role in terms of spreading information in rural areas where the roads and transport links were still in a bad condition. Community meetings were another source where the villagers could access the information of government policies and other projects’ aids.

This corroborates the finding of Samal (2012) that a family’s worldview can impact their perspective. In this case, how gender was defined as being related to working on the farm was linked to their occupation as upland rice farmers. The respondents’ considerations did not expand outside of their

worldview, for instance to contemplate about women's rights and gender discrimination. Furthermore, this supports the Standpoint theory, in that the respondent's view of the world from the rural location of the Ta-oy district impacts on their perception of women. For the most part a woman's role in society in Ta-oy, would indicate why the majority of respondents related the definition of "gender" to working on the farm. The background and environment of the respondents can be seen to be "meaning-making" as their suggested definitions of gender centered around women's working role in the family and on the farm.

### **Relationship of Socio-demographic Characteristics and Respondents' View on Gender Role**

In order to determine the relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents such as sex, educational attainment, occupation and annual family income, and their views on gender role, the Pearson Chi-square was used. The Pearson Chi-square was used as the statistical test and based on the decision rule of the Chi-square test, the null was rejected ( $H_0$ ) if the p-value was less than 0.05. Otherwise, it failed to reject the null. All the Pearson Chi-square test results were showed in table 3.

Results of the Pearson Chi-square test showed that there was no association between the respondents' sex and their choice of priority child regarding educational importance; preferred child to be educated when resources are limited; the main child helping with work in the home at a 5% level significance since its p-values (0.052, 0.99, 0.12 respectively) were greater than 0.05 alpha. Thus, those variables were independent and not associated with the sex of the respondents.

At 5% level of significance, it was found that there was no significant association between the respondents' educational attainment, occupation, and annual family income and their choice of priority child in education, preferred child to be educated when resources are limited and the main child helping with work in the home since the respective equivalent p-values (0.10, 0.76 and 0.36 for education attainment; 0.38, 0.29, 0.57 for occupation; and 0.06, 0.53, 0.34 for annual family income) were greater than 0.05 alpha. It could be said that those variables were independent and not related to the socio-demographic characteristics of educational attainment, occupation, and annual family income of the respondents.

In conclusion, statistically most of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents such as sex, educational attainment, occupation, and annual family income had no significant effect on their views of gender roles. However, even if sex of the respondent was not statically related to their preferred child to be educated when resources are limited and the main child helping with work in the home, for instance, it is still significant in that over three quarters of the respondents chose boys rather than girls and there were a greater number of respondents who said that their daughter was the primary person helping with work in the home. This indicated the negative culture towards educating females that their daughters were a second priority and that girls were not given time to attend school or to properly complete homework given at school.

### **Respondents' View of Girls/Women's Role and its Implications for School Inclusion**

There were 29 (18.2%) respondents who did not have a boy-child in school while 52 (32.7%) respondents did not have a girl-child in school. It was seen that there was a disparity between the sexes in education participation since the results showed the number of boy-students was greater than girl-students in school. In fact, the results from the focus group discussion and the interviews with the director of the District Education Bureau and the director of the district Lao women's union agreed that the number of girls and boys in school was not equitable. One of the many problems for gender equality in education that this study was trying to investigate was the reason why the number of female students in higher grades was less than male students. These reasons could be attributed to the meanings that the Ta-oy tribe attaches to gender.

From the respondents' views of the causes as to why there were less girls in school was that most girls were used to help with their parents' work in the home. Also, it was not safe for girls to travel to school when it was far away from their home. When the school was built in the village the females have grown beyond their school age and thus were reluctant to attend school. Only a few parents complained that it was their daughter's laziness to study that kept them at home to help with work. However, it was found that most of the female students who were asked argued that they loved to go to school everyday but that they all also had to work hard at home.



In terms of who was the most influential person in the family regarding decision making about sending the children to school, it was found that 76% of respondents said they equally made the decision whereas 20% of the respondents agreed that the father was the most influential person in making this decision, particularly for small minority groups such as the Taoy tribe. Only 3% of respondents answered that the mother influenced the decision-making but that was because they were widows. However, due to the multiple projects implemented by the government and NGOs regarding gender rights, these habits were disappearing gradually.

The findings also showed that 100% of respondents were aware that education was necessary for their children. However, when the respondents were asked to choose which child should be educated if their resources would permit them to educate only one child, most of the respondents (77%) answered that they would prefer to educate boys. Only a few respondents (23%) claimed that they would rather educate girls but again, this was mainly because there was no boy-child in the family. The main reason why boy-children were more commonly the first priority to be educated was because traditionally it was boys/men who would look after their parents and stay with the family when they got married. Girls/women were traditionally expected to stay with the husband's family. Girls/women also often got married early so it was seen as a waste of resources to educate girls. It could be said that girls/women were viewed as a second priority in education.

The majority of respondents (54%) would like to see their daughters' career in the future be teaching and 26% of respondents preferred their daughters to become nurses, whereas only 18% of respondents answered that it depended on their daughters' decision. Conversely, the female student respondents revealed that the future job they would like to do would be nursing (26%); teaching (19%), and becoming a lawyer (15%). It was seen that the preferred future profession between the children and parents were reversed. This could be because the more frequently the respondents had seen the job being done in their community, the more likely they were to choose that for their daughters' ideal future career.

Most respondents (43%) mentioned that, if given the opportunity, the highest level to which they would educate their son would be a bachelors degree level, while only 33% would educate their daughter to this level. Meanwhile, the largest proportion of the respondents answered that they

would educate their daughters up to high school or upper secondary school level, which was still a basic level of education and would not give them the necessary qualifications as the minimum requirement for most jobs is at least a complete vocational school at least. Again, despite the respondents being given the scenario in which resources were not limited, they still put their sons as the first priority.

The results (Table 3) showed that the chore work done most commonly by sons included helping with work in the upland rice fields, house construction and repairs, bamboo weaving, taking care of cattle in the fields, finding food, fetching water, and cooking. Most of these chores done by sons were categorized as being done sometimes by the largest proportion of respondents. Some of the respondents agreed that some tasks are never done by male children, such as looking after younger siblings (67%) and searching for firewood (65%). However, male student respondents claimed that they did help with work such as fetching water, searching for firewood, cooking, cleaning the house and looking after younger siblings and they did these tasks every day.

The list of chores done by daughters (Table 4) included fetching water, pounding rice, cooking, searching for firewood, feeding pets, finding food, looking after younger siblings, cleaning and helping to work in the upland rice fields. These tasks were also confirmed by the female student respondents as most of them answered that they got involved in these activities every day. However, some tasks were rarely done by daughters such as house construction and repair, and bamboo weaving, although some of girls/women did cotton weaving instead. It was seen that daughters helped with work for the family more than sons.

The respondents were asked to rank the important reasons for educating girls/women including their social role for the purpose of finding their view on the contents. The responses were as following in the order of the most important to the least important: educating girls/women is important step in overcoming poverty; educating girls/women is important as educating boys/men; educating girls/women is important benefit for society as a whole; educating girls/women will be more productive at home and work; girls/women's biological and physiological characteristics are not strong as boys/men; girls/women should stay and with work in the home helping family; and girls/women are not productive as boys/men. This indicated that most of the respondents realized the importance of educating girls/women.

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## **Proposed Plans to Promote Girls' Participation in School**

The DESB statistical report indicated that there was a considerable disparity in the sex distribution in school with the enrolment rate of males being 79% while only 70% for females in primary school (grade 1- grade 5). The gross enrollment rate at lower secondary school was 29% for females and 40% for males. This disparity was also confirmed by the respondents' survey, FGD, and KII results who confirmed the same that the number of boy-students was greater than girl-students. Thus, it was seen that girl-students are disadvantaged numerically in school.

It was found that some of the respondents were aware of the MOES's policies and strategies, but they did not access the information or sometimes misinterpreted the policies because of their low education background. From the results of the one hundred and fifty-nine respondents, 122 (70%) respondents were not knowledgeable about measures taken by MOES to improve education while only 29% respondents were aware, but they could not specifically name any of those measures. In fact, the respondents agreed that the MOES's policies and strategies were not specific on girls/women's education yet.

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents said they could advise girls and other parents; 30% said they should pay fees and provide for the needs of girl-students, while 10% of parents said they should give girls an equal opportunity to attend school. The respondents also suggested that to improve girls' participation in education parents must encourage their children go to school, support sufficient funds for their child's basis educational needs, avoid asking children to help with work in the home and reduce the chores for girls, and seek education to solve their illiteracy. The respondents also suggested that the VEDC should make sure that children go to school regularly and villagers support village volunteer teachers. Finally, village authorities should conduct fundraising to support poor students and meet with families who keep their children out of school.

In addition, most of the respondents believed that if girls/women were offered a scholarship by the government or NGOs, this would increase the number of girls/women in school. They also agreed that employing more female teachers in school would increase girls' participation in school because they would act as good role models to encourage girls to participate in education and its activities.

Alternative suggestions were compiled and summarized from FGDs and KIIs on how to improve girls' participation in school. This includes eradicating illiteracy among parents; implementing early childhood education in rural areas; hiring more female teachers; conducting a campaign stop early marriage; penalizing parents who keep girls out of school; establishing a girls/women committee at a village level; and strengthening the capacity of government of relevant institutions and agencies to address ethnic and gender concerns and equality in education.

These suggestions, based on the experiences and observations of stakeholders in the communities where the programs to improve the participation of girls in schools will be initiated, should be taken into consideration in present and future initiatives to improve female participation in schooling.

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**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

		n	%	Total (n)	Total (%)
<b>Sex</b>	Male	103	64.8	159	100.0
	Female	56	35.2		
<b>Age</b>	19 - 29	14	8.8	28	17.6
		14	8.8		
	30 - 49	57	35.8	94	59.1
		37	23.3		
	50 - 69	27	16.9	32	20.0
		5	3.1		
	> 70	5	3.1	5	3.1
		0	0.0		
<b>Educational attainment</b>	No formal education	31	19.5	75	47.1
		44	27.6		
	Primary education	58	36.4	67	42.0
		9	5.6		
	Secondary education	11	6.9	14	8.7
		3	1.8		
	Vocational education	3	1.8	3	1.8
		0	0.0		
<b>Occupation</b>	Unemployed/seeking	6	3.8	8	5.1
		2	1.3		
	Salaried/wage worker	4	2.5	5	8.8
		1	6.3		
	Self-employed	93	58.5	146	91.8
		53	33.3		
<b>Annual family income range</b>	US\$ 120 or less	42	26.4	78	49.0
		36	22.6		
	US\$ 121 to US\$ 500	42	26.4	62	39.0
		20	12.6		
	US\$ 501 to US\$ 1,000	12	7.5	12	7.5
		0	0.0		
	up to US\$ 1,000	7	4.4	7	4.4
		0	0.0		
<b>Age of marriage</b>	11-15	7	4.4	20	12.6
		13	8.2		
	16-20	63	39.6	99	62.2
		36	22.6		
	21-25	27	16.9	34	21.3
		7	4.4		
	26-30	5	3.1	5	3.1
		0	0.0		
	> 31	1	0.6	1	0.6

**Table 2.** Summary of Chi-Square value between sex, educational attainment, occupation, annual income and three variables

Variables	Socio-demographic Characteristics				
	Sex P-value	Educational attainment P-value	Occupation P-value	Annual Income P-value	Conclusion
the choice of priority child in education	0.0052	0.1	4.14	0.06	ns
preferred child to be educated when resources are limited	0.99	0.76	2.42	0.53	ns
the main child helping with work in the home	0.12	0.36	2.88	0.31	ns

**Table 3.** The distribution of son's chores in the home

List chore works of son	every day		some time		never		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
upland rice farming	7	4.4	141	88.7	1	.6	149	93.7
build/repair the house			92	57.9	31	19.5	123	77.4
bamboo weaving			107	67.3	24	15.1	131	82.4
feed cattle in the field	9	5.7	121	76.1	12	7.5	142	89.3
find food	1	.6	142	89.3	6	3.8	149	93.7
fetch water	27	17.0	41	25.8	77	48.4	145	91.2
cooking	32	20.1	57	35.8	53	33.3	142	89.3
look after siblings	7	4.4	29	18.2	106	66.7	142	89.3
search for firewood			38	23.9	104	65.4	142	89.3

**Table 4.** The distribution of daughter’s chores in the home

List chore works of daughter	every day		some time		never		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Fetching water	130	81.8	5	3.1			135	84.9
Pounding rice	33	20.8	101	63.5			134	84.3
Cooking	95	59.7	40	25.2			135	84.9
Searching for firewood			132	83.0	2	1.3	134	84.3
Feeding pets	48	30.2	86	54.1			134	84.3
Find food	4	2.5	126	79.2	3	1.9	133	83.6
Looking after siblings	16	10.1	115	72.3	3	1.9	134	84.3
Cleaning	98	61.6	37	23.3			135	84.9
Upland rice farming	1	.6	125	78.6	3	1.9	129	81.1