

EXPLORING THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND  
EMPLOYMENT FOR HMONG WOMEN IN SAPA,  
VIETNAM



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In the mountainous region of Sapa, Vietnam, the Hmong community navigates the complex interplay of preserving their cultural identity amidst immense pressure to modernize. This thesis, centered on Hmong women, delves into their selective adaptation to contemporary challenges, particularly in education and employment. Using document research, a survey, and fieldwork this study draws from both historical data and firsthand accounts. These findings highlight significant disparities in educational attainment and employment opportunities when compared to the national average. Notably, issues of linguistic barriers, cultural priorities, and systemic underrepresentation emerge as primary obstacles. This research illuminates the unique socio-economic dynamics faced by Hmong women, offering valuable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and academia. As Vietnam progresses in an ever-changing globalized world, understanding and integrating the nuanced experiences of marginalized communities like Hmong women becomes essential so that no one is left behind.

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cia siab tias nej cov Hmoob sawv daws thoob plawb lub ntiaj teb yuav noj qab nyob zoo thaum tam sim no thiab mus ib txhis. Kuv hlub nej. Kuv yeej nco txog nej sawv daws tag nrho. Nej siab dawb siab zoo heev. Kuv niaj hnuv sim ua tug neeg zoo npaum li nej.

Connor John Kidd



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## PREFACE

### Why I chose to Study Hmong Women in Sapa, Vietnam

In February 2013, I received a mission call from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, marking a pivotal moment in my life. As a member of the church, embarking on full-time missionary service is a rite of passage. Men serve up to 24 months, and women serve up to 18 months. Eligibility begins at 18 for men and 19 for women upon high school graduation.

Initially envisioning a mission in Japan due to having prior language training as an early teenager, my plans took an unexpected turn when my call assigned me to the California Roseville Mission. A sigh of relief came over me as I read the assignment. I thought I would have a relatively “normal” mission, not needing to learn another language or immerse myself in another culture. However, as I read further in the mission call letter, it clearly stated that I would preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Hmong language.

I had never heard of Hmong people; I even pronounced it as “huh mong” not knowing that the “H” in Hmong is not actually silent or pronounced like an English “H” depending on the dialect of Hmong. White Hmong speakers pronounce the initial “H” in words as a puff of air outside the nostrils while the Green Hmong dialect completely drops the initial “H” sound. I did not even know that there were pockets of minority groups in the United States besides Chinese and Latinos. As an American from a small potato farming town of around 3000 people in the state of Idaho, I truly knew nothing about global geography at the time.

It was during this time that I delved into the history of the Hmong people, a community unfamiliar to many. Stationed in Northern California, I learned the White and Green Hmong dialects, gaining firsthand cultural insights from Hmong refugees and immigrants from Laos and Thailand.

Post-mission, I maintained connections with Hmong friends, returning to California occasionally, even meeting some at my university. Despite my language proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, and Thai, my decision to study Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, might seem unexpected. Vietnam was an unfamiliar territory to me, and my linguistic expertise did not extend to Vietnamese. Yet, my choice was fueled by a desire for a comprehensive understanding of Hmong culture and history. Over the years, working in Minnesota as an employment counselor with Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants, particularly the Hmong, broadened my perspective. Each cultural interaction unveiled unique layers of the Hmong identity.

Building on my experiences as an employment counselor in Minnesota and observations during my mission in California, I noticed certain patterns among Hmong Americans facing socio-economic challenges. Many individuals sought government assistance. Literacy in their native language as well as literacy and fluency in English appeared to be a hurdle for some. This sparked my curiosity, especially considering the vast differences in the Hmong experience between America and the unique setting of Sapa in Vietnam. Intrigued by the contrasts and driven by a desire to explore the nuanced perceptions of Hmong women in Sapa regarding themselves, their perceived barriers to education and employment, and their strategies for navigating these challenges, I embarked on a journey to delve deeper into the intersection of culture, identity, and socio-economic dynamics in this distinct context.

While prior studies about Hmong in Sapa focus on grouping ethnic groups together, or focus on the entire Hmong ethnicity, I wished to zero in on Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam to explore the tourism driven economy and how that has shaped Hmong women in Sapa.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Who are the Hmong?

#### 1.1.1 The Hmong Diaspora and their History with Conflict

It is unknown how long the Hmong have been around, but experts say that they have been around since at least 2700 B.C. because of their mention in ancient Chinese texts (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 6). The Hmong have a complicated history with the Chinese. Between the 1600s and 1900s, the Han Chinese had the Hmong do corvée labor. The Chinese would also call the Hmong “miāo 喵” or “miáo 苗” meaning sound of a cat (making fun of their spoken language) and barbarians because of their tendency to rebel. In the late 1700s and early 1800s the Hmong began to leave China and venture further south to Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Millet, 2002, pp. 14-15). From 1859 to 1954 the French ruled over Vietnam. This was also some of the Hmong’s first recorded times of interacting with Europeans. In 1918 was when French missionaries arrived to Sapa, Lao Cai, where a lot of Hmong live. The French also began to force corvée labor on the Hmong. The Hmong tried to revolt from 1918 to 1921 also known as the “Madman’s War” by French historians (Millet, 2002, p. 15).

From 1918 to 1921, the Hmong rebellion led by Pa Chay, known as "Rog Paj Cai" or Pa Chay's War to the Hmong, unfolded in French-controlled Vietnam. The rebellion stemmed from an incident in China, where a Hmong man claimed a miraculous recovery and was subsequently accused of sorcery by Chinese authorities. The French-colonized Hmong, already facing oppression and exploitation by corrupt

officials, joined the rebellion, sparking conflicts with both the Chinese and the French (Lee, 2015, p. 104).

Pa Chay's War reflected a historical pattern of ethnic uprisings in the borderlands between China and Southeast Asia. It drew inspiration from earlier rebellions such as the Great "Miao" and Panthay rebellions, as well as Hmong messianic uprisings led by figures like Xiong Tai and Xiong Mi Chang. The socio-economic trigger for the revolt reflected the Hmong's desire for autonomy and echoed a resurgence of the latent Hmong dream of independence within the context of French-controlled Vietnam (Lee, 2015, p. 104).

The rebellion spread to various regions within French-controlled Vietnam, including Muang Tinh, Muang La, and Dong Xuong, leading to clashes between Hmong leaders and French forces (Lee, 2015, p. 105). The complexity of the rebellion increased as messianic figures emerged, such as a self-proclaimed "queen" in Thuan, revealing preexisting clan and regional divisions among the Hmong (Lee, 2015, p. 107).

While the French managed to quell some outbreaks through negotiations and promises of investigations into grievances, the Vietnamese highlands experienced a more intense and protracted rebellion that followed. The historical context of exploitation, ethnic hierarchy, and cultural divisions played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the Hmong rebellion against French rule in Vietnam during this period (Lee, 2015, p. 108).

In 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared independence while the French wished to remain in Vietnam which started the First Indochina War. The First Indochina War ended in 1954 with Vietnam divided by the communist North and French South. The North and



South continued to fight but then in 1965, the USA officially entered the conflict. This would later be known as the Vietnam War in the West. This is an interesting turn of events because in Laos, the Hmong assisted the USA while in Vietnam, the Hmong in the North were on the side of the communists. In 1975, the communists or Vietnam People's Liberation Army, gained full control of Vietnam. The Hmong in Laos had no choice but to flee to Thailand and hope that the West could offer safety while the Hmong in Vietnam needed no such exodus (Millet, 2002, p. 16).

More than 50 years ago, the United States began using Laos as a battleground to fight communism. The early CIA, without the consent of larger federal bodies, secretly enlisted the aid of Hmong guerrilla fighters in Laos as their proxies to fight the Pathet Lao as well as disrupt Viet Cong supply lines within the Ho Chi Min Trail. This is seldom talked about among Americans and the world at large giving deeper meaning to its name The Secret War in Laos.

The Hmong's decision to fight against Laos was influenced by various factors. First, the Hmong, led by General Vang Pao, rejected communism and its ideology, opting to resist its spread into Laos. Second, promises of support from the U.S. and the CIA, including weapons, food, and medical supplies, motivated the Hmong to collaborate in the fight against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. Additionally, there were hints of promises for autonomy or support in the event of success (Chan, 1994, p. 60).

Ultimately, the Hmong saw themselves as defenders of their way of life and opponents of communism, aligning with the U.S. to counter the perceived threat posed by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. The Hmong's role in Laos

became significant in the broader context of the Cold War, as they became a frontline defense against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia (Chan, 1994, p. 62).

Between 1964 and 1973, the United States began its bombing missions in and around Laos. Laos today is regarded as the most bombed countries in the world, more so than Germany and Japan combined. Over 160 million bombs were dropped on Laos during this 9-year period. 580,344 bombing missions were conducted (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 289). Approximately one third of those bombs did not explode resulting in 87,000 square kilometers of land contaminated with unexploded ordnance (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, pp. 294-295).

The reason given for the systematic bombing of Laos that the United States gave was to disrupt communist supply lines. The Ho Chi Min Trail ran through southern Laos. The Pathet Lao, the communist soldiers of Laos, occupied the half of the country that borders Vietnam and China while the other half bordering Thailand remained neutral. The Pathet Lao controlled side also was bombed (Riaño & Caicedo, 2020, pp. 9-10).

During this time, the early CIA enlisted the help of Hmong guerrilla fighters led by General Vang Pao. General Vang Pao also happened to be the only Hmong General in the Lao Royal Army. General Vang Pao assisted in the bombings by helping the CIA identify possible important military targets from the mountain tops. The mountains are where the Hmong call home, what they could easily use as a vantage point (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 288).

In the early stages of the war, Cambodia and Vietnam were also bombed from US airbases located in southern Vietnam as well as Thailand. Whenever US pilots

encountered enemy fire or bad weather and could no longer complete the mission, instead of flying back to base right away, pilots would destroy other targets in Laos. This is due to the fact that the explosives were unstable and caused for a lengthy unloading process, it was more feasible to drop their load on another target. Because of these unplanned bombing missions, it is nearly impossible to quantify the total square kilometers covered by bombs or even the number. These things happened but not all were reported as failures because the full load was dropped (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 289).

In 1968, President Lyndon B Johnson, due to the outcry of the American people, stopped the bombings in Cambodia and Vietnam. President Johnson indicated he did not wish for lives to be lost unnecessarily on both sides of the conflict. However, because the American public did not know about the Secret War in Laos, the resources used initially for the bombing of Cambodia and Vietnam were redirected to Laos. An official was quoted saying, “Well, we couldn’t just let the planes rust,” (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 289).

In 1967, before President Johnson’s announcement, there were 52,120 sortie missions to Laos. In 1969, after the announcement, sortie missions peaked at 148,069. A sortie is when a plane flies from its base, drops its load, and then returns to base to refuel (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 289). The United States government also made a conscious decision to bomb villages, farmland, and civilians. The idea was to destroy all communist means of continuing like instead of killing individual ants, you destroy the ant hill (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 290).

The Secret War in Laos resulted in Lao PDR becoming the most bombed country in the world (Riaño & Caicedo, 2020, p. 9). The Hmong that assisted the CIA were hunted down by the Lao government causing many Hmong to flee using a variety of methods (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. xvii). Many Hmong, as a result of the war, immigrated to Thailand, The United States, France, and other places to seek a better life (Yang, 2003, pp. 277-281).

The historical narrative of the Hmong people reveals a consistent pattern of oppression and exploitation by various governments, fueling their desire for independence and resistance against external control. From the 1600s to 1900s, the Hmong faced corvée labor and derogatory labels under Chinese rule, prompting their migration to Southeast Asian countries in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The French colonial period in Vietnam from 1859 to 1954 intensified Hmong discontent, culminating in the "Madman's War" of 1918 to 1921, a notable resistance against French rule.

The Hmong's collaboration with the United States during the Vietnam War era was rooted in their rejection of communism and the promises of support for autonomy, reflecting a consistent theme of preserving cultural identity and resisting external domination. The Secret War in Laos, marked by the Hmong's assistance to the CIA, fueled their desire for independence as Laos became the most bombed country, making them targets for persecution by the Lao government. This persecution led to a diaspora, emphasizing the Hmong's determination to escape governmental oppression and seek a better life elsewhere.

In Sapa, the Hmong's experiences are intricately tied to their historical journey from China, fostering an enduring anticipation for fair treatment. Over the past two centuries, globalization has brought both opportunities and challenges, impacting the Hmong community. The impacts of globalization and government meddling have brought about numerous economic, social, cultural, and environmental transformations that have affected the Hmong community in both positive and negative ways. Unlike their counterparts in Laos who faced a second great exodus after the Secret War in Laos, the Hmong in Vietnam remained in the country and have had a unique experience. Despite not directly feeling the impact of the Secret War in Laos, the overarching experience of conflict and displacement in Vietnam has instilled expectations for socio-economic stability and cultural understanding in interactions with the government. The Hmong's resilience and hope for equitable treatment highlight their ongoing quest for freedom and security.

### 1.1.2. The Hand Dealt to the Hmong in Vietnam

In my exploration of Hmong women in Vietnam, I aim to unravel the intricate layers of their identity. The Hmong identity, synonymous with complexity, is deeply rooted in history, language, and cultural intersections. To fully comprehend the Hmong's socioeconomic status in Sapa, Vietnam, it is essential to understand how they ended up in Vietnam and the interaction between the Hmong and the Vietnamese government in the past. Additionally, examining the economic changes in Hmong professions since their arrival in Vietnam and understanding the impact of globalization on their culture will provide a comprehensive view of their current situation. The social and cultural structure of the Hmong is also crucial to the study,

as it can highlight the challenges they face in preserving their traditions while adapting to a rapidly changing world.

As a process of trading technology and sharing ideas worldwide, globalization has created opportunities and challenges for the Hmong community. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how they have adapted to a globalized society and examine the positive and negative impacts of globalization on their socioeconomic status.

There are 54 different ethnic groups residing in Vietnam. The Kinh (Vietnamese) makes up about 86% of that population. Out of all of the 53 minority groups, the Hmong number as the fifth largest with over 1 million people according to a 2009 census. That means that the Hmong make up 1.24% of the population. Over 90% of the Hmong in Vietnam are settled in the mountains in Northern Vietnam. The living conditions in northern Vietnam are less than ideal. The lowlands of Vietnam already contained other ethnic groups which forced the Hmong to settle in the mountains. There is significantly less infrastructure in the mountainous region of Vietnam. Development just does not happen as fast as the south and the lowlands (Luong & Nieke, 2013, pp. 1-2).

It has been documented that 10.5% of Kinh work in the state sector while only 1.3% of total Hmong work in the State sector. 98.5% of Hmong work for household enterprises while only 74.6% of Kinh work for household enterprises. These statistics show that the Hmong are greatly underrepresented in official government positions. This means that socioeconomic issues important to the Hmong tend to not be a major concern to the overall government. To make matters worse, the Hmong only make up 1.4% of national assembly deputies and at the province level in the north, the Kinh take up important positions even though their population is significantly less. In Lao

Cai specifically, minorities make up 64% of the population yet only hold 26% of the administrative positions at the provincial, district and township levels. National Assembly Deputies, especially if they are of a minority group, would appear to have less political sway or influence in decision making (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 9).

It would appear to Michaud in his research that the Hmong “selectively” adapt to changes brought upon them, especially those involving change to their livelihood (Michaud, 2012, p. 3). This is often attributed to the Hmong isolation in the mountains from the rest of society as well as the Hmong’s long history of moving from place to place due to over oppressive governments. The Hmong are slow to open up and build trust, but when they do, they are fully open (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 24).

The Hmong tend to be much more “resistant” than other ethnic groups in adapting change to their society due to their desire to preserve their cultural identity. If there is too much pressure put onto the Hmong to change or adapt, they choose to remove themselves from that situation entirely as we’ve seen from their diasporic past (Turner & Michaud, 2008, p. 184). It is noted that the Hmong overall have less access to education, transportation, credit, land, markets as well as experiencing stereotyping by their Kinh peers (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 12).

### 1.1.3. Hmong Women

The Hmong community, rich in their traditions and cultural heritage, have historically shown resilience in the face of external influences, often being resistant to rapid changes. This resistance is not a mere aversion but rather a discerning process where the community is selective in assimilating alterations that align with their core

values and beliefs. Such discernment raises intriguing questions, especially when examining the lives of Hmong women in Sapa, who stand at the crossroads of preserving traditions and navigating the demands of an evolving world. This study wishes to delve into this nuanced dynamic, exploring how Hmong women in Sapa negotiate with change, what they choose to embrace or resist, and the underlying reasons that guide their choices. Understanding this selective adaptation offers a deeper insight into the intricate balance they maintain between upholding their heritage and forging pathways in a modernizing world.

Education and employment, fundamental pillars for empowerment and socioeconomic mobility, often present multifaceted barriers for Hmong women. These barriers are not just the tangible obstacles of infrastructure or resources, but also the intangible hurdles rooted in cultural norms, societal perceptions, and economic dependencies. In a world rapidly modernizing and evolving, where gender equality has become a global focal point, understanding the unique challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa offers a lens into the nuanced interplay of tradition, geography, and modernity. This study aims to dive deep into these intricacies, shedding light on the lived experiences of Hmong women and the barriers they navigate in their quests for education and employment. By doing so, it seeks not only to amplify their voices but also to inform interventions that can foster a more inclusive and equitable landscape for them.

The Hmong society persists as a patriarchal structure where women encounter challenges in gaining recognition as heads of households. Traditional gender roles continue to cast men in dominant roles, contributing to the perpetuation of a male-centric hierarchy. This is evident in the prevalent practice of arranged marriages



within the Hmong culture, where familial decisions often overshadow individual choices. Bridal snatches, both with and without consent, remain part of the cultural landscape, reflecting historical norms that have yet to fade entirely. Although contemporary shifts are apparent, with marriage for love gaining acceptance, remnants of traditional practices endure. A notable aspect is the occurrence of marriages at a young age, underscoring the influence of cultural norms on matrimony. While wife snatching appears to be less common in modern times and seems to decrease as more women receive formal education, its historical resonance serves as a reminder of the complex interplay between tradition and evolving social dynamics within the Hmong community (Huong et al., 2011, pp. S205-S206).

Additionally, Hmong women tend to give birth at home rather than going to a medical facility. This is due originally to Hmong tradition of a woman giving birth on her own due to “shame” they perceive of the birthing process. This is exacerbated since Hmong people are weary of strangers and its difficult for them to open up, therefore having a stranger as a doctor does not sit well with Hmong women. Transportation issues living in rural settings and having access to doctors, midwives and medical facilities still remains a barrier (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, pp. 63, 73, 98).

## 1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the primary cultural, economic, and societal barriers that Hmong women in Sapa encounter when pursuing education and employment opportunities?

2. How do Hmong women in Sapa perceive and navigate these barriers in their daily lives, and what personal narratives can they share regarding their experiences in education and employment?

### 1.3. Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the societal, cultural and economic barriers Hmong women in Sapa face in accessing education and employment opportunities.
2. To study the perceptions of Hmong women regarding education and employment.

### 1.4. Key Words

Vietnam, Hmong women, education, employment

### 1.5. Literature Review

#### 1.5.1. Key Themes

Sarah Turner is a professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Her research focuses on how people in different cultural and social environments make a living, such as small-scale traders in Indonesia or ethnic minority farmers in Vietnam. The scholar argues that outsiders, like government officials or aid agencies, may not understand why people make certain decisions about their livelihoods, but these decisions make sense to the local people based on their understanding of success and their specific knowledge of their local context. If outsiders do not understand this, it can have serious consequences for the people they are trying to help. Turner's research aims to give voice to local people and incorporate their perspectives into development

thinking and practice (Turner). Turner is thus a perfect voice to help us understand the modern concerns of the Hmong people in an ever-globalized world.

Jean Michaud's work on the Hmong aims to deepen our understanding of their history, culture, and society, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. He seeks to challenge popular stereotypes and misconceptions about the Hmong, and to provide a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of their experiences. Michaud's work also emphasizes the agency and resilience of the Hmong people, and the ways in which they have adapted to changing social, economic, and political conditions over time. His research is characterized by a multidisciplinary approach that draws on anthropology, history, and political science, among other fields (Michaud, 2017). Both Michaud and Turner often come up on web searches of Hmong in Vietnam. Michaud and Turner have often done research expeditions together in Southeast Asia and China (Turner et al., 2015, p. 8).

Constance Lavoie is another scholar that I cite in my literature review, however, she is not per se a Hmong expert, rather, she is an expert in bilingual education and language education with minority groups (Lavoie). Lavoie gave a wonderful summary of a study done by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), (which I will go in more detail later), which demonstrates not only the educational reality of Hmong children in Northern Vietnam but also from the teachers' perspective as well.

### 1.5.2. Education

In discussions about education, it is imperative to recognize that it encompasses far more than just formal schooling or conventional academic pursuits. Education, in the broader sense, speaks of skills, competencies, and knowledge that an individual acquires throughout their life. This includes linguistic literacy in native tongues like Hmong, national languages like Vietnamese, or even other global languages. It also extends to work-related skills, whether they are traditional crafts passed down through generations or contemporary skills acquired in response to modern demands. Thus, when referring to 'education' in the context of this study, I am addressing this holistic understanding, capturing the entirety of experiences and skills that shape an individual's ability to navigate their world, both inside and outside a classroom (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 16-17). To only focus on formal education experiences would leave a huge gap of overall marketable knowledge Hmong people can offer their larger community and nation's job market.

The educational attainment levels of the Hmong in Vietnam have been significantly lower compared to the national average. Despite Vietnam achieving universal primary education at 94%, the net enrollment rate for primary education among the Hmong was only 41.5% in 1999. The dropout rate for Hmong students from elementary school was also much higher, ranging from 50-70%, with a repetition rate of 30-40%, compared to the national dropout rate of 2.3%. The language barrier is one of the major factors that contribute to the low academic achievement of Hmong students. They often struggle to understand the medium of instruction, which is Vietnamese. This lack of understanding leads to poor academic performance, and social mobility since academic results determine social status in Vietnam. While the Vietnamese government has policies that support multilingual

education, few schools in minority areas fully implement them. As a result, the Hmong are often at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and have difficulty being well represented in government (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 3).

Accessibility, language barrier, workload and resource shortage are some of the main things that hinder not only Hmong children but teachers in Hmong communities as well. Hmong children in mountainous areas have difficulty accessing schools due to dangerous mountain roads and long distances from their homes. This causes low enrollment and transition rates to secondary schools, leading to a significant gap in education between Hmong communities (41.5%) and Kinh communities (91.4%). Many children have no shoes or inappropriate shoes for walking through the mountains, making the journey to school even more difficult (Lavoie, 2011, p. 155).

Hmong children often do not finish their homework assignments due to not having a dedicated workspace for them to do schoolwork at home. The Hmong also have much farming and housework to do, and the children are expected to help. Priority is not given to their education but to farming and housework. After finishing chores, Hmong children are often tired and cannot complete homework assignments due to fatigue (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 22).

Teachers in Hmong communities face many different types of shortages, including a lack of pedagogical materials, electricity shortages, and unsuitable temporary buildings made of bamboo. Some schools have hand pumps, while others have no access to fresh water aside from rivers. Additionally, the economic resources of families are very limited, imposing some limitations on the school supplies that can be provided by families (Lavoie, 2011, pp. 166-167).

School activities are conducted mostly in Vietnamese, which excludes Hmong children from some group activities due to their lack of understanding of the language. Teachers who cannot speak Hmong add to the difficulty in teaching Hmong children (Lavoie, 2011, p. 165).

In order to remedy the language barrier specifically, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam and UNICEF sponsored a bilingual education project in Northern Vietnam with Hmong children. The pilot bilingual program involved 28 teachers, 26 of which were Hmong while the others were Kinh. All 28 teachers were able to attain a literacy certification in the Hmong language before teaching began. A secondary project was conducted by Lavoie. Lavoie's project aimed to gauge the "educational reality" of Hmong Children as well as teachers in the mountains. Lavoie's project involved using photographs and drawings to provide a broader perspective on educational inequalities in Vietnam. The aim was to give a voice to marginalized individuals who are often overlooked by researchers and policy makers. The project also aimed to counter Western bias and empower teachers to become co-researchers (Lavoie, 2011, p. 154).

The Hmong written language was only developed recently in 1954 chiefly by linguist William Smalley, Yves Bertrais and Linwood Barney (Ly, 2020, p. 2). Even then, the Hmong written language was only formally introduced properly to academia in 2008. The lack of written literacy for the sake of this study deemed Hmong people visual learners. Hmong children during the study were asked survey questions but were asked to answer in the form of art. Children would then describe to the teacher what they drew, and teachers would thus document their findings. It is the results of

this study which gave this literature review a look at the hard reality of Hmong children and their upward battle in the realm of academia (Lavoie, 2011, p. 155).

Vietnam's UNICEF sponsored bilingual education project in Vietnam was successful, as it led to the introduction of pilot bilingual schools in three provinces, integrating three minority languages alongside Vietnamese. Lavoie's project involving the teachers as participants and researchers working with Hmong children illustrated their realities through drawings, photographs, interviews, and discussions. The study identified several issues faced by the teachers, such as poor road conditions, a lack of Hmong teachers causing language barriers, the workload of Hmong children, and the shortage of human and physical resources. However, the teachers also provided suggestions for adapting the educational system for Hmong, such as training teachers from Hmong communities, paying for training and material preparation in local languages, building extra schools to facilitate accessibility, and including local minority knowledge into the curriculum. Overall, the evidence suggests that the bilingual education project was successful in promoting a shift towards a multilingual system that includes minority languages and knowledge in Vietnam (Lavoie, 2011, p. 172).

#### 1.5.2.1. Ethnic Minority Education Policies in Vietnam

Government policies in Vietnam have sought to address the disparities in access to education and employment faced by ethnic minority groups such as the Hmong (Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 2). However, the effectiveness of these policies has been a topic of debate. While many of these policies are good in theory, there is evidence that many of these policies are poorly implemented or not implemented throughout the country when they are effective. Therefore, it is important to examine the policies

that have been put in place and their impact on the educational opportunities and outcomes of ethnic minority groups, including the Hmong, in Vietnam.

The Government of Vietnam has established the Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Area Affairs (CEMA) as a ministerial-level government body that oversees management functions for ethnic minorities and mountainous areas. CEMA has representative agencies down to the district-level in geographically strategic areas or areas with an ethnic minority population of 5000 or more. Programs that target ethnic minority groups cover a wide range of issues including poverty reduction, resettlement and forest land allocation, education, health, and communication. These programs benefit ethnic minorities through various channels such as their ethnic identity, residence areas, poor economic status, and general social programs for households recognized as having contributed to the government. However, concerns have been expressed regarding the efficiency and adequacy of program implementation, and the costs and benefits of these programs have not been evaluated (Dang, 2012, p. 2).

The Vietnamese government has implemented policies specifically aimed at the language and education of ethnic minorities. Bilingual programs (as has been mentioned previously) have been established for young minority students, and primary schools have been teaching 10 ethnic minority languages, such as Bahnar, Rhade, Jarai, Sedang, and Mnong, in the Central Highlands. Although minority languages are usually taught as a subject, a few L1-based research programs have been conducted since 2000, using the minority students' L1 as the medium of instruction. These programs are intended to counteract subtractive schooling and promote the preservation of minority languages, but they remain pilot projects and are



not yet available throughout the country, owing to the shortage of resources and ethnic diversity (Nguyen & Hamid, 2017, p. 2).

The Research Center for Ethnic Minority Education (RCEME), previously a branch of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) and additionally worked with UNICEF on creating bilingual schools in Vietnam, was changed to an affiliate research institute. This change gives the RCEME less decision-making ability leading to concerns that this was done to prevent the empowerment of ethnic minority groups. The work of UNICEF and RCEME has led to the introduction of pilot bilingual schools in three provinces (Lavoie, 2011, p. 171).

The government's policies aim to address the education of ethnic minority students and preserve their languages, but they still face subtractive schooling. Subtractive schooling refers to removing certain elements of a student's learning experience, in this case language. The lack of emphasis on minority or indigenous languages can lead to the decline in use or proficiency among the younger generations, in other words "killing a language without killing the speakers" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 90). Students are primarily taught in Vietnamese, and minority languages are only taught as a subject if at all, resulting in lower academic achievement, developmental risks, and high dropout rates among minority students (Nguyen & Hamid, 2017, p. 3). For minority groups that do finish their K-12 education report that they use far less of their L1 and even have their L2, Vietnamese, mixed in or replace parts of their L1 (Nguyen & Hamid, 2017, p. 9). These bilingual schools however are still only used in a few places and has not expanded beyond its original inception much (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, p. 135).

### 1.5.3. Employment

The Hmong have a unique pattern of employment and income distribution. They earn their livelihoods through farming, husbandry, hunting, fishing, and foraging, and have a strong sense of kinship-based subsistence. Compared to the other top five most populous ethnic groups in Vietnam being the Kinh, Tay, Thai, Muong, and Khmer, the Hmong have a higher share of people engaged in household enterprises and rely heavily on traditional livelihoods. This is partly due to their limited access to education and lack of representation in state and private sectors, resulting in a passive and powerless position in relation to the economic system in Vietnam. The market-oriented economy has gradually penetrated and broken up their self-supplying and self-sufficiency model, but their strong sense of identity and patterns of settlement have often resulted in cautious responses to external forces (Luong & Nieke, 2013, pp. 9-10).

The Hmong face significant challenges in accessing job opportunities. Compared to other ethnic groups, they have the lowest educational achievements and poorest academic performance, with low literacy rates and high non-school attendance. This, coupled with their isolation and socio-economic vulnerability, results in a passive and powerless position in relation to the economic system in Vietnam. Their needs or problems are rarely reflected and considered in the development of state policies on land and economic issues, and they have the lowest proportion of workers in state sectors and no involvement in collective, private, and foreign-invested enterprises. As a result, they struggle to find employment opportunities outside of their traditional livelihoods and have limited access to higher-paying jobs. Despite external forces pushing them towards education and market-oriented employment, the Hmong people

in Vietnam persist in their selective pattern in their livelihoods, attaching strong importance to the preservation of their identity and culture in their adaptive economic strategies (Luong & Nieke, 2013, p. 22).

Since the 1990s, the Hmong people in Sa Pa district have found a new source of income in tourism. Specifically, young Hmong women work as trekking guides for backpackers looking to explore the highlands. About 40 Hmong women, in a study done by Sarah Turner, work as trekking guides, and their daily interactions with Western tourists have enabled them to become fluent in English. These women work either in loose agreements with hotels or tourism agencies in Sa Pa town or as freelance guides for multiple establishments. They can earn between 70,000 VND to 150,000 VND per day for a trek, and 250,000 VND for an overnight trek with a homestay. In addition, they often receive sizeable tips from appreciative clients, which can double their daily income (Turner, 2012, p. 414).

Although the Hmong guides make an important income, there is less evidence of this income when visiting their family homes. Most of the earnings are spent on accommodation, food, cell phones, and clothing, with occasional cash passed on to the family for emergency medical costs and to help cover rice shortages and fertilizer costs. At times, the income is used to pay for extra agricultural labor for the family so that the young women can continue guiding while others prepare fields and plant rice or maize in their absence. Despite this, the last arrangement is often frowned upon by the parents of the guides, who prefer their daughters to come back to the hamlet to help out (Turner, 2012, p. 414).

The growth of rural tourism also poses a challenge to the traditional Hmong patriarchal society. In Hmong society, men have more rights and responsibilities than

women, and the head of the village plays a significant role in decision-making. Hmong women's engagement in tourism and wage labor may lead to a shift in the power dynamics within the community. The autonomy and independence that women gain from earning an income outside of the home may challenge the traditional gender roles and hierarchy. Additionally, the flexible work arrangements that allow women to engage in wage labor may also undermine the traditional communal labor system. This system, which is based on reciprocity and mutual assistance, is a key feature of Hmong culture and plays an important role in the community's social and economic organization. Thus, while rural tourism has brought economic benefits to the Hmong, it has also brought changes to their traditional way of life and society (Lohne, 2019, p. 51).

This literature review has explored the challenges faced by the Hmong in education and employment, and the impact of these challenges on their socioeconomic status. While some progress has been made in recent years, the Hmong still face significant barriers to accessing quality education and employment opportunities that align with their cultural values and traditions. Moreover, the Hmong community remains underrepresented in government, which makes it difficult to address their unique concerns and challenges. Therefore, it is crucial for policymakers to prioritize the needs and concerns of the Hmong community and work towards creating policies that address their specific needs. This includes investing in education and employment opportunities that are tailored to the cultural and linguistic needs of the Hmong, as well as increasing their representation in government to ensure that their voices are heard, and their concerns are addressed.

Building upon the foundational research from Turner, Michaud, Lavoie, and others, it becomes evident that the landscape of education and employment for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam have shed light on significant portions of the Hmong, Vietnamese experience. Yet, a targeted exploration specifically centered on the barriers perceived by Hmong women remains a notable gap. While these prior studies offer snapshots into the broader Hmong experience, there is still room to dig deeper into the nuanced challenges and aspirations of Hmong women. My proposed thesis intends to fill this gap. My aim is to give a voice to Hmong women on how they feel and deal with their own perceived disadvantages in society. Additionally, through understanding their literacy in Hmong, Vietnamese, their schooling backgrounds, and their children's educational experiences, I aim to make a comprehensive portrayal, which can serve as a cornerstone for informed, targeted interventions in the future. Given the evolving socioeconomic landscape of Vietnam and the importance of preserving cultural identities in a globalized world, this thesis is not just relevant but crucial in the broader discourse on the Hmong community's empowerment and development.

## 1.6. Hypothesis

In Sapa, Hmong women confront intersecting cultural, economic, and societal barriers when accessing education and employment. Traditional norms, Sapa's tourism-driven economy, and the region's geographical challenges may collaboratively limit their educational and professional aspirations. This study seeks to elucidate these intertwined barriers through the lived experiences of Hmong

women. Research has indicated that the geography of Sapa, language fluency and education levels largely limit both the equity and equality of opportunity for the Hmong. It is essential to take into account a Hmong woman's perception of education and employment such as the language barrier deterring many from higher education, the overall value of receiving an education and possibilities of landing a job, and their traditional roles vs modern opportunity. Whereas many researchers have concentrated on aspects like trekking, crafts, and farming within Hmong communities, this research strives to provide an overarching analysis of all aspects of education and employment, aiming for a holistic perspective that encompasses the full spectrum of opportunities and challenges faced by Hmong women today.

### 1.7. Research Methodology

The three main steps of this study will include document research, fieldwork, and a survey. Document research will be conducted first to gain a better background of Sapa, its demographics, economy, niche characteristics of Hmong women there, governmental policies, regional economic reports, and historical accounts. I wish to map out the educational and employment landscape specific to the Hmong women in Sapa as well. By analyzing these things, I hope to identify any recurring themes, gaps, or anomalies in the data and understand the broader socio-cultural and economic dynamics at play. Additionally, this document research will assist in formulating targeted observational strategies, refining research questions, and ensuring that the fieldwork is both culturally sensitive and contextually informed. Ultimately, this

preparatory phase is intended to equip me with a strong foundation on the Hmong of Sapa, Vietnam.

**Document Research:** Prior to delving into the fieldwork, an extensive document research will be conducted to establish a comprehensive background on Sapa. The focus will be on its demographics, economy, niche characteristics of Hmong women, governmental policies, regional economic reports, and historical accounts. The intention is to map the educational and employment landscape specific to the Hmong women in Sapa. By evaluating these resources, the study aims to identify recurring themes, detect any gaps or anomalies in the data, and better understand the broader socio-cultural and economic dynamics at play. This preliminary phase is crucial to gain a deep understanding of the Hmong community in Sapa, ensuring that the fieldwork would be both culturally sensitive and contextually informed.

**Field Research:** Field research is designed to observe the Hmong community in Sapa closely. The primary focus is on recognizing patterns related to their socio-economic well-being, such as the jobs they engage in and gaining insights into their daily lives. The aim is also to collaborate with non-profits, governmental organizations, and local Hmong experts to obtain a holistic view.

A significant component of this research is the Hmong-guided trek, designed to provide a firsthand tourist perspective, examining the interactions between Hmong women and tourists, gauging their English proficiency, and assessing their living conditions. Observing the treks these women frequently undertake is vital to understand the challenges they face, while also giving an insight into the

infrastructure, such as schools and roads, which could affect the education and employment opportunities for Hmong women. A day is also dedicated to observing Sapa Town, conversing with Hmong women selling handcrafts, and understanding their interaction dynamics with tourists. Additionally, a day will be spent in Hanoi to visit the Ethnology Museum, aiming to glean what information they could offer about the Hmong.

**Survey:** For this study, I surveyed a sample of 175 Hmong women aged 18 and up. This age group was specifically chosen to capture working age adults and gauge their formal education, work experience, and perceived barriers to education and employment.

Although I initially planned on translating the survey into Hmong, drawing from the literature review and personal experience, it is clear there are notable Hmong literacy concerns among the Hmong community. Given that the Hmong written language was only formally established in the 1950s, and recognizing the possible literacy challenges this might present, I have decided to translate the survey into Vietnamese. This approach ensures greater accessibility and understanding for the target audience. The survey will be developed in English first. Afterward, it was translated into Vietnamese.

The online format of the survey offers a convenient feature allowing participants to freely switch between Vietnamese and English versions. This ensures participants can choose the language they are most comfortable with, catering to a broader range of literacy and language proficiencies. Although the in-person interviews were initially preferred to build trust with the Hmong community, who often have



reservations about opening up to strangers, the online format aims to provide a degree of anonymity. It is hoped that this will encourage open and honest responses from the participants.

**Data Analysis:** The data collected from the document research will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach was chosen to extract patterns, trends and central ideas from the vast information collected.

**Ethical Considerations:** All participants in the study will be informed about its purpose. Their right to withdraw at any time is emphasized. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is prioritized to build trust and encourage candid responses.

**Limitations:** The study recognizes the limitations of not incorporating a broader sample from the entire Hmong population of Sa Pa, primarily due time constraints and being a self-funded project. However, efforts were made to diversify interactions and ensure a rich mix of perspectives through the help of local Hmong contacts. Another limitation was the language barrier, as most interactions were limited to English and Hmong speakers.

## 1.8. Research Significance

This research illuminates the unique challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa, providing policymakers and NGOs with actionable insights. With these findings,

more targeted interventions can be developed, promoting effective resource allocation and advocacy for change.

By focusing on Hmong women in Sapa, this study fills an academic gap and offers deeper socio-cultural insights. This enriched perspective can influence academic discourse and foster more informed and respectful interactions with the Hmong community.



## Chapter 2: Sapa, Vietnam Overview

Sapa is a mountainous district situated in the western part of Lao Cai province in Vietnam. Sapa resides in the Hoang Lien mountains and is also partially inside Hoang Lien National Park. The Hoang Lien mountains is also home to Mount Fansipan which is Vietnam's tallest mountain at 3143 meters. The altitude in this region ranges from 300 to over 3000 meters, featuring many slopes greater than 25° which is very steep (Le, 2004, pp. 1-2). The area experiences a high average annual rainfall of about 1500 mm, with maxima exceeding 3500 mm. Sapa's wet season occurs in the summer, lasting from June to September, while a stable cool season persists throughout the year, occasionally experiencing frost and snow in winter. Rice agriculture, a primary livelihood in the region, has developed over centuries with terraced rice ecosystems (Dang et al., 2018, p. 3).

The Hmong, arriving in Sapa around 1820 alongside other minority groups, asserted their claim to the area, stating that it was uninhabited at the time. Originating from China, these migrating Hmong practiced wet rice cultivation upon their arrival, though it remains uncertain whether this form of agriculture was practiced before their move into Vietnam (Michaud & Turner, 2000, pp. 87-88).

The most recent estimate of the Hmong population in Sapa equates to about 30,600 people (Office, 2022). I was unable to find specific gender population statistics. While the website was last updated in 2022, it is possible that these statistics are from 2019 which is when Vietnam's last published census was, at least one that I could find.



Figure 1 Map of Sapa, Vietnam (Sapa Trekking Map)

Historically, the upper reaches of northern Vietnam, including Sapa, saw minimal interference from lowland powers. In the 19th century, Cantonese and Yunnanese traders occupied the location of present-day Lao Cai city, seeking

resources like coffin wood, forest and animal products, and raw opium from the mountains around Sapa (Michaud & Turner, 2000, p. 88).

Various marketplaces in Sapa district have existed over the years, serving both economic and social purposes for the Hmong and other groups. These marketplaces facilitated the exchange of goods, information, and social interactions among different communities.

The French presence in Sapa began in the late 1890s, leading to the construction of a rail link and the establishment of a small town. By 1915, Sapa became a prominent summer destination for French colonists, resulting in the construction of villas and the influx of Kinh workers to provide services (Michaud & Turner, 2000, pp. 88-89).

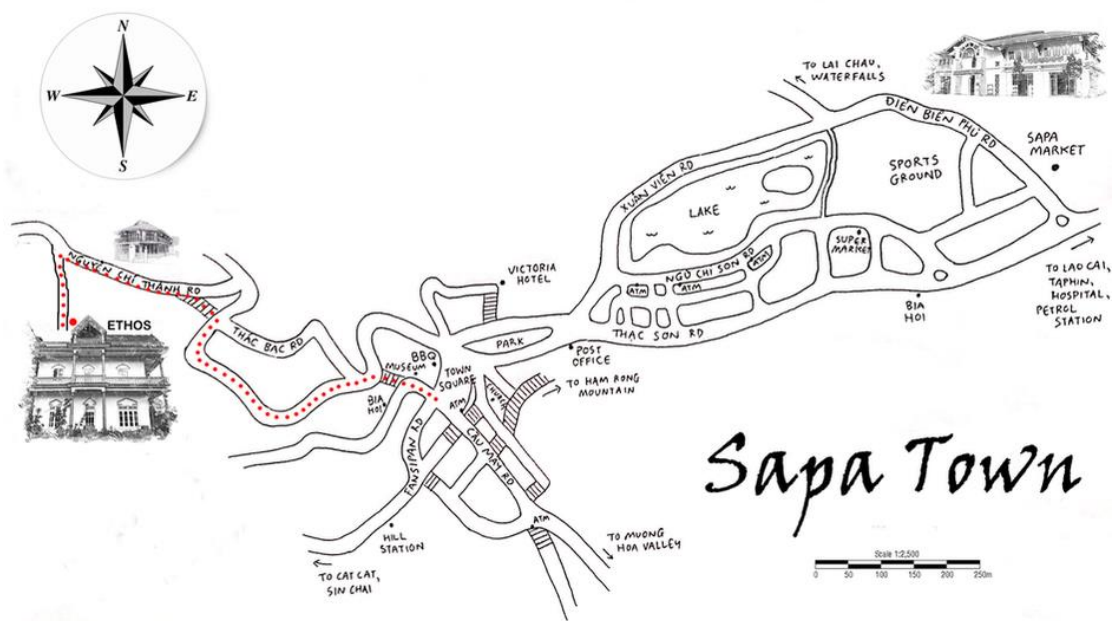


Figure 2 Map of Sapa Town (Sapa Trekking Map)

During the French period, the main Sapa marketplace served as a hub for trading activities between hill tribe groups, French colonists, Kinh workers, and Yunnanese traders. It functioned as a centralized location for the exchange of goods

very much the same as previously traded, including raw opium, forest and animal products, and coffin wood (Michaud & Turner, 2000, p. 89).

Sapa's foray into tourism began in the early 1900s when the French designated it as a hill station for military purposes. A sanatorium was built in 1913, and a tourist office opened in 1917. Privately owned villas and hotels were constructed between 1920 and 1940. However, during the French War (1945–1954), the area suffered severe damage (Truong et al., 2014, p. 1074).

Sapa's role as a colonial hill station ended with the war with the Viet Minh in 1946, leading to a period of disuse. Traditional marketplaces regained importance in the hill tribe groups' economic and social activities. In the 1960s, hill tribe economy saw tentative reorganization under the national agricultural collectivization scheme. The ban on forest clearing in 1992 and the prohibition of opium poppy cultivation in 1993 significantly impacted hill tribe revenue. In the 1990s, a railway network connecting Sapa with Hanoi and other provinces was established, creating favorable conditions for tourism development. Sapa officially reopened to tourists in 1992, attracting increasing numbers due to its natural beauty and rich ethnic cultures. (Michaud & Turner, 2000, pp. 90-91).

Since 1992, tourism has been an integral component of Sapa's economy, with activities initiated or controlled by Kinh entrepreneurs. The Sapa People's Committee, dominated by the Kinh and holding key positions, limits the influence of the Hmong in district politics (Michaud & Turner, 2000, p. 92). This historical overview traces the economic shifts in Sapa, from traditional subsistence to French colonial trade, post-war decline, and the recent influences of tourism and external entrepreneurship. The pivotal role of tourism in Sapa's economic development and poverty alleviation

efforts is underscored in non-tourism policy documents, acknowledging its substantial contribution to economic progress. The Sapa People's Committee envisions tourism and services constituting over 60% of the local economy by 2020, with the overarching goal of reducing the poverty rate to below 5% (Truong et al., 2014, p. 1074). Tourism in the district has greatly increased since the construction of the Noi Bai-Lao Cai highway (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, p. 30).

Within the literature exploring Sapa's socio-economic landscape, a predominant theme emerges, emphasizing the significant involvement of Hmong women in the local tourism industry. Existing research frequently highlights their roles in activities such as trekking, crafting, and the sale of handmade goods, encapsulating a blend of traditional skills and tourism-related engagement. Trekking, in particular, stands out as a noteworthy endeavor, reflecting both the preservation of traditional knowledge about the region and the adaptation of skills to cater to the demands of the burgeoning tourism sector. Moreover, the literature underscores the intricate interplay between traditional forms of employment, like farming, and the more contemporary opportunities arising from the tourism industry. As modern-day Hmong women navigate the economic landscape of Sapa, the literature suggests a delicate balance between holding onto traditional practices and embracing newer avenues. This dual engagement, often in the context of tourism, highlights the complex choices and challenges faced by Hmong women as they strive to maintain cultural heritage while adapting to evolving economic opportunities in the region. Understanding the dynamics presented in the literature is pivotal for contextualizing the experiences of contemporary Hmong women in the spheres of education and employment in Sapa.

In the realm of education, cultural expectations often prioritize traditional roles for Hmong women, such as homemaking and supporting the family's agricultural activities. This prevailing mindset can hinder educational pursuits, as families may perceive investing in a girl's education as less valuable than her contributions to more traditional roles. Consequently, young Hmong women may face resistance when seeking educational opportunities beyond primary schooling. Cultural norms around early marriage may also limit their ability to pursue higher education.

Moreover, the Hmong language, a crucial aspect of their cultural identity, poses both a facilitator and a barrier. While proficiency in the Hmong language is an asset for communication within the community, it can hinder educational attainment and employment prospects in a predominantly Vietnamese-speaking environment. The preference for preserving cultural and linguistic heritage may discourage some Hmong women from engaging fully in mainstream educational and employment opportunities.

In terms of employment, Hmong women grapple with deeply ingrained gender roles that assign them responsibilities within the domestic sphere. The societal expectation for women to prioritize familial duties over career pursuits can limit their participation in formal employment sectors. Furthermore, traditional crafts, such as handcrafting and textile arts, are often perceived as primary sources of income for Hmong women. While these skills hold cultural significance, the overemphasis on these traditional roles may discourage women from exploring alternative career paths.

Cultural barriers are further exacerbated by the influence of broader societal dynamics, where discriminatory practices and stereotypes contribute to the marginalization of Hmong women. The limited representation of Hmong individuals



in decision-making processes and formal employment sectors reflects a broader cultural challenge that extends beyond the immediate community.

## 2.1. Field Study Overview

### 2.1.1. Arrival & Initial Impressions

Upon landing at Hanoi's bustling airport on a Saturday afternoon, the immediate cultural immersion began. Local Kinh vendors thronged around me, offering everything from sim cards to bus rides catering specifically to tourists. Quickly, I secured a sim card and arranged a bus trip, marking the commencement of my journey to the mountainous region of Sapa.

The six-hour bus ride from Hanoi was an experience in itself. An atypical double-decker bus, it featured bed-like seats which surprised me. Mid-journey, I caught a quick glimpse of a bus employee taking a puff from a hookah, a scene that imprinted a cultural marker on my mind. I am not too sure what substance was being smoked, I assumed it was opium or marijuana, but locals later told me it was probably tobacco. As an American, I have never seen tobacco smoked in a hookah. Hookahs in my experience is reserved for marijuana or something else.

### 2.1.2. Exploring Sapa: Embracing the Mountains

Arriving in Sapa around 11 pm, I was housed in a quaint tourist-oriented homestay. The simple wooden structure, reminiscent of traditional designs, allowed

the crisp October Mountain air to seep in. As a Rocky Mountain native, this chill was nothing but familiar and comforting.

The following morning began with a rustic breakfast, setting the tone for my trek, which was organized by a local tourist agency. I met other tourists, notably a young German couple, but we embarked on different trails, each of us led by our respective guides.

### 2.1.3. Trekking and Interactions with the Locals

My guide, Mai, a native Black Hmong of the region, briefed me on the two-day trek that would take us to her family's home. The journey began with a taxi ride to the outskirts, followed by an on-foot exploration of the Sapa valley. As we hiked, Mai's deep knowledge of the region became apparent. She pointed out terraces, informed me about the crops, and enlightened me about the famed Black Hmong community. Their unique indigo-dyed clothing, derived from the hemp plant, was a significant cultural takeaway.

Our trek presented both challenges and insights. Muddy pathways made the climb strenuous, while a surprise bee colony further hindered our progress. Eventually, we reached a dirt road, where I witnessed both the resilience of the local Hmong guides and the bustling daily life of the village. Alongside locals, I encountered foreign tourists who, like me, were absorbing the tapestry of life in Sapa.

Mai's house, nestled on a Sapa mountain, welcomed us after a long trek. Here, amidst the hum of daily life and the warm hospitality of Mai's family, I learned about

the Hmong's deep-rooted traditions. Hemp dyeing, food preparations, and familial bonds stood out, echoing the community's ties to both nature and kinship.

#### 2.1.4. A Glimpse into Hmong Life and Culture

The following day offered deeper interactions with the local community. Despite the physical challenges of trekking, my spirit was invigorated by the stories, the landscape, and the people. Mai's insights into the region's frequent landslides were sobering, highlighting the challenges of life in Sapa.

Our journey took an unexpected turn when the path to Mai's parents' home became too treacherous. However, with Mai's knowledge of the region, we shifted our plans, visiting her cousin's house instead. This deviation provided another lens into Hmong culture, particularly the community's Catholic beliefs.

#### 2.1.5. Exploration of Sapa Town

On my final day, I ventured into Sapa Town. As I roamed its streets, Yao women, with their vibrant crafts, tried to strike a deal. While I navigated through the bustling town square, my background in Hmong language proved beneficial. It not only surprised the local vendors but also allowed deeper interactions and connections.

Despite the town's modern trappings, traditional elements persisted. A visit to a local restaurant named 'Hmong Restaurant', though primarily run by the Kinh ethnic group, showcased the influence of Hmong culture through its décor.

The picturesque region of Sapa, Vietnam, is known for its rich cultural tapestry, notably the Hmong community's presence. While tourism in Sapa thrives on

showcasing the authentic Hmong experience, the reality presents stark contrasts, underlined by socio-economic disparities between the Kinh and the Hmong.

## 2.2. Survey Overview:

The survey conducted to explore the experiences of Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, gained significant attention, amassing a total of 534 views and yielding 175 completed surveys. This dataset serves as a foundation for understanding the nuanced challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa. The survey's geographic focus was Sapa Vietnam, with 95% of views originating from the country, particularly emphasizing the experiences within the specific context of Sapa. A smaller percentage of views, 4%, came from the United States, and 1% from Thailand, reflecting the targeted reach of the survey. 100% of respondents originated from within Vietnam ensures that the findings are deeply rooted in the local experiences of Hmong women.

The comprehensive survey overview further reveals details about the platforms and devices used by respondents. Notably, 95% of respondents accessed the survey through Facebook, emphasizing the significance of social media in reaching and engaging with Hmong women. Furthermore, the dominance of Android (63%) as the preferred platform and the utilization of various iPhone models highlights the diverse technological landscape among the survey participants. This diverse use of technology underscores the importance of considering various platforms and devices in future research on this subject. One respondent completed the survey on a Windows desktop.

In terms of survey platforms, the dominance of Facebook as the chosen browser highlights the pervasive use of social media among respondents. This suggests a tech-

savvy population with a significant presence on social platforms, emphasizing the importance of online spaces for engaging with the target demographic.

The diverse array of devices used, particularly the range of iPhones and various Android models, showcases the accessibility and inclusivity of the survey. Respondents from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as evidenced by their smartphone choices, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the surveyed population.

It is important to note a few limitations of this method. It has been noted in the literature review that several Hmong are not literate in Vietnamese. This in itself is a barrier and would limit the number of respondents. Another notable barrier would be the concern of internet access to fill out the survey or the ownership of some sort of electronic device. In order to remedy this, during my time in Sapa, I befriended a number of young Hmong trekking guides. These women were more than happy to spread the survey to their friends, and they even offered to distribute the survey orally to older Hmong women, especially those that are not literate in Vietnamese as the survey is in both Vietnamese and English.

With there being a high likelihood, this survey was distributed orally, the survey statistics on platform, device and operating system may not quite represent the daily use of all Hmong women that participated in this survey, rather it shows the Hmong trekking guide's devices.

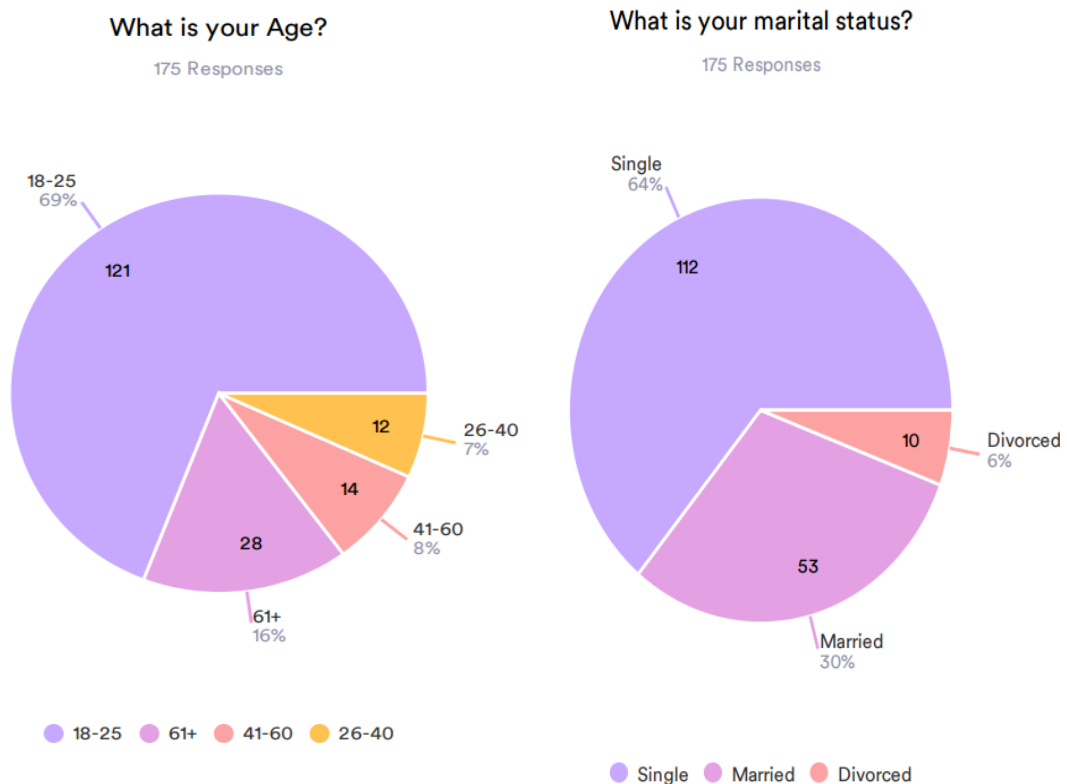
## Chapter 3: Education

In this chapter, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the educational landscape for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, shedding light on the barriers they face in accessing and continuing education. Through a detailed analysis of survey results, we unravel the challenges hindering educational pursuits, with a particular focus on language as a notable obstacle. The chapter begins with insightful pie charts that provide an overall perspective on the survey responses, allowing readers to grasp the broader trends. Following this, a meticulous breakdown by age groups is presented in tables, offering a nuanced understanding of how these barriers manifest across different life stages. Beyond survey data, the chapter delves into the personal experiences and observations of my time in Vietnam, providing a qualitative dimension to the quantitative findings. By juxtaposing survey results with on-the-ground insights, this chapter seeks to paint a comprehensive picture of the intricate interplay between socio-cultural factors and educational access for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam.



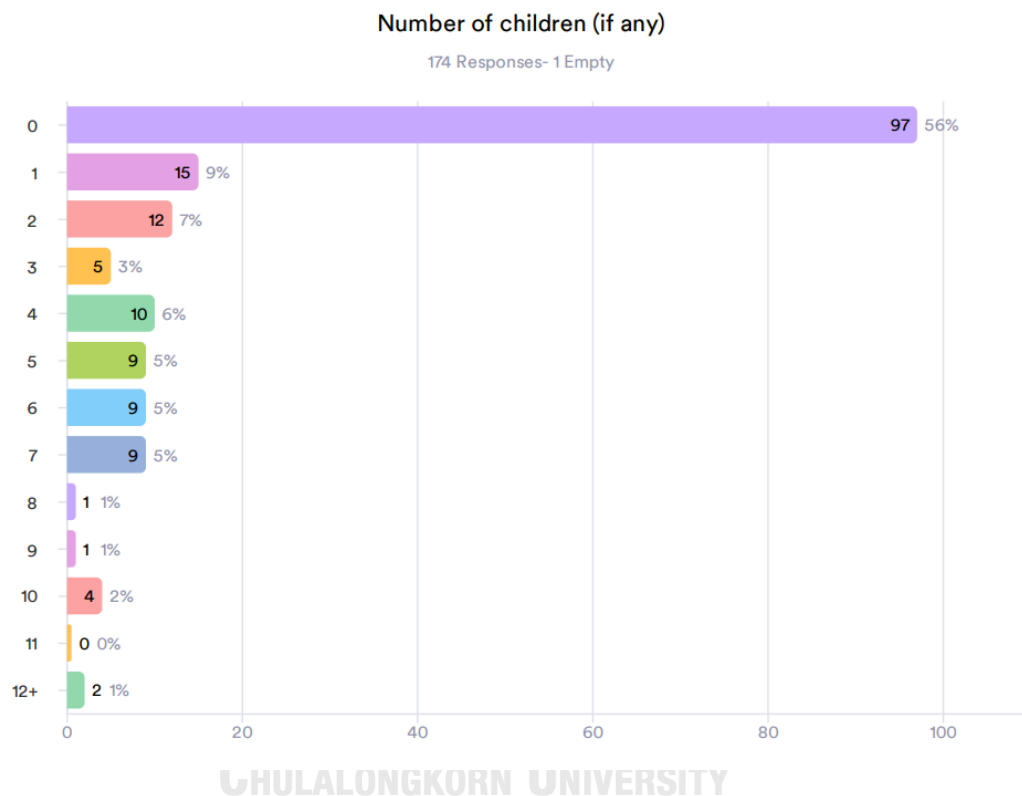
### 3.1. Demographics:

Here are the first two pie charts displaying age and marital status and a bar table displaying the number of children of the respondents. We can see from the results that most of the respondents are young women being between the ages of 18 and 25. Surprisingly I had more than double the amount of respondents over the age of 61 as I did the age of 26 to 60. Delving into demographics, the age group distribution reveals a noteworthy concentration of younger respondents, primarily falling within the 18-25 age bracket. This trend may signify a higher level of engagement and participation among the younger population, potentially reflecting their interest or concern in the survey's subject matter as well as their access to the internet.



*Figure 3 Survey Demographics*

Similarly, the majority of respondents identifying as single suggests a potential focus on the younger, unmarried population. This demographic insight is crucial for contextualizing the experiences and perspectives captured in the survey, as marital status often correlates with various social and economic factors.



*Figure 4 Number of children*

In this bar graph we see the number of children go all the way up to 12 or more. The reason I allowed my survey to go this high is because from my experience from Hmong Americans, Hmong people tend to have a large number of kids compared to the overall population. This goes to show that even in Sapa, Vietnam, Hmong families continue to have wonderful posterity.



In the table titled “Total Respondents by Age Group” we see of course that among women aged 18-25 are predominately single. What is striking however is that those of age 18-25 with children, according to the following table titled “Respondents with Children by Age and Marital Status” most 18-25 year old Hmong women with children report being single. For the younger generation, this trend is unfortunate. As we move up in age group, we see less respondents reporting being single.

<b>Total Marital Status by Age Group:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Divorced</b>
18-25	112	9	1
26-40	2	11	0
41-60	0	12	2
61+	0	19	6

<b>Total Respondents by Age Group:</b>		
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Children</b>
18-25	121	26
26-40	12	12
41-60	14	14
61+	28	25

<b>Respondents with Children by Age and Marital Status:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Divorced</b>
18-25	16	9	1
26-40	1	11	0
41-60	0	12	2
61+	0	19	6

*Table 1 Survey Demographics*

### 3.2. Education Background:

The table below shows that out of all respondents, half of which report not attending formal schooling. The data gathered from the survey on school attendance and educational levels among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam reveals crucial insights into the educational landscape of this unique community. Delving into the attendance breakdown by age group unveils disparities, notably with the majority of the 18-25 age bracket (68%) being present, while the 41-60 age group reports a complete absence in attendance. This discrepancy may signify varying priorities of education as the literature review references that there may have been a loss of interest in education due to a variety of reasons. We see that accessibility challenges across different life stages as more and more schools have been built more recently which we will touch on later.

Attendance:				
Attendance	Count		Percentage	
Yes	89		50%	
No	86		50%	

Attendance by Age Group:				
Age Group	Yes	No	Percentage of Yes	Percentage of No
18-25	83	39	68%	32%
26-40	5	7	42%	58%
41-60	0	14	0%	100%
61+	1	27	4%	96%

*Table 2 School Attendance*

Educational Levels:		
Education Level	Count	Percentage
Primary	4	4%
Secondary	17	20%
Higher Secondary	52	59%
University	15	17%

Educational Levels by Age Group:				
Age Group	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	University
18-25	4	14	51	14
26-40	0	3	0	1
41-60	0	0	0	0
61+	0	0	1	0

*Table 3 Educational Attainment*

Moving on to educational levels, the distribution across primary, secondary, higher secondary, and university categories reflects a diverse educational background among the respondents. Notably, the majority fall into the higher secondary category (52 respondents), showcasing a commitment to pursuing education beyond basic levels. Analyzing educational levels by age group highlights a concentration of higher secondary education within the 18-25 age group, indicating a strong focus on continued learning among younger Hmong women. However, it's worth noting the absence of respondents in the 41-60 age group pursuing university education, suggesting potential barriers or different priorities for this demographic. A possibility given for this is that it was in the 1980's that Vietnam was reunified and in 1986 was the start of the Doi Moi economic initiative. Women in the 41-60 age group were born or were adolescents at this time, therefore Vietnam was still recovering from wartime

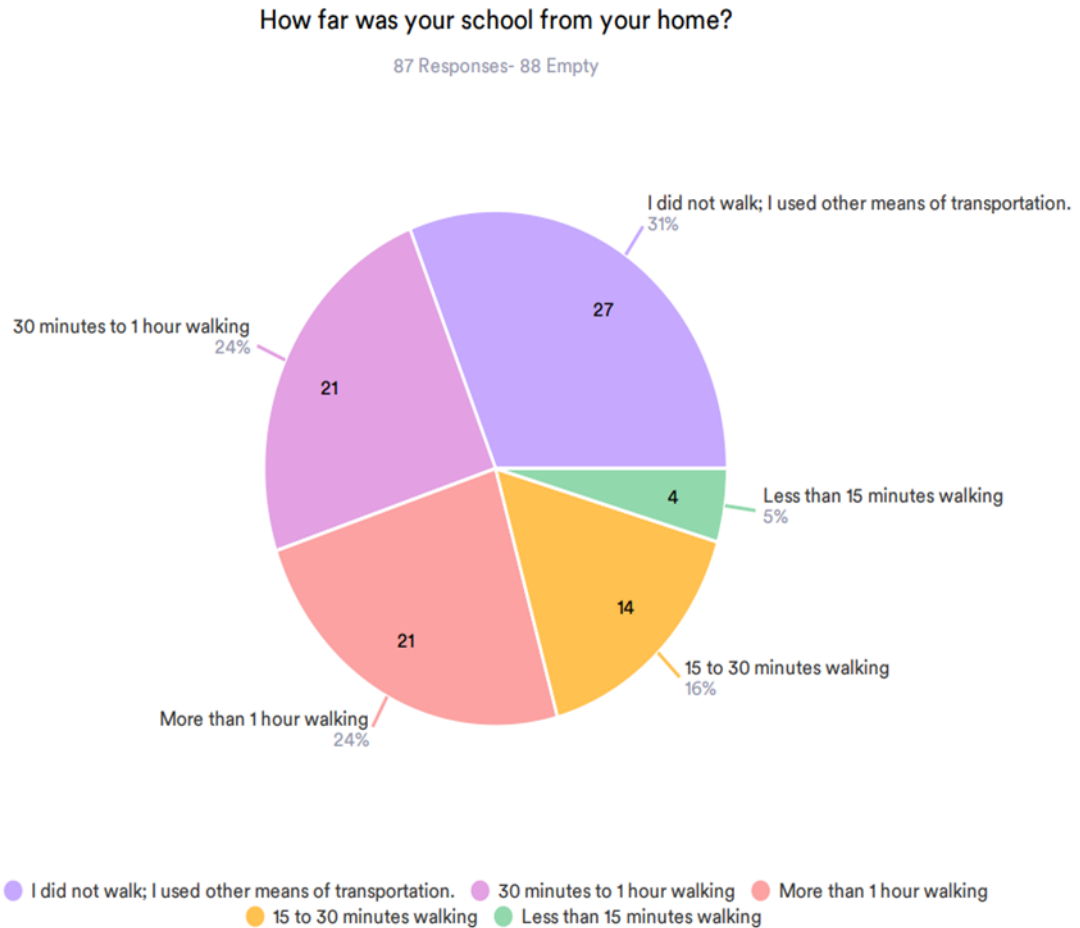
so the building up of educational infrastructure of Vietnam had not yet taken effect in the North (Goodkind, 1995, p. 344).

It is important to note that the survey question requesting educational level did not specify as to how much of a particular education level was attained so respondents could have entered their first year of secondary school and then dropped out soon after. This does not depict if one has finished a certain level of education, only if one has reached that level.

It is difficult to track older groups and their level of education as perhaps the survey did not reach a large amount of older respondents compared to the 18-25 group, however, specifically talking about the 18-25 age group we see that more and more are reaching higher secondary level and even university level of education. This is in stark contrast to the older generation according to the literature review and the statistics of this survey. However, we can see from secondary sources that transportation is more difficult and takes longer the higher level the education is. While on average each commune or village has one primary school, for secondary and higher secondary education, the distance becomes much further (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, p. 2).

The data provides a foundational understanding of attendance patterns and educational pursuits among Hmong women in Sapa. Further analysis could explore the factors influencing attendance and the barriers to pursuing higher education, offering valuable insights for tailored interventions to enhance educational opportunities within this community. As we delve deeper into the nuances of age-specific trends, it becomes evident that a holistic approach is necessary to address the

diverse needs of Hmong women across different life stages, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of fostering educational empowerment within the community.



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*Figure 5 Distance from Home and School*

**Distance from Home to School:**

Age Group	Less than 15	15-30	30-60	60 minutes or more	Other means
18-25	4	12	21	18	27
26-40	0	2	0	2	0
61+	0	0	1	0	0

*Table 4 Distance from Home and School by Age Group*

The analysis of the distance from home to school among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, provides valuable insights into the challenges they face in accessing education. The data reveals a diverse range of commuting experiences, with respondents falling into different categories based on the time spent traveling to school.

A notable proportion of respondents (50%) reported walking for more than 30 minutes to reach their educational institution, showcasing a commitment to overcoming geographical barriers. Specifically, 21 respondents indicated a travel time between 30 and 60 minutes, while an equal number reported journeys lasting more than an hour. This suggests a significant portion of Hmong women in the survey are willing to invest substantial time and effort in accessing education.

Interestingly, a considerable portion of respondents (27) reported using means of transportation other than walking. This could include various modes of transport such as private vehicles or public transport, indicating a certain level of mobility and adaptability in addressing the challenge of distance. More realistically, on the dirt road mountain paths of Sapa, it is more likely that this other means of transportation is a motorbike as many Hmong are seen with motorbikes. The availability and utilization of alternative transportation methods are crucial factors that contribute to overcoming geographical obstacles to education.

Breaking down the distance data by age group adds nuance to the analysis. The majority of respondents in the 18-25 age group reported using other means of transportation, potentially reflecting increased independence and access to varied transportation options among younger individuals. This also shows perhaps a gain in wealth in the current generation as many more Hmong women are able to use

motorbikes as transport compared to before. While Hmong in the past had to decide to buy a motorbike to make trips to school and town easier or a buffalo to assist with farming, more are choosing the former compared to before. On the other hand, respondents in the 61+ age group predominantly reported longer walking times, possibly indicating a lack of convenient transportation options for this demographic.

This analysis underscores the diverse commuting experiences of Hmong women in Sapa and highlights the resilience and determination demonstrated in their pursuit of education despite geographical challenges. Further exploration into the specific modes of transportation used and the factors influencing the choice of commuting can offer deeper insights, ultimately contributing to the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving accessibility and reducing barriers to education for this community.

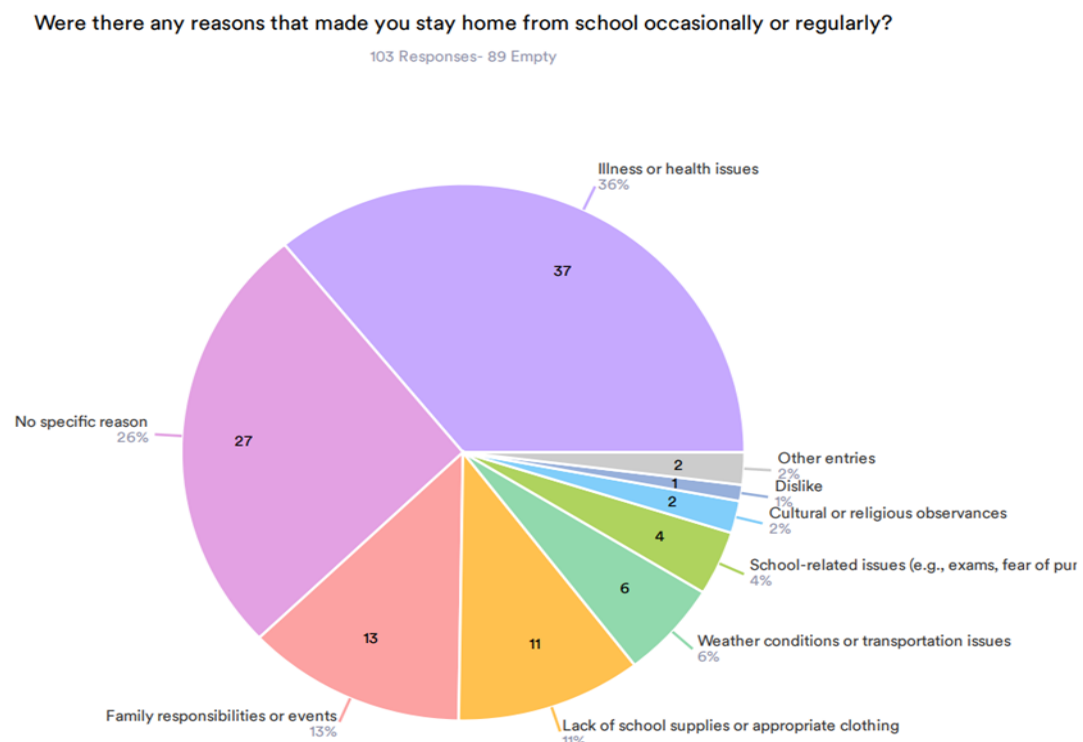


Figure 6 Occasional or Regular School Attendance

The analysis of reasons for occasional or regular absences among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, sheds light on the multifaceted challenges these individuals face in maintaining consistent attendance in an educational setting. The data provides a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to absenteeism and offers valuable insights into potential areas for intervention.

Health-related issues emerged as the most prevalent cause of absence, with 37 respondents citing illness or health problems. This underscores the significant impact that health challenges can have on educational participation. The high number of health-related absences, particularly among the 18-25 age group, suggests a vulnerability to health issues that may be exacerbated by various factors such as limited access to healthcare, preventive measures, or awareness. This is also striking as many researchers don't think to consider this as a factor contributing to school absence in the Hmong community. On the other hand, This could be seen as the Hmong community approaching a normalcy of school attendance as many children in well off countries cite occasional health issues as a primary concern such as the common cold, etc. While the number of doctors working in communes went from 22% to 45% from 2010 to 2014, local informants claim medical facilities are not fully equipped due to lack of funding and resources (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, pp. 63, 98).

The absence reasons reported by respondents in the 18-25 age group reveal additional challenges contributing to non-attendance. Lack of essential supplies or appropriate clothing (11 respondents) points to potential socioeconomic barriers that hinder regular school attendance. The importance of addressing material needs



becomes evident, as it directly impacts a student's ability to engage in the learning environment comfortably.

Family responsibilities or events were reported by 13 respondents, emphasizing the complex interplay between education and familial obligations. This is particularly notable in the 26-40 age group, where family responsibilities are a significant factor. Addressing these dynamics are crucial for crafting educational policies and support systems that consider the holistic context of students' lives.

Reasons by Age Group	18-25	26-40	61+
Illness	36		1
Lack of supplies	11		
Family responsibilities	9	4	
Weather conditions	6		
School issues	4		
Cultural or religious	2		
No specific	26		
Dislike	1		
House not in good condition	1		
Other	1		

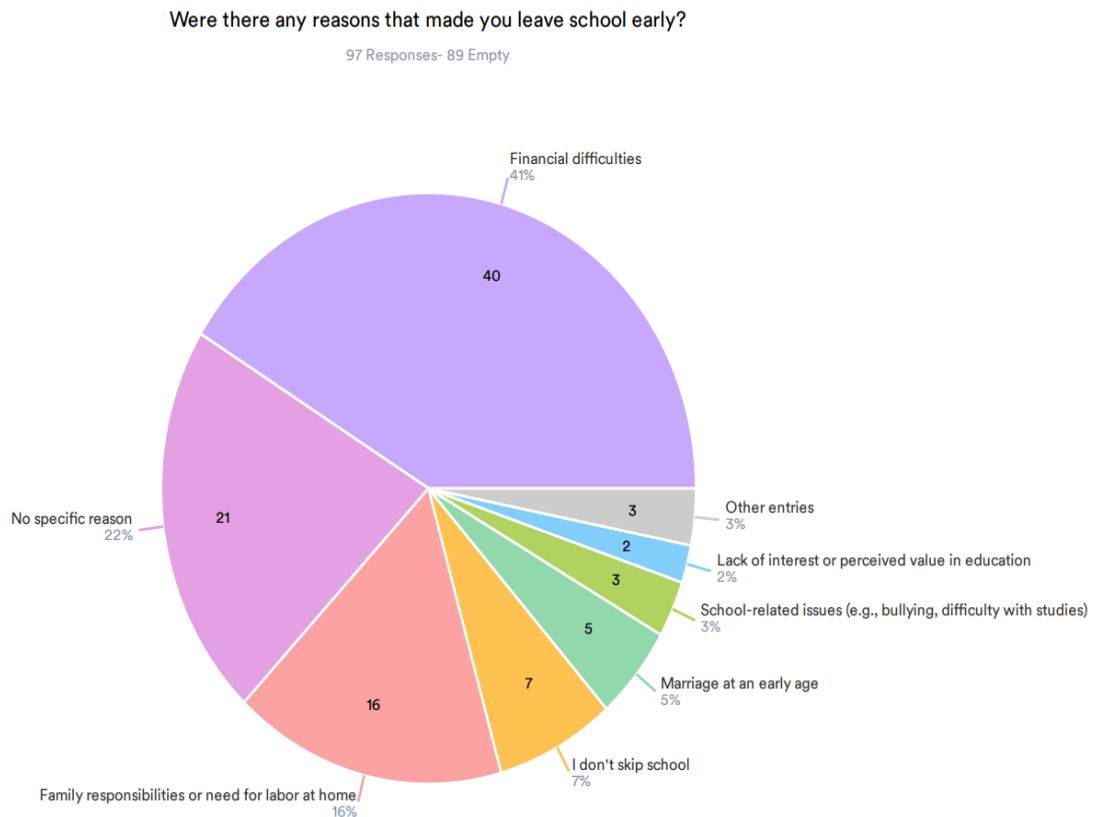
*Table 5 Occasional or Regular Absence by Age*

Weather conditions (6 respondents) emerged as a noteworthy factor affecting attendance. Given the geographic location of Sapa, known for its challenging terrain and weather patterns, these circumstances can pose considerable obstacles to commuting. Developing strategies to mitigate the impact of weather-related challenges could enhance attendance rates, especially in regions prone to adverse weather conditions. The dirt roads in particular are especially susceptible to adverse

weather conditions. If too much rain comes, a road may be too rough to pass through on motor bike or even too treacherous to walk in off-road trails.

School-related issues, including exams, fear of discipline, and bullying, were reported by a smaller yet notable number of respondents (4). This suggests the presence of non-academic barriers within the educational environment itself, emphasizing the need for creating safe, supportive, and inclusive spaces for learning. This number is low which shows that those that attended school tended not to skip school because of these concerns.

In conclusion, this analysis underscores the intricate web of challenges influencing attendance patterns among Hmong women in Sapa. It highlights the interconnectedness of health, socioeconomic factors, familial responsibilities, environmental conditions, and school-related issues. Tailoring interventions to address these specific challenges can contribute to creating an enabling environment that promotes consistent attendance and enhances educational outcomes for this community.



*Figure 7 Reasons for Leaving School Early*

The exploration into the reasons for leaving school early among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, unveils a nuanced narrative of educational challenges shaped by intricate socio-economic, familial, and individual dynamics. This data not only provides a snapshot of educational patterns but also offers valuable insights into the factors influencing the discontinuation of formal schooling.

The attendance patterns across age groups depict a somewhat balanced distribution between those who attended school and those who did not. However, a notable trend emerges among respondents in the 41-60 age group, where a significant proportion did not partake in formal education. This disparity suggests the existence of generational variations in educational opportunities or access within the Hmong community.

Examining the educational levels of the respondents reveals a predominant presence in higher secondary education, followed by secondary and university levels. This diversity in educational backgrounds suggests a range of academic experiences among Hmong women, emphasizing the need for tailored educational approaches that address varying needs and aspirations.

Reasons by Age Group	18-25	26-40	61+
Financial difficulties	39	1	1
Family responsibilities	13	3	
Marriage at an early age	4	1	
Lack of interest	2		
School issues	3		
Study abroad	1		
No specific reason	21		
I do not skip school	9		

*Table 6 Reasons for Leaving School Early by Age*

The distance to school is another critical aspect, showcasing a diverse range of commuting times and a substantial reliance on means of transportation other than walking. This underscores the importance of considering transportation infrastructure and accessibility in educational planning and policy-making to ensure equitable access for all.

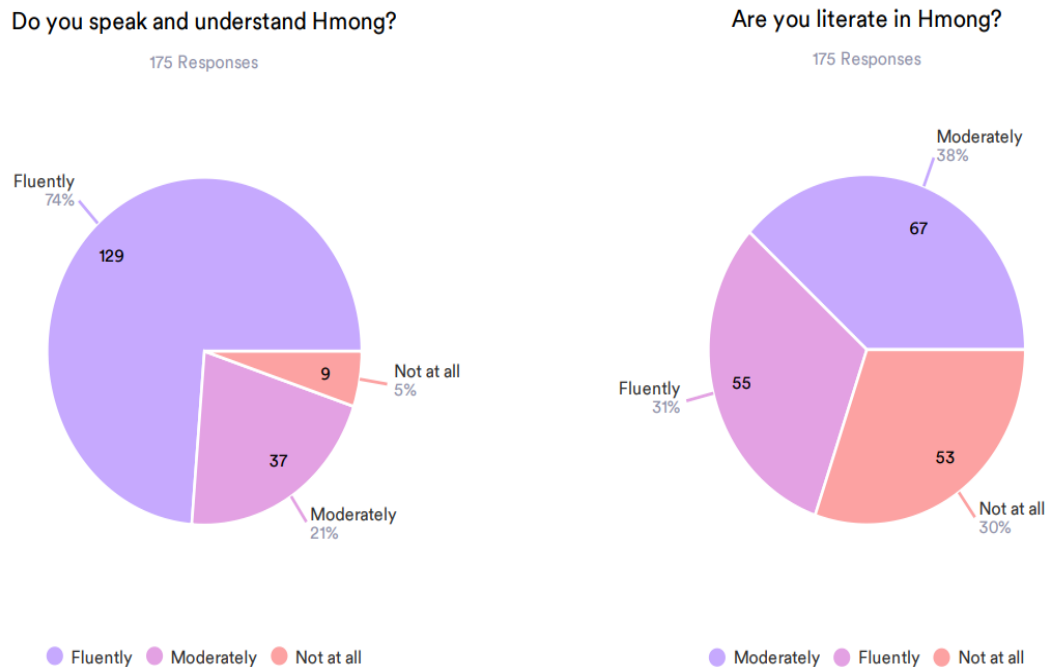
Health-related issues, family responsibilities, and the lack of essential supplies emerge as significant contributors to school absences. The prevalence of health-related reasons emphasizes the necessity for improved healthcare access and awareness within the community. Furthermore, the reasons for leaving school early

are underscored by financial difficulties and family responsibilities, particularly pronounced among respondents aged 18-25. This sheds light on the socio-economic challenges faced by younger members of the Hmong community, potentially impeding their ability to pursue formal education.

The most selected reason for leaving school early is financial difficulties. While occasional school absence is predominately attributed to health and illness, leaving school all together is attributed to financial difficulties. These financial difficulties can manifest in a number of ways such as the price of supplies, tuition, transportation or fuel for a motorbike, clothing, etc. Many may have selected financial difficulties as an over arching reason which could also encapsulate family responsibilities as the family may need additional help at home with farming.

While this analysis provides a foundational understanding of the educational experiences of Hmong women in Sapa, it calls for further exploration. Connecting these experiences with the broader context of barriers faced by the community will be crucial for a comprehensive understanding and for developing targeted interventions. In essence, the reasons for leaving school early reveal a complex tapestry of challenges, pointing towards the need for holistic strategies to ensure inclusive and accessible education in the region.

### 3.3. Language Proficiency:



*Figure 8 Hmong Language Knowledge*

The examination of language proficiency among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, unveils a complex landscape where the majority profess fluency in speaking and understanding Hmong. However, nuanced differences emerge when dissecting the data across age groups, shedding light on potential correlations with educational experiences and challenges faced by the community. It is important to note that in the following tables comparing age groups with their proficiency in each language, school attendance was also taken into account with language proficiency. Next to the actual proficiency number per age group and fluency level is the number of that particular sum that attended school to get an idea whether school attendance correlates with fluency.

Firstly, the sheer number of respondents claiming fluency in Hmong is noteworthy, signaling a robust connection to their cultural and linguistic roots. A substantial proportion also reports a moderate level of proficiency, highlighting a continuum of linguistic abilities within the community. Conversely, a small percentage asserts a lack of understanding of Hmong, emphasizing potential barriers that may impact communication and educational engagement.

<b>Speaking and Understanding Hmong:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Fluently</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
18-25	83 (58)	34 (28)	4 (3)
26-40	10 (4)	1 (1)	1
41-60	13 (0)	0	1
61+	23 (0)	2 (1)	3

<b>Literacy in Hmong:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Fluent (Attended School)</b>	<b>Moderately (Attended School)</b>	<b>Not at all (Attended School)</b>
18-25	54 (38)	58 (38)	9 (6)
26-40	0 (0)	6 (1)	6 (4)
41-60	1 (0)	3 (1)	14 (0)
61+	1 (0)	3 (1)	24 (0)

*Table 7 Hmong Language Knowledge by Age Group and School Attendance*

Age group analysis reveals intriguing patterns. The 18-25 age stands out with the highest number of respondents claiming fluency, possibly indicative of a stronger emphasis on cultural preservation and linguistic continuity within younger generations. It would have been my guess that the younger generation would speak and understand Hmong less and less similar to Hmong Americans from my

experience. In contrast, the 41-60 and 61+ age groups exhibit a higher prevalence of respondents reporting no proficiency in Hmong. This discrepancy raises questions about the interplay between age, cultural identity, and language retention within the Hmong community. I will go into more detail of this discrepancy in the other languages section.

A particularly interesting observation is the correlation between school attendance and language proficiency. Respondents who attended school, especially in the 18-25 age group, tend to claim proficiency in both speaking and understanding Hmong, as well as literacy in the language. This correlation implies that formal education might play a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing linguistic skills, acting as a conduit for cultural and linguistic preservation.

However, the presence of anomalous responses introduces a layer of complexity to the analysis. Some respondents, despite completing the survey in either English or Vietnamese, assert not speaking or understanding Hmong or being literate in the language. This raises concerns about potential data entry errors, misinterpretations, or broader challenges related to self-reporting language proficiency.

The unexpected finding of nine respondents, constituting 5.14% of the total sample, claiming zero language ability in Hmong raises intriguing questions about the validity of the survey responses. While it is conceivable that respondents may face challenges in reading Hmong, the revelation that some individuals lack proficiency in speaking or understanding Hmong is concerning. Notably, four respondents within the 18-25 age group assert fluency in Vietnamese only, raising questions about their eligibility for inclusion in a survey specifically targeting Hmong women. The puzzling aspect arises from the fact that the survey was administered in both



Vietnamese and English, making it perplexing as to why individuals with zero fluency in any of the languages would choose to participate. This prompts a critical examination of the possibility that the survey may have been accessed and completed by individuals outside the intended demographic, potentially including Dao individuals. The absence of existing research indicating a decline in Hmong language ability among Hmong women in Sapa, coupled with the feedback from local informants, suggests the need for a closer examination of the survey's accessibility and completion by non-Hmong participants. Transparency in reporting these unexpected variables is essential for ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the research findings. It is possible human input error is at fault as for one, the respondent may have misread the question thinking the question referred to literacy and not oral ability. Second, being that the survey was distributed in English and Vietnamese for Hmong women with zero ability in those languages provides a barrier of completion which is why I enlisted the help of some young Hmong tourist friends to give the survey orally to those in the desired demographic of the survey.

In the context of the overarching thesis, understanding the language proficiency of Hmong women is pivotal, as it directly ties into the identified barriers to education and employment. The patterns observed in this linguistic analysis offer valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of language retention and proficiency within the Hmong community. Moving forward, addressing the anomalous responses and further exploring the interplay between language, education, and employment will be essential for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam.

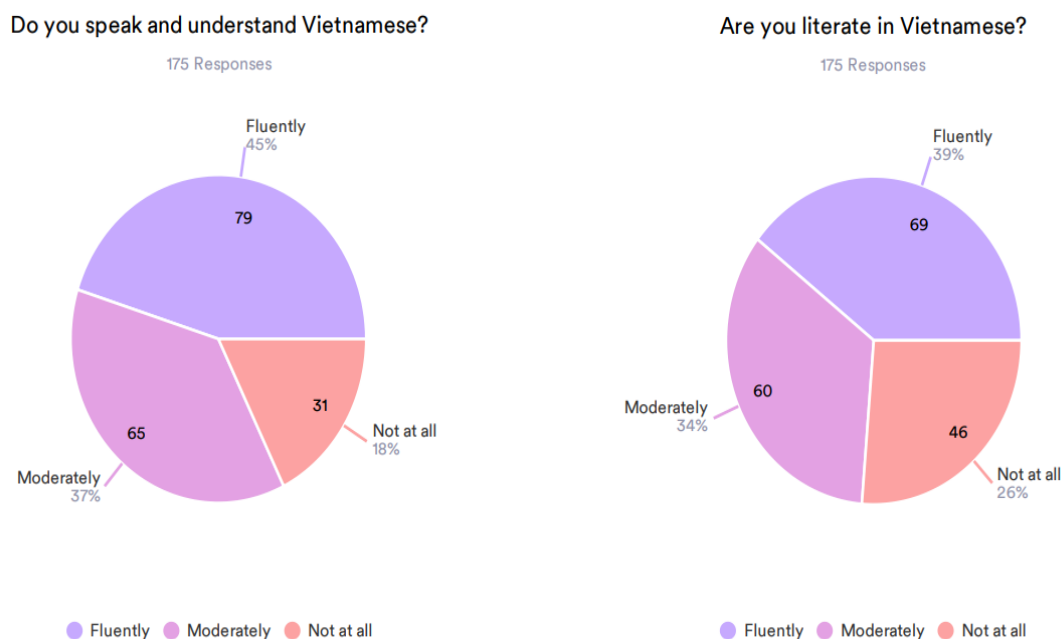


Figure 9 Vietnamese Language Knowledge

Speaking and Understanding Vietnamese:			
Age Group	Fluently	Moderately	Not at all
18-25	72 (54 attended school)	48 (28 attended school)	1 (0 attended school)
26-40	5 (4 attended school)	7 (1 attended school)	0 (0 attended school)
41-60	0 (0 attended school)	5 (0 attended school)	9 (0 attended school)
61+	2 (0 attended school)	5 (1 attended school)	21 (0 attended school)
Overall	79	65	31

Literacy in Vietnamese:			
Age Group	Fluently	Moderately	Not at all
18-25	64 (48 attended school)	52 (32 attended school)	4 (2 attended school)
26-40	4 (3 attended school)	5 (2 attended school)	3 (0 attended school)
41-60	0 (0 attended school)	0 (0 attended school)	14 (0 attended school)
61+	1 (0 attended school)	2 (1 attended school)	25 (0 attended school)
Overall	69	60	46

Table 8 Vietnamese Language Knowledge by Age Group and School Attendance

The exploration of Vietnamese language proficiency among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, unveils a landscape of linguistic abilities and challenges. Similar to

the patterns observed in the Hmong language analysis, the majority of respondents profess fluency in both speaking and understanding Vietnamese. However, a significant number also report moderate proficiency, underlining the diversity in linguistic skills within the community. Notably, a percentage of respondents admit to not understanding Vietnamese at all, pointing to potential communication barriers that may influence educational and employment experiences.

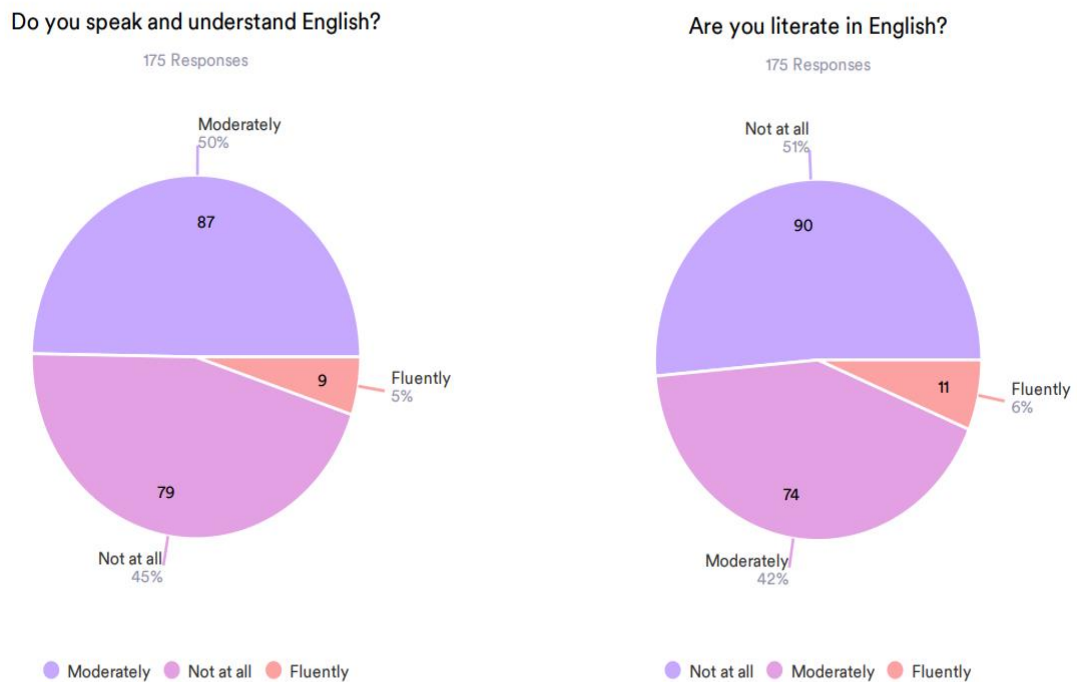
Age group analysis reveals intriguing parallels with the Hmong language data. Once again, the 18-25 age group emerges as having the highest number of respondents claiming fluency in both speaking and understanding Vietnamese. This consistency across languages raises questions about the interconnectedness of age, cultural identity, and language retention within the Hmong community. It suggests that the younger generation, while potentially more fluent in Vietnamese, also faces unique challenges in preserving their native Hmong language.

The correlation between school attendance and language proficiency remains a consistent theme. Across all age groups, a significant number of respondents who attended school assert proficiency in both speaking and understanding Vietnamese, as well as literacy in the language. This connection highlights the role of formal education in shaping and reinforcing linguistic skills, potentially acting as a bridge between cultural heritage and the demands of a broader, predominantly Vietnamese-speaking society.

Considering the implications for the overarching thesis, the analysis of language proficiency in both Hmong and Vietnamese is pivotal. The observed patterns provide a foundation for further investigation into how language skills relate to the identified barriers to education and employment for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. The

diversity in language proficiency within the community underscores the complexity of the linguistic landscape and its potential impact on social, economic, and educational aspects of the respondents' lives.

Moreover, the parallels and differences between Hmong and Vietnamese language proficiency raise broader questions about the interplay between cultural identity, language retention, and the broader societal context in which these women navigate their lives. Future research and analysis should delve deeper into these dynamics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, particularly concerning language and education.



*Figure 10 English Language Knowledge*

The analysis of English language proficiency among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, provides valuable insights into the linguistic landscape of this community and its potential implications for education and employment. The data reveals a diverse range of English proficiency levels among respondents, with a substantial number reporting moderate proficiency and a significant percentage indicating a lack of understanding of the English language.

<b>Speaking and Understanding English:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Fluently</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
18-25	7 (7)	71 (58)	41 (16)
26-40	1 (0)	7 (2)	4 (2)
41-60	1 (0)	6 (0)	7 (0)
61+	0 (0)	3 (1)	25 (0)

<b>Literacy in English:</b>			
<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Fluently (Attended School)</b>	<b>Moderately (Attended School)</b>	<b>Not at all (Attended School)</b>
18-25	10 (10)	69 (56)	42 (16)
26-40	0 (0)	3 (1)	9 (3)
41-60	1 (0)	0 (0)	13 (0)
61+	0 (0)	2 (1)	26 (0)

*Table 9 English Language Knowledge by Age Group and School Attendance*

Age group differences mirror the patterns observed in Hmong and Vietnamese language proficiency analyses. Once again, the 18-25 age group stands out as having the highest number of respondents claiming fluency in both speaking and understanding English. This consistency across languages prompts reflection on the interconnectedness of age, cultural identity, and language retention within the Hmong

community. It suggests that the younger generation, while potentially more proficient in English, may face unique challenges in preserving their native languages. This also suggests that the younger generation may be more involved with foreigners arriving in Sapa for trekking and tourism purposes. It also shows perhaps a desire for the younger generation to consume more English language content online.

A noteworthy correlation between school attendance and language proficiency emerges across age groups. Respondents who attended school are more likely to claim proficiency in speaking and understanding English, as well as literacy in the language. This pattern suggests that formal education plays a crucial role in shaping linguistic skills, potentially serving as a bridge between cultural heritage and the demands of a globalized, English-speaking society.

In the context of the overarching thesis, the analysis of English language proficiency underscores the nature of language challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. The observed patterns highlight the importance of considering not only the preservation of native languages (Hmong and Vietnamese) but also the acquisition of proficiency in English for effective communication and integration into broader societal contexts. This is especially important for the older generation. Those 61 and older predominately report not knowing English at all which may hinder their ability to sell handcrafts to foreign tourists. This is also true for those age 41-60 as around 50 percent report not knowing English at all.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate language considerations. Understanding the linguistic diversity and challenges within the Hmong community is essential for crafting targeted interventions to address barriers to education and employment. Moreover, the analysis sets the stage for further

exploration of the complex interplay between language, cultural identity, and the broader societal landscape in Sapa, Vietnam.

In conclusion, the analysis of English language proficiency contributes crucial information to the broader understanding of language dynamics within the Hmong community. The nuanced patterns observed shed light on the nature of language challenges, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that consider the preservation of native languages and the acquisition of proficiency in English for the holistic development of Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam.

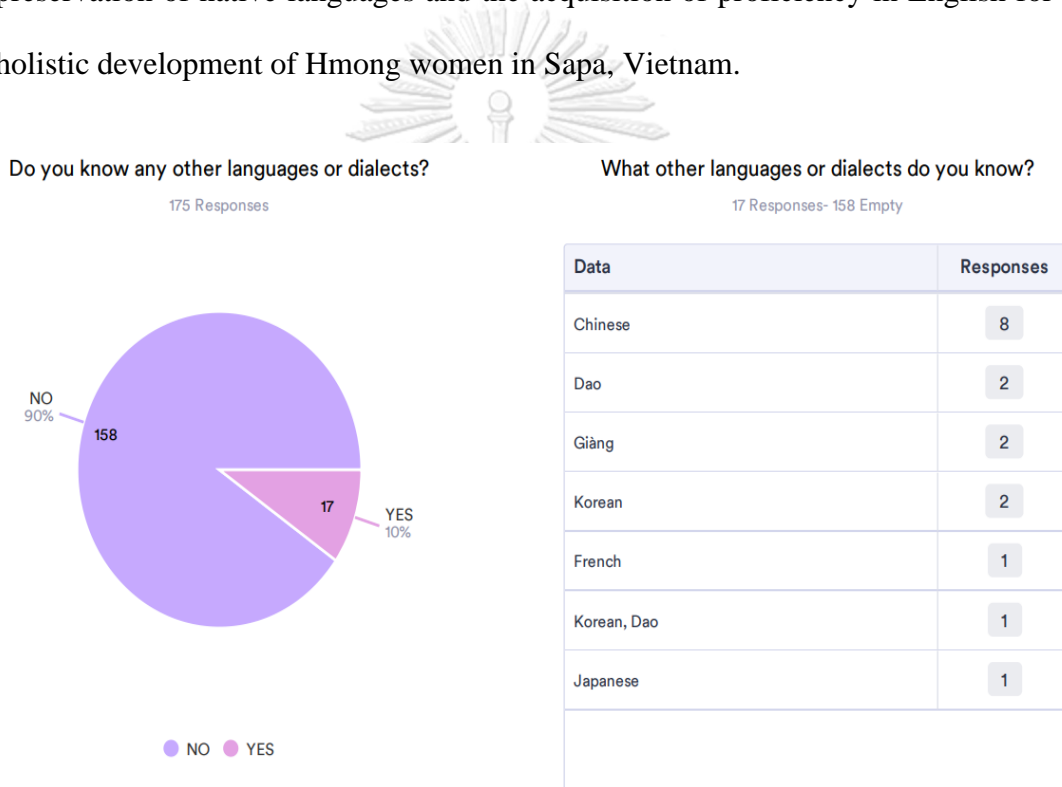


Figure 11 Other Known Languages

Other Languages Known by Age Group						
Age Group	Chinese	Dao	Giàng	Korean	Japanese	French
18-25	8 (6)	3 (3)	2	3	1 (0)	0
41-60	0	0	0	0	0	1

Table 10 Other Known Languages by Age Group and School Attendance

The analysis of proficiency in other languages among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, provides valuable insights into the linguistic diversity within this community and its potential connections to education and cultural exposure. The data indicates that a minority of respondents claim knowledge of other languages or dialects, with Chinese, Dao, Giang, Korean, French, and Japanese being mentioned.

Across age groups, the 18-25 demographic stands out for its varied knowledge in different languages, including Chinese, Dao, Giang, and Korean. However, it's essential to note the potential for typing errors, particularly in distinguishing between Korean and Chinese. The Vietnamese script's similarity for these languages introduces a level of ambiguity, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and addressing potential discrepancies in the data.

The 41-60 age group mentions proficiency in French, showcasing a different linguistic exposure compared to the younger demographic. This diversity in language knowledge across age groups suggests that cultural exposure and language acquisition may vary, potentially influenced by historical, educational, or regional factors. It is also important to note that only one person reported knowing French.

A notable correlation emerges between language knowledge and school attendance. Respondents who attended school are more likely to claim knowledge of other languages, reinforcing the idea that education plays a pivotal role in shaping linguistic skills and broadening cultural perspectives. This finding aligns with the broader thesis theme of understanding the barriers to education and employment for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam.

However, the analysis also highlights the need for caution in interpreting the data, particularly regarding potential typing errors. The acknowledgment of these



uncertainties is crucial for maintaining the study's integrity and ensuring accurate representation of language-related information, especially concerning Korean and Chinese. This consideration prompts a call for further exploration and validation of language data to enhance the reliability of the findings. Additionally while it is very plausible that respondents know the Dao language, considering they are the second most populous minority group in Sapa, some Dao could have also responded to the survey.

In the context of the overarching thesis, the analysis of proficiency in other languages contributes nuanced insights into the cultural and linguistic landscape of Hmong women in Sapa. The findings underscore the importance of considering not only the major languages like Hmong, Vietnamese, and English but also the diversity of additional languages or dialects known within the community.

In conclusion, the analysis of proficiency in other languages among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, adds depth to the understanding of linguistic diversity and its potential connections to education and cultural exposure. The data encourages a nuanced perspective, recognizing the complexities introduced by potential typing errors and emphasizing the need for further exploration to refine language-related findings.

### What challenges have you faced in accessing education?

276 Responses- 5 Empty

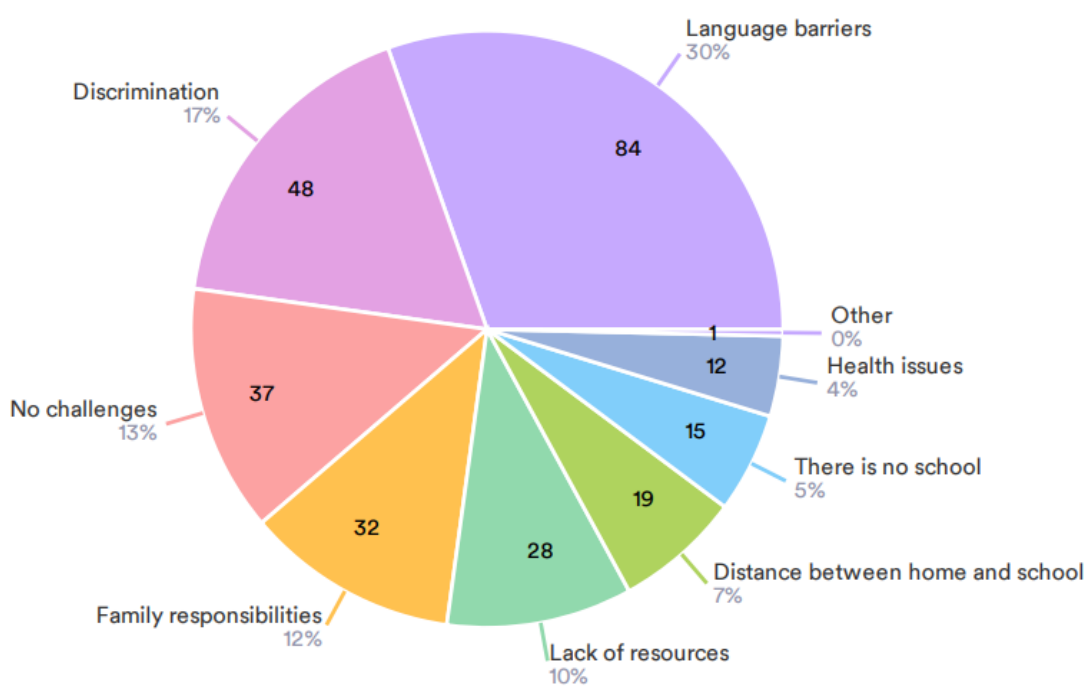


Figure 12 Challenges Faced in Education Access

Challenges and Number of Responses by Age Group				
Challenges	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+
Language barriers	41	10	12	21
Discrimination	21	9	6	12
No challenges	37	0	0	0
Family responsibilities	8	5	8	11
Lack of resources	16	5	2	5
Distance between home and school	15	2	1	1
There was no school	0	0	4	11
Health issues	11	1	0	0
Other	1	0	0	0

Table 11 Challenges Faced in Education Access by Age Group

The analysis of challenges faced in accessing education among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, reveals a complex landscape marked by diverse hurdles. With a total of 276 responses, respondents could choose multiple challenges, providing a comprehensive view of the barriers influencing their educational experiences.

Language barriers and discrimination emerge as the primary challenges, with 84 and 48 responses, respectively. This suggests a substantial impact of linguistic obstacles and discriminatory practices on Hmong women's access to education in Sapa. Language-related challenges may encompass difficulties in communication, comprehension, and participation in an educational setting, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these issues.

Interestingly, 37 respondents in the 18-25 age group reported facing no challenges, indicating a potential variation in experiences among different age groups. Understanding the factors contributing to this perception of minimal challenges could shed light on the dynamics of educational access for younger Hmong women.

A noteworthy addition to the responses is the sentiment expressed by respondents, amounting to 15 or more, stating that "there was no school." While this response was not part of the original answer choices, its emergence as a common sentiment underscores a potential oversight in the survey design. Many respondents may share the perception that accessible schools are lacking, emphasizing the importance of capturing such nuanced sentiments in future research. 100% of those that responded with this were of age 41 and older. This shows that while the older generation overall access to schools was very limiting, the younger generation has seen a greater increase in school access.

The prevalence of multiple challenges faced simultaneously by respondents adds depth to the analysis. The coexistence of language barriers, discrimination, family responsibilities, lack of resources, and other issues highlights the intricate web of obstacles Hmong women navigate in pursuit of education. This complexity reinforces the need for a nuanced understanding of their experiences to inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations.

The findings have crucial implications for the overarching thesis, which aims to unravel the barriers to education and employment for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. The identified challenges, particularly the perceived absence of schools, point to systemic issues that necessitate further investigation. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including targeted language support, anti-discrimination measures, and initiatives to enhance accessibility and infrastructure.

### 3.4. Barriers to Education Observed During Field Study

The field study in Sapa, Vietnam, brought to light several critical factors contributing to the challenges faced by Hmong women in accessing education. Among the prominent challenges, geographical obstacles play a pivotal role. The rugged terrains and dispersed settlements characteristic of the region create hurdles for education accessibility. While a primary school was observed near Mai's home, the study revealed that the younger generation, particularly girls, might encounter difficulties accessing higher educational institutions. The necessity to travel to Sapa Town for secondary school and above introduces a logistical challenge that impacts

the educational prospects of Hmong girls. Informants indicate that more primary schools have been created over the years within proximity of each village which greatly removes distance barriers in relation to primary school. Despite the recent increase, the amount of primary schools does not meet the national standard (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, p. 3).

The geographical challenges underscore the importance of infrastructure development and strategic planning in addressing educational disparities. Improving the connectivity of remote areas to educational hubs could alleviate some of the barriers faced by Hmong women, promoting inclusivity and broader access to educational opportunities.

Talking to other locals revealed that children do have an option of staying in Sapa Town in a dormitory, but this raises concerns for Hmong parents as well as children. Firstly, parents might be worried about how their child may be treated outside of school hours in their dorms by classmates and staff. Second, parents may be reluctant to send students away during the week over financial concerns. Third, parents will lose a farmhand that can work outside of school hours. While being away from home and chores will allow a child to have greater focus on homework, this will cause parents to have an increased workload while farming outside of school hours. Lastly, children may not want to stay away from their family. It is also documented that Hmong boys are prioritized when pursuing secondary and higher secondary education in the Hmong community which is a societal and even financial obstacle that needs to be overcome for more Hmong girls to further their education (Jones et al., 2013, p. 5).

Data further reveals that even from the beginning of a Hmong girl's education, boys are prioritized, and the disparities only continue to increase as Hmong youth

approach higher secondary education, more than twice the amount of boys are found to be taking the 10<sup>th</sup> grade entrance exam than girls despite Hmong girls receiving higher scores than Hmong boys on average. Despite testing higher than Hmong boys, girls still test much lower than the local Kinh and national average (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, pp. 4, 129, 194).

Another significant factor identified during the field study is the influence of economic imperatives on educational participation. The traditional occupations of the Hmong community, such as farming and handcrafting, play a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape. Economic dependencies may necessitate the early involvement of youngsters, particularly girls, in family trades. This early engagement limits their time and inclination towards formal education.

The economic imperatives highlight the intricate interplay between livelihoods and education. Breaking this cycle requires a comprehensive approach that not only emphasizes the importance of education but also explores avenues for economic empowerment. Initiatives that integrate skill development, promote alternative livelihoods, and provide support for families can contribute to a more conducive environment for Hmong women to pursue education without compromising their economic contributions.

The findings from the field study in Sapa emphasize the nature of challenges faced by Hmong women in accessing education. The geographical hurdles and economic imperatives present formidable barriers that necessitate targeted interventions. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers infrastructural improvements, economic empowerment initiatives, and community engagement. By understanding and addressing these factors, efforts can be directed

towards creating an environment where Hmong women can actively participate in and benefit from formal education, breaking the cycle of educational disparities in the region.



## Chapter 4: Employment

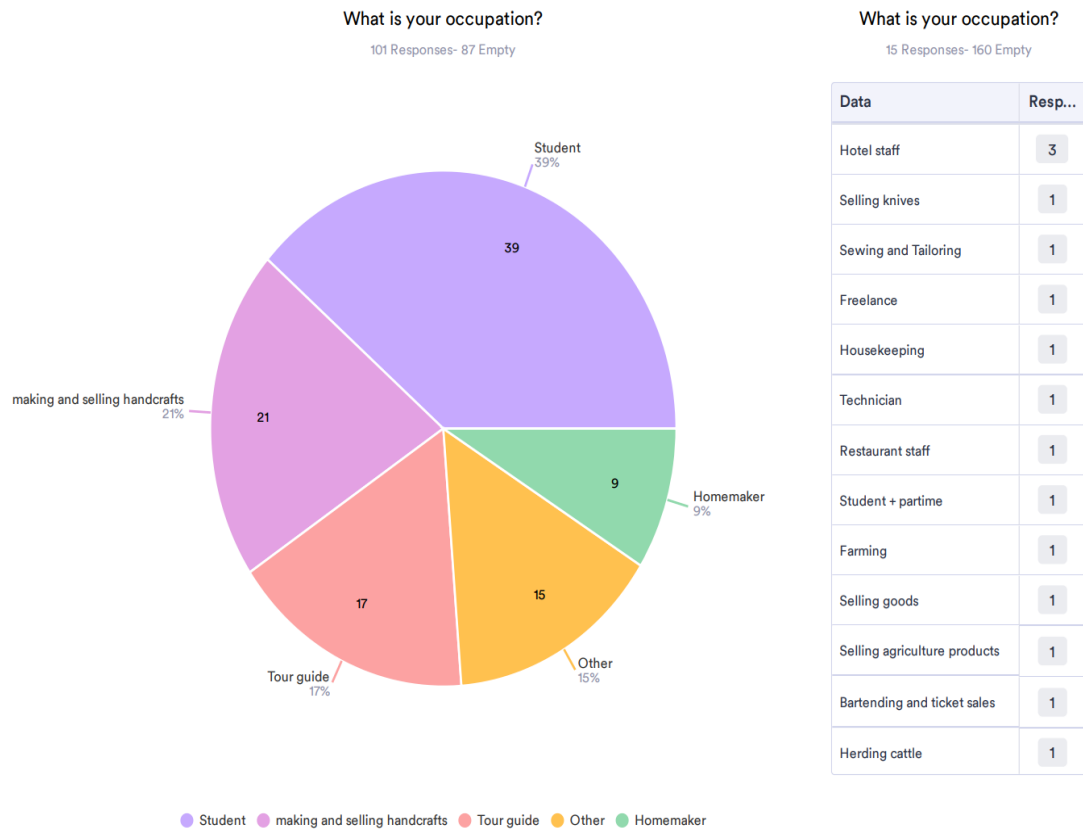
In the exploration of the employment landscape among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, this chapter delves into a comprehensive analysis of survey results that provide a nuanced understanding of their employment status, traditional skills, and perceived barriers. The chapter begins by presenting visually accessible pie charts and tables, meticulously breaking down these aspects according to age groups. Through these visual aids, readers gain insights into the intricate intersectionality of age and its influence on employment dynamics within the Hmong community. As the chapter unfolds, it transitions to an in-depth exploration of the barriers observed during my field research in Sapa, offering a qualitative dimension to complement the quantitative survey data. By intertwining survey outcomes and field observations, this chapter aims to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by Hmong women in their pursuit of employment, ultimately contributing to a more holistic understanding of the complex socio-economic landscape in this unique cultural context.

### 4.1 Survey Results for Hmong Women and Employment

Employment Status by Age Group				
Employment Status	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+
Employed	68	11	3	6
Not Employed	53	1	11	22

*Table 12 Employment Status by Age Group*





*Figure 13 Occupations of Hmong Women*

The exploration of employment status among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, reveals a dynamic and intricate landscape, woven with cultural nuances and individual perceptions. The near-balanced division between those reporting employment and those who do not highlights the cultural complexity inherent in defining work in this community. The study acknowledges that the traditional dichotomy of employed versus unemployed may not fully encapsulate the diverse economic activities undertaken by Hmong women.

Occupationally, Hmong women engage in a rich tapestry of roles, ranging from traditional practices like crafting and agriculture to more contemporary positions in tourism and technology. The inclusion of activities like farming and homemaking, traditionally undervalued or overlooked, contributes to a more comprehensive

understanding of their economic lives. However, the survey also recognizes certain oversights in its design, acknowledging the challenge of crafting a concise yet inclusive instrument to capture the multifaceted nature of these women's occupations.

The revelation that a substantial number of respondents, particularly those in the 41-60 and 61+ age groups, report being unemployed adds a layer of complexity to the examination of employment status among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. The stark age-wise distribution of unemployment underscores potential generational differences in access to and participation in the workforce. The concentration of unemployed individuals in the older age groups prompts consideration of historical and societal factors that may have shaped their employment opportunities.

This imbalance in employment status further accentuates the need for a nuanced understanding of cultural and age-related perspectives on work. While the survey initially presented a near-perfect 50-50 split, the prevalence of unemployment in specific age brackets prompts a reevaluation of how employment is perceived and navigated across different life stages within the Hmong community. The findings underscore that cultural and generational contexts play crucial roles in shaping the employment landscape for Hmong women in Sapa.

The revelation that a notable number of respondents who are unemployed also have children introduces a compelling layer to the analysis of employment status among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. Among those aged 41 and above, where the majority of unemployment is concentrated, the acknowledgment that these individuals have children raises questions about their roles and responsibilities. It's plausible, as mentioned, that many in this age group are not stay-at-home mothers, as their children may have grown and become more independent. This insight challenges conventional

assumptions about the connection between unemployment and childcare responsibilities, particularly in older age groups.

Contrasting the reported numbers for those with and without children across different age brackets offers valuable insights into the diverse life stages and circumstances of Hmong women in Sapa. The data suggests that the relationship between employment and childcare responsibilities may vary significantly based on age, potentially reflecting changes in family dynamics and societal expectations. Understanding these nuances becomes essential for crafting targeted interventions that recognize and respect the diverse roles and responsibilities of Hmong women within their families and communities.

The occupation distribution showcases a spectrum of roles, ranging from traditional occupations such as making and selling handcrafts, to more contemporary positions like being a freelancer or engaging in technology-related work. The prominence of student roles reflects a commitment to education, while the participation in tourism-related occupations, such as tour guides, and selling and making handcrafts to sell to tourists highlights the community's engagement with the local tourism industry.

However, the data also brings attention to the subjective nature of employment perceptions. The 50-50 split in employment status suggests that respondents may interpret and categorize their activities differently. Some individuals engaged in activities like farming, herding cattle, or homemaking may not self-identify as employed, contributing to this equilibrium. This finding underscores the importance of acknowledging cultural and individual perspectives when assessing labor participation.

The analysis further recognizes certain oversights in the survey design. The omission of specific job categories, particularly farming, acknowledges the challenge of crafting a concise survey while attempting to capture the full spectrum of economic activities. The role of a "technician" adds an element of ambiguity, emphasizing the need for more detailed information on the nature of certain occupations to ensure a clearer understanding. This could be related to computer hardware, software, plumbing, electrical work, or any number of professions.

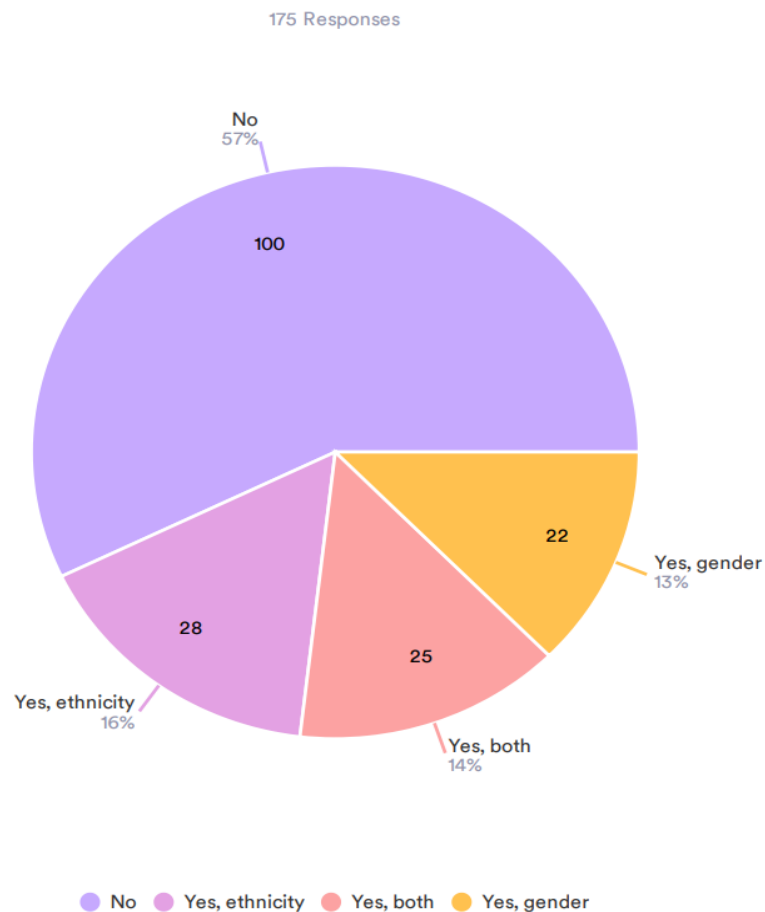
Multiple responses provided by respondents reflect the multifaceted nature of their occupations, highlighting the diverse roles individuals undertake simultaneously. This complexity underscores the need for a nuanced approach to understanding employment patterns within the Hmong community.

Recognizing the diverse occupations and the nuanced perspective on employment is crucial for developing a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to education and employment for Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. Tailoring interventions that respect and align with the cultural context of the community is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Hmong women in their pursuit of education and economic empowerment.

### **Perceived Challenges of Discrimination Based on Ethnicity or Gender**

The examination of challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, in the realms of ethnicity and gender presents a nuanced picture that underscores the intricacies of navigating employment landscapes in this cultural context.

Have you faced challenges in finding or keeping a job due to your ethnicity or gender?



*Figure 14 Perceived Discrimination*

The survey data reveals a substantial number of respondents, totaling 75 individuals, who acknowledge encountering challenges due to ethnicity, gender, or both. These figures shed light on the potential existence of barriers that Hmong women may confront as they seek employment opportunities. Notably, 80 respondents in the 18-25 age group report no challenges related to race or gender, offering a counterpoint that suggests a segment of the population may not perceive such obstacles. While gender and racial discrimination against minority groups is

heavily reported in the past, Hmong women for the most part do not see themselves as experiencing such discrimination (Turner, 2018, p. 52).

Challenges	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+
No Challenges	80	1	7	12
Yes, Ethnically	14	4	3	7
Yes, Gender	12	4	0	6
Yes, Both	15	3	4	3

*Table 13 Perceived Discrimination by Age Group*

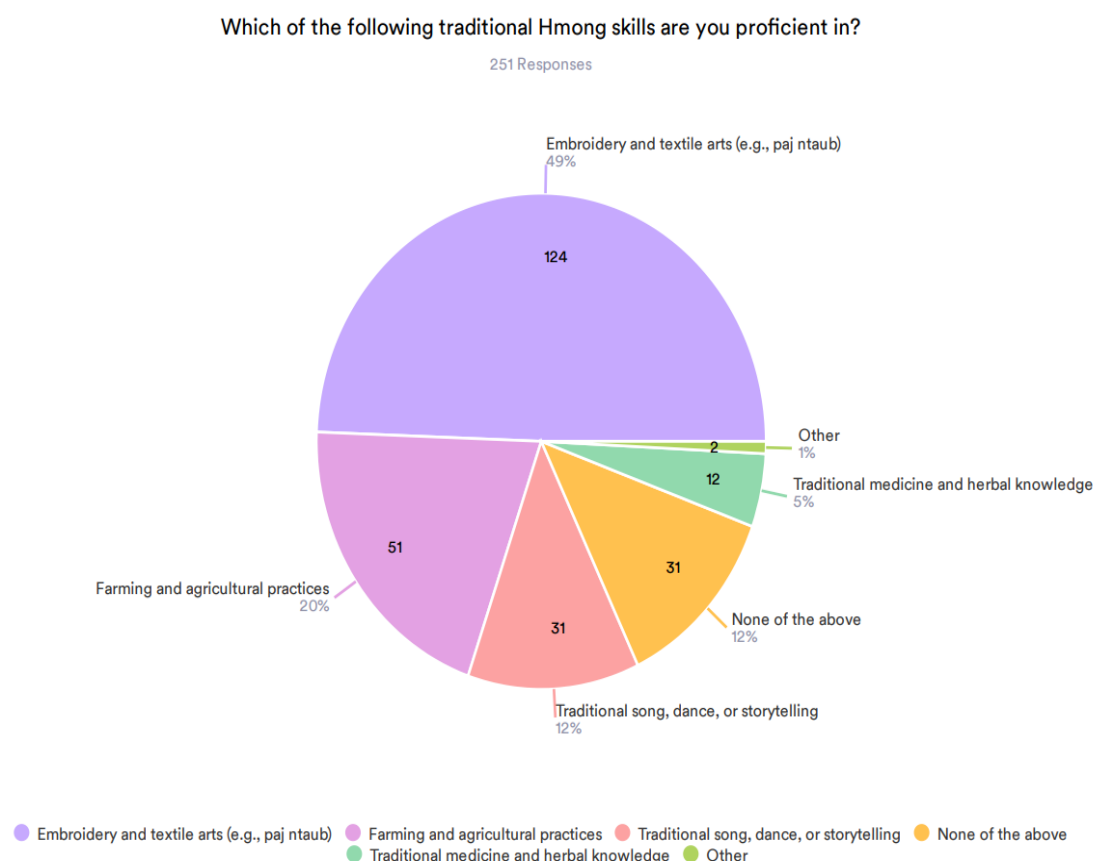
Delving deeper into the reported challenges, distinct patterns emerge across age groups. Among respondents aged 18-25, 14 acknowledge facing challenges specifically related to ethnicity, with 12 reporting challenges associated with gender. This suggests that, even among the younger cohort, there's a recognition of hurdles linked to cultural and gender identity. In contrast, respondents aged 61 and above show a higher incidence of challenges associated with ethnicity (6) compared to those related to gender (3), pointing to potential generational differences in the perceived impact of these factors.

The acknowledgment of challenges related to both ethnicity and gender by 15 respondents in the 18-25 age group and three in the 61+ age group suggests an intersectionality of obstacles, highlighting the complex interplay of cultural and gender dynamics that Hmong women navigate. This intersectional lens is essential for understanding the layered nature of challenges and the need for targeted interventions that consider multiple dimensions of identity. It is important to note however that

most 18-25 year old women do not perceive any type of discrimination which can attribute to their own perceived self-worth, the evolution of Vietnamese society, or both. One possible reason this is the case is because Hmong women may simply not know how to identify discrimination and have not been educated as such. The Women's Union of Lao Cai has been established to grant women social experiences in the form of workshops to educate women on protecting their rights and preventing discrimination. It was reported that the Women's Union uses Vietnamese as the medium of instruction and seldom uses visual aids. This would exclude Hmong women almost entirely. It was suggested in the report to have separate workshops for minority women, especially Hmong women and to use more visual aids like projectors, pictures, etc. (UNICEF-Vietnam & Committee, 2016, p. 56).

### Challenges, Traditional Skills, and Resource Access:

The exploration of proficiency in traditional Hmong skills and perceived lack of



access to resources among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, reveals significant insights into the preservation of cultural heritage and the challenges faced in accessing essential resources.

*Figure 15 Traditional Skill Knowledge*

Proficiency in traditional Hmong skills, as reported by survey respondents, reflects a strong connection to cultural practices. Notably, a substantial number of respondents (124) express proficiency in embroidery and textile arts, such as *paj ntaub* (Hmong traditional embroidery art). This high level of skill underscores the cultural significance attached to traditional Hmong crafts, emphasizing the community's commitment to preserving and transmitting these art forms across generations. Additionally, skills in farming and agricultural practices (51 respondents) and traditional song, dance, or storytelling (31 respondents) demonstrate a great engagement with traditional practices, highlighting the richness of Hmong cultural heritage.

The reason I wished to gauge traditional skills while talking about barriers in employment for Hmong women in Sapa is because Hmong women have much to offer Sapa. So far in Sapa's tourism driven economy, we have seen Hmong women showcase their knowledge of local terrain in trekking and the making of handcrafts while other beautiful and unique aspects of Hmong traditional culture are not utilized and very much could be utilized in tourism to benefit the Hmong community.

However, it is notable that a portion of respondents (31) reports not being skilled in any of the specified traditional Hmong skills. This raises questions about the factors contributing to this lack of proficiency, whether due to individual choices,



generational shifts, or other influences. Further exploration of these nuances during field research would provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping traditional skill proficiency within the Hmong community in Sapa.

**Skills by Age Group**

Skills	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+
Skilled in Embroidery and Textile Arts	71	12	14	27
Skilled in Farming and Agriculture Practices	27	3	9	12
Skilled in Traditional Medicine and Herbal Knowledge	7	1	0	4
Skilled at Traditional Song, Dance, and Storytelling	21	0	2	8
Not Skilled in Any of These	31	0	0	0
Skilled in Other	2	0	0	0

Table 14 Traditional Skill Knowledge by Age Group

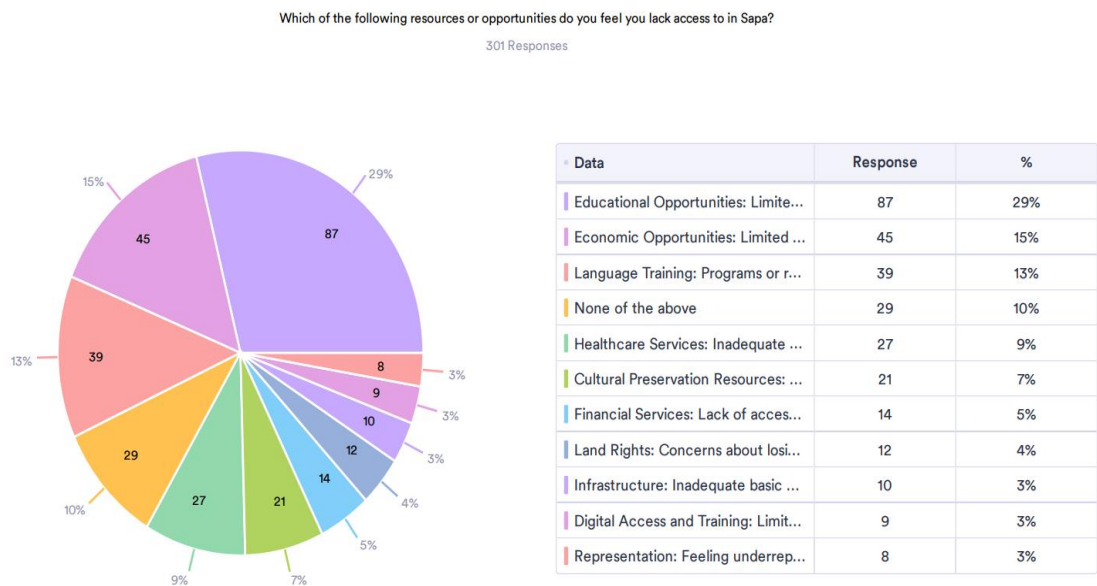


Figure 16 Perceived Lack of Resources and Opportunities

Perceived Access by Age Group				
Perceived Access	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+
Educational Opportunities	42	12	12	21
Healthcare Services	12	0	6	9
Economic Opportunities	28	2	4	11
Language Training	36	0	1	2
Land Rights	9	0	1	2
Cultural Preservation Resources	19	0	1	1
Infrastructure	7	0	1	2
Digital Access and Training	8	0	0	1
Representation Concerns	6	0	1	0
Financial Services	11	0	1	2
None of These	28	0	0	1

*Table 15 Perceived Lack of Resources and Opportunities by Age Group*

The examination of perceived lack of access to resources among Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam, provides valuable insights into the overall challenges faced by the community. The survey responses reveal a nuanced landscape of needs and priorities, shedding light on the areas where respondents perceive significant gaps in available resources.

Educational opportunities and economic opportunities emerge as the most prominently perceived lacking resources, aligning closely with the thesis's central focus on barriers to education and employment. A considerable number of respondents across age groups express concerns about the limited access to educational pathways, underlining the urgency of addressing these issues to empower Hmong women in Sapa through education.

Similarly, economic opportunities, with 28 respondents aged 18-25 and 11 respondents aged 61+, are identified as a substantial concern. This resonates with the broader context of employment challenges discussed in previous sections, emphasizing the interconnectedness of educational and economic barriers in the lives of Hmong women in Sapa.

Healthcare services also emerge as an area of concern, particularly among respondents aged 18-25 (12 respondents) and those aged 61+ (9 respondents). This highlights the importance of addressing healthcare accessibility to ensure the well-being of Hmong women across different age groups.

Moreover, respondents express various concerns related to specific resources, including language training, land rights, cultural preservation resources, infrastructure, digital access and training, representation in government, and financial services. These diverse concerns reflect the complex array of challenges faced by Hmong women in Sapa, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and tailored approach to address their varied needs.

The low emphasis on representation in government, reported by only 6 respondents across age groups, aligns with historical observations about the Hmong people's preference for independence and limited interest in governance. This aspect adds depth to the understanding of the community's values and priorities, influencing their perceptions of representation and governance. With the Hmong's overall underrepresentation in government may not solely be because of economic, language or other societal barriers but perhaps it must be considered that Hmong people are not interested in government affairs as we see it. They may be more focused on Hmong specific affairs such as clan affairs, marriages, culture specific things. The Hmong

after all report governmental affairs have little sway in the way Hmong parents choose to raise a family which testifies to the Hmong lack of concern for governmental affairs (Jones et al., 2013, p. 4).

## 4.2. Employment Observations During Field Study

The field study conducted in Sapa, Vietnam, provides a qualitative dimension to the survey findings, offering a more nuanced understanding of the types of employment observed among Hmong women and the barriers they face in the local context. The study identifies three primary types of employment prevalent among the Hmong community.

Firstly, traditional crafts play a significant role in the employment landscape, with Hmong women engaging prominently in handcrafting items, particularly those dyed with indigenous methods. The weaving and dyeing of hemp to produce indigo-colored fabrics stand out as traditional avenues of employment. This aligns with the survey data, which highlighted a substantial number of respondents involved in making and selling handcrafts.

Secondly, agriculture remains a crucial sector of employment for the Hmong, as indicated by the terraced fields and references to various crops. This finding resonates with the survey data, where a notable number of respondents reported farming and agricultural practices among their traditional skills.

Thirdly, tourism-driven occupations, ranging from trekking guides to street vendors selling crafts, are prevalent among Hmong women. However, the field study sheds light on the exploitation faced by the Hmong community within the tourism

industry. The Kinh community appears to dominate the tourism sector, with establishments like the "Hmong Restaurant" symbolizing this phenomenon. This observation aligns with the survey data, where respondents highlighted discrimination as a significant challenge in accessing education and employment. The field study underscores the economic implications of this discrimination, with Hmong women receiving lesser value in tourism-related occupations due to the intermediary roles played by other ethnic groups.

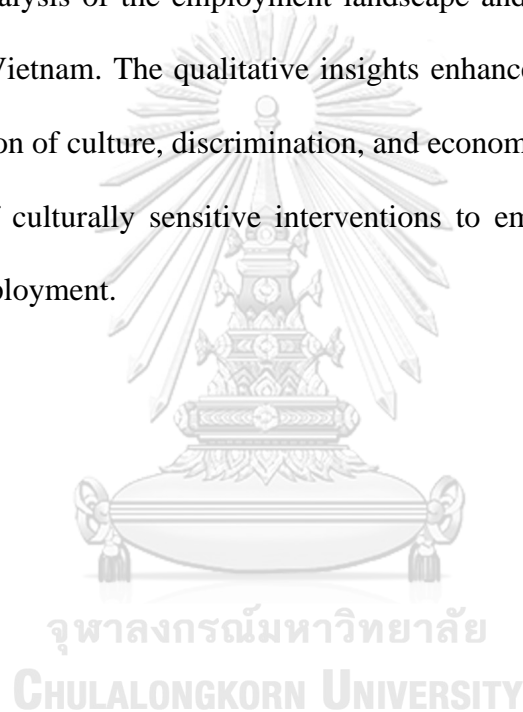
Furthermore, the field study identifies specific barriers to employment faced by Hmong women in Sapa. The phenomenon of tourism exploitation by the Kinh community emerges as a notable barrier, with Hmong-operated establishments sidelined from mainstream economic benefits. This aligns with the survey data, which highlighted challenges related to ethnicity and discrimination in the workplace.

The lack of representation in the formal sector is another barrier observed during the field study. Most formal establishments, including shops, restaurants, and transportation services, were predominantly operated by the Kinh community. In contrast, Hmong women were often relegated to informal sectors, primarily seen selling handmade crafts on the streets. Hmong and Dao women often go as far as following tourists all over Sapa Town to pester them to buy handicrafts. When one person buys an item, more women follow suit swarming the tourist in hopes he or she is willing to buy more. This observation resonates with the survey data, emphasizing the need for addressing barriers to formal employment opportunities for Hmong women.

Cultural exploitation is a significant concern highlighted in the field study, with tourists often presented with mass-produced items marketed as authentic Hmong

crafts. This practice, occurring in Kinh-run establishments, reduces opportunities for genuine Hmong artisans to sell their handmade products. While not explicitly covered in the survey, this finding underscores the broader challenge of preserving and promoting authentic Hmong cultural practices within the economic dynamics of the region.

In conclusion, the integration of field study findings with survey data provides a comprehensive analysis of the employment landscape and barriers faced by Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam. The qualitative insights enhance our understanding of the intricate intersection of culture, discrimination, and economic disparities, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive interventions to empower Hmong women in education and employment.



## Chapter 5: Comparative Analysis and Concluding Remarks

### 5.1. Survey Comparative Analysis

The comprehensive exploration of the Hmong women's experiences in Sapa, Vietnam, through a combination of survey data and field study findings reveals a rich tapestry of challenges, skills, and aspirations. This comparative analysis aims to distill key takeaways from the amalgamation of quantitative and qualitative data, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing education, employment, and overall well-being.

**Language Proficiency and Educational Barriers:** The survey illuminated the diverse linguistic landscape of the Hmong community, with varying levels of English proficiency reported across age groups. The correlation between school attendance and English proficiency underscored the pivotal role of education in language acquisition. The field study complemented this by identifying geographical challenges that hindered access to higher education, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to bridge language gaps and improve educational infrastructure in remote areas such as using a bilingual approach as done previously but on a more extensive level.

**Occupational Diversity and Perceptions of Employment:** Survey responses highlighted a near-even split in employment status, reflecting cultural nuances in how respondents define and perceive work. The diverse range of occupations, from traditional crafts to modern roles, accentuates the multidimensionality of Hmong women's economic activities. However, the field study shed light on the discrepancy between the perceived and actual value derived from certain occupations, particularly

in the tourism sector. The findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and respecting diverse cultural perspectives on labor while addressing economic disparities.

**Challenges in Accessing Education and Employment:** The survey unveiled a spectrum of challenges faced by Hmong women, with language barriers and discrimination emerging as primary concerns. The nuanced field study added depth to these findings, uncovering the systemic challenges, such as the exploitation within the tourism industry and the lack of representation in formal sectors. The perceived absence of schools and the reported barriers to employment underscore the intricate intersection of ethnicity, gender, and economic dynamics, emphasizing the need for context-specific interventions. The last few decades of economic reformed since Doi Moi seem to have trickled to the Hmong community in Sapa. While it is confirmed that younger generations appear to have more access to education than the older one, sons are ultimately still prioritized when pursuing secondary and higher secondary education which could also explain the near 50% formal education enrollment (Jones et al., 2013, p. 5). This claim still requires additional research as my study focuses solely on the experiences of Hmong women.

**Traditional Skills and Cultural Preservation:** Both survey and field study data converged on the significance of traditional skills, particularly in embroidery and textile arts. The high proficiency reported aligns with the observed emphasis on preserving Hmong cultural practices. However, the challenges faced by artisans in selling genuine products due to cultural exploitation highlight the delicate balance between cultural preservation and economic exploitation. These findings call for



initiatives that empower Hmong women to leverage their traditional skills while safeguarding their cultural heritage.

**Access to Resources and Economic Opportunities:** The survey identified perceived lacks in educational and economic opportunities, aligning with the field study's observation of Hmong women being relegated to informal sectors. The dominance of the Kinh community in formal establishments and the exploitation within the tourism industry underscore systemic barriers that impede equitable access to resources. The integration of these findings emphasizes the need for interventions that address both perceived and actual gaps in educational, economic, and cultural resources.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis reveals a complex web of challenges and opportunities for Hmong women in Sapa. The integration of quantitative and qualitative insights enriches our understanding of the cultural, economic, and systemic dynamics shaping their experiences. Moving forward, nuanced, culturally sensitive interventions that address language barriers, economic disparities, and cultural preservation are imperative to empower Hmong women in Sapa and foster sustainable development in the region.

## 5.2. Remarks from Field Study

The Kinh profit from the Hmong experience. The Kinh community, being more integrated into Vietnam's mainstream socio-economic fabric, effectively capitalizes on the tourism potential of Sapa. They control significant tourism-related infrastructure, from transport services to restaurants and shops. By selling an

"authentic" Hmong experience, they often sideline the actual Hmong community both economically and representationally. This dynamic not only limits the economic opportunities available to the Hmong but also dilutes the authenticity of the cultural experience for visitors.

### 5.3. Research and Policy Recommendations

#### Cultural Exchange Programs:

One avenue for promoting authentic cultural interactions involves researching and implementing cultural exchange programs. These programs would empower Hmong women to share their traditional skills and knowledge with tourists, enriching the tourism experience. Policies supporting these initiatives should be developed to encourage genuine cultural exchanges that contribute to a deeper understanding of Hmong heritage. As shown from the survey results, Hmong women have a wealth of knowledge and skill to share within the tourism industry such as traditional song and dance, even culinary arts as I learned a bit from my own experience in Sapa.

#### Community-Based Tourism Initiatives:

Research should be conducted to explore the viability of community-based tourism initiatives that actively involve Hmong women in designing and managing cultural experiences for tourists. Policies should prioritize the inclusion of Hmong communities in decision-making processes related to tourism activities, ensuring fair representation and equitable economic benefits for the entire community.

#### Skills Enhancement Programs:

To align traditional skills with market demands, research-backed skills enhancement programs should be developed. These programs would empower

Hmong women to enhance their crafts, making them more marketable to tourists. Policies supporting these initiatives should provide training and resources for skill development, fostering economic opportunities and cultural preservation. This could involve English training courses to interact with tourists, different selling techniques or employment workshops to share employment opportunities available to Hmong people.

#### Tour Guide Certification Programs:

Research is needed to establish tour guide certification programs specifically designed for Hmong women. These programs would identify the skills and knowledge necessary for becoming certified guides, considering both traditional and contemporary aspects. Additionally, the certification process could involve classes to teach Hmong women skills necessary to be a tour guide and how to market themselves or help Hmong women find meaningful jobs with fair wages with tour companies or hotels. Policies should facilitate the integration of certified Hmong women as tour guides, promoting authentic storytelling and cultural exchange. Certification itself should never become a barrier. If certification is done to exclude on basis of language accessibility such as having a certification process completely in Vietnamese, this would be an incredible misstep. This program, if incorrectly implemented, would exclude a significant portion of already practicing tour guides due to their lack of Vietnamese language ability.

#### Fair Trade Practices:

Investigating fair trade practices within the tourism industry is essential to ensure that Hmong women receive fair compensation for their contributions. Research should inform policies that promote fair wages, ethical business practices, and

transparent economic transactions, protecting Hmong women from exploitation while fostering economic empowerment.

#### Cultural Sensitivity Training:

Researching the impact of cultural sensitivity training for tourists and tourism industry professionals is crucial. Policies should be developed to encourage or mandate such training, fostering respectful interactions between tourists and Hmong communities. This approach contributes to a more inclusive and authentic tourism experience.

#### Public-Private Partnerships:

Researching and establishing public-private partnerships that support initiatives benefiting Hmong women in tourism is vital. Policies should encourage collaboration between governmental bodies, private enterprises, and local communities to create sustainable tourism practices that empower Hmong women economically and culturally.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, these research and policy recommendations aim to foster a tourism environment in Sapa that not only preserves and showcases Hmong cultural heritage but also provides meaningful economic opportunities for Hmong women. Through the implementation of these initiatives, we can ensure their active participation and empowerment in the tourism sector, contributing to a more authentic and sustainable tourism experience in Sapa.

## 5.4. Conclusion

The pristine landscapes of Sapa, echoing with the vibrant culture of the Hmong community, present a rich tapestry of traditions and resilience. However, beneath this beauty lies a tale of systemic disparities, with the Hmong, especially the women, often sidelined from the mainstream economic opportunities. These women, despite the barriers to employment and education, embody the spirit of endurance and ingenuity. From handcrafting intricate designs to preserving age-old dyeing traditions and taking on the mantle of guiding tourists through their ancestral lands, Hmong women stand as pillars of their community. Their strength, skill, and determination, set against the backdrop of socio-economic challenges, not only deserve admiration but also a rightful place in Sapa's socio-economic landscape. It is their stories, skills, and spirit that truly encapsulate the authentic essence of Sapa, making it imperative to ensure that they are celebrated and supported in every possible way.

The comprehensive analysis of Hmong women's experiences in Sapa, Vietnam, reveals a nuanced interplay of challenges and opportunities in education, employment, and cultural preservation. Language proficiency emerged as a key factor influencing educational barriers, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to bridge linguistic gaps and improve infrastructure. Occupational diversity showcased the multidimensionality of Hmong women's economic activities particularly in the tourism sector.

In the heart of Sapa's magnetic allure lies the rich culture and traditions of the Hmong and other minority groups, drawing tourists ranging from local Vietnamese enthusiasts to Western backpackers and curious Asian explorers. Yet, there lies an

irony in their experience. These very tourists, while seeking an authentic immersion, are often held at arm's length from the true essence of these hill tribe groups. They are unknowingly or sometimes indifferently presented with a diluted, 'packaged' experience, a far cry from the genuine traditions and daily life of these communities. Hmong women, the torchbearers of many of these traditions, face an uphill battle when it comes to getting their fair share from the tourism pie. With the Kinh ethnic group holding a predominant stake, right from the selling of bus tickets at Hanoi airport to curating Sapa's major tourist experiences, the question arises: How can the Hmong women genuinely compete? The dominating monopoly of the Kinh in the tourism sector leaves little room for the Hmong to provide an unfiltered view of their life, thereby depriving many visitors of the true heart of Sapa.

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## Appendix: Survey Questions



Dear Informants

My name is Connor Kidd, I am currently an MA student at Chulalongkorn University's Southeast Asian Studies Program. This questionnaire is part of a data collection for my thesis entitled: *Hmong Women's Perceived Barriers to Education and Employment in Sapa, Vietnam*. Your answers will be confidential and used for academic research only. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at: [kheejvaj@gmail.com](mailto:kheejvaj@gmail.com)

Kính gửi Người thông tin,

Tôi tên là Connor Kidd, hiện đang là sinh viên thạc sĩ chương trình Nghiên cứu Đông Nam Á tại Đại học Chulalongkorn. Bảng câu hỏi này là một phần của việc thu thập dữ liệu cho luận án của tôi với tiêu đề: Khám phá những Rào cản nhận thức của phụ nữ H'Mông đối với giáo dục và việc làm ở Sapa, Việt Nam. Các câu trả lời của bạn sẽ được bảo mật và chỉ được sử dụng cho mục đích nghiên cứu học thuật. Nếu bạn có bất kỳ câu hỏi nào, xin đừng ngần ngại liên hệ với tôi tại: [kheejvaj@gmail.com](mailto:kheejvaj@gmail.com)

## Hmong Women's Perceived Barriers to Education and Employment in Sapa, Vietnam

### Rào cản nhận thức của phụ nữ H'Mông đối với giáo dục và việc làm ở Sapa, Việt Nam

#### Demographics Phần Thông tin cá nhân

What is your age? **Bạn có bao nhiêu tuổi?**

What is your marital status? **Tình trạng hôn nhân của bạn là gì?**

- Single **Độc thân**
- Married **Kết hôn rồi**
- Widowed **Góa bụa**
- Divorced **Ly dị**

Number of children (if any) **Bạn có bao nhiêu con cái (nếu có)**

#### Education Phần Giáo Dục

Did you attend formal schooling? **Bạn có đi trường học chính quy không?**

- Yes **Vâng**
- No **Không**

Up to which level did you study? **Mức cao nhất của giáo dục của bạn là gì**

- Primary **Trường tiểu học**
- Secondary **Trường trung học**
- Higher secondary **Trường trung học phổ thông**
- University **Trường đại học**

Were there any reasons that made you leave school early? **Có lý do gì khiến bạn nghỉ học sớm không?**

- Financial difficulties **Khó khăn về tài chính**
- Family responsibilities or need for labor at home **Trách nhiệm gia đình hoặc nhu cầu lao động tại nhà**
- Marriage at an early age **Kết hôn ở tuổi trẻ**
- Lack of interest or perceived value in education **Thiếu hứng thú hoặc không thấy giá trị trong việc học**
- Health issues or disability **Vấn đề sức khỏe hoặc khuyết tật**
- School-related issues (e.g., bullying, difficulty with studies) **Vấn đề liên quan**

đến trường học (ví dụ: bị bắt nạt, khó khăn trong việc học)

- No specific reason **Không có lý do cụ thể**
- Other (please specify) **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

Were there any reasons that made you stay home from school occasionally or regularly? **Có lý do gì khiến bạn ở nhà thay vì đến trường thỉnh thoảng hoặc thường xuyên không?**

- Illness or health issues **Ôm hoặc vấn đề sức khỏe**
- Family responsibilities or events **Trách nhiệm gia đình hoặc sự kiện**
- Lack of school supplies or appropriate clothing **Thiếu dụng cụ học tập hoặc quần áo phù hợp**
- Weather conditions or transportation issues **Điều kiện thời tiết hoặc vấn đề vận chuyển**
- School-related issues (e.g., exams, fear of punishment) **Vấn đề liên quan đến trường học (ví dụ: thi cử, sợ bị trừng phạt)**
- Cultural or religious observances **Lễ tôn giáo hoặc phong tục văn hóa**
- No specific reason **Không có lý do cụ thể**
- Other (please specify) **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

How far was your school from your home? **Trường học của bạn cách nhà bao xa?**

- Less than 15 minutes walking **Ít hơn 15 phút đi bộ**
- 15 to 30 minutes walking **15 đến 30 phút đi bộ**
- 30 minutes to 1 hour walking **30 phút đến 1 giờ đi bộ**
- More than 1 hour walking **Nhiều hơn 1 giờ đi bộ**
- I did not walk; I used other means of transportation. **Tôi không đi bộ; tôi sử dụng phương tiện di chuyển khác.**

### Language **Phần Ngôn Ngữ**

Are you literate in Hmong? **Bạn biết chữ tiếng H'Mông ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**
- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Do you speak and understand Hmong? **Bạn có thể nói và hiểu tiếng H'Mông ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**

- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Are you literate in Vietnamese? **Bạn biết chữ tiếng Việt ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**
- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Do you speak and understand Vietnamese? **Bạn có thể nói và hiểu tiếng Việt ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**
- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Are you literate in English? **Bạn biết chữ tiếng Anh ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**
- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Do you speak and understand English? **Bạn có thể nói và hiểu tiếng Anh ở mức độ nào?**

- Fluently **Trôi chảy**
- Moderately **Trung bình**
- Not at all **Không biết**

Do you know any other languages or dialects?. **Bạn biết thêm ngôn ngữ hoặc tiếng địa phương nào không?**

- Yes **Vâng**
- No **Không**

What other languages or dialects do you know? **Bạn biết thêm ngôn ngữ hoặc phương ngữ nào khác không?**

### **Employment Phần Việc Làm**

Are you currently employed? **Hiện tại, bạn có đang việc làm không?**

- Yes **Vâng**
- No **Không**

What is your occupation? | **Nghề nghiệp của bạn là gì?**

- Student | **Học sinh / Sinh viên**
- Homemaker | **Nội trợ**
- Tour guide | **Hướng dẫn viên du lịch**
- Making and selling handcrafts | **Làm và bán hàng thủ công**
- Other (please specify) | **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

How did you acquire the skills for your current job? | **Bạn đã học được những kỹ năng cho công việc hiện tại của mình từ đâu?**

- Formal training | **Đào tạo chính quy**
- Family | **Gia đình**
- Self-taught | **Tự học**

Which of the following traditional Hmong skills are you proficient in? (Participants can select more than one option.) | **Bạn có kỹ năng trong bất kỳ nghề thủ công hoặc thương mại truyền thống nào không? (Người tham gia có thể chọn nhiều hơn một tùy chọn.)**

- Embroidery and textile arts (e.g., paj ntaub) | **Thêu và nghệ thuật dệt (ví dụ, paj ntaub)**
- Farming and agricultural practices | **Nông nghiệp và thực hành canh tác**
- Traditional medicine and herbal knowledge | **Y học truyền thống và kiến thức về thảo dược**
- Traditional song, dance, or storytelling | **Bài hát, điệu nhảy, hoặc kể chuyện truyền thống**
- None of the above | **Không có mục nào trên đây**
- Other (please specify) | **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

Have you faced challenges in finding or keeping a job due to your ethnicity or gender? | **Bạn đã từng gặp khó khăn trong việc tìm việc hoặc giữ việc do chủng tộc hoặc giới tính của mình không?**

- Yes, ethnicity | **Có, vì chủng tộc**
- Yes, gender | **Có, vì giới tính**
- Yes, both | **Có, vì cả hai**
- No | **Không**

What challenges have you faced in accessing education? | **Bạn đã gặp những thách thức gì trong việc tiếp cận giáo dục?**

- Language barriers | **Rào cản ngôn ngữ**
- Lack of resources | **Thiếu nguồn lực**
- Discrimination | **Phân biệt đối xử**
- Family responsibilities | **Trách nhiệm gia đình**
- Health issues | **Vấn đề sức khỏe**
- Distance between home and school | **Khoảng cách giữa nhà và trường**
- No challenges | **Không gặp thách thức**
- Other (please specify) | **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

Which of the following resources or opportunities do you feel you lack access to in

Sapa? | **Bạn cảm thấy mình thiếu quyền truy cập vào nguồn lực hoặc cơ hội nào sau đây ở Sapa? (Người tham gia có thể chọn nhiều hơn một tùy chọn.)**

- Educational Opportunities: Limited access to quality or culturally relevant education | **Cơ hội giáo dục: Quyền truy cập giới hạn đến giáo dục chất lượng hoặc phù hợp văn hóa**
- Healthcare Services: Inadequate access to healthcare, medicines, or maternal care | **Dịch vụ y tế: Truy cập không đầy đủ đến dịch vụ y tế, thuốc, hoặc chăm sóc mẹ và bé**
- Economic Opportunities: Limited job opportunities outside of traditional farming or craftwork | **Cơ hội kinh tế: Cơ hội việc làm giới hạn ngoài nghề nông hoặc thủ công truyền thống**
- Language Training: Programs or resources to learn Vietnamese or other languages for better communication and integration | **Đào tạo ngôn ngữ: Chương trình hoặc nguồn lực để học tiếng Việt hoặc ngôn ngữ khác để giao tiếp và tích hợp tốt hơn**
- Land Rights: Concerns about losing traditional lands or not having legal rights to land | **Quyền đất đai: Lo ngại về việc mất đất đai truyền thống hoặc không có quyền hợp pháp đối với đất**
- Cultural Preservation Resources: Limited opportunities to learn or pass down traditional Hmong crafts and customs | **Nguồn lực bảo tồn văn hóa: Cơ hội giới hạn để học hoặc truyền dạy nghệ thuật và phong tục Hmong truyền thống**
- Infrastructure: Inadequate basic utilities like clean water, electricity, or transportation | **Cơ sở hạ tầng: Tiện ích cơ bản không đầy đủ như nước sạch, điện, hoặc phương tiện di chuyển**
- Digital Access and Training: Limited access to digital tools, the internet, or training for their use | **Truy cập và đào tạo số hóa: Quyền truy cập giới hạn đến công cụ số, internet, hoặc đào tạo để sử dụng chúng**
- Representation: Feeling underrepresented in local governance or decision-making bodies | **Đại diện: Cảm giác không được đại diện đúng mức trong cơ quan quản lý địa phương hoặc cơ quan ra quyết định**
- Financial Services: Lack of access to credit, loans, or financial training | **Dịch vụ tài chính: Thiếu quyền truy cập vào tín dụng, vay vốn, hoặc đào tạo tài chính**
- None of the above | **Không có mục nào trên đây**
- Other (please specify) | **Khác (vui lòng chỉ rõ)**

How do you feel about the rapid changes in Sapa due to globalization and tourism? | **Bạn cảm thấy thế nào về những thay đổi nhanh chóng ở Sapa do toàn cầu hóa và du lịch?**

- Positive | **Tích cực**
- Negative | **Tiêu cực**
- Mixed feelings | **Cảm xúc lẫn lộn**

## VITA

**NAME** Connor John Kidd  
**DATE OF BIRTH** 7 September 1994  
**PLACE OF BIRTH** Idaho, USA  
**INSTITUTIONS ATTENDED** Brigham Young University-Idaho



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