

Child marriage in Lao PDR

Introduction

Child marriage is defined as the marriage of a child under age 18. The number of child marriage has exceeded 70 million girls worldwide. Although child marriage has been decreasing over the past two decades, it remains common in Lao PDR. In 2018, slightly more than one-third of Laotian women aged 20-24 years were married before age 18, and this was the highest among ASEAN countries. Child marriage is likely to expose women to various sexual and reproductive problems, such as teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, sexually transmitted infections, obstetric complications, low birth weight, preterm birth, and others, and these will bring about adverse effects to both the women and their children. Hence, this paper aims to examine the correlates of child marriage in Lao PDR for a better understanding of the reasons behind the high prevalence of child marriage in a less developed country.

Data and Research Methods

The data for this study came from the 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey. The survey is a household-based survey that applied the technical frameworks of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). The main dependent variable is the proportion of women who were first married before age 18. This study focuses on the ever married respondents aged 20-24 years (n = 2,918) to avoid censoring and truncation problems. The independent variables for this analysis include place of residence, educational level, wealth index, ever used a computer and internet. Binary

logistic regression is used to examine the net effects of the socio-economic variables on child marriage.

Results

Overall, 50.1% of ever married Lao women aged 20-24 were first married before age 18. At the bivariate level, the prevalence rate of child marriage was higher among women residing in the rural areas as compared to the urban women (52.7% versus 41.7%). Education and wealth have strong positive effects on child marriage, and the gross educational effect on child marriage is relatively stronger than that of the wealth index. More than half of the respondents that never used a computer (53.7%) and internet (56.7%) reported their age at marriage were less than 18 years old.

Multivariate analysis indicates that place of residence, education, wealth index, and internet usage were significant determinants of child marriage in Lao PDR. Relative to women residing in the urban areas, the odds of getting married before age 18 was 19% lower among those residing in the rural areas (as opposed to the finding from bivariate analysis). The odds of experiencing child marriage decreased monotonically across educational and wealth groups. For instance, as compared to women with no education, the odds of getting married under age 18 among those with primary, upper secondary, and post secondary/higher education were 29%, 72%, and 91% lower, respectively. Respondents who came from the wealthiest families were reported to have 38% lower odds of experiencing child marriage than their poorest counterparts. As compared to

women who ever used internet, the odds of getting married before age 18 was 1.51 times higher among those who never used.

Conclusions

The high prevalence of child marriage in Lao PDR is closely associated with the low educational level among the girls. Hence, improving the educational level is of paramount importance to reduce child marriage. Greater efforts are required to provide family life and reproductive health education as well as community activities to the disadvantaged groups and the poorer segment of the population to equip them with basic life skills with the aim of reducing early sexual debut and eventually early marriage. A better understanding of the determinants of child marriage is vital to develop effective policies and programs to reduce child marriage and ultimately reduce various sexual and reproductive problems in the country.