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## **Barriers to Accessing Educational Services for Female Students in Ethnic Minority Areas: A Study of Selected Countries and Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

The right to access education is one of the fundamental human rights, widely recognized in international conventions. Many countries around the world, including Vietnam, have continuously improved their legal systems to establish an equal legal environment that facilitates access to education for both men and women. However, due to their unique characteristics, ethnic minority girls still face double discrimination and inequality, which is a consequence of the intersection of gender stereotypes, patriarchy, generational barriers, and disparities in development between countries and regions within a country. Restrictions on access to education directly and indirectly impact on the quality of the workforce and social stratification. Through a literature review of research in several countries, this study aims to deeply identify the barriers to educational access for ethnic minority girls, focusing on five aspects: (i) Theoretical basis; (ii) Economic barriers; (iii) Socio-cultural barriers; (iv) Geographical distance and infrastructure; and (v) Institutions and policies. Finally, the research proposes recommendations to firmly ensure the right to education for ethnic minority girls in the new context.

### **Keywords:**

*Barriers to access, educational services, female students, ethnic minorities.*

### **1. Problem Statement**

Around the world, millions of girls and young women continue to face inherent barriers that limit their access to education. While significant progress has been made in narrowing the gender gap in education, progress remains uneven, leaving many behind. As of 2023, an estimated 122 million girls were still out of school, mostly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNESCO, 2023). Poverty, child marriage, and inherent discrimination continue to hinder their education and opportunities. Research into the barriers to accessing educational services for ethnic minority girls has been conducted by numerous researchers across various countries, including Vietnam. Therefore, in-depth research into these barriers to

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accessing educational services is necessary. This article addresses research directions concerning barriers to accessing educational services for ethnic minority girls through an overview of international and domestic research. By exploring concepts, theories, methods, content, and general findings regarding barriers to children's education, this study proposes several solutions to improve access to education for girls from ethnic minorities.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### ***2.1. Information Collection Methods***

The main research method involves synthesizing literature and analyzing several barriers, including economic, cultural, social, geographical, infrastructure, and institutional policies, affecting access to education for ethnic minority female students. Through the synthesis of studies, it is evident that the most used methods in addressing educational access barriers are quantitative methods, such as direct interviews and surveys using self-reported questionnaires (either online or offline). Other frequently used methods include qualitative methods, such as document analysis and focus group discussions. These are the methods most frequently employed in research related to educational access barriers for female students.

### ***2.2. Research results***

#### ***2.2.1. Theoretical Foundation***

##### *The concept of educational approach*

The right to education includes enrollment at the appropriate age and progression to the appropriate grade level, regular school attendance, academic results consistent with national achievement standards, a safe learning environment, and equitable distribution of learning opportunities (Lewin, Keith M., 2015). The Glossary of Education Reform lists the types of approaches that government agencies, service providers, and schools can offer to students (Sabbott, 2013).

- Access to suitable public transportation to public and charter schools may or may not be located near a student's home.
- Access to assistive technologies, convenient accommodation, improved school facilities and transportation aims to enable students with disabilities of various types to fully participate in school programs.
- Equal access to opportunities in educational programs and activities regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation, including extracurricular activities and sports.
- Access to adequate healthcare and nutrition, including free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches at school, ensures that children living in poverty do not have to attend school while sick or hungry.
- Access to counseling, social services, academic support, and other resources can help students at risk of academic failure or dropping out to continue their education in school.
- Access to technology, including high-speed internet connectivity and appropriate hardware (computers, laptops, tablets) and software (especially learning applications), should give students equal opportunities to access digital and online learning, regardless of family income or ability to afford these technologies.

### 2.2.2. Theoretical Framework

Numerous studies exploring the barriers faced by ethnic minority girls have utilized Intersectionality Theory an analytical framework initiated by Kimberlé Crenshaw. This theory posits that various forms of inequality do not exist independently; rather, they are always interconnected and compounded, creating distinct privileges or unique vulnerabilities for each individual.

Within the context of education for ethnic minority girls in Vietnam, this intersectionality manifests along three primary axes. The first is the gender axis, wherein traditional stereotypes regarding the roles of women within indigenous households and societies construct the initial barrier. The second is the ethnicity and language axis, characterized by cultural divergence and linguistic barriers relative to the majority Kinh population, which impede cognitive acquisition and structural integration into the school environment. The third is the economic axis, involving multidimensional poverty in mountainous regions that severely undermines a household's financial capacity to afford education. When these three axes intersect, ethnic minority girls do not merely experience disadvantages because they are female; rather, because they are concurrently "female, members of an ethnic minority, and impoverished," they confront a "compounded pressure." Consequently, they are simultaneously marginalized by gender bias, restricted by language barriers, and constrained by severe economic deprivation. Utilizing this theoretical framework enables the study to avoid reductive perspectives, ensuring that gender dynamics and ethnic cultural specificities are never overlooked when examining educational access for ethnic minority girls (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1979).

Critical Race Theory, formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell in the 1980s, posits that race and ethnicity are social constructs; however, distinct racial and ethnic groups encounter systemic restrictions and obstacles in accessing societal resources and opportunities. Critical Race Theory argues that despite the existence of current legislative frameworks and public policies, systemic social dilemmas and gender issues persist. Since discrimination within society remains an empirical reality, the critical imperative is to determine effective methodologies to dismantle such biases. Concurrently, this theory emphasizes the necessity of robust coordination among relevant stakeholders in formulating and executing policy interventions and practical solutions (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1979).

The principles of equality and non-discrimination are, first and foremost, enshrined in Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and serve as core values across various United Nations human rights instruments. These include Articles 2 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (The United Nations 1999). Women's right to equality across all domains has been formally recognized in international jurisprudence since the founding of the United Nations. Specifically, Article 13 of the ICESCR establishes that everyone possesses the right to education, stipulating that "the States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education." Furthermore, an international legal instrument that explicitly addresses the equal status of women generally and their educational rights particularly is the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2021).

### 3. Barriers to Educational Access for Ethnic Minority Girls

#### 3.1. Economic Barriers

Numerous international studies affirm that disparities in economic conditions constitute one of the primary factors obstructing educational access for students in general and ethnic minority female students in particular. A 2023 study by Zena Ismail Machinda<sup>1</sup>, Veneranda Paulo Byerengo, in Tanzania aimed to investigate the barriers to girls' access to equitable, quality educational opportunities in Ilemela District, Tanzania. The findings indicate that the barrier of poverty remains a pervasive issue that prevents girls from accessing quality education (Zena Ismail Machinda, 2023).

According to a document published by the World Bank, as cited in Osiebe (2020) regarding girls' education, it is stated that: "Girls' education is not just about getting girls into school but also about ensuring that they learn, contribute, and feel safe within the school environment" (World Bank, 2017).

Many families in Nigeria, particularly those in rural regions, endure severe poverty (Ebunife, 2018). This pervasive economic deprivation compels parents to prioritize the education of sons over daughters, consequently leading to either total neglect or insufficient resource allocation toward girls' education. Additionally, when a girl is forced into marriage between the ages of 11 and 15, her access to formal education is severely compromised, almost invariably yielding detrimental outcomes. This remains a highly sensitive and contentious discourse, given that the vast majority of girls affected by child marriage are deprived of adequate formal schooling. Furthermore, documented instances of systemic abuse, perpetrated by both relatives and strangers, are highly prevalent. Another critical dimension arising from Nigeria's traditional and religious paradigms is that within early marriage institutional practices, affected girls possess minimal to no agency in the decisions made (Zena Ismail Machinda, 2023).

The education of girls is widely acknowledged as one of the most transformative investments for the global economy. Estimates indicate that nations collectively lose between 15 trillion and 30 trillion dollars in cumulative lifetime productivity and earnings due to educational gaps. Most crucially, sustained investment in female education directly correlates with a reduction in child marriage rates, lower infant and maternal mortality, and substantial advancements in public health outcomes. Educated women consistently demonstrate greater autonomy in making informed decisions regarding healthcare, domestic finances, and future aspirations (World Bank, 2017).

Empirical research in Tanzania indicates that poverty constitutes the foremost driver of child marriage. Within this context, early marriage is conceptualized as a mechanism to shield girls from economic deprivation while alleviating familial financial burdens. The traditional practice of "Mahari" (bride price) which mandates that the groom transfer capital, livestock, or goods to the bride's family further diminishes the wife's autonomous capacity to generate income. Consequently, many girls perceive marriage as their sole viable trajectory. According to the World Bank (2022), poverty remains a deterministic factor undermining girls' educational attainment. When households face financial incapacity to absorb educational expenditures, school attrition rates among girls escalate substantially compared to boys. Girls are frequently retained at home to manage domestic labor and care for younger siblings. This division of labor is deeply rooted in patriarchal gender roles and the traditional belief that sons represent future household breadwinners, whereas daughters are designated as domestic caregivers. While child marriage temporarily mitigates immediate economic distress for socioeconomically

disadvantaged households, it systematically obstructs girls from achieving long-term financial independence. Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy collectively exacerbate gender disparities in education. Globally, an estimated 39,000 girls under the age of 18 marry daily. The ten nations exhibiting the highest prevalence of child marriage include Niger at 75%, Chad and the Central Republic of Africa at 68%, Bangladesh at 66%, Guinea at 63%, Mozambique at 56%, Mali at 55%, Burkina Faso and South Sudan at 52%, and Malawi at 50% (UNICEF, 2018). These staggering statistical indicators explain why girls face severe structural barriers in continuing their education. Post-marriage, institutional expectations confine their roles to domestic spheres, and their probability of pregnancy increases exponentially, culminating in a complete disruption of their educational trajectories.

In Peru, research examining the impact of poverty on the educational opportunities of Afro-Peruvian girls highlights two primary systemic issues: first, the direct correlation between socioeconomic deprivation and the substandard quality of public education; and second, the limited capacity of poor parents to hold public schools accountable for the quality of education their daughters receive.

According to a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) based on the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test (OECD, 2014), the socioeconomic status of students in Peru exerts a more profound influence on their academic performance than in other countries. The PISA test targets 15-year-old students—the standard age for third-year secondary school students, two years before completing their program. In the 2012 test, Peru recorded the worst results among 64 participating countries across all three evaluated skills: mathematics, reading comprehension, and science. Furthermore, nearly 95% of Peruvian students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds performed poorly in mathematics. The 2012 test results showed that a 15-year-old student with limited resources was seven times more likely to perform poorly academically than their classmates from more privileged backgrounds. According to the OECD report, educational outcomes are not solely contingent upon a country's per capita income; they are also significantly modulated by household structures such as whether a student has only one parent or geographic factors, such as attending a school in a rural area. Collectively, these intersecting poverty indicators reinforce the systemic educational disadvantages faced by low-income girls in Peru.

Another study by Young Lives demonstrated that educational gaps can be predicted based on household poverty levels when children are merely one year old, with discernible disparities already observed when children are only five years old (Molinas, 2018). Prior to age 12, there is no statistically significant difference in school attendance rates between boys and girls. At older ages, a slight tendency emerges wherein boys in the lowest income groups exhibit higher school attendance rates than girls within the same socioeconomic bracket (Guadalupe, 2017).

In Vietnam, poverty remains a primary systemic barrier to education in rural areas, particularly impacting ethnic minority children in general and ethnic minority girls in particular. While 53 ethnic minorities account for 13.8% of Vietnam's population, they make up 70% of the poor population in Vietnam (World Bank, 2009). Therefore, within rural and ethnic minority communities, poverty consistently serves as a critical impediment restricting ethnic minority girls from enjoying their right to education. This challenge exists not only in Vietnam but also across various African nations. Lambert, Perrino, and Barreras (2012) reported that parents in extremely disadvantaged areas of Africa cannot afford both the direct and indirect costs of schooling, such as tuition fees, transportation, school uniforms, or additional school contributions. Under these financial constraints, parents prefer sending their sons to school due

to the cultural norm that males are primary financial providers for the household. Conversely, girls are perceived to earn money primarily through early marriage instead of formal education (Zena Ismail Machinda, 2023). This dynamic is also highly prevalent in Vietnam, especially within rural ethnic minority communities. Faced with low household incomes, escalating educational expenditures, and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, education for girls, from the perspective of ethnic minority parents, is often viewed as an investment with minimal economic value. Furthermore, poverty mandates that rural ethnic minority girls allocate substantial time to domestic labor to assist their families. These girls need to stay home to care for younger siblings or work in the fields, all of which severely limit and reduce their learning effectiveness. Consequently, they face heightened risks of school attrition or diminished academic achievement (The Ha Chau, 1991).

A 2022 study by Nghiem Thi Thuy and Nguyen Trong Tai demonstrated that women's educational attainment varied across different household types. The highest percentage of women with no formal education (38.8%) was observed in near-poor households, followed by poor households (26.3%), whereas the lowest was recorded in non-poor households (24.2%). The percentage of ethnic minority women in poor households who achieved a high school education (10.5%) was lower than in non-poor (13.3%) and near-poor (14.9%) households (Figure 1). Furthermore, 21% of respondents cited financial incapacity to afford tuition fees as the primary cause of school dropout, while 38.1% indicated that they had to withdraw from formal education to enter the labor force (Nghiem Thi Thuy, 2022).

In reality, household economic conditions constitute a crucial factor determining the educational opportunities available to ethnic minority girls. Households maintaining average or above-average living standards exhibit lower rates of girls not attending school compared to poorer households. A root cause of this structural limitation is the paucity of targeted policies that directly address the specific challenges faced by rural ethnic minority girls. Beyond the adverse factors previously discussed that hinder girls' educational opportunities, these limitations are compounded by inefficiencies and inequities within the management and distribution of financial support systems. Many state-sponsored scholarships or financial aid programs designated for ethnic minority children derived from education policies fail to allocate sufficient resources. Consequently, rural ethnic minority girls and their families remain unable to absorb the high costs of education.

Trieu Quang Thanh (2018) utilized data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey spanning 1992 to 2014 to examine the factors contributing to the expansion of ethnic educational inequality at the secondary school level. The findings revealed that variations in family background specifically parental educational attainment and widening ethnic-based income disparities at the household level explained these ethnic educational inequalities. Nguyễn Thị Hằng (2018) similarly pointed out the entrenched educational inequalities between ethnic minority regions and low-income demographics. This study offered specific policy recommendations, including poverty alleviation, targeted investment in educational infrastructure, and public awareness campaigns on the societal value of education. Contributing to this discourse, Nguyễn Đình Tuấn (2020) focused on analyzing institutional access to general education for socioeconomically disadvantaged children residing within these regions.

### **3.2. Socio-cultural barriers**

A 2023 study by Zena Ismail Machinda<sup>1</sup>, Veneranda Paulo Byerengo, in Tanzania aimed to investigate the barriers to girls' access to equal, quality education in Ilemela District, Tanzania. This study was prompted by existing data regarding increasing school attrition rates

among girls, early pregnancy, and substandard academic performance. A mixed-methods research design was employed to collect data through focus group discussions and questionnaires, involving a sample of 90 participants. Data analysis was performed utilizing descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The primary findings indicate that cultural beliefs and patriarchal values are significantly associated with barriers restricting girls' access to education, with certain cultural contexts still completely prohibiting girls from accessing formal schooling. Furthermore, challenges related to menstruation and female genital mutilation (FGM/C) persist in specific regions such as Mara, Mwanza, and Dodoma in Tanzania. This cultural practice, although currently legally banned, remains highly prevalent within the community (Zena Ismail Machinda, 2023).

An EEPA survey showed that African-Peruvian children whose parents were uneducated had a 70% lower probability of accessing post-secondary education, while those whose parents had only completed primary education faced a 49% lower probability. Poverty also constituted a significant factor contributing to educational exclusion, as the socioeconomically poorest cohorts in Peru exhibited a 75% lower probability of accessing post-secondary education compared to the wealthiest cohorts (Benavides, 2015).

According to official figures from the Peruvian government, 42.3% of parents believe that corporal punishment yields positive outcomes when administered correctly, 29.6% maintain that corporal punishment is occasionally necessary as a disciplinary method, and 20% of African Peruvians believe that punishing their children is essential for their future success in life. Furthermore, a 2011 survey of African Peruvians revealed that 28.2% of African Peruvian children had experienced corporal punishment, which was 7 percentage points higher than the rate observed among children of other ethnicities (21.4%) (Benavides, 2013). While parents justify the corporal punishment of their children based on a variety of behavioral factors such as disobedience, misconduct, or disrespect few endorse the use of physical punishment for failure to complete homework or poor academic performance. This divergence suggests that parents with lower educational attainment may place a higher premium on behavioral obedience than on educational achievement (Benavides, 2013). Ultimately, exposure to violence perpetrated by or between parents exerts a detrimental impact on children, adversely affecting not only their cognitive and non-cognitive development but also their academic performance (Favara, 2016).

In Nigeria, cumulative research over recent years has demonstrated a significant correlation between female literacy rates and prevalent religious and traditional misconceptions (Falae, 2018). As a highly religious nation where socio-cultural practices are deeply embedded in faith, Nigeria presents a context where religious beliefs substantially influence familial perceptions regarding the necessity of formal education for girls relative to boys. This perspective is similarly mirrored in the country's indigenous traditions, most of which restrict the societal roles of women primarily to motherhood and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, from this traditional viewpoint, formal education is often deemed financially redundant for daughters, given that maternal roles do not conventionally necessitate academic qualifications. Attributing this exclusively to "sexism" would be reductive, as it assumes a lack of parental investment or affection toward daughters, which empirical evidence indicates is not entirely accurate (World Bank, 2017).

Gender Inequality, three primary gender-related dimensions are critical to understanding the barriers to secondary school completion among African Peruvian girls: gender roles and stereotypes, the lack of discretionary time, and unintended teenage pregnancies. Regarding gender roles and stereotypes, African Peruvian girls are subjected not

only to conventional gendered expectations such as viewing motherhood and marriage as their sole or primary life trajectories but also to lower institutional and familial expectations regarding their intellectual potential and academic achievement. Furthermore, African Peruvian girls are vulnerable to intersecting ethnic stereotypes (Benavides, 2013) that disproportionately value their physical attributes over their cognitive abilities. These racialized and gendered stereotypes reinforce prevailing societal assumptions regarding the supposedly innate talents of African Peruvian girls, confining their perceived potential to areas such as dance, while systematically perpetuating the over-sexualization of this demographic (Kogan, 2012) (Galarza & Yamada, 2015).

In Vietnam, child marriage functions as a deeply embedded socio-cultural and traditional practice that severely restricts the educational opportunities of rural ethnic minority girls. Research by Nguyen and Wodon (2012) indicates that child marriage significantly depresses female educational participation rates, while DeJaeghere and Miske (2009) conceptualize early marriage as a traditional institution “resulting from patriarchal norms and gender roles.” Characteristically, the vast majority of Vietnamese females who marry before the age of 20 reside in ethnic minority regions where child marriage has been culturally perpetuated across generations. The cascading consequences of child marriage introduce further systemic barriers to female education, most notably adolescent pregnancy. In addition to these structural impediments, girls who marry prematurely face pervasive social discrimination. Consequently, while Vietnamese jurisprudence strictly prohibits child marriage and coerced unions through numerous statutory provisions, the practice persistently endures across many rural enclaves of the country.

### **3.3. LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

Language serves as the fundamental mechanism for conceptualizing, articulating, and preserving thoughts and ideas. Within the pedagogical environment, instructions delivered in the student's mother tongue are critical, as native language proficiency significantly modulates how children interact with educators and articulate their evaluations of the educational ecosystem. This includes their capacity to evaluate instructional methodologies, express satisfaction with institutional infrastructure, and advocate for necessary improvements to the school environment. Consequently, linguistic barriers frequently precipitate substandard academic performance and systematically diminish educational opportunities for children.

In Vietnam, ethnic minority children predominantly acquire and utilize their indigenous mother tongues within their daily lives. As a result, a substantial proportion of these children experience considerable difficulties in comprehending and speaking Vietnamese, the nation's official and dominant language. This restricted proficiency in Vietnamese severely impedes their ability to engage with educational materials and curricula, which are primarily authored in the dominant language. Addressing these systemic challenges, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) issued the following concluding observations:

“Limited access to mother-language-based education for ethnic minorities and minority groups; insufficient numbers of ethnic minority and minority teachers and a lack of appropriate training for these teachers to teach in bilingual education, as well as low-quality textbooks for children of ethnic minorities or minority groups, hinder the right of children of these groups to fully learn and preserve their distinctive language.”

Linguistic barriers not only impede the capacity of ethnic minority children to comprehend institutional information within the school environment but also diminish their self-esteem, as they are unable to articulate themselves or interact effectively with educators, majority-language peers, and school administrative staff. A primary consequence of these

language barriers is the elevated school attrition rate observed among ethnic minority children in Vietnam. Furthermore, within rural contexts, ethnic minority boys frequently occupy a higher socio-cultural status than girls due to deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions that favor sons over daughters. Compounded by a lack of social interaction, girls often exhibit lower academic achievement, which subsequently perpetuates or worsens their marginalized social status. This systemic disadvantage also engenders feelings of alienation or insecurity regarding school attendance, thereby accelerating the dropout rate among female students. Secondly, ethnic minority girls predominantly utilize their mother tongue for domestic and community purposes (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child). According to DeJaeghere & Miske (2009), this socio-linguistic tradition may further limit the capacity of ethnic minority girls in rural areas to achieve proficiency in and utilize Vietnamese within the formal educational setting.

Recognizing the detrimental impact of linguistic barriers on ethnic minority girls in rural areas, the Vietnamese government has established a comprehensive legal framework and implemented targeted policies to mitigate this issue. Among the most prominent interventions is the implementation of bilingual education initiatives for ethnic minority children. However, Kosonen (2004) contends that the bilingual education policy has not achieved its anticipated success. In practice, a persistent deficit remains of qualified educators who possess fluent bilingual proficiency in both Vietnamese and indigenous ethnic minority languages. Furthermore, the conceptualization and application of bilingualism within the national curriculum are structurally limited; the education system continues to treat indigenous languages merely as standalone elective subjects rather than as primary media of instruction for teaching and learning within the classroom.

In addition to linguistic barriers, early marriage in Vietnam persists as a deeply entrenched and harmful traditional practice among ethnic minority communities, presenting a continuous institutional challenge. Early marriage substantially truncates the educational opportunities of ethnic minority girls, who are frequently compelled to withdraw from formal schooling due to adolescent pregnancy or the mandatory reallocation of their time to domestic labor. Empirical literature demonstrates that educational attainment exerts a significant protective effect against early marriage. For instance, girls who receive no formal education are seven times more likely to marry prematurely compared to those who complete secondary education, while children of highly educated parents exhibit a significantly lower risk of early marriage. Under the Law on Marriage and Family, the legal age of marriage is established at 20 for men and 18 for women; unions violating these statutory thresholds are legally void. Concurrently, the Law on Children categorizes child marriage as a fundamental violation of children's rights, and the Criminal Code stipulates that individuals who organize or facilitate underage marriages are subject to statutory penalties, including imprisonment for up to two years.

### ***3.4. Geographic and Infrastructure Barriers***

Numerous studies and scientific articles have confirmed that geographical location significantly exacerbates educational inequality, as rural and remote areas primarily inhabited by ethnic minorities frequently lack adequate educational infrastructure. In Vietnam, institutions in the Central Highlands often lack basic amenities and essential instructional materials, while facing a critical deficit of over 6,500 qualified teachers across all educational tiers (Kelly Chalupnik, 2024). The stark disparity between urban and rural education in Vietnam remains pronounced, with urban schools disproportionately benefiting from superior resources, highly experienced educators, and access to advanced instructional technologies.

This systemic disparity directly skews student participation and learning outcomes, ultimately leading to lower educational attainment in rural locales. In 2022, the net enrollment rate for upper secondary education stood at 82.4% in urban centers compared to merely 74.1% in rural jurisdictions (UNICEF, 2022). Furthermore, the net enrollment rate for lower secondary education in rural areas was registered at only 76%, representing a deficit of nearly 15 percentage points compared to the 90% recorded in urban environments (UNICEF, 2022). These structural gaps highlight the critical imperative for targeted policy interventions to bridge the educational divide and ensure equitable learning opportunities nationwide (Katie Chan, 2025).

A study by ActionAid Vietnam (2023) conducted in the Northwest provinces demonstrated that the absence of institutional policies to safeguard and support secure dormitories or subsidized transportation for students not officially enrolled in designated "boarding schools" effectively prevents girls from accessing lower and upper secondary education. Long pedestrian commutes through rugged terrain expose female students to heightened risks of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, frequently compelling ethnic minority parents to withhold their daughters from school attendance. Corroborating this, the Malala Fund (2021), in its global assessments of girls' education, demonstrated that for every additional kilometer of distance between the household and the school, the enrollment rate of girls decreased by 10% to 20%, whereas the corresponding impact on boys remained statistically negligible (Irish Aid, 2017).

According to Irish Aid, the National Committee on Minority Affairs, and UNDP (2017), the average distance from the household to the nearest secondary school for ethnic minority populations is 11.7 km; specifically, for the Muong ethnic group, the distance is 16.3 km, and for the Hmong ethnic group, it reaches 23.3 km. This geographical separation constitutes one of the primary structural barriers restricting educational access for ethnic minority students, particularly ethnic minority girls. Empirical survey results indicate that approximately 8% of respondents cited excessive distance to the educational institution as a prohibitive factor, while 10.4% experienced school attrition due to the unavailability of transportation during the early morning hours (Irish Aid, 2017).

### ***3.5. Institutional and Policy Barriers***

The UNESCO Global Report on Education Monitoring (2020) confirms that fragmented financial support policies lacking transitional phases in developing countries often inflict the most severe harm on girls who are subject to double discrimination as both female and ethnic minorities, leading to a sharp increase in high school dropout rates.

Despite numerous legislative efforts to promote gender equality and education in ethnic minority areas, institutional and policy barriers persist in the form of legal gaps, inconsistent implementation, and institutionalized, invisible gender stereotypes. These systemic barriers inadvertently create a "glass ceiling" that restricts access to education for ethnic minority girls. Current tuition fee exemption and learning cost subsidy policies in Vietnam, such as Decree 81/2021/ND-CP, focus only on those belonging to poor or near-poor households or in particularly disadvantaged communes (Region III).

Research by the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and UN Women (2021) indicates that when a locality is recognized as "meeting the standards of a new rural area," policies supporting education for ethnic minority students there are immediately cut or abolished, even if the household's economic capacity is not yet truly sustainable. In the context of depleted family resources, gender stereotypes will resurface: parents often prioritize investing in their sons' education and keeping their daughters at home to work or marry early.

A World Bank study (2018) in Southeast Asian and African countries indicated that implementing a single-language policy in schools without a proper transitional pathway increases the rate of grade repetition and dropout among ethnic minority girls by 1.5 times compared to boys of the same ethnic group.

Regarding education policy in Vietnam, Vietnamese is stipulated as the official language of instruction in schools. Although the Education Law includes provisions on teaching and learning the spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities, its practical implementation remains very limited due to a shortage of teachers and learning materials. According to a survey by the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences (VNIES) & UNICEF (2022), ethnic minority girls have fewer opportunities to communicate in Vietnamese outside of school than boys due to their limited mobility and gender stereotypes keeping them confined to their families. When education policies do not effectively promote bilingual education models based on their mother tongue, ethnic minority girls experience "language shock" from primary school, leading to low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and early school dropout (VNIES & UNICEF 2022).

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Educational attainment for ethnic minority girls constitutes not merely an indicator of academic achievement, but a fundamental metric of humanity and inclusiveness of a nation's social security system. By dismantling the systemic bottlenecks at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic deprivation, society directly invests in a generation of autonomous women capable of transforming the socio-economic landscape of mountainous and ethnic minority regions. Ultimately, the trajectory toward sustainable poverty eradication and substantive gender equality begins with securing unhindered pathways to schooling for female students.

A comprehensive review of international experiences and domestic practices in Vietnam demonstrates that female students from ethnic minority cohorts are currently subjected to a "compounded impact" driven by multifaceted barriers to educational access. These impediments originate not only from economic hardships, geographical remoteness, and socio-cultural divergence, but also, more fundamentally, from deeply ingrained traditional gender stereotypes, linguistic challenges, and systemic gender inequalities. Although Vietnam and other developing nations have implemented numerous targeted support policies, opportunities for ethnic minority girls to access high-quality education remain inequitable compared to their male counterparts and urban peers. Resolving these structural bottlenecks is imperative to achieving sustainable development goals and ensuring genuine gender equality.

##### ***Recommendations***

To enhance educational access and retention for female students from ethnic minority groups, this article proposes the following key policy interventions:

*Shifting from traditional tuition subsidies to "opportunity cost" support:* Scholarships and social welfare provisions for ethnic minority female students at the lower and upper secondary levels should be recalibrated to partially offset the household income shortfall incurred while children are enrolled in school. This fiscal adjustment serves to alleviate immediate economic pressures, thereby preventing premature school attrition driven by the need to integrate children into the familial labor force.

*Digitalizing education in remote regions:* Promoting the strategic application of digital education frameworks (E-learning) is critical to bridging geographical and infrastructural divides. Providing essential learning equipment and robust internet infrastructure to remote institutions not only democratizes access to global knowledge networks for female students but also equips them with critical digital literacy—an essential asset for integration into the contemporary 4.0 labor market.

*Developing bilingual and multicultural educational models:* Expanding the training and recruitment of native-speaking educators and reinforcing Vietnamese language proficiency through mother-tongue-based bilingual instruction is essential. This pedagogical approach facilitates smoother academic integration for female students while preserving their distinctive cultural identity.

*Leveraging media and community leadership to reshape public perception:* Strategic collaboration with village elders, community leaders, and local influencers is required to disseminate progressive socio-cultural narratives and systematically dismantle patriarchal ideologies, such as the preference for sons over daughters and the practice of child marriage. Cultivating community-wide awareness is vital to shifting parental perceptions regarding the long-term socioeconomic returns of their daughters' education. Furthermore, age-appropriate sex education should be contextually integrated into local cultural frameworks to address relevant adolescent health challenges.

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