

# Gendered Trajectories through School, Work and Marriage in Vietnam

Ina Zharkevich, Jennifer Roest and Vu Thi Thanh Huong



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## Summary

This paper discusses the school, work and marriage trajectories of young people in Vietnam, using analysis of Young Lives longitudinal qualitative data gathered from 16 children and their parents between 2007 and 2014 as well as descriptive survey statistics. One of the main findings is that gender is not always a key driver of children's divergent schooling, working and marriage trajectories. Instead, intersectionality of socio-economic status, locality and ethnicity play a more important role, with locality and ethnicity associated with the widest gaps in school, work and marriage trajectories. Gender gaps in Vietnam do not appear to open up until mid- to late adolescence, close to upper secondary school age, with girls more likely to continue their education at a higher level. However, girls' slight advantage in education does not necessarily translate into an advantage in the labour market, since boys have access to more prestigious and better-paid jobs. The findings indicate that gender gaps evolve over the life course and are shaped by socio-economic status, ethnicity and locality, as well as by social norms, which have a particularly strong bearing on gender relations as girls and boys come of age and as they start families. This points towards the centrality of longitudinal research and the life-course approach for understanding the gendered nature of young people's pathways (and by implication, the importance of tracking children through into adulthood).

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## **About Young Lives**

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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The views expressed are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

# 1. Introduction and background to the situation of young people in Vietnam

## 1.1. Demographics

Vietnam has experienced rapid socio-economic development over the past two decades. Economic and political reforms in the 1980s (Doi Moi), aimed at creating a 'socialist-oriented market economy', led to a reduction in Vietnam's poverty rate from 58.1 per cent in 1993 to 9.6 per cent in 2012 (OECD 2014; UN Women 2016) and to its transition to lower-middle-income status in 2010. Young people feature prominently in the philosophy of the Vietnamese state and the Communist Party of Vietnam, which de facto rules the country. The Vietnam Youth Law (2005) defines the category of youth as anyone between the ages of 16 and 30. Alongside the Youth Development Strategy for 2011–2020, the Youth Law sees young people as central to the economic growth and prosperity of the country. Every effort is made to raise a 'patriotic generation' and to create a youth workforce that will meet the demands of the modernised economy (see Ministry of Home Affairs and UNFPA 2012). Indeed, the Youth Development Strategy aims to create new jobs for young people as well as to improve their education and skills. Yet, despite many remarkable achievements – such as a near-universal literacy rate, near-universal school enrolment and high academic results achieved by Vietnamese students (Rolleston and Krutikova 2014; Rolleston et al. 2013) – young people in contemporary Vietnam face problems finding jobs, acquiring appropriate skills and training and getting access to healthcare, according to the 2015 *National Report on Vietnamese Youth* (Ministry of Internal Affairs and UNFPA 2015)).

The focus on young people as an engine for economic growth can be explained by the distinctive demographic situation in Vietnam – the so-called 'golden population structure'. Vietnam is experiencing the highest-ever number of young people as a proportion of the population – those aged 15–29 comprised 31.9 per cent of the total workforce in 2010 (United Nations 2015) – and over 50 per cent of the population are aged 15–64 and classed as non-dependent (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011). The Vietnamese state views this as a unique opportunity for economic growth and modernisation through the use of abundant human resources.

Vietnam has also experienced a demographic transition from high to low fertility and mortality, resulting in a decline in the total dependency ratio and a shrinking of the average household size from 4.8 people in 1989 to 3.8 in 2009 (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011). Concurrently, the sex ratio at birth has become increasingly imbalanced so that, whilst close to normal in 2000 (105 boys to 100 girls), by 2014 official figures showed 112.2 male births per 100 female (UNFPA 2009). This trend reflects greater access to ultrasound technology and increased recourse to selective abortion in recent years, and points towards a deep patriarchal bias in the Vietnamese society, rooted in Confucian norms and patrilineal ideology (see discussion below).

## 1.2. Education

Though some researchers claim that gender no longer affects children's education trajectories and that inequalities in education have almost disappeared (Lê 2006a, Truong et al. 1995), the *National Report on Vietnamese Youth* (Ministry of Internal Affairs and UNFPA 2015) finds that there are gaps in educational access between youth from Kinh majority and ethnic minority groups, between children from families with different socio-economic backgrounds, and between those from different socio-economic regions. Young Lives research indicates that Vietnam has made impressive progress in narrowing gaps in educational achievement between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (Rolleston et al. 2013), but confirms that ethnicity and locality remain important for understanding the divergent education trajectories of boys and girls (Chi 2010, 2011; Huong 2011, 2014; Young Lives 2014a). Indeed, findings show that coming from an ethnic minority group might be of greater disadvantage than being poor, including with regard to children's interest in studies (Duc and Tam 2013). Other studies indicate that even the equal learning opportunities offered by Vietnam's egalitarian school system cannot compensate for differences in household circumstances, whereby better-off children are provided with more 'sophisticated learning opportunities' such as taking additional classes and so forth (Rolleston and Krutikova 2014).

## 1.3. Work

Currently, unemployment and lack of jobs pose a significant challenge to Vietnamese young people, especially in rural areas. In 2010, 66.5 per cent of unemployed people were classed as youth and the youth unemployment rate was almost three times higher than that of adults (United Nations 2015). Youth unemployment is less problematic in Vietnam than in many other lower-middle-income countries, due at least in part to a rapidly expanding economy guided by a strong state and solid work ethic (based on the combination of Confucian notions of filial duty and Communist values (McNally 2003; Rydstrom 2006)). However, young people are still more likely to be unemployed than other groups of the population.

Gender disparities in education have consequences for access to employment and training opportunities for boys and girls in Vietnam. Young females (those under 30 years old) are reported to have the highest unemployment rates – 54.2 per cent compared to 45.3 per cent for young males. Half of young females were unemployed because they needed to stay at home to do household chores, while young males were unemployed because could not find appropriate jobs or did not want to work (Ngo 2010). In addition, the unemployment rates of young people in urban areas are higher than those in rural areas and the unemployment rates of Kinh youth are higher than those of ethnic minority groups. This is because Kinh young people and those from urban areas have high job expectations and they spend longer searching for appropriate jobs.

The other problem facing Vietnamese young people is the lack of skilled jobs. The Population and Housing Survey of 2009 (GSO 2010) showed that about 24 million young people in the 16–30 age group (85.8 per cent of the youth population) never received any technical/professional training. Moreover, the data from Round 2 of the Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY2) (Ministry of Health et al. 2010) indicated that among those who received technical/professional training, only 41.7 per cent were doing the jobs they had been trained for and the percentage of young people doing unskilled jobs had rapidly increased in both urban and rural areas (2010). The technical/professional training for young females is usually very traditional and badly paid, for example, training in sewing or hairdressing, and this partly explains why the rates of young females moving out of the

agriculture sector are lower than those of young males, according to the 2015 *National Report on Vietnamese Youth* (Ministry of Internal Affairs and UNFPA 2015).

#### 1.4. Marriage

Data from the National Population and Housing Census (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011) indicates that ethnic minority girls who live in remote areas tend to get married earlier than their urban peers. The report also shows that girls usually marry earlier than boys: the mean age at marriage is 26.2 years for males and 22.8 years for females. According to Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey data, about 3.2 per cent of females (58 people) aged 15–19 reported being pregnant, among whom 24.3 per cent (12 people) reported not wanting to be pregnant (GSO and UNICEF 2010). This may be partly because females have little access to information about contraceptive measures and safe sex: only 14.5 per cent of females used condoms when having first sexual intercourse while the rate for young males was 36.5 per cent, according to SAVY2 (Ministry of Health et al. 2010).

## 2. Review of youth studies in Vietnam

There is a lack of studies published in English regarding youth in Vietnam. A number of articles analyse young people's risky behaviours and sexual attitudes (Bélanger and Hong 1999; Blum, Sudhinaraset and Emerson 2012; Le and Blum 2011; P. A. Nguyen 2007), but few in-depth qualitative studies are available. The most notable exception is Rydstrøm's seminal ethnographic work with children on social norms and values in a northern Vietnamese rural commune (Rydstrøm's fieldwork was conducted in 1994, and 2000–01 (Rydstrøm 2006; Rydstrøm 2003, 2010, 2013). Her research is remarkable for showing the ways in which social norms, rooted in a combination of Communist and Confucian ethics, continue to shape the dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity as well as gender relations.

Despite the spread of communist ethics over the past decades, which celebrate both the productive and the reproductive roles of women, Confucian values remain deeply engrained in the fabric of Vietnamese society, stressing the role of women as 'the bearers of the ideal family' and as submissive partners who uphold harmony in the household (Rydstrøm 2010). According to Confucian ideas, male progenies are central for the continuation of the patrilineage, while women and girls are considered as being outside the lineage (Rydstrøm 2006). The Confucian moral code of the 'three obediences' holds that a woman must be obedient to her father before married, to her husband after marriage and to the eldest son after the death of her husband (Schuler et al. 2006). In Vietnam, males are culturally sanctioned to express anger, which often leads to cases of domestic violence, whereas women are supposed to uphold 'harmony' and remain calm (Rydstrøm 2013). Even though Young Lives did not initially plan to look into domestic violence, it emerged as one of the important themes running through children's narratives (Pells, Wilson and Hang 2015).

After several decades of Communist ideology, which tried to inculcate an ethic of gender equality and erase some of the more oppressive norms regulating gender relations (Turley 1972), Vietnam appears to have remained a strongly patriarchal society. In fact, under the influence of Communist ethics, women in Vietnam are now pressured to perform well across



multiple roles and many experience the problem of 'double burden', where they must do paid work alongside completing the majority of domestic tasks at home (Schuler et al. 2006). Illustratively, the National Women's Union Campaign calls on women to 'Study Actively, Work Creatively, Raise Children Well and Build Happy Families' (ibid.). Communist ideals of women as productive workers in the national economy have been layered on top of Confucian values that emphasise women's domestic roles, producing a gender ideology that requires women to shoulder responsibility in multiple domains of life, without necessarily having the corresponding powers of decision-making or status within the family and patriline.

Alongside economic changes over the past two decades, Vietnam underwent a process of rapid socio-cultural change in the 1980s–90s. The economic liberalisation in the 1980s–90s and its impact on family values and social mores has received considerable attention from researchers, reflecting a strong societal concern about the possible 'corruption' of society by norms and practices alien to Vietnamese society. Nilan (Nilan 1999) notes that the 'social evils' campaigns, launched in 1996, reflect the state's concerns about the threat of consumerism and Western-style trends to Vietnamese culture and to Communist ideology. The Vietnamese state established the Department of Social Evils Prevention, a branch of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, in order to campaign against 'social evils', which have variously included prostitution, trafficking, internet access, pornography, karaoke bars, gambling, drugs, early sexual activity, etc. Arguably, 'social evils' has become a catch-all term to include anything bad, including divorce, family breakdown, alcoholism and domestic violence. In a study of trafficking, Vijeyrasa (Vijeyarasa 2010) suggests that that nearly 20 years of 'social evils' language influences people's thinking about a range of social questions and shows that the rhetoric of social evils stigmatises disadvantaged people and increases their vulnerability.

Despite the ascendance of consumer society, with multiple opportunities for indulging in enjoyable pastimes, many authors note how children and young people in Vietnam are highly committed to study and value education above all (Bayly 2007; P.A. Nguyen 2004; Nilan 1999). Nilan (1999: 365) notes a tendency in the media to portray youth crime as resulting from an 'absence of discipline in the family, schools and society, inconsistencies in childcare and educational practices, breakdown of traditional patterns of family life, one-parent households, or both parents working'. In other words, the breakdown of a traditional family and the alleged decline of the Confucian notions of filial piety, obedience and respect – something which is not necessarily supported by Young Lives data – is often taken as a reason behind the failings of individual children.

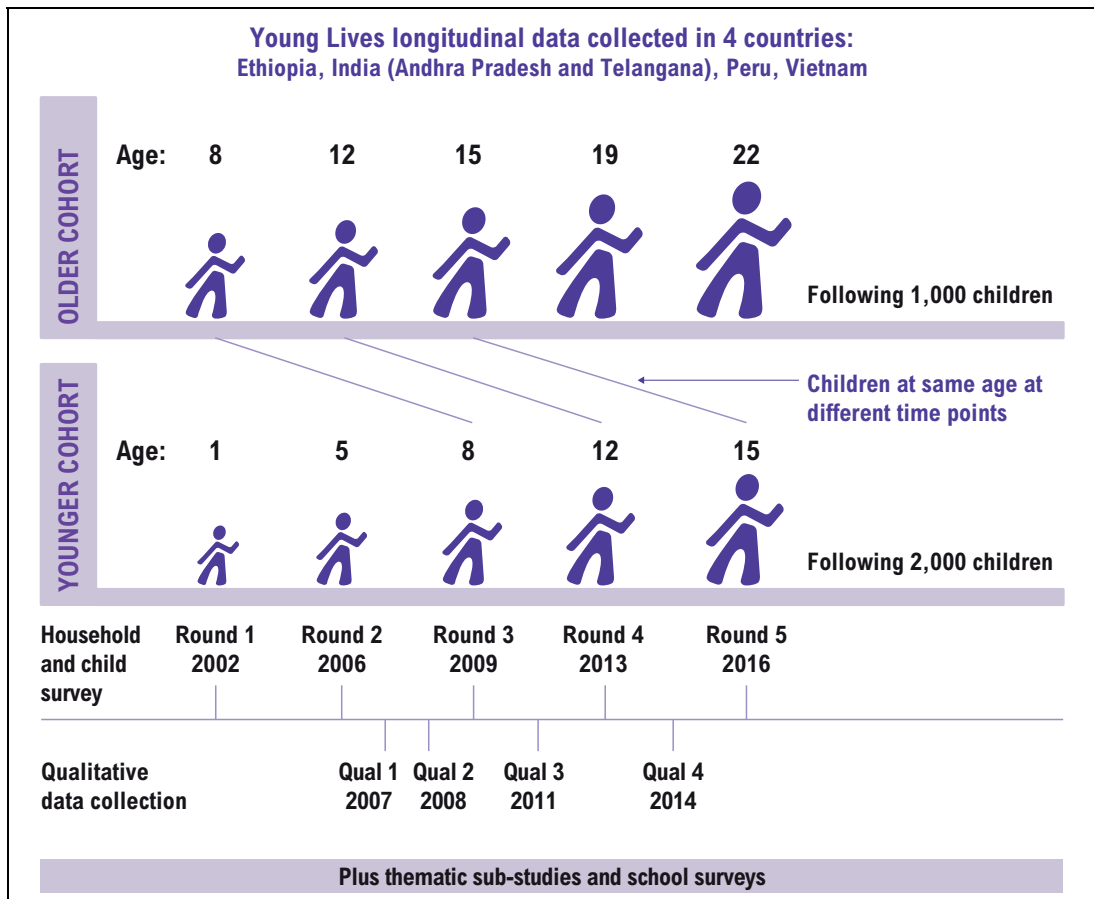
Given the paucity of qualitative research on children and young people in Vietnam, this Working Paper makes a valuable contribution to existing literature, drawing on the only available longitudinal qualitative dataset from Vietnam. It adopts a life-course approach in analysing qualitative data from four rounds of data collection and survey data from two rounds, demonstrating how earlier conditions in life impact on children's later outcomes, how children's lives are shaped within the micro-context of their families, and how young people's life trajectories are embedded in the socio-economic and historical context they grow up in. Rather than focusing solely on the survey data, which indicate some potential determinants of children's outcomes, this paper makes use of the rich qualitative dataset to explain the mechanisms, processes and norms that lead to particular outcomes. The paper seeks to present a holistic picture of children's lives and, while paying attention to structural influences on children's trajectories, such as class, ethnicity and locality, the paper also highlights the

centrality of norms, socio-cultural capital and aspirations (those of both children and parents) for determining children’s trajectories in schooling, work and marriage.

### 3. About Young Lives: study sample and methodology

This paper draws on data from Young Lives, a 15-year study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Peru, India (in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Vietnam. The aim of the study is to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children’s life chances in the context of Millennium Development Goals. Young Lives collects data from two cohorts of children in each country: 2,000 born in 2000–01 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 children born in 1994–95 (the Older Cohort). A survey is carried out every three years with a sample of children and their caregivers (see Figure 1 below), and is complemented by qualitative research with a sub-sample of 50 children in each country, their parents/caregivers, and other key figures in the community, including teachers, local health workers and community elders (see [younglives.org.uk](http://younglives.org.uk) and Crivello et al. (Crivello, Morrow and Wilson 2013) for further details).

**Figure 1.** *Young Lives study design*



This paper draws on Rounds 2 and 4 of the survey data, gathered in 20 sites from a sample of 887 children, selected using a pro-poor sampling methodology (Brock and Knowles 2011). It also draws on four rounds of qualitative data, gathered in 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014 in three sites: Van Tri (a prosperous rural commune in the Red River Delta, about 25 km from Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam), Nghia Tan (an urban neighbourhood in Da Nang city) and Van Lam (a very poor rural commune in the central highlands, where the Kinh and the Cham H'Roi – an ethnic minority group – cohabit). These sites were purposively selected from the Young Lives 20 survey sites to enable an exploration of variations in location (rural and urban), ethnicity and socio-economic status, and to include differing regions, reflecting the main ethnic groups. In each site, 12 Young Lives children were selected – six older children (born in 1994), and six younger children (born in 2001) (see Crivello et al. 2013). The process of qualitative research was guided by a number of ethical principles: the primacy of informed consent, anonymity, respect and protection for children, working with local researchers and reporting back to the communities (Morrow 2012, 2013a)

Since the paper sets out to explore the gendered nature of children's transitions in education, marriage and work, it was decided to focus on the Older Cohort, who were aged 19–20 in 2014. There are 24 Older Cohort children in the qualitative sample and the paper analyses data relating to 16 of these, selected as the cases which had the most data available consistently across different rounds of data collection (five from each of two sites and six from the third). Data were collected from a wide pool of respondents, yielding a more holistic understanding of children's lives. They were drawn from group activities and discussions, in-depth interviews and observations, and collected from the children/young people, their caregivers, siblings, other relatives, friends, their teachers and community representatives. Most of the data were collected in 2011 (Qualitative Round 3) when the cohort were 16–17 and in 2014 (Qualitative Round 4). The paper also draws on data from Qualitative Round 1 (2007) and Qualitative Round 2 (2008), where such data are available, and on fieldwork notes (especially in Van Lam community), which provide valuable insights into the intra-household dynamics of the case-study children, thus complementing the interview data.

Young Lives research has shown that children's trajectories cannot be understood outside the context of their families and home environment (Rolleston and Krutikova 2014). Caregivers' interviews in particular can provide a valuable means to explore both the context and direction of children's trajectories. Hence this paper gives equal weight to the analysis of children and caregiver's interviews, using them to show the interdependence between the aspirations, norms and values expressed by children and their parents or, in some cases, by children and their siblings.

There are some limitations to the study, which should be borne in mind. First, the Young Lives sample is pro-poor. Assessment of the sampling approach has found that, 'it covers the diversity of children in the country in a wide variety of attributes and experiences' (N. Nguyen 2008); however, findings do not necessarily represent the experiences of more affluent young people. Second, the paper draws on a relatively small number of qualitative cases, and logistical difficulties during Qualitative Rounds 1 and 2 (in 2007 and 2008) mean that only young people from Van Lam were consistently involved across all four rounds. Third, the paper addresses substantial topics (transitions into marriage, school and work) in a confined space and thus may not represent the full complexity of processes involved in determining young people's trajectories through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Finally, while all 16 children's interviews (as well as those of their caregivers) have been analysed across all available rounds, this paper cites only a selection of cases, where they offer

particularly clear examples for illuminating the general trends and factors impacting on children's trajectories (see Morrow and Crivello (Morrow and Crivello 2015) for further discussion of qualitative longitudinal research).

The next section of the paper presents an overview of descriptive statistics based on the survey findings from Round 4 before the paper moves onto the qualitative data analysis and discussion.<sup>1</sup>

## 4. Overview of gender-based differences and outcomes at the age of 19

### 4.1. Education

By the age of 19, almost half the Young Lives Older Cohort had left education completely, whilst 18 per cent were attending upper secondary school and 35 per cent were attending post-secondary or vocational schools, college or university (see Table 1). Gender disparities in enrolment were visible, with girls more likely to have remained in school for longer and to have progressed to higher levels; 21 per cent of girls were attending university, for example, as opposed to only 16 per cent of boys.

Of those who were no longer enrolled in school, girls were more likely to have completed higher levels of education than boys – 37 per cent of girls having completed at least upper secondary school compared with 27 per cent of boys. The most likely reasons for boys and girls, both urban and rural, to have left education by the age of 19 were work-related, including the need to learn a skill or trade, carry out domestic or agricultural work, or undertake paid work. Work-related reasons also included leaving school because further education or qualifications were not necessary for the specific job that young person intended to do in the future. Girls were far more likely to have left because of marriage than boys – 15 versus 3 per cent.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the survey findings from Round 4 see also the Young Lives Round 4 factsheets on Youth and Development (Young Lives 2014b) and on Education and Learning (Young Lives 2014a).

**Table 1.** *Young people's education enrolment and highest level of education completed, by gender, location and ethnicity (age 19) (%)*

		None	Primary	Lower secondary	Senior secondary	Post-secondary/vocational/college	University	Other	Total number
Full sample: level of education enrolled in, by gender	Male	50.35		0.71	16.71	15.06	16.24	0.94	425
	Female	42.23		0	19.26	17.07	21.01	0.44	457
	Total	46.15		0.34	18.03	16.1	18.71	0.68	882
Males: level of education enrolled in, by location	Urban	40.43		0	19.15	17.02	23.4	0	94
	Rural	52.91		0.92	15.9	14.68	14.37	1.22	327
	Total	50.12		0.71	16.63	15.2	16.39	0.95	421
Females: level of education enrolled in, by location	Urban	37.65			12.94	18.82	30.59	0	85
	Rural	38.69			22.32	17.86	20.54	0.6	336
	Total	38.48			20.43	18.05	22.57	0.48	421
Highest level completed for those no longer in education, by gender	Male	3.74	6.54	63.08	24.77	1.4	0.47		214
	Female	3.11	9.33	50.78	36.27	0	0.52		193
	Total	3.44	7.86	57.25	30.22	0.74	0.49		407
Highest level completed for those no longer in education, by ethnicity	Majority group	3.15	4.73	54.57	35.96	0.95	0.63		317
	Minority group	4.44	18.89	66.67	10	0	0		90
	Total	3.44	7.86	57.25	30.22	0.74	0.49		407

Source: Young Lives survey data from Round 4 (2013)

Location was also significant – particularly when combined with gender. Urban boys were over 10 per cent more likely to be enrolled in higher levels of education – post-secondary, vocational, college or university – than their rural peers, and a similar pattern was observable between urban and rural girls. Urban girls were the most likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education or above (49 per cent) and rural boys the least likely (29 per cent).

Disparities appeared regarding ethnicity, with young people from minority ethnic groups faring far worse in the education system than their majority ethnic peers. Of those no longer enrolled in education by 19 years old, only 10 per cent from ethnic minority groups had completed upper secondary school (and none any higher). Contrastingly, 38 per cent from ethnic majority groups had completed upper secondary, post-secondary or university level education.

**Table 2.** *Young people's educational aspirations, by gender, wealth tercile and location (age 19) (%)*

		None	Primary	Lower secondary	Senior secondary	Technological/vocational institute	Degree	Postgraduate	Total number
Full sample, by gender	Male	0.74	0	2.94	21.81	7.84	49.02	17.65	408
	Female	1.35	0.22	3.36	9.87	4.93	51.79	28.48	446
	Total	1.05	0.12	3.16	15.57	6.32	50.47	23.3	854
Full sample, by wealth tercile	1	2.34	0.78	13.28	30.47	8.59	39.06	5.47	128
	2	0.93	0	1.55	17.34	5.26	51.08	23.84	323
	3	0.27	0	0.8	9.07	6.13	54.13	29.6	375
	Total	0.85	0.12	3.03	15.62	6.17	50.61	23.61	826
Males, by location	Urban	0		0	20.43	5.38	49.46	24.73	93
	Rural	0.96		3.54	22.51	8.68	48.87	15.43	311
	Total	0.74		2.72	22.03	7.92	49.01	17.57	404
Females, by location	Urban	0	0	1.18	4.71	2.35	64.71	27.06	85
	Rural	1.22	0.31	2.45	9.79	4.89	50.15	31.19	327
	Total	0.97	0.24	2.18	8.74	4.37	53.16	30.34	412

Source: Young Lives survey data from Round 4 (2013)

At 19, a similar proportion of boys and girls aspired to reach degree-level education, but a higher proportion of girls aspired to post-graduate level than boys (see Table 2). Young people from the poorest tercile were more likely to have lower aspirations for their education – 45 per cent aspired to degree- or post-graduate level compared to 84 per cent of young people from the richest tercile. Rurality also made a difference here, with girls and boys from urban areas more likely to aspire to degree- or post-graduate level education than their rural counterparts, though a slightly higher percentage of girls from rural areas still aspired to higher levels of education than urban boys (81 per cent of rural girls compared to 74 per cent per cent of urban boys).

Young Lives also measured the educational aspirations of children at 12 years old, and comparisons between the two sets of data reveal that aspirations diminished most steeply amongst the poorest children. The percentage of children from the poorest tercile who aspired to reach degree level or higher had fallen by 14 per cent between the ages of 12 and 19 compared to a 7 per cent fall amongst the richest tercile. There were more minimal changes observable by gender: boys' aspirations had diminished slightly (from 70 per cent aspiring to degree level or above to 67 per cent), whilst girls' aspirations had increased slightly (from 78 to 80 per cent). This pattern was the same for girls and boys living in both rural and urban settings.

## 4.2. Activities

By the age of 19, Young Lives boys in Vietnam were more likely to be only working (44 per cent) than girls (26 per cent), where working was defined as either carrying out agricultural activities (not for their own families); working for someone other than members of their household; or working on their own account or for someone else's business (see Table 3). By contrast, girls were more likely to be only studying (36 per cent) than boys (25 per cent). Locality plays an important role in influencing activities: young people from urban sites were slightly more likely to be only studying and slightly less likely to be only working than their rural counterparts. The disparity is greater for young men, with those living in urban sites

around 13 per cent more likely to be only studying and 18 per cent less likely to be only working than those from rural areas.

Girls were much more likely to be married than boys, with 18 per cent being married or married and working/studying compared to only 5 per cent of boys. Again, location matters: a higher proportion of girls from rural sites were married than those from urban sites. Ethnicity also appears to make a difference: only 7 per cent of young people from ethnic majority groups were married or married and studying/working, compared to 44 per cent of those from minority ethnic minority groups.

Regarding socio-economic status, young people from the poorest households were less likely to be only studying (15 per cent vs. 40 per cent) and more likely to be only working (40 per cent vs. 27 per cent) in comparison to young people from the wealthiest households. The poorest young people were also more likely to be married or married and working than young people from the wealthiest tercile.

**Table 3.** *Young people's activities education/employment status (age 19) (%)*

		Not studying, working, or married	Only studying	Only working	Married (not studying nor working)	Studying and working	Studying and married	Working and married	Total number
Full sample, by gender	Male	7.49	25.12	44.44	0.48	17.87	0	4.59	414
	Female	5.41	36.49	25.68	6.08	13.96	0.23	12.16	444
	Total	6.41	31	34.73	3.38	15.85	0.12	8.51	858
Full sample, by location	Urban	8.38	36.31	31.84	1.68	19.55		2.23	179
	Rural	6.23	31.31	37.23	2.49	15.58		7.17	642
	Total	6.7	32.4	36.05	2.31	16.44		6.09	821
Full sample, by wealth tercile	1	6.82	15.91	40.91	7.58	4.55	0	24.24	132
	2	6.21	27.95	41.61	2.17	17.08	0	4.97	322
	3	6.88	39.68	27.25	2.38	19.58	0.26	3.97	378
	Total	6.61	31.37	34.98	3.13	16.23	0.12	7.57	832
Full sample, by ethnicity	Majority group	6.84	33.51	35.25	2.95	17.16	0.13	4.16	746
	Minority group	3.57	14.29	31.25	6.25	7.14	0	37.5	112
	Total	6.41	31	34.73	3.38	15.85	0.12	8.51	858
Males, by location	Urban	10.64	35.11	30.85	1.06	21.28		1.06	94
	Rural	6.62	22.4	48.9	0.32	17.03		4.73	317
	Total	7.54	25.3	44.77	0.49	18		3.89	411
Females, by location	Urban	5.88	37.65	32.94	2.35	17.65		3.53	85
	Rural	5.85	40	25.85	4.62	14.15		9.54	325
	Total	5.85	39.51	27.32	4.15	14.88		8.29	410

Source: Young Lives survey data from Round 4 (2013)

### 4.3. Employment

Of all forms of employment, the ones young people were most likely to be engaged in were self-employment in agriculture (28 per cent) or regular salaried employment (29 per cent) (see Table 4). Gender differences were present, but not to any great extent. Equal proportions were self-employed in agriculture, though girls were 7 per cent more likely to be self-employed in non-agricultural activities than boys, and boys were 5 per cent more likely to be in wage employment in agriculture than girls. The poorest young people were more likely to be working in the agricultural sector, the least poor in other sectors.

**Table 4.** *Young people's employment, by gender, location and wealth tercile (age 19) (%)*

		Self-employed (agriculture)	Wage employment (agriculture)	Other agriculture	Self-employed (non-agricultural)	Wage employment, unsalaried (non-agricultural)	Regular salaried employment (non-agricultural)	Other non-agricultural	Total number
Full sample: employment sector of those currently in work, by gender	Male	27.57	6.16	1.17	11.14	19.35	26.98	7.62	341
	Female	27.71	1.2	0.3	18.07	14.46	31.33	6.93	332
	Total	27.64	3.71	0.74	14.56	16.94	29.12	7.28	673
Full sample: employment sector of those currently in work, by location	Urban	1.63	0	0.81	28.46	21.95	37.4	9.76	123
	Rural	32.63	4.83	0.77	11.58	16.41	26.83	6.95	518
	Total	26.68	3.9	0.78	14.82	17.47	28.86	7.49	641
Full sample: employment sector of those currently in work, by wealth tercile	1	57.02	8.26	1.65	4.13	10.74	16.53	1.65	121
	2	24.36	5.09	0.73	11.27	16.36	34.18	8	275
	3	18.5	0.39	0.39	23.62	20.87	26.77	9.45	254
	Total	28.15	3.85	0.77	14.77	17.08	28	7.38	650

Source: Young Lives survey data from Round 4 (2013)

#### 4.4. Time use

**Table 5.** *Young people's time use, by gender and location (age 19) (mean hours)*

		Sleep	Caring	Domestic chores	Other domestic tasks	Work	School	Study	Leisure
Males, by location	Urban	8.2	0.5	0.8	0.9	2.6	3.2	1.5	6.4
	Rural	8.3	0.1	1.2	1.7	3.5	2.1	0.9	6.1
	Total	8.3	0.2	1.1	1.5	3.3	2.4	1.0	6.1
Females, by location	Urban	8.1	0.5	1.6	0.9	3.0	3.3	1.7	5.0
	Rural	8.3	0.6	1.8	1.0	2.5	3.1	1.3	5.3
	Total	8.2	0.6	1.8	1.0	2.6	3.1	1.4	5.3

Source: Young Lives survey data from Round 4 (2013)

Regarding time use, the greatest disparities occurred between young men living in rural and urban settings, rather than between boys and girls. There were some differences along gender lines; girls had almost one hour less time for leisure than boys each day and spent slightly more time on caring or other household chores. They also spent around 45 minutes more each day studying or at school. There were minimal differences in time use between urban and rural girls; however, rural boys spent on average one hour less each day in education than boys from urban areas, and almost two hours more each day doing domestic tasks. They also had less time for studying.

Overall, our quantitative findings reveal that gender, rurality, ethnicity and socio-economic status all play an important role in shaping the types of transitions children make. The next section uses analysis of the qualitative data to unpack these findings, exploring the mechanisms and processes which influence children's education, work and marriage trajectories.



## 5. Tracing individual trajectories from adolescence into early adulthood: school, work and marriage

**Table 6:** *The profile of the qualitative sample*

Name	Gender	Community	Completed Grades	University	Work
Lien	F	Van Tri	High school	University of Labour and Social Affairs	
Linh	F	Van Tri	High school	Medical College	
Long	F	Van Tri	Grade 10		Briefcase factory
Ho Nit	F	Van Lam	Grade 4		Subsistence farming
Ho Mai	F	Van Lam	Grade 5		Subsistence farming
Mai	F	Nghia Tan	High school	Tourism College	
My	F	Nghia Tan	High School	Police University	
Nga	F	Nghia Tan	Grade 10		Unemployed and self-employed
Hung	M	Van Tri	Grade 10		Military Service
Quoc	M	Van Tri	Grade 10		Construction assistant
Chinh	M	Van Lam	High school	Industrial College	
Y Mich	M	Van Lam	Grade 10		Military service
Y Thinh	M	Van Lam	Grade 7		Farming and work in communal militia
Nhat	M	Nghia Tan	High school	Vocational College (Network Administration)	IT/website development work
Phuoc	M	Nghia Tan	High school	University of Economics	Work related to his university degree
Quang	M	Nghia Tan	High school		Driver in a Japanese company

Source: Young Lives qualitative data from (2014)

Note: Spaces are left blank where information was missing or where children were either not engaged in work or not engaged in formal education.

### 5.1. Schooling trajectories

As the analysis of the survey data has illustrated, girls have a slight advantage over boys when it comes to education beyond secondary school (see Table 1 above). However, one can argue that locality and ethnicity rather than gender are have had the greatest influence on the schooling trajectories of girls and boys at the age of 19: only 10 per cent of ethnic minority children had completed upper secondary education compared to 36 per cent of their ethnic majority peers and 31 per cent of girls living in urban areas were attending university compared to 21 per cent from rural sites.

While the qualitative sample from Young Lives is very small, it nevertheless confirms (and helps to explain) these findings, with location and ethnicity strongly affecting children's

pathways through education. Amongst the 16 qualitative cases analysed for this paper, children from the urban area, Nghia Tan (in Da Nang city), were the most likely to finish upper secondary school and go on to universities: four out of six children were studying in universities or colleges during 2014 and five of them had completed upper secondary school. In stark contrast to this was Van Lam, a rural mountainous community in the province of Phu Yen, where only one child out of five was continuing his education, in a vocational college. Only one of the remaining four children in this rural site had attended upper secondary school: the others had left school much earlier. Tellingly, the only young person to continue education beyond high school was a boy from the Kinh ethnic majority group: his ethnic minority peers from the Cham H'Roi community left school either at primary or lower secondary stage (although one boy left school during Grade 10).

Gender did not seem to play an important role in determining children's trajectories early on, especially in primary and lower secondary school: instead, gender gaps appear to open up/widen at a later stage, in upper secondary school and in universities, when more boys are likely to enter the labour market rather than continue their education. The survey findings show, for example, that around 10 per cent fewer boys were only studying at the age of 19 than girls, and around 20 per cent more were only working. This sub-section is used to explore some of the factors which drive the processes described here.

#### 5.1.1. *Urban/rural divide and children and young people's learning trajectories*

The importance of locality in determining children's schooling outcomes can be explained at different levels. First, it appeared that there were different norms related to schooling in rural and urban areas. Thus, leaving school early was perceived to be a norm among ethnic minority children in rural areas rather than an exception. Moreover, parents of children from ethnic minority groups usually had lower educational aspirations for their children: whilst starting off high when the children were small, their aspirations diminished as children progressed slowly through (or failed) school grades. Second, the agricultural structure of the rural economy in itself inhibited learning for children from rural sites: apart from doing the usual household chores, children in rural areas devoted more time to agricultural work than their urban peers. In general, the more industrialised the area, the less household work children performed; the duties of the children from Nghia Tan were limited to household chores, whereas children from Vam Lam and Van Tri engaged in paid work and unpaid labour in the fields from the age of 12–13. Whilst in rural areas children's labour was essential for the reproduction of households as well as for children's capacity to continue education, in urban areas children's contribution to the household economy was marginal. Lastly, whereas lower secondary education was sufficient for being a farmer in rural Vietnam, in Da Nang city one had to have a high school certificate in order to get a semi-skilled job.

#### 5.1.2. *Ethnicity, mother-tongue education and ethnic minority children*

Living in rural areas and coming mostly from poor households, ethnic minority children experience a 'triple' disadvantage of poverty, locality and ethnicity, which makes it extremely difficult for them to reach upper secondary school, let alone a university. They are exposed to entrenched stereotypes that hold ethnic minority children to be less intelligent than their Kinh majority peers and in primary school they have to learn in Vietnamese, a language which some of them cannot understand or speak well. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that ethnic minority children start falling behind quite early on in their education (Chi 2010, 2011; Huong

2011, 2014). They often cited boredom or lack of interest as reasons for leaving school prematurely. The explanation of Y Think, a boy from the Cham H'Roi ethnic community, who left school in Grade 7, sheds some light on this: “[A]fter the first half of the second semester, I started getting bored and kept fighting with other classmates and schoolmates. Also, I could not understand study materials ... I couldn’t digest the lessons. So I felt tired of learning.”

‘Boredom’ or ‘lack of interest in studies’ should not be blamed on children’s personal characteristics but seen rather as a function of structural factors within the Vietnamese education system that fail ethnic minority children from the very first years of school; when the foundations for learning are laid down, ethnic minority children get education in a language that is technically foreign to them (Vu 2014; Truong 2011; Nguyen 2006). Being taught in Vietnamese means that getting qualifications becomes an insurmountable obstacle for many ethnic minority children, who are stereotyped as ‘slow’ or ‘less capable’ and often treated as such by teachers and bullied by peers. In 2011, for instance, Y Think recalled how his father was invited to school to speak with the teacher because of Y Think’s fight with another boy.

Interviewer: All right. Now please tell me again. The other day you told me that he mocked you first, so how did he mock you?

Y Think: He mocked me for being an ethnic.

Interviewer: And what did he do to you after that?

...

Y Think: He gave me punch with his fist.

As a result of these entrenched stereotypes, some of the ethnic minority children seem to have internalised this view about their ‘slowness’, attributing their difficulties with learning to the alleged innate properties of their ethnic group. For instance, Ho Mai, an ethnic minority girl, explained in 2008 why Kinh children were better at learning than ethnic minority children “because they know more than us. They have more knowledge, we are just ethnic people so ...”

Whilst teachers might be attentive to ethnic minority children in some ways, they tended to explain any learning difficulties as resulting from large family sizes, impoverished circumstances, and the lack of a supportive learning environment at home. Teachers did not mention such factors as the absence of mother-tongue education or the absence of bilingual teachers (whose numbers were miniscule and who were not always properly trained):

In general, ethnic [minority] students have difficulties because of their family’s poor condition. They have to study and work at the same time. For example, if my students go to school in the afternoon, they have to work on the field or graze oxen in the afternoon. Some children’s houses are far from school, their bicycles are not in good condition as children of the Kinh people; therefore they often feel lazy and don’t want to go school. Besides the curricular time, they don’t want to participate in extra-curricular activities. During their study, these children are very passive. These two students rarely raise their hands to answer my questions.

(Teacher, Van Lam, 2008)

The reasons behind the passivity and timidity of ethnic minority children were not explored in depth. However, as noted by another teacher, the same children who appeared to be shy in class, became lively and talkative when left in their own environment. The next section explores the centrality of peers and social support at school for children’s learning trajectories.

### 5.1.3. *Transitions from primary to secondary school and the centrality of peers for children's learning trajectories*

The transition from primary to secondary school appears to be a critical point for children's schooling trajectories in Vietnam. A common thread running through many children's narratives was their boredom with education at secondary level. A number of different things may be contributing to the decline of children's interest in their studies, including structural and socio-economic factors as well as psychosocial factors. Some children complained about the 'abstract' nature of lessons, about the lack of resources and the fact they could not borrow books from the library. Other catalysts included falling behind in studies, struggling with the different structure of the secondary education system, experiencing a difficult social environment at secondary school and being increasingly influenced by peers.

Regarding ethnic minority children, there may be sizeable numbers enrolled in primary school but many drop out as they transition to secondary school, often leaving the remaining ethnic minority children relatively isolated among their ethnic majority peers. In addition to coping with language difficulties, these children then have to manage feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. Children from the Cham H'Roi ethnic minority group reported having school friends mostly from the same ethnic group and little interaction with the Kinh majority children. Strong intra-group friendship and tacit segregation led some Cham H'Roi children to feel like leaving school because their peers had done so and there were no more ethnic minority children left in their class.

Y Mich, an ethnic minority boy who had been quite keen on studying in earlier grades, decided to leave school after passing the exam to enter upper secondary school, and start working on farms, despite his parents' objections to the decision. According to one of Y Mich's friends:

"When I talked to him he said that it was boring for him in the class, as he felt an outsider there, he had no friends to talk to in the class, ... I asked him [Y Mich] 'Why did you leave school?' He said: 'I am not interested in learning, it's boring ... I don't want to learn, in the class. I don't have anyone to talk with, I feel sad and bored in the classroom.'"

Learning is an activity which happens in a social context and interactions with both peers and teachers are key to the learning process. Y Mich's case confirms that peer support and networks of friends can be crucial to the success of children's learning trajectories in Vietnam. The impact of peers on children's learning trajectories seems to be particularly pronounced in secondary school. Nga, a girl from Nghia Tan, represents a case which illustrates the ambiguous role this peer influence can play. After a period of spending time with friends and skipping lessons, Nga decided to leave school in Grade 10 in order to work in a café alongside one of her friends and to help her mum to sell porridge in the street. Coming from a poor family where the father was drinking heavily and was also beating her mother (Pells, Wilson and Hang 2015), Nga received support from friends who were mostly out of school and who faced similar problems. In 2009, when Nga was 15, she explained:

Interviewer: Do you have many friends?

Nga: Not in class but outside.

Interviewer: Who did you hang out with outside of class?

Nga: A few good children who had to quit school because of their family situation ...

Then when interviewed again in 2013 (at the age of 19):

Interviewer: So you took the entrance exam into Grade 10? And after some time you left?

Nga: Yes ... Grade 10, I had some friends ... but I couldn't really learn anything ... I couldn't learn anything, so I thought I would stay at home to help out my parents.

Interviewer: After quitting school, did you feel more comfortable or sad?

Nga: I felt kind of sad, and now I want to go back to school. Nowadays, you need a Grade 12 diploma for everything. Without a Grade 12 diploma you can't find a job.

Nga's narrative shows that her friends played an ambiguous role in her learning trajectory: on the one hand, they provided her with the support needed to cope with the difficult environment at home; on the other hand, they played a role in encouraging her to leave school and take up casual work in a café. The worrying aspect of Nga's story is not the fact of her leaving school but rather that she regrets this move with the hindsight of several years.

Inasmuch as peer effect could have a negative influence on children's schooling trajectories, it could also play a positive role. Especially notable was the influence of elder siblings who served as role models for their brothers and sisters. In families where elder siblings had succeeded in entering university, younger siblings seemed to have a good role model to follow. They could also draw on their sibling's advice. Lien, a girl from Van Tri community, explains:

Interviewer: Who was the one that had the most impact on you?

Lien: My sister.

Interviewer: What did she say?

Lien: She said I need to study to change.

Interviewer: To change what?

Lien: To change my life.

These cases demonstrate that friends and siblings play an important role in children's schooling trajectories, and the role of friends only increases as children transition from primary to secondary school.

#### 5.1.4. *Parental aspirations and children's learning trajectories*

Parental educational aspirations play an important role in influencing children's schooling trajectories. However, as the Young Lives survey findings illustrate, aspirations change over time in light of new experiences and often as a function of one's socio-economic location. Most of the parents, both in urban and rural areas, had high educational aspirations for their children but parents in urban areas seemed to have more resources to create a favourable learning environment for them. Thus, many parents in the urban area of Nghia Tan spared their children from household chores and emphasised that they should concentrate on studying at school. In urban areas, especially in Nghia Tan, children's education was the priority for parents. Contrastingly, many parents in rural areas could not afford to prioritise their children's education, and instead relied upon their children to contribute household and agricultural work to alleviate household poverty.

If one compares the schooling trajectories of Phuoc, a boy from Nghia Tan, and Quoc, a boy from Van Tri, one can see the impact of parental educational aspirations and encouragement

on children's schooling trajectories. At 19, Phuoc was studying in the Tourism Department of Da Nang University. Phuoc was an industrious student throughout his school career and he won a scholarship to attend one of the best schools in Da Nang. Phuoc's parents went out of their way in order to ensure that their son could get into university. Phuoc's mother explained: "[S]o, whatever was convenient, so that the children could study, that's the decision of the parents. Everything we do is for our children. So they already knew. We don't spend anything. I save everything for my children." Importantly, Phuoc did not take up any temporary employment, neither did he have to do a lot of household work. Phuoc experienced both poverty and shocks, including his parents being ill while he was in upper secondary school and the family needing to move to pay off a debt of 12 million dong (about 550 US dollars) during his exam period. Yet, despite all odds, he achieved educational success and passed his entrance exams to university.

The example of Quoc from Van Tri is quite different. Quoc was fairly good at learning in primary school and in the early grades of secondary school, but his parents did not take much interest in his school work. Quoc's mother admits that she rarely attended parent-teacher meetings and was told off by teachers for not paying enough attention to her son's education. She explained:

"At that time we were in too poor condition, and we just tried our best to earn money, but didn't pay any interest to the children's education ... I was too busy at work place, so I forgot to pay attention to my son."

While Quoc was characterised as being creative in school, the boy was also quite 'lazy' and preferred to spend time playing with friends to studying in the evening. He also had some extra responsibilities (looking after his brother, housework and cooking), which he performed alongside school. When Quoc failed his exams in senior secondary school, his mother was not surprised. Even though Quoc's parents wanted him to continue at school, the boy was "fed up" with learning and wanted to start working at the local ceramics factory. Quoc's mother was sad with his decision, but they could not force their son to change the decision. Three years later, Quoc regretted not having stayed on at school.

One of the differences between Quoc's and Phuoc's stories is the different priorities in both households: whereas for Phuoc's parents, their children's education was the ultimate goal they were working towards, Quoc's parents were struggling against severe poverty, and thus their time and attention were consumed by work. Parental aspirations have a significant impact on children's learning trajectories, though it would be too bold a statement to claim that all shocks can be overcome and that multiple disadvantage is surmountable if one holds high aspirations. Parental aspirations and encouragement may positively influence children's educational outcomes, but it is important to locate these within the household's socio-economic context and to analyse the constraints which force parents to lower their aspirations over time.

#### 5.1.5. *Familial interdependence and compound disadvantage*

Familial interdependence plays a prominent role in determining children's trajectories through education and employment. As discussed by Crivello et al., 'dependence is rarely unidirectional and more often than not it is mutual between young and old' (2014: 105). Both girls and boys feel duty-bound to provide support when needed to their parents and siblings, and in the Young Lives pro-poor sample, this support was often required. Children frequently undertook work alongside their schooling in order to supplement family income and/or to

alleviate the burden of household chores or caring responsibilities on their parents. Where families had experienced multiple – or ‘compound’ – disadvantage, parents’ dependence on their children for support appeared to grow, with implications for the time children spent working or studying. Conversely, where families were more prosperous and children experienced multiple advantages, this burden was lightened, enabling children to focus more on their own studies or future career opportunities. What was also clear, however, was that children did not necessarily feel forced to contribute additional work to the family, but emphasised that they did so voluntarily, though influenced by feelings of intergenerational mutuality. This shows that the Confucian ethic of filial duty and respect towards the elders constituted an inseparable part of children’s selves, informing their decision-making and influencing their trajectories.

Thus, children’s decisions were rarely individualistic, but instead reflected the collective needs and desires of their families. In Hung’s case, his family had been very badly affected by a series of natural events that had a detrimental effect on the whole community in Van Tri. In 2006, a bad hail storm destroyed their 500 ornamental kumquat trees; they “lost everything” in a violent flood in 2008 – including their orange harvest; and in 2010, his family lost more than 100 million dong (about 4,500 US dollars) through the spread of pig disease. His older brother also became ill in 2010 and needed to be hospitalised at a cost of 30 million dong. Hung’s father encouraged Hung to go to school and even to retake the entrance exam to senior secondary school after failing it in 2009. However, his mother was extremely distressed by the family’s economic situation and Hung and his brother took great pains to reassure her that they could earn money themselves to support the family and recoup their economic losses. She explained that “in 2010, there was such a terrible event which ruined my family’s economy. My children told me that we didn’t have to worry any more. They also told that when they are now strong and healthy, they could earn money.” Hung did not return to education after failing the exam; instead he worked in construction, giving his wages to his parents, before leaving work altogether in order to help build their new family home.

By contrast, Linh, a girl from Vam Lam community, said that her family’s situation had improved during her childhood, so that her parents were able to provide better care for her both “materially and emotionally”. She explained how they had had enough time to care for her and her younger sister and had been able to buy her the things she needed. She felt her educational conditions had improved: “The clothes, the books, and I get to go to school in a new vehicle.” When she needed books, for example, she said that “I’d tell my dad and he’d buy for me”. She talked of going on trips with her father and of having a wide networks of friends and family members who assisted her with her school work during secondary school and with accommodation during university. Whilst Linh faced a number of challenges outside her home (for example, the poor quality of teaching in her secondary school), she experienced a number of advantages growing up that made her household context more conducive to studying than those of Hung and Long, a girl from Van Tri, whose poorer educational outcomes may in some ways reflect the heavier burden of work they shouldered in support of their families in situations of poverty.

Thus, understanding children’s trajectories through education, work and marriage requires an intimate knowledge of intra-household dynamics and relationships, for, as the next sub-section illustrates, young people’s agency might be enabled or constrained by such factors, including by families’ socio-economic status.

### 5.1.6. *The rising importance of socio-economic status for educational transitions beyond secondary school*

As noted earlier, the educational system in Vietnam is relatively egalitarian in nature (Duc and Tam 2013; Rolleston and Krutikova 2014; Rolleston et al. 2013). It enables children from different socio-economic backgrounds to receive primary and secondary education. While secondary school education is virtually universal in urban areas, further education often depends on parental financial and social support. In order to go to senior secondary school, children have to pass exams. If they fail these exams, they might still carry on at school on condition that their parents pay fees to private schools. Alternatively, they can retake exams one year later. This means that if children fail the exams at the end of Grade 9, only those from families that can and are willing to support their offspring's further education can continue schooling.

Thus, Long, a girl from Van Tri community, had to leave school after failing her Grade 9 exams. While Long had been willing to retake the exams the following year, her parents did not allow her to. They thought that Long's learning capacity was weak and that retaking exams would be a waste of time. Even though Long's parents attribute the girl's failure to poor academic capacities, Long herself explained that she had to work long afternoons in the family fields:

I had to go to school in the morning and work in the afternoon; I was so tired when returning home in the evening ... In the evening, I could study only for a while, and then I was so sleepy ... Yes. Actually, after secondary school, I really wanted to continue my study. But when I asked my mother, she said that with my average learning capacity in 9th grade, she wouldn't let me continue studying. With my learning capacity, I think it was difficult for me to pass the exam, but I wanted to try more times. However, at that time, my family's financial situation ... the higher education I study, the more expensive it will be. So I decided to stop there. Then I didn't mention about that any more. Also, compared to my family, the families of my friends who studied high school were better.

Parental or kin support is crucial both at the level of senior secondary school and at the level of university or college-level education. Even if young people successfully pass university entrance exams, their parents have to find resources to pay fees and, in cases where they study away from home, to pay for food and lodgings. Of all Young Lives children who went on to universities or colleges (from the qualitative sample), only one child paid his own tuition fees, by developing websites and doing IT services for different clients (Nhat). Parents supported all the other children.

Quang's story is an example of how the offer of parental financial support for education is dependent upon household wealth as well as on the real and perceived availability of employment opportunities for young people once they finish school. Quang tried to enter the College of Technology, but did not do well enough in the entrance exams. He explained that instead of going to a vocational college, he preferred to start working: his parents had divorced and the boy's family (his mother and brother) had to live in a relative's house. According to Quang: "I thought that if I went to study, it would add to our family's difficulty burden, so I decided not to." However, Quang's mother explained that the boy decided to look for a job after his father's refusal to help him:

"When he finished Grade 12, he was having an intention to take the university entrance exam, but he did not have that ability, so he wanted to go to a college. And he called his



father. His father said, 'Even if you go to college, you won't be able to find a job after you graduate. We cannot afford it, so just let him quit school.'

These cases illustrate that children's agency is deeply entwined with the family economic situation and with parental aspirations. Children's agency often manifested in their decisions to fulfil obligations towards their parents rather than to pursue paths of their own choosing – thus relinquishing their own aspirations. Rather than striving to fulfil unrealistic goals, many children had to give up their dreams and follow a trajectory that was more feasible. Yet, as the next section illustrates, children from more affluent families could in some cases pursue further education even after exam failure, because money can buy a 'better future' for children whose parents have the means to pay a bribe.

### 5.1.7. *Bribes at school as a problem*

Bribery was frequently mentioned in relation to school. Children and parents alike explained that paying a bribe was one of the ways to ensure that a child could continue their education after exam failure. Linh, a girl from Van Tri community who studied hard and who had to do a lot of household tasks from an early age, told the interviewer about the ways in which money could 'buy' marks as well as educational success:

Interviewer: You passed the exam to be in Grade 10. Do you find your value different from those who failed ?

Linh: I think it's the same. Because now many of their parents have money, they can bribe the teachers way beforehand, so those who failed were not necessarily bad students. Many of them are good, but they were pushed out. What a pity! I think studying is one thing, but if they fail, poor them ! It's not that they are bad at their study, but nowadays in our society, a lot of people use their money to get what they want.

On several occasions when Young Lives children failed exams, their parents wanted to pay a bribe in order for them to continue in education but the children refused. Some said that they did not want to go to high school in such a way, that it would be a waste of their families' (limited) resources, that it would not help them in the long term since their academic abilities may be too weak for them to progress further in school regardless, or that they didn't want to pass an exam in this underhand manner. However, others accepted, as explained by the mother of Long, a girl from Van Tri:

Lots of children failed the exam: There were many. In this whole village, only few children passed the exam; all the others failed. Only few of them, three or four of them got into high school, all others failed. Some children paid 15 million, some paid 7 million to get in but now also dropped out. The child that paid 15 million to get in now also quit, he was terrible at studying, and couldn't catch up with other students ...

My, a girl from Nghia Tan, encountered the dilemma of bribes while studying at the Police University. She was initially assigned a field of specialisation different from her first choice of traffic policing. Her teacher hinted that the girl's family could pay a bribe so that she could follow her preferred course of study, but My did not want to start university in such an undignified manner: "I said I didn't agree with it. In my school, such negativity does exist, you can use money to switch to another field. I said I didn't want to be like those people." Thus the system of bribery operates across many levels of education, as well as within multiple layers of society, as we will see in later sections.

### 5.1.8. *Locality and the choice of higher education institution*

One of the important factors in deciding the place of study and work was the locality of the prospective university or job placement. Studying or working away from home was not encouraged and was quite rare among the qualitative sample. In general, parents did not want their children to study far from the natal home for several reasons. First, families would have to pay additional money for renting a room and for food. In this respect, families who had connections who would help them find a place in a dormitory, or who had relatives to host the child were more fortunate. Second, parents were afraid their child would be exposed to social evils through the negative influence of peers in big cities. They were anxious that boys might start drinking or become addicted to computer games, or that girls might enter into premature marriage. Third, a complicated registration of residence system in Vietnam makes it difficult for people to migrate freely.

The example of My from Nghia Tan, who did exceptionally well at school and turned down an offer to study abroad, demonstrates some of the dilemmas faced by parents and their children when deciding where children will study. Having won second place in the national competition in history in Grade 12, My was awarded a scholarship to study abroad. While My's parents were, in their own words, "80 per cent for studying abroad", they were also apprehensive because most families "who let their children study abroad are economically stable". As explained by My's mother, the family would have to ensure that they had enough resources to support their daughter for the whole duration of the study:

"We were quite hesitant because most of the families who let their children study abroad are economically stable. What I mean by that is we usually would have to have a guaranteed amount of money, because in such a long period of time, we have to anticipate all uncertainties ... So that's why we were 20 per cent uncertain about it. So I told her, 'It's up to you.'"

When the parents left the decision to My, she preferred to continue her education in Vietnam. My thought that in this way her parents would have resources to support her younger siblings and she would not have to study too hard. She was also worried about living far away from her parents:

"Well because I wanted to study here to be closer to home, studying over there [abroad] was too far away, I didn't know if I could come back. Here, I could come home twice a year, whereas if I studied over there, I would probably stay there and would only come back after four years."

Some other girls in the sample who studied away from home reported feeling lonely and missing home at the beginning of their college studies. In general, while some parents advised their children against studying away from home, children in the Young Lives sample themselves preferred to remain at home, or at least close to home. For these young people, geographical mobility was not necessarily a key aspiration associated with social mobility and becoming 'somebody in life' (Boyden 2013; Crivello 2011). There was much more emphasis on stability and continuity of place, familial ties and career trajectories than on seeking better opportunities either abroad or in urban areas away from home.

## 5.2. **Work trajectories**

As noted above, at 19 years old, 35 per cent of young people from the Young Lives survey sample (n=858) were 'only working' and 16 per cent were 'studying and working'. The young people most likely to be 'only working' were boys, were from the poorest and middle terciles

and were living in rural areas (see Table 3). Gender, socio-economic status and rurality affected the types of work undertaken by young people, with girls 7 per cent more likely to be self-employed in non-agricultural activities than boys, and boys 5 per cent more likely to be in wage employment in agriculture than girls (see Table 4). The poorest young people were also more likely to work in the agricultural sector than their least-poor peers.

The Young Lives qualitative sample reflects these findings, revealing how gender, poverty and social disadvantage all impact on the kind of employment young people undertake and have access to. Young people who entered the labour market were mostly involved in manufacturing, such as pottery, briefcase or fishing rod manufacturing, but boys also worked in construction, as drivers and in the communal militia, whilst girls were encouraged into sewing, caring or administrative roles. Several boys served in the army whilst several girls from the ethnic minority group in Van Lam was also self-employed in agriculture, i.e., he worked in subsistence farming. Some of the preliminary observations below illustrate that gender differences and inequalities open up quite late in Vietnam, particularly around timing and type of employment. It is yet to be seen, however, what the Round 5 (2016) survey data will reveal about the role gender plays in influencing girls' and boys' pathways into the labour market and whether gender gaps widen as boys and girls come of age.

### 5.2.1. *The centrality of informal and familial networks for finding jobs*

When looking for a job, most of the young people in the sample relied on family connections and at times on paying bribes. Quang, for instance, found his first employment with the help of his aunt. It was a job in a Japanese company specialising in producing fishing rods. The boy noted that without connections, his chances of getting a job would have been slim: "Without the connections, then they may take in the applications and just leave them there, they would keep us waiting for a long time. But with the connections, it would be faster." His aunt's recommendation did not guarantee the job, but it allowed the boy to be invited for an interview in a more expedient manner. It is notable that some of the parents did not want to support their children's higher education, because, according to them, education would be useless in future if the family did not have "proper connections". Even after graduating from university, young people would not be able to find a job without social connections and money, explained Long's mother, saying, "[M]y family was very poor; we wouldn't have the money to help her find a job."

It is not only social networks that emerged as an important factor in finding jobs, but also one's capacity to pay bribes. Respondents reported that bribes could be paid at the school level in order to pass important exams and at the university in order to secure accommodation in a dormitory, as well as after graduation in order to secure a job. In Linh's case, her family struggled to find a teaching job for her older sister, having to pay large sums of money to more than one school in order to secure her a position. Linh was disappointed with the experience of her sister and realised that decisions regarding her own further education would need to reflect the networks available to her for finding a job in the future:

"To be honest, before, I wanted to become a teacher, but my wish changed as I grew older. It's not as easy to find a good job nowadays. If my family is able to afford for me, and if I have the ability, I think I'll go into the Law Enforcement [Police] Department, but it's really difficult ... I think there'll probably be bribing and using connections, but I'll be able to get a stable job immediately, unlike teaching or something else."

Thus, young people are acutely aware that degrees do not automatically confer good jobs in future and so opt for professions that can guarantee secure employment rather than fulfil their aspirations. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next two sections, boys and girls face different problems when finishing school: whereas girls need to find employment or acquire a skill which will correspond to the gender-appropriate roles in society, boys have to deal with the prospect of compulsory military conscription – a prospect which in many cases is anticipated with apprehension.

### 5.2.2. *Gendered pathways in work trajectories: military conscription for boys*

In Vietnam, males aged 18–25 are subject to compulsory military service, which lasts 18 months in the army and air defence but may reach 24 months in case of the navy or the air force.<sup>2</sup> However, young people who study at universities or vocational colleges are exempt from military service. This disadvantages young people from rural, poor and ethnic minority households, because most of the college and university students come from wealthier urban backgrounds.

Compulsory military service for boys is another area where bribery and connections play a key role in determining young people's trajectories. While potential conscripts' bad health and parents' bribes might spare them from military service, a lot of families have neither the resources nor the inclination to pay a bribe. For boys from disadvantaged families, military service in the army can present opportunities for social mobility and some parents, especially from rural areas, appear to value the life skills, such as self-discipline and communication skills, that the military service can teach their children. The story of Hung is illustrative in this respect. Hung explained that his parents told him "that they could 'bribe' so I didn't have to go, but I told them not to, and I joined the army". Hung explained that if he did not go, his younger brother would have to join instead. Once in the military, Hung struggled. However, later on he adapted to the new environment and even learned new things. During his interview in Qualitative Round 4 (2014), Hung told us he was about to be promoted from sergeant to senior sergeant. While in the army, he had been advised to join the Communist Party of Vietnam which, he was told, might be useful in future and he also developed a new aspiration – to get the (free) officer training offered after the military service was finished. Instead of removing opportunities, the military service opened several doors for Hung and allowed him to develop new aspirations.

Compulsory military conscription can present opportunities for social mobility, though it remains a pathway predominantly for disadvantaged youth – a situation which might need more attention from policymakers. The next section discusses how girls have to negotiate their choice of work and education in a context of strict gender norms about the kinds of work that are permissible for women.

### 5.2.3. *Gender norms and girls' work trajectories*

When choosing where to study at post-secondary level and what to specialise in, young people's decision-making was influenced by gender norms, according to which the proper place for women is administrative or care work. Among the young people who did not study at post-secondary level, girls often worked for a range of manufacturing companies, whilst

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<sup>2</sup> While females may volunteer for active duty military service, their service is not compulsory.

many of those who studied trained for social work or nursing. Whilst boys often dreamt of becoming drivers and could earn a good income by working on construction sites, girls' work was usually less well paid. Lien's decision to apply to study at the University of Labour and Social Affairs was influenced by the gendered advice of her school teacher:

Interviewer: Who was the one that guided you to take that major and that school?

Lien: I heard it from a pedagogy teacher ... He went to my school and talked about many fields, but he said the girls should do social work ... It has a lot of activities ... I could take care of the elderly or children, work at the ward or companies that need social workers ... I didn't know so much. I heard about it and I just chose it.

Lien's parents were not in a position to give her guidance and so her choice of higher education was based largely on the advice of one teacher. Instead of being presented with a range of options, Lien was told about opportunities that had little to do with her academic interests but instead reflected the teacher's biased view of what professions were appropriate for women. In theory, My, who successfully passed exams to the Police Academy with the highest grades, should have been able to choose any field of specialisation, ranging from criminal policing to traffic control. Yet, in practice the university assigned her to the economic crimes investigation field without her consent, even though she had really wanted to study traffic policing. When making a decision about her major, My was told that regardless of her specialisation, she would end up doing 'office work, not investigations'. According to My, "We study the same things with the boys, we study everything, but the boys get to be outside, and we stay inside to do paperwork. Everyone can do paperwork – I don't like it."

Furthermore, there is some indication that gender norms regulating social activities pursued by young people in their teens and early twenties, such as participating in student and youth unions, change at the university level, with boys getting more advantages in the unions associated with the structure of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the various committees that are crucial for future career development. My, for instance, got used to being a leader of her class at school, but could not become a member of the steering committee at the university because this privilege was reserved for boys. The next sub-section of the paper explores boys' and girls' marital trajectories, focusing on the impact of norms, education and locality on children's marital pathways.

### 5.3. Marriage trajectories

Young Lives survey data show that girls, young people from the poorest tercile, those from rural areas, and those from ethnic minority groups were often married considerably earlier than boys, young people from the least poor tercile, those from urban areas, or those from ethnic majority groups (see Table 3). As we saw, 44 per cent of young people from ethnic minority groups were married by the age of 19 compared to only 7 per cent from ethnic majority groups. This is consistent with the 2009 census, which showed that females and males in urban areas, of Kinh ethnicity and who had received higher levels of education got married later than rural residents, people from ethnic minorities or those who had to terminate schooling early and enter the labour force (Ministry of Planning and Investment 2011).

Young Lives qualitative data confirm these findings. In general, social norms regarding marriage were quite strong and people stressed the importance of predictable and orderly transitions. There was an overarching consensus about the timing of marriage: both parents and children, rural and urban felt that young people should get married only after they got stable jobs. However, the meaning of 'stable job' differed between people according to where

they lived, how educated they were and their ethnicity. The formula of ‘school-college-stable job-marriage’ was envisioned as a normative pathway for young people’s life trajectories, but the reality was highly dependent on factors such as locality, ethnicity, socio-economic status and educational level. Moreover, while both boys and girls prioritised work over marriage, there was a slight gender difference in their views on the ideal age of marriage and girls tended to get married slightly earlier than boys.

### 5.3.1. *The relationship between marital and educational trajectories*

There is a strong conviction among young people in Vietnam that marital life is not compatible with education. Therefore, it was only the girls who left school in primary or lower secondary school who were married by the age of 19. Two of the married girls from the Young Lives qualitative sample came from the Cham H’Roi ethnic minority group and lived in rural areas. By contrast, most of the girls and boys who studied in colleges or universities were neither married nor in a relationship, with a few exceptions. Girls who studied explained that early marriage would put a hold on their education, whereas boys explained that relationships could take too much time and effort, as well as distract them from studies. The mother of My, the girl who studied in the Police Academy in Ho Chi Minh City, explained why early marriage could be detrimental to her daughter’s life path:

I think she should study right away. First of all, men are different. Once a woman has a family, it becomes difficult, she will be bound by so many things. Once you get married, you must have children, and it leads to so many things. So I think those older than her are right: she should spend a certain time in her life to complete all her studies, in a systematic manner.

Most parents in the Young Lives sample were against early marriage both for boys and for girls, because they believed that early marital life without a stable economic foundation would lead to conflicts and family breakdown. Young people appear to have also internalised the norm about the importance of financial stability for marital life. Young people’s ideas about an ideal partner reflect this social norm: both girls and boys think that their future spouse should have a stable job and be caring.

While young people want to delay marriage until they get stable jobs, they are also aware that it is important not to delay marriage for too long. For instance, Hung did not want to go abroad to work, because he was afraid that “time might be slipping away”. If he went for too long, Hung continued, he would not be able to find a wife on his return, and marrying a foreign girl would be very different from marrying a Vietnamese girl. Like other young people, Hung did not mind what his wife would be doing as long as she had a stable job.

Young men expected their wives, in addition to being successful workers in the country’s economy, to have all the classical features associated with the normative version of femininity, such as being gentle and caring, and being good housewives and mothers – views which can be traced back to the Confucian model of women as ‘the bearers of the family’ (Rydstrøm 2010). When girls talked about their vision of ideal partners, the qualities they stressed were kindness, compassion and the ability to take care of the family, i.e., they emphasised similar qualities to the ones boys were looking for in girls. While it is difficult to speculate why this might be the case, the traditional model of the patriarchal family, where women are subordinated to men and can be subjected to violence (Pells, Wilson and Hang 2015; Rydstrøm 2013), might lead girls to wish for kind and ‘compassionate’ partners, rather than ones prone to venting emotions aggressively.

### 5.3.2. *Social norms around sexuality*

While Young Lives qualitative data do not contain a wealth of information on social norms around young people's sexuality, some cases from the interviews reveal that girls are subjected to stricter control than boys, and that girls' sexuality is policed. Girls' mothers talked with them about the importance of avoiding early sexual relations and, in some cases, fathers admitted that girls' chastity was important. Girls' parents were especially worried if their daughters studied far away from home and tried to persuade their daughters to refrain from early relationships. Such views reflect Confucian norms that hold premarital and extramarital sex to be unacceptable. In addition, the campaigns launched 20 years ago by the Vietnamese state against amoral behaviour (using the language of social evils) included premarital sex as one of the 'dirty' practices (Rydstrom 2006).

Young Lives qualitative data illustrates that the moral framework of 'social evils' as well as Confucian norms which value female virginity have been internalised to a certain extent both by children and their caregivers. My, for instance, recalled how her mother advised her to communicate with her boyfriend:

"I talked to my mother. My mother said, 'Just get to know him.' What she meant was I should just get to know him normally, I should not be spontaneous. 'Don't be clever for three years and stupid for one hour.' My mother always quoted that saying, meaning not to let others fool you and induce you. I told her, 'Yes, I know.'"

In more extreme cases, parents physically policed girls' honour. Long, a girl who commuted to her factory work on a daily basis, described how she was beaten by her father when he suspected her of staying out late after work, despite having explained to him that she needed to work extra hours in the evening. It is not only parents or males who control the behaviour of young women, but also peers, who might act as 'moral disciplinarians'. Thus, one of the Young Lives girls mentioned that one of her classmates was beaten in school for her "swagger", i.e., for wearing bright clothes and a lot of make-up.

It is striking that none of the children or parents talked explicitly about sex education when asked directly by interviewers, but rather used such phrases as "preserve oneself". It appears that there are either distinct taboos associated with discussing the topic openly, and/or there is a significant dearth of sex education. In fact, whether and how to talk to children about safe sex remains a dilemma, and, according to Rydstrøm (Rydstrom 2006), some young girls think that sexuality should not be a topic of conversation, because, if overheard, it could taint one's reputation. Despite stringent norms around female sexuality, both girls and boys are free to choose their marital partners – a point that is explored in more detail in the next sub-section.

### 5.3.3. *Children's agency in marital decision-making and the impact of locality*

While parental influence and advice are apparent in the areas of further education and job procurement, marital choice appears to be primarily the domain of young people themselves. Some of the parents stressed that they could do nothing when they did not agree with their children's marriage, as was the case with some relatively early marriages in the rural community of Van Lam. Even in the case of early marriage between families of different economic standing, often parents can do nothing but agree to their children's choice.

Yet, while young people appear to have the freedom to choose their marriage partners, such factors as the social norms of their locality and ethnicity play a big role in determining not only the timing of marriage but also the mode of dating. Among ethnic minority young people, marriage appeared to be quite common after a year of dating – dating for five years was almost unheard of and would likely be disapproved of. In addition, they had a strong preference for marrying a partner from the same ethnic group and for getting married before their early twenties. Ho Mai, who got married at the age of 17, explains:

“In my ethnic tradition, people get married at 17 or 18. If someone is 21 or 22, that is too late, they call it ‘unsellable’. We are not like you and the Kinh people, where people can wait until 27 or 28 years old to get married. Here, 21 or 22 is considered unsellable. Getting married at that age is late, getting married at 17, 18, 19 is early.”

Ho Mai left school in primary school. Being the eldest daughter in a very poor household and having five brothers and sisters, she took on childcare responsibilities, she grazed livestock and she did most of the household chores. When she was 16 she met her future husband, and after half a year of being in love, they decided to get married because she was afraid that her husband would change his mind. While being slightly ahead of the norm even for the girls from her ethnic community, Ho Mai’s marriage still conformed to the expectations of early rather than late marriage.

Conversely, in urban areas, especially among college-educated youth or those who were studying in college, young people were strategic about the timing of marriage and were delaying it until they’d found a job. For instance, Quoc had been in love with the same girl for six years. Even though the couple had been dating for more than six years, they preferred to wait until the girl had finished her education. Quoc explained the prolonged period of courtship:

“It may be a while before we get married ... I have to wait until she gets a stable job, then we can get married ... Now she does not have a job, she is still in school, so we cannot get married. Because if we get married and do not have money, we will fight. It may last half a month before she goes back to her home.”

In contrast to girls who were studying in universities and who prioritised their professional career as a meritorious route to marital life, some of the girls from rural areas talked about the importance of learning to be a good housewife and a good daughter-in-law. In comparison to urban girls, whose work trajectories happen largely outside the household (even though they also perform most of the household work after marriage), the careers of rural girls happen more within their in-laws’ houses and fields, hence the difference in aspirations between urban and rural girls.

## 6. General discussion

According to our analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from Vietnam, the gendered nature of social transitions is not necessarily apparent at an early stage of children’s lives. Qualitative data corroborate the survey findings in showing that boys and girls have high social expectations regarding education and finding stable employment. However, analysis of the survey data suggests that girls in Vietnam have a slight advantage over boys when it comes to education beyond secondary school, and qualitative data confirm that gender inequalities open up at a later stage, with the labour market and the structures of the



Communist Party of Vietnam being major areas where men might get advantages over women who gained admission to tertiary education institutions. For instance, university-educated young girls from the Police Academy might end up in clerical or administrative jobs rather than being placed in criminal investigation departments, illustrating that there are quite strict social norms regulating the types of jobs that men and women can undertake. Furthermore, the level of one's academic performance does not appear to pose a significant challenge to these barriers, which considerably devalues studies at the university level for girls, who might think that however hard they try, they may not be able to secure a job matching their qualifications. In addition, young boys who transition to the labour market straight after school appear to have access to better-paid jobs than girls: construction and driving are better paid than sewing, for instance.

A further observation from the qualitative data analysis is that rather than looking at gender as a marker of disadvantage, one should explore ethnicity and locality as key factors impacting on children's education, work and marital trajectories. It is important to examine the impact of the intersection of socio-economic status, ethnicity and locality though, as illustrated by the qualitative data, social norms, rural locality and a dearth of social networks might be more critical than poverty per se in determining children's social transitions. Children's trajectories cannot be disentangled from the social norms that inform parental and children's decision-making. The earlier age at marriage among ethnic minority groups, for example, cannot be understood simply through the prism of poverty: social norms sanctioning and even encouraging early marriage are fundamental.

One could argue that the findings presented in this paper can be theorised using Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), in which the actor's decisions, preferences and dispositions inadvertently and often subconsciously reflect his or her location in the social structure and a distinct social field. And, as this theory holds, social and cultural capital are at least as important as economic capital – an observation which is vividly illustrated in the case of children's educational and work trajectories in Vietnam. Social capital is important not only for finding jobs or getting advice for one's university studies, but also for getting encouragement and support. Furthermore, the learning environment at home and the tacit values that children internalise while growing up in families with distinct values play a crucial role in differentiating educational trajectories of children in a relatively egalitarian education system (Rolleston and Krutikova 2014).

Young Lives qualitative data also have implications for considering the power of parental aspirations to influence children's trajectories and how these might be key for overcoming the consequences of household poverty and shocks. Thus, instead of focusing solely on the agency of individuals, it might be important to also look at the interdependence between parents and children, since children are highly dependent on parents until their late teens and in many cases beyond that. Parents' agency and educational aspirations for their children appeared to be a function of both household wealth and societal factors such as the availability (and accessibility) of skilled employment opportunities for young people. We saw that in several quite well-to-do families, parents were not encouraging children to focus on studies and were not supporting the quest for academic knowledge and subsequently children did not 'succeed' despite relatively favourable economic conditions. Conversely, in other families, parental aspirations and a firm belief in the transformative power of education for children's later outcomes led some parents to prioritise children's education despite the negative impact of shocks, with a positive impact on their learning trajectories.

The situation of young people in Vietnam is quite untypical in that the levels of youth unemployment are quite low compared to many other lower-middle-income countries and young people do not appear to experience the condition of 'waithood' as in many other contexts across the world (Honwana 2014; Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2007). On leaving school, most young people from the Young Lives qualitative sample either went on to further/higher education or took up a semi-skilled manual job (though it is important to keep in mind that the situation might change in future when Young Lives children graduate from universities). The structure of the labour market in Vietnam determines the nature of the social transitions made by young people. Unlike their peers in countries that have undergone a period of de-industrialisation and neo-liberal reforms, young people in Vietnam have a range of job opportunities within the context of a liberalising economy guided by a strong state. Therefore, rather than unemployment per se, the main obstacles for young people appear to be corruption (as noted earlier, bribes and social connections can matter hugely for employment) and the possibility of being caught in low-paid and unskilled jobs with few social guarantees. Moreover, it appears that there is a distinct work ethic in Vietnam which makes the practice of unemployment and loitering around unacceptable in society. The Confucian values which emphasise the importance of hard work, thrift and strict morality are not that dissimilar from the socialist model, with its drive to eradicate 'social evils' and instil proper morality in both the public and the private domains. Such ethics are not only a means of maintaining social order in a society undergoing rapid socio-economic change, but also a way to boost the national economic growth through disciplining young people and making them into exemplary citizens and an obedient workforce.

Finally, the case of Vietnam illustrates the heterogeneous nature of children's transitions, which depend on the intersection of such factors as socio-economic status, locality, ethnicity and gender. While the normative version of social transitions in Vietnam largely corresponds to the vision of the international development agencies, i.e., 'school-university-job-marriage', this ideal materialises only in the lives of the better-off children whereas their 'less fortunate' peers from remote areas and ethnic minority groups experience non-linear and unpredictable social transitions – a trend which can be observed globally (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Morrow 2013b; Wyn and Woodman 2006). While in urban areas children often focused exclusively on formal education and were frequently spared from household chores or paid work, the situation was different for children in rural areas, especially for ethnic minority children, who often combined school and household work from early childhood, and subsequently left school and got married early. The linearity of transitions can thus be viewed as a privilege which is largely accessible to children from families of higher socio-economic status, especially in urban areas, and which is denied to their peers from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 7. Conclusion

This Working Paper aimed to trace the impact of gender on children's schooling, work and marriage trajectories in Vietnam, paying particular attention to understanding the moments when gender gaps open up. The paper finds that gender is not the most important factor accounting for children's diverging trajectories during adolescence. Intersectionality of socio-economic status, locality and ethnicity is more important for explaining major differences in children's life trajectories, with locality and ethnicity being key markers associated with the widest gaps in school, work and marriage trajectories.

Gender gaps in Vietnam appear to open up at a rather late stage, closer to senior secondary school, with girls being more likely to continue their education at a higher level. However, although girls have a slight advantage when it comes to education, this does not necessarily translate into advantage in the labour market, where we see a rapid widening of gender gaps, with young men experiencing greater access to more prestigious and better-paid jobs. In Vietnam, women work both outside and inside the home, experiencing the 'double burden' of productive and reproductive work (Schuler et al. 2006). However, social norms that bestow more risky, demanding and therefore better-paid jobs to men, and which stress the role of women as primarily mothers and carers, determine the divergence of working trajectories and outcomes for young men and women.

Recent findings about the shocking gender ratio figures at birth in 2014, e.g., 112.2 boys for 100 girls (UNFPA 2009), demonstrate that one needs to be very cautious in interpreting the positive schooling outcomes of girls in Vietnam as a sign of gender equality or better opportunities for girls. Because of dominant social norms, girls' earlier educational advantage does not necessarily translate into better work outcomes. Neither does it lead to the equal position of women within the family, which is still largely dominated by patriarchal values (Rydström 2006; Rydström 2010). Hence, when looking at girls' transitions and their outcomes, it is important to account for different stages in girls' lives. Earlier advantages, for instance in schooling, will not necessarily lead to better outcomes in future and certainly will not transform the ideology of 'patriline' which, arguably, lies at the heart of the structural discrimination against women at different levels of Vietnamese society.

While poverty is often posited as the major factor impeding children's development, Young Lives data illustrate that the importance of socio-economic status increases as children grow older. The relatively egalitarian school system in Vietnam means that cumulative disadvantages become more apparent later in life, particularly around the time when decisions have to be made about studying in universities or colleges. Children's decision-making regarding their educational and work trajectories is highly dependent on the financial and social/emotional support of their parents. In fact, only one child from the qualitative sample managed to earn money to finance his college education in the IT sphere. All of the other children had to rely on their parents to support their education; in some cases, where parents refused to support their children in getting college education, children had no choice but to embark on a work trajectory.

The case of Vietnam also highlights the centrality of parental aspirations and family environment in influencing children's educational trajectories – especially so for ethnic majority and urban young people. Social and cultural capital, understood broadly in terms of the available role models, individual dispositions and family connections, were also crucial for enabling some children to be successful in education or in finding good jobs. It is noteworthy that most of the children from the qualitative sample who did not go on to further education found their jobs through family connections. One could argue that in Vietnam relatives and friends serve as a source of information, advice and, most importantly, entry into the world of jobs, dormitories in higher education institutions, and in some cases, not discussed in the context of this study, probably to universities themselves.

Finally, while social norms impact on parents' and children's decision-making across all domains, the role of these norms in determining young people's marital trajectories is particularly striking, with marital norms being significantly different in rural and urban areas and among ethnic minority and majority children. The striking gap between rural ethnic minority girls and urban girls in terms of age at marriage is best explained in terms of the

difference in social norms that govern girls' marital decision-making. In fact, if girls' narratives about work and school were often individual and varied from person to person, there was a conspicuous similarity in terms of their marital aspirations, as though girls did not have their own opinions on the matter at all. While the urban girls repeated the 'education-job-marriage' mantra, rural girls from the ethnic minority group were talking about the importance of getting married early and after a short period of dating.<sup>3</sup>

## 7.1. Policy recommendations

One of the major recommendations that follows from this research is the urgent need to look into the possibility of providing mother-tongue education to ethnic minority children, at least in primary school. Likewise, training ethnic majority teachers (many of whom seemed to be highly sensitive to the problems faced by ethnic minority children) to identify problems encountered by ethnic minority children in schools and deal with such problems in a timely manner seems to be another area of priority.

Taking into account the fact that secondary school became a critical point for many children in terms of schooling – with many children falling behind or simply starting to miss classes or not do homework, there is a need for further research on determining what makes transition through secondary school so problematic. Attention should be paid to the curriculum and teaching methods, as well as the possible psychological problems encountered by children.

There is a need for more professional careers advice for senior secondary school students on professional, vocational and higher education options. Quite a few of the children could not rely on their parents' advice (parents were not highly educated) and sought information from their teachers. While providing advice, it seems important to avoid gender-based views which relegate girls to care work or office jobs and allocate the more prestigious and better-paid jobs to boys. Similarly, while there are not enough data on gender discrimination in the structures of the Communist Party of Vietnam at a higher education level, there is some indication that boys might be favoured in terms of appointments in the Party structure. Since the latter serves as an important avenue for social mobility, it is important to ensure that girls who do well at school in different children's unions can continue their socio-political activities at university.

While vocational training appeared to be useful for a number of jobs, such as for electricians or mechanics, quite a few children learned their skills on the job after having joined various companies or factories. It therefore seems logical to ensure that job providers have specific periods of relatively well-paid training schemes. Unpaid traineeship schemes are likely to put off young girls and boys who have to sacrifice new skills for jobs that are better paid but require lower qualifications (as was the case for the girl who did not want to take a low-paid sewing traineeship). It is vital that children without vocational education (who often come from disadvantaged families) can also get traineeships to do skilled manual jobs, which would be possible only through a programme of traineeships or apprenticeships.

Bribery/corruption at different levels of society emerged as an important element of children's and parents' narratives. It seems to be the most difficult area for intervention, and merits full attention in order to ensure equal opportunities for young people from different social and economic backgrounds.

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<sup>3</sup> Social norms relating to education might not seem as prominent as those relating to marriage precisely because belief in the importance of learning and education was fairly ubiquitous among parents and their children across all social groups.

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# Gendered Trajectories through School, Work and Marriage in Vietnam

This working paper examines how gender affects the trajectories of girls and boys in Vietnam through school, work and marriage, from childhood, through adolescence and into early adulthood. It explores when gender inequality begins to open up in childhood; in which domains, how and why gender disparities persist across adolescence and into early adulthood; and, finally, whether and how gendered norms, values and practices impact on children's trajectories.

Using analysis of Young Lives longitudinal qualitative data, gathered from children and their parents, and descriptive survey statistics, we find that:

- gender is not always a key driver of children's divergent schooling, working and marriage trajectories;
- intersectionality of socio-economic status, locality and ethnicity plays an important role, with locality and ethnicity associated with the widest gaps in school, work and marriage trajectories;
- gender gaps in Vietnam do not appear to open up until mid- to late adolescence, closer to senior secondary school, with girls more likely to continue their education at a higher level;
- girls' slight advantage in education does not necessarily translate into an advantage in the labour market, since boys have access to more prestigious and better-paid jobs.

Our findings indicate that gender gaps evolve over the life-course and are shaped by socio-economic status, ethnicity and locality, as well as by social norms, which have a particularly strong bearing on gender relations as girls and boys come of age and as they start families. This highlights the importance of longitudinal research



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc, Ethiopia*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
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